

Vows and Oaths in Scripture

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According to Scripture, and based upon the cultural norms of the ancient middle east, a vow was a solemn pact in which failure to perform the vow would be tragic and disgraceful. If a vow was given in the name of the Creator, it is far worse a situation should they fail to fulfill the vow—as it involves the violation of the third commandment. What about vows made between ourselves and others? What do we do with those vows? The questions before us are simple—does Yahweh expect us to fulfill our vows, whether to Him or others? Is it good to make vows? Is it good to fulfill vows to do evil? And what should be done in respect to rash vows (vows which could result in the violation of Scripture)?

The first question is, “Does Yahweh expect us to fulfill our vows made to Him?” The answer is, yes. Please notice what Scripture says:

When a man makes a vow to Yahweh, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. (Numbers 30:2)

Very plainly, Yahweh expects us to keep our vows. But Messiah seems to say it is wrong to make oaths—is there a difference?

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)

According to Messiah, it is not good to make oaths because of the fact that it is so easy to make rash promises which we cannot keep, and thereby show the source as from “the evil one.” Since we do not have unlimited knowledge or power we may easily find ourselves in a situation of not being able to keep our rash promises. For example, we cannot make even one of our hairs white or black—how much more can we declare our knowledge of Scripture to be infallible? Of course, there is a distinction between an oath and a vow, for even when we make a vow we are simply saying, “Yes or No” to a certain course of action—so it is certainly not wrong to make an agreement (or vow). So, what Messiah is really saying is to avoid making

oaths using the name of Yahweh or some other symbol of authority—not vows or agreements in general. Even so, it is expected that we will fulfill all of our vows.

What if a man makes a rash vow, and the fulfillment of that vow involves doing something good or evil? What is he supposed to do? Scripture plainly tells us what he is supposed to do:

Or if a soul swear, pronouncing with his lips to do evil, or to do good, whatsoever it be that a man shall pronounce with an oath, and it be hid from him; when he knoweth of it, then he shall be guilty in one of these. And it shall be, when he shall be guilty in one of these things, that he shall confess that he hath sinned in that thing: And he shall bring his trespass offering unto Yahweh for his sin which he hath sinned, a female from the flock, a lamb or a kid of the goats, for a sin offering; and the priest shall make an atonement for him concerning his sin. (Leviticus 5:4-6)

Even though most of us are no longer living in an agrarian society (such that we could sacrifice one of our goats), the principle is still valid. Sadly, many do not follow this basic prescription by acknowledging the sin and turning from it. Instead they harden themselves because of fear of losing face and will attempt to fulfill the vow, no matter how evil and grievous it may be. Yahweh does not sanction the fulfillment of evil or rash vows. Notice what it says regarding some known vows of the Bible that resulted in a terrible outcome:

And when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done unto Jericho and to Ai, They did work wily, and went and made as if they had been ambassadors, and took old sacks upon their asses, and wine bottles, old, and rent, and bound up; And old shoes and clouted upon their feet, and old garments upon them; and all the bread of their provision was dry and mouldy. And they went to Joshua unto the camp at Gilgal, and said unto him, and to the men of Israel, We be come from a far country: now therefore make ye a league with us. And the men of Israel said unto the Hivites, Peradventure ye dwell among us; and how shall we make a league with you? And they said unto Joshua, We are thy servants. And Joshua said unto them, Who are ye? and from whence come ye? And they said unto him, From a very far country thy servants are come because of the name of Yahweh thy Elohim: for we have heard the fame of him, and all that he did in Egypt, . . . And the men took of their victuals, and asked not counsel at the mouth of Yahweh. And Joshua made peace

with them, and made a league with them, to let them live: and the princes of the congregation swore unto them. And it came to pass at the end of three days after they had made a league with them, that they heard that they were their neighbours, and that they dwelt among them. And the children of Israel journeyed, and came unto their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, and Chephirah, and Beeroth, and Kirjathjearim. And the children of Israel smote them not, because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by Yahweh Elohim of Israel. And all the congregation murmured against the princes. But all the princes said unto all the congregation, We have sworn unto them by Yahweh Elohim of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them. This we will do to them; we will even let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath which we swore unto them. And the princes said unto them, Let them live; but let them be hewers of wood and drawers of water unto all the congregation; as the princes had promised them. (Joshua 9:3-9;14-21)

