



Jephtha

Biblical drama by Christian Lanciai (2013)

The characters:

Jephtha
Storge, his wife
Iphis, their only daughter
Hamor, her betrothed
Spokesman of the Ammonites
four bridesmaids
Zebul, Jephtha's brother and general
The priest
Other Israelis
12 other priests

The action takes place in the times of the Judges of Israel.

Act I scene 1.

1 He will not speak with us. He hates Israel.

2 No wonder. But we have no choice. Only he can save us.

3 It's the fault of Gilead's sons who cast him out.

1 Come, let's take our souls into our hands and try.

(They knock on Jephtha's door.)

Jephtha (opens) What do you want?

1 Sorry to bother you, but we need help against the Ammonites.

Jephtha Too late for that now. I have nothing to do with Israel.

2 We know, but the need is great, and only you can help us.

Jephtha Help yourselves. I was cast out by my brothers from the community of Israel. I have accepted that. Mind your own business.

3 We need a leader, and only you can handle the Ammonites.

Jephtha What have they done?

1 They attack us, claiming that we have taken their lands.

Jephtha No wonder. That's precisely what you have done, haven't you?

2 But we can't surrender what we believed to be ours, since we have built our homes there.

Jephtha You should have talked the matter over with the Ammonites before you established your settlements in their country. Now it is too late.

3 You can speak with them.

Jephtha Very well, I will make an effort at diplomacy. But you must then give me the authority of sovereign leadership.

1 You have it.
2 We all want you for our leader in this.
Jephtha Then I will come with you. But I cannot promise any good results.
(*follows them.*)

Scene 2.

Storge We have been able to live in peace ever since his brothers cast him out of Israel. That they now plead with him to return cannot bring anything good.
Iphis Why was he cast out?
Storge For not being legitimate.
Iphis Not a legitimate human being?
Storge That he was a son of Gilead didn't help when he also was the son of a whore.
Iphis Does that make him less of a man?
Storge No, but the Israelites make a difference between themselves and people of less value. If you are the son of a whore you are not racially acceptable.
Iphis Isn't his blood as red as his brothers'?
Storge If not even redder. Here he is. – I would wish you would just ignore those Israelis, Jephtha. They only want to use you.
Jephtha If the Lord calls on me I have no choice. Perhaps we can reach a peaceful settlement. Trying that is the least thing I can do.
Storge Whatever you do, don't start any war.
Jephtha That's the last thing I will do.
Storge May you then make the best of it. Good luck.
Jephtha Thank you. This quarrel will probably not last for very long. (*leaves*)
Storge No, just for years, if it ever will end. I know those Israelites. We will never reach peace in all eternity.
Iphis Don't be so harsh, mother.
Storge I am just stating the case as it is. Here is now your suitor.
Iphis Don't overdo it, mother. He is only courting me so far.
Hamor (enters) You are lovelier than ever, Iphis.
Iphis Oh well, don't overdo it.
Hamor No, I am just understating it. When shall we get married?
Iphis When father returns from the war.
Hamor Is there a war on?
Iphis There will always be one when the Israelis get started.
Storge There is no war yet.
Iphis I hope father can blow it off.
Hamor I am sure he will. He is a wise and reasonable man.
Storge He was not wise to get fooled by the Israelis.
Iphis It's they who aren't quite wise sometimes. He sees a possibility to calm them down.

Storge He will never succeed in that.
Hamor If there is a war I should be in it.
Iphis There must not be a war.
Storge Stay home, my boy. No one should be forced into a war against his will.
Hamor But if it's a matter of defending our country.
Storge It's not. This is a matter of attacking the country of others.
Iphis Stay home, Hamor. It will probably soon be over.
Hamor Everything will soon be over. The question is how.

Scene 3.

Ammonite spokesman Worthy leader of Israel and Gilead, thus speak our clansmen, – why has Israel taken our lands? Return our stolen grounds, and all shall be good between us as good neighbours.

