



Internet Lodge 9659
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Title

Who was Jephtha ?

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Of the many characters within Masonic ritual, Jephtha is one who seems to appear from nowhere. He is first mentioned half way through the Second Degree Tracing Board lecture and is revealed as a cunning and successful military commander of the Gileadites. It was he who trapped his retreating Ephraimite enemies into revealing their origin through the simple test of how they pronounced a certain word. We are told that this led to King Solomon adopting that word as a “*pw in a FCs’ Lodge to prevent any unqualified person ascending the winding staircase which led to the middle chamber of the Temple*”. And then.....Jephtha simply disappears from Masonic history, almost as swiftly as he entered.

What, then, are we to think of Jephtha? A bit-part player? Why is he even mentioned at all? And just exactly **who** was he?

His story is mainly contained in the Old Testament Book of Judges [1]. The Judges (of whom Jephtha was one) were appointed tribal leaders of Israel in the time before the founding of the Royal House of David.

To most masons, Jephtha’s notoriety is associated solely with that infamous word. The biblical histories paint a more detailed and slightly more complex picture of him, as will be seen. But even within our ritual [2], we gain additional insights into his character and perhaps further clues as to why he appears. The Additional Explanation of the Second Degree Tracing Board gives us an account of the fall and rise of Jephtha and the Ammonitish war which immediately preceded his battles with the Ephraimites.

He was poorly treated by his family, having been banished from his homeland because he posed a threat to the inheritance of his half-brothers following the death of their father Gilead:

“Thinkest thou, who art but the son of a bond-woman, to inherit with us who are free born?”

He overcame this setback quickly, becoming the leader of a small army in his adopted country and, at some later point, his notoriety as a general led to the Gileadites turning to him to command their army when threatened by a massive Ammonitish invasion. The ritual tells us he struck a deal with the Chiefs of Gilead that if he succeeded in defeating the Ammonites then he would become the Gileadites’ permanent ruler. In this part of the history, his determination to do the right thing comes through clearly. When asked to command the armies against the Ammonites, he could easily have refused and simply maintained the exalted position he had achieved in the land of his banishment. The undoubted impending defeat of the Gileadites would also have afforded some measure of revenge for his former banishment, if Jephtha had been so minded. Instead he chose to **serve his people** in their time of need, achieving the greater good in the process:

“Recollecting it was his native country and his brethren (although unworthy), who were in distress”...

Ruthless in prosecuting a war, his objectives were always to protect his people. Although he lived in a violent age of perpetual conflict, his first instinct was to seek a diplomatic solution to a dispute rather than simply opt for combat. Once he had accepted command of the Gileaditish army and reinforced it with his own troops he entered into negotiation with the King of the Ammonites. The ritual informs us that he was “*desirous, if possible, to spare the effusion of blood*”. However, this dialogue proved fruitless and he was

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forced to go to war with calamitous consequences to the Ammonitish invaders. Later, following acts of aggression by his Ephraimite neighbours, Jephtha *“tried all lenient means to appease them, but finding these ineffectual had recourse to rigorous ones”*. Again, the diplomacy failed but he certainly gave it every chance of success and made **all efforts** to **avoid** bloodshed even although the Ephraimites had signalled their determination to destroy him and his people and help themselves to the spoils of the Ammonitish war!

The biblical account adds a new dimension to the story, missing from standard masonic ritual. Jephtha's military victory over the Ammonites was followed by tragedy. Prior to the campaign he made a solemn promise to God that if he defeated them, the first person to greet him at his house upon his return would be offered as a sacrifice. To his horror, on returning to his home in victory he was met by his only daughter, dancing and celebrating. And although it may seem incredible from a modern perspective that such a promise should be carried through, Jephtha did so after giving his daughter a short reprieve. Basically, he had made a solemn vow to the GAOTU:

“..I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back.”

Indeed, his daughter made no efforts to avoid her fate, agreeing with her father that a promise made to God must be a promise kept. This represented yet **another** reversal of fortune for Jephtha, undoubtedly the worst during his eventful life. This episode, in particular, has influenced many artists and was the focus of Handel's oratorio “Jephtha”.

So.... what are we to think of this man once we piece together the various strands of his history?

His life, with its various and undeniably extreme “ups and downs”, amply illustrates the symbolic explanation of the mosaic pavement contained in the First Emulation lecture [3]:

“Today we may travel in prosperity; tomorrow we may totter on the uneven paths of weakness, temptation and adversity”.

The lecture exhorts us as masons to *“act as the dictates of reason prompt us, to practise charity, maintain harmony, and endeavour to live in unity and brotherly love”* whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. The history of Jephtha provides us with examples of:

- The importance of a solemn promise made to God
- The need for reasoned debate and the avoidance of conflict if at all possible
- Perseverance in the face of obstacles and setbacks
- Truth, sincerity and plain dealing
- And...most importantly, charity and relief. Jephtha came to the aid of his people when the easiest option **by far** would have been to refuse. He also **avoided** the temptation of **revenge**.

Put simply, Jephtha's story illuminates many of our Masonic principles.

.....He is certainly **more** than just a “**one word wonder**”.

[1] VSL, OT, Judges, Chapters 11, 12.

[2] Emulation Ritual, 11th Edition, 2005, Lewis Masonic.

[3] The Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Masonry, 2000, Ian Allan Publishing.

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