We previously read that according to Leviticus 5 if someone makes an oath and the one who makes it realizes later that it is a sinful oath, then he is to confess his sin and offer up a sacrifice in atonement for his sin. In this case, Joshua fulfilled his vow to the Gibeonites—but he made them into servants. It is clear that they did not consult Yahweh when they decided to make a league with them, nor does it say that they consulted Yahweh when they decided to spare their cities. This is merely what the Israelites decided to do on their own in an effort to fulfill their vow and at the same time to honor Yahweh, even though Yahweh plainly commanded that all the inhabitants of the land were to be killed (or driven out). Here is another case:

Then the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the people of Ammon. And Jephthah made a vow to Yahweh, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be Yahweh's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering." So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and Yahweh delivered them into his hands. . . .When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her,

that he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to Yahweh, and I cannot go back on it." So she said to him, "My father, if you have given your word to Yahweh, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because Yahweh has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon." . . . And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. (Judges 21:29-33, 34-36, 39-40)

Sadly, Jephthah made this oath and it was made in the name of Yahweh. To fail to fulfill the oath would have been both tragic and sinful, but it was (in the eyes of Yahweh) just as sinful to make this particular oath. There is plenty of [debate regarding whether Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter](#), or merely forced her to remain a virgin. But regardless of which action he took, the vow that he made was foolish and sinful. If he offered his daughter as a burnt offering, then he would have committed murder. Yahweh does not sanction the offering of human sacrifice—in fact, it is a most grievous sin in His eyes (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10). Although a father has authority over his daughter, there is a limit to that authority in both Scripture and our current society—in fact, in our current society a father has very limited authority over his own children.

Very plainly, Yahweh expects us to keep our vows. But there are other commands from Yahweh, which (depending upon our vow) may be in conflict:

. . . take care that you are not snared into imitating them, . . . saying, "How did these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same." You must not do the same for Yahweh your Elohim, because every abhorrent thing that Yahweh hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. (Deuteronomy 12:30:31)

Also, Scripture teaches that the children cannot be held accountable for the sins of their father; neither can the father be held responsible for the sins of his children.

The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin. (Deuteronomy 24:16)

Since Jephthah sinned by making a foolish vow, he could not (according to teachings of Torah) put his children or anyone else to death—*both* because it is forbidden human sacrifice, and because the children cannot be “put to death” for the sins of their fathers (i.e., a rash vow from their father). That does not mean he did not actually sacrifice her, nor does it prove that he did otherwise, but it clearly means that to do so would have been an even more grievous sin. According to Leviticus 5, *he did* have a way out of the situation. I am of the opinion that he did not fulfill the vow in the way originally intended, but instead he chose to keep her a virgin the rest of her life, and by this in some way fulfill the vow. And it makes for an interesting discussion whether he actually did that, or actually had her sacrificed, as can be seen from this website article which talks about how this controversy over the vow of Jephthah has resulted in many people losing their faith in Scripture. The article is called [Jephthah: Artificial Excuse For Unbelief.](#) Please remember that just because the Bible says someone did something, and the author doesn't appear to condemn that action, it is not proof that Yahweh condoned that action. However, whatever course he took, the tragedy of this event was that he had no heirs by which to carry on his name.

Another even more serious vow came from Herod. In this case, it was tragic in its outcome:

But when Herod's birthday was celebrated, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. Therefore he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. So she, having been prompted by her mother, said, "Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter." And the king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it to be given to her. So he sent and had John beheaded in prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. (Matthew 14: 6-11)

Was this a foolish vow? Yes it was. Was Herod required to fulfill the vow? No, because the vow involved a sin against another. Leviticus 5 requires that a sacrifice be made and the sin be acknowledged—it does not require the fulfillment of the vow, since the vow itself was sinful.