Jephtha Tell your clansmen, that when we marched up from Egypt we asked for safe passage through the land of Moab, but they forbade us. We tried other ways, but they were blocked as well and we were hindered. Finally we had no other choice but to march through the land of Ammon but then chose desolate areas beyond your habitations not to disturb you. Since they were deserted some families stayed there to till the earth and build their homes. They have been allowed to live there in peace until today. Why do you want to drive them out now after a hundred years and not before? Are you jealous because they made your deserted lands to prosper?

Spokesman It's a matter of principle. The land belongs to us.

Jephtha What belonged to you was a desert. What we tilled and cultivated is a garden. That garden is ours and can't we leave because you ask us, since we can't take it with us.

Spokesman Then there will be war on your responsibility.

Jephtha War is always on the responsibility of the one who starts it. We only want to live in peace.

Spokesman And we don't want our lands taken away from us. We must end that robbery.

Jephtha Be content with what you have got and don't desire what others created.

Spokesman The land was ours!

Jephtha But the Lord gave it in our hands. What the Lord has given you can't take away from us. You have your own god. Find your protection in him.

Spokesman This is not about religion. It's about who owns our lands.

Jephtha You never claimed them. We claimed and cultivated them. So they are ours. If you take them by violence we must fight back.

Spokesman You give us no choice.

Jephtha In that case you give *us* no choice.

Spokesman This argument is over! (*leaves upset*)

Zebul So there will be war?

Jephtha Yes, there will be war. We have gone too far, and they refuse to compromise.

Zebul Can we win?

Jephtha We have to win. – Here now is also my valiant son-in-law to be, without doubt to voluntarily join up for the war. Then we can only win. – Welcome, Hamor! Are the women at home crying much now for our being at war?

Hamor They are not crying, but your wife is very dissatisfied and says that all we men are good for is to make trouble and war.

Jephtha She is right, for we haven't done much else. But what does your sweetheart say about you going out to war?

Hamor She urged me on. She thought the best way for me to prove myself worthy of being your son-in-law was by fighting by your side.

Jephtha I am glad that you showed no cowardice. Now we can prevail together.

Hamor I am looking forward to it.

Jephtha I know the Lord is with us and that we must be victorious. Anything else would be odd. And as a sign that I am fighting for Him I shall sacrifice whatever first meets my eye when I come home, whether it is a donkey, a goat, a calf or whatever.

Zebul Do you think the Lord will grant you victory because you promise him a sacrifice?

Jephtha He shall choose it himself. What it will be his grace will show after the victory.

Zebul We are your witnesses.

Jephtha Then it's just for us to prepare. To arms! To victory!

Act II scene 1.

Iphis How do you think it will turn out, mother?

Storge It will all turn out as usual. Israel is victorious and the wars are doubled, for the more Israel prevails, the more enemies he will get. It's his own fault, that he always makes enemies everywhere.

Iphis But don't we have the right?

Storge Of what good is that? We prevail anyway and make more enemies anyway. That we have any right doesn't make it better.

Iphis Then father will probably be home soon.

Storge He sure will, but he will not be rid of Israel anyway. After his victory over the Ammonites he will never be rid of Israel, who wants to keep him for a judge and leader for life. We will see very little of him.

Iphis But look, there is Hamor! Hamor! Hamor! (*rushes to meet him and jumps in his arms, embraces him and kisses him*) How did it go?

Hamor Victory, victory everywhere. We defeated the Ammonites thoroughly. They will never cause us trouble any more. Twenty cities were taken, and as many

thousands were slaughtered. Our strategy was superior, and we just had to march from one bloodbath to another and burn village after village.

Iphis And father?

Hamor Unharméd. He will come home eventually.

Iphis We must receive him properly with song and dances and festivities! I will summon the temple maids.

Hamor His return from the victory was a glorious triumph, but nothing could make it more brilliant and festive than you.

Iphis He shall be received as the hero he is! Imagine that my father is the foremost hero of Israel! He will go down in history!

Hamor That is certain. He accomplished the victory by sound strategy and proved himself superior as a leader and authority over the Israelites and Gileadites. His brothers must now feel shame for what they once did to him.

