

Haftarah

'The spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah'



Israel then sent messengers to King Sihon of the Ammorites, king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, 'Let us pass through your land to our country.' But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory; so Sihon gathered all his people together, and encamped at Jahaz, and fought with Israel.

Judges 11:19-20

Connection

- The link between the Torah portion *Chukat* (Numbers 19:1-22:1) and the Haftarah (Judges 11:1-33) is this: in Judges 11:19-22 we find the recitation of a story told in Numbers (21:21-25) about how Israel came to acquire certain territory by force when peaceful negotiations failed.

Ponder

- Judges 11:1-3 tells of Jephthah's painful upbringing: cast out of his home by his own brothers because of his illegitimate birth of a prostitute, and living the life of an outlaw until events draw him back into the fold of Israel, as a military commander no less.
- 11:4-11. Jephthah's reversal of fortune leads him to question the actions of those who wish to raise him up to a position of leadership.
- 11:12-29. Jephthah defends Israel's possession of the disputed territory, arguing that war was engaged only when forced upon Israel; they were subsequently victorious. Negotiations with the Ammonites prove futile.
- 11:30-33. Jephthah makes a vow to God. His army is victorious in battle, but his vow leads to a tragic story involving the death of his daughter by his own hand (Judges 11:34-40). This latter episode is not included in this Haftarah, however it has attracted much discussion in Jewish tradition because of its disturbing implications. In brief, the story is this:
 - *'Then whoever comes out of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering'* (v.31). Jephthah is expecting an animal to greet him, however his daughter greets him instead (v.34). Both she and her father are grief-stricken as they agree to honor his vow and she prepares to die.
- Deeply disturbed by this violent deed for a holy cause, the sages did not hesitate to condemn Jephthah's action, both for the hastiness of the vow and for Jephthah's failure to seek its annulment by a priestly authority. Modern Jewish commentators go further and emphasize the tragic figure of Jephthah in terms of the continuity of his violent childhood with his adult life. He is a great leader, yet suffering, violence, bloodshed and family tragedy pursue him throughout his life.
- The tragic story of Jephthah's daughter, however, is not included in the Haftarah which instead closes by declaring victory for Israel—*'So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel'* (v.33).

Discuss

- Discuss the ambiguities in the biblical story of Jephthah, and the moral dilemmas raised. How can such sacred scripture speak to the 'fragility' and 'ambiguities' of people's lives today, as it is reflected upon and interpreted and reinterpreted over time?

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996). Scripture quotations: NRSV.