And he said, 'The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the

promise from you.' So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him , 'Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me.' And he called for two centurions, saying, 'Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night; and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor. (Acts 23:20-24)

Not only is this a foolish vow, to even think of fulfilling it would be a most pronounced evil. Yahweh does not require them to fulfill this vow. In fact, it would be an act of righteous repentance for them to acknowledge their sin and submit to the requirements of Leviticus 5.

Let us consider the foolish vow of Saul. Jonathan, his son, ate of the honey when Saul had plainly commanded none of his army to eat anything on that day. When he found out what Jonathan had done, the people rescued Jonathan from the plan of Saul to have him killed. Saul attempted to fulfill his foolish vow by killing his own son, but instead the people were able to bring him to his senses.

Then said Saul unto the people that were with him, Number now, and see who is gone from us. And when they had numbered, behold, Jonathan and his armourbearer were not there. . . .So Yahweh saved Israel that day: and the battle passed over unto Bethaven. And the men of Israel were distressed that day: for Saul had adjured the people, saying, Cursed be the man that eateth any food until evening, that I may be avenged on mine enemies. So none of the people tasted any food. And all they of the land came to a wood; and there was honey upon the ground. And when the people were come into the wood, behold, the honey dropped; but no man put his hand to his mouth: for the people feared the oath. But Jonathan heard not when his father charged the people with the oath: wherefore he put forth the end of the rod that was in his hand, and dipped it in an honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes were enlightened. Then answered one of the people, and said, Thy father straitly charged the people with an oath, saying, Cursed be the man that eateth any food this day. And the people were faint. Then said Jonathan, My father hath troubled the land: see, I pray you, how mine eyes have been enlightened, because I tasted a little of this honey. How much more, if haply the people had eaten freely to day of the spoil of their enemies which they found? for had there not been now a much greater slaughter among the Philistines? And they smote the Philistines that day

from Michmash to Aijalon: and the people were very faint. . . . And Saul said, Draw ye near hither, all the chief of the people: and know and see wherein this sin hath been this day. For, as Yahweh liveth, which saveth Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die. But there was not a man among all the people that answered him. Then said he unto all Israel, Be ye on one side, and I and Jonathan my son will be on the other side. And the people said unto Saul, Do what seemeth good unto thee. Therefore Saul said unto Yahweh Elohim of Israel, Give a perfect lot. And Saul and Jonathan were taken: but the people escaped. And Saul said, Cast lots between me and Jonathan my son. And Jonathan was taken. Then Saul said to Jonathan, Tell me what thou hast done. And Jonathan told him, and said, I did but taste a little honey with the end of the rod that was in mine hand, and, lo, I must die. And Saul answered, Elohim do so and more also: for thou shalt surely die, Jonathan. And the people said unto Saul, Shall Jonathan die, who hath wrought this great salvation in Israel? Elohim forbid: as Yahweh liveth, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground; for he hath wrought with Elohim this day. So the people rescued Jonathan, that he died not. (1 Samuel 14:17, 23-31, 38-45)

Would it have been wrong if Saul fulfilled his vow? Yes it would, for the same reasons given above regarding Jephthah's vow. Saul made a very foolish oath when he forced his army to fight a battle against the Philistines without eating. He also condemned anyone to death who ate anything that day. Yet it was his own son, Jonathan, that had saved Israel that day while eating some of the honey that was found on the ground. While Saul sought to fulfill that vow, the people intervened and saved him from being killed by Saul.

Does strict obedience to the letter of the law sometimes cause us to become blind to other laws which are of far greater importance? If Jephthah really did sacrifice his own child as a burnt offering, did he really fulfill Torah?

And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, *is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.* (Mark 12:33)

Are we sometimes blind to or unwilling to see the merciful side of Yahweh? Do we often seek justice while being blind to the mercy that goes along with it? According to the Messianic Writings, the true character of the wicked is revealed by the fact that they exercise justice without showing also mercy.

Is this not the prevailing attitude of this very generation, to condemn others for the faults which they themselves possess?

For he shall have judgment without mercy, *that hath shewed no mercy*; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment. (James 2:13)