Iphis They will probably not dare to show themselves.

Hamor Except Zebul, who was loyal all the way.

Iphis Well, shall we prepare the celebrations? Come on and help me dress up!
(*drags Hamor out along with her.*)

Storge Something tells me there is something under this victory which is more than just the victory. We shall see. (*attends to her duties.*)

Scene 2.

Jephtha So I am on my way home as a celebrated victor by all my people, who have accepted me again after almost a lifetime of banishment, only because my mother was a prostitute. But it will probably be only me among all my brothers who will have a lasting fame. But the victory was too easy. It was like ploughing a field without stones in the ground. The Lord gave me a great victory, and the Ammonites are beaten for good, but what was the meaning of the war and the victory?

(*Iphis appears with followers in beautiful white virgin dresses, wreathes in their hair, with dancing and music playing.*)

Iphis Celebrate our hero with strings and harps and music play!

The girls For he is the saviour of Israel who struck down all our enemies!

Iphis Now we are free from all threats from our enemies!

Girls For he has saved Israel from all our enemies!

Iphis Greet our hero with flowers and wreathes and songs!

Girls For he is the hero of Israel now and forever!

Jephtha (appalled) My daughter, what is this?

Iphis A welcome ceremony! What else?

Jephtha Alas, you don't know what is expecting you!

Iphis My wedding, my long awaited wedding, what else?

Jephtha Alas, my daughter, my only daughter, (*embraces her painfully*) I have lost you!

Iphis Have you gone mad, father? You have won, haven't you?

Jephtha I anticipated my victory. In a dangerous moment I promised the Lord, if he granted me victory, that the first living thing what would meet me at my homecoming would be sacrificed as a burnt offering to his glory!

Iphis You are joking.

Jephtha No, my daughter. The Lord gave me the victory but has claimed you as the price of it.

Iphis So there will be no wedding?

Jephtha It doesn't look any better.

Iphis You will find it difficult to explain this to mother and to Hamor.

Jephtha Perhaps we could avoid it in some manner. The priests are not unreasonable.

Iphis How could you make such a thoughtless promise?

Jephtha I never could guess it would be you. I expected a calf, a goat, a dog or anything and even an invaluable and indispensable bull, but not my only daughter.

Iphis What a dilemma for all of us!

Jephtha You said it.

Maid 1 Will there be no wedding now?

2 And we who rejoiced so much about it!

3 How could this happen?

4 Ask the Lord, but he never answers.

Jephtha We must resolve this in one way or another. I can't accept it.

1 Neither can we.

Iphis No human being should accept such a vow. It isn't human.

2 No, it isn't.

Jephtha In any case I must confess it to your mother. That will be the hardest thing of all. She will never forgive me my inconsideration.

Iphis Come, father, (*takes him under the arm,*) Let's go home. I will help you handle the crisis, either by resolving it or accepting it.

Jephtha Could you at all consider submitting?

Iphis Yes, if all other possibilities were excluded, I would resign to my fate, if only I was given time enough first to bewail the loss of my youth and virginity.

Jephtha I will do all I can to have you released from my bond, but we must have the priest's condonation.

Iphis Do you think he is reasonable?

Jephtha I don't know. He must stick to the word of the law. Or else he is not a priest.

Scene 3.

Priest No, it will not do.

Zebul But it's absurd! You can't demand this! The pagans apply human sacrifices, but we are too good for such baseness! We haven't done it since Cain sacrificed Abel!

Priest What about Abraham and Isaac then? He would have done it if an angel had not stopped him. And Abimelech and the extermination war against the tribe of Benjamin? You go slaughtering Ammonites in thousands to secure their land for yourselves, isn't war if anything a matter of human sacrifice, and you complain loud and clear when only one lonely woman is the issue, who even is a virgin!

Zebul That only makes it worse. She should have been married at Jephtha's homecoming. Instead she is slaughtered and burnt at a stake for the sake of a casual empty promise.

Priest The promise was binding. You don't compromise with the Lord. We can't let her get away.

Zebul Here is now my devastated brother. Try to comfort him with your moral cakes, if you can.

Jephtha I beg you, rabbi, to show mercy on us and her. It would not harm anyone. On the contrary. But if she would be sacrificed it would harm us all and perhaps even all Israel and our religion at its very foundation.

Priest A given word cannot be taken back.

Zebul He was cheated. He only thought of his donkey and bull and his goats, but unfortunately he did not express it in his oath. Now he will be bereft of his only daughter instead. Is that fair? Is that how we apply justice?

Priest It's not a matter of justice. It's a matter of the Lord's holiness. It must not be questioned. If we let her get away, it will be us cheating him instead. It will not do. And the consequential punishment could be horrible.

Zebul Let her then belong to the Lord, but alive! Ordain her to altar service for the rest of her life.

Priest That would be a reasonable compromise, which neither she nor I would have anything against, and which even my wife would be able to accept.

priest I shall consider that possibility, but I have to discuss the matter with my crew. This a unique moment that must needs demand exact accuracy in the investigation, but God's word is untouchable. A promise to him cannot be recalled. That is self-evident.

Zebul Go and discuss the matter with your other old men then. In the meantime Iphis will cry for her virginity, and her groom is even more depressed. Is that how God wants it?

Priest Don't ask me. Ask him.

Zebul He never answers questions. Come, Jephtha. Let's get out of here. We have done what we could for the moment. In time we shall hear what the other priests say.

Jephtha As long as she lives there is hope.

Zebul And if they insist on sacrificing her?

Jephtha In that case neither God nor Israel will be any more for me.

Act III scene 1. The seminar of the priests.

Priest 1 We face a very complicated dilemma, my brothers. When Jephtha went to war he promised if he would be victorious to sacrifice whatever first met him when he came home as a burnt offering to God. He had in mind some domestic animal, but instead God sent in his way his only child, a daughter, betrothed and ready for marriage but still a virgin. Consider it carefully. The dilemma is the following. The Lord forbids his own people to practise human sacrifice, but here he now suddenly demands a human sacrifice by Jephtha, our judge, and a virgin at that, his only child and daughter.

2 It will not do.

3 What will not do?

2 The inconsistency is intolerable.

1 That's what I mean. There is something here that does not add up.

4 If Jephtha has given such a promise, he can't take it back whatever it means.

2 But we can't allow human sacrifice. That's what the heathens practise, when they sacrifice small children to Baal and Moloch. We are supposed to be better than that.

3 But a promise is a promise. If you break a promise to God, the consequences could be unsurveyable in fatalities and misfortunes.

1 Jephtha suggested for a compromise that she would serve as an altar maid for the rest of her life and thereby always remain a virgin. She would still be sacrificed to God but not as a burnt offering at the stake.

4 And could she maintain that virginity? What does it warrant? As young and freshly engaged she has just started to get a taste of life. I know the girls how they work. It would never work.

3 Girls will be girls.

4 Exactly.

1 Shall we put it to a vote, just for guidance?

2 I would welcome it. I consider the whole thing a mistake that only would be made worse unless we stop it from being carried through. Israel cannot overlook a human sacrifice.

3 But when God so clearly demands it?

2 Clearly? Have you interpreted the matter correctly? Perhaps he only sent this for a trial and test, or maybe even as an indication that we should cancel all burnt offerings by showing us how outrageous the custom is?

1 May I ask those who are in favour of implementing the procedure to raise a hand. (*counts the votes*) I make it six. And against? (*counts again*) Six again. So we are totally at odds, and I have the casting vote. So it's up to me to decide on the matter. I will let it rest until further. The seminar is dissolved. (*knocks. The priests break up.*)

Scene 2. At home.

Storge I should never have let him out to war.

Iphis But mother, the fault is not his.

Storge He allowed himself to be persuaded. He let himself be fooled by them. He fell for the temptation of their offers of power and influence. He let himself be seduced by his own weakness, and for that I shall never forgive him.

Iphis No, mother, he was led by his sense of duty and responsibility and good will to help others.

Storge Help others to kill his neighbours? Sense of duty? Good morning! He just wanted a position, and still he had once been outcast by his own and declared not to be one of them, and still he fell to their flattery and false promises. God's chosen people are the most deceptive people in the world when it comes to reckoning.

Iphis But they did not demand my sacrifice. It was his own thoughtlessness.

Storge In a promise to the holiest and highest and most almighty, who never answers prayers. If such a promise to such a divinity is binding it is no divinity but just an arbitrary murderer without soul and with nothing but bureaucratic automatic insensitivity.

Iphis They may still cancel the validity of the vow.

Storge Do you think they will do that? These bigoted priests, who only think of their own power and position and live for nothing but to cultivate and boost their false authority, do you think they will waive the slightest inch from the unquestionable infallibility of the cult of their divinity? Never while they live. You will die, my daughter, the victim to the senseless and unreasonable cruelty of an established superstition.

(enter Jephtha with Hamor and the priest)

Well, old man, any result of your pleading?

Priest I am sorry, *Storge*, but after careful discussions in the council we have by a majority arrived at the conclusion that the promise is binding. We can't make an exception from the infallibility of the Lord. I did what I could and several others with me, no reasonable arguments for your case were lacking, but the opponents were relentless.

Storge What did I tell you? There's your holy priesthood, old man! There is your holy Israel, your own people, your brothers, for whom you so wholeheartedly and heroically gave everything and helped to achieve a bloody victory!

Hamor (embraces Iphis) Let me be sacrificed in her stead! She is their only child and a holy virgin at that! There are many other and better warriors in the army than me. I am much less indispensable than she! Burn me at the stake and let her live!

1 I am sorry, but it is not possible. You cannot compromise with the letter of God's law.

Iphis (releases herself from Hamor) It doesn't matter. I am ready. Just give me two months to bewail my virginity with my maiden friends. Then you may sacrifice me

as much as you please. Bring out the knife, father, and sharpen it carefully, since you are the one who has to do it. You were the one who gave the promise and no one else. You can't get away from it and can't hand it over. I will not be married, but instead I will be offered to your Lord forever in a bloody ritual which might quench the inextinguishable bloodthirstiness of certain Israelis, and they can feel good about it, for afterwards there will be no one able to avenge me, for I am just a simple harmless woman, the granddaughter of a whore at that. Do with me whatever you like after I have finished dancing for two months and bewailed my virginity across the mountains under gentle singing and sincere prayers for a return. (*leaves*)

Hamor Iphis! (*hurries out after her*)

Jephtha You may rely on that she will be back in two months and allow herself to be sacrificed. It's a cruel sentence you pronounce by the power of your priestly authority, which is the one to apply the knife, not I, who am just a most unwilling executor. But I am afraid, your holiness, that a worse sentence and doom will be waiting for you and your establishment, I mean your religion, by destiny than by the God you represent, a doom and destiny of longer term than this indefensible human sacrifice. Your religion will not be able to survive such a lack of compromise.

Priest Jephtha, you are judge of Israel, you are chosen for life as such by us, and we expect you to continue managing your office as a leader both in peace and war. Duty called on you, and you accepted it like man and managed it well to your imperishable honour. What subsequently happened has nothing to do with your duty and office. Metaphysics is our business, and if it will be as you say, so be it: her blood may come over our heads and our sons. I only ask you not to do anything foolish. Can we keep trusting you as our judge?

Jephtha I am no deserter.

Priest Very well, I shall let the Levites and other tribes know this.

Jephtha Even if it will feel hard and heavy, I will continue serving my period, but I am afraid I will not be able to carry on many years after this.

Priest (takes his hand) I am sincerely sorry. (*presses it and leaves*)

Jephtha (looks after him, after a while) The leading religion of our world has become the leading star of hopelessness.

Storge Come, old man. You need something to eat. (*leads him into their cabin.*)

The End.

Manali 3.11.2013,
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