

# Judges 12 - Jephthah Slaughters the Ephraimites; The Judgeships of Ibzan, Elon & Abdon

II. Failure in rescue of Israel through the seven cycles (Judges 3:7—16:31)

(9) Jephthah defeats the Ammonites (Judges 10:6—12:7)

(f) Jephthah slays the East Jordan Ephraimites (12:1-6)

(E) Silence (12:7)

(10) Ibzan (12:8-10)

(11) Elon (12:11-12)

(12) Abdon (12:13-15)

## Judges 12

### Jephthah's Dispute with the Tribe of Ephraim

**1** Now the men of Ephraim were **summoned**, and they crossed to Zaphon; and they said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you!"

**1** Then the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you."

**1** A little while later, the army of Ephraim was mustered, and they crossed to Zaphon. They confronted Jephthah and asked, "Why did you cross over to fight the Ammonites without calling us to accompany you? We're going to burn your house down around you!"

**1** And the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and went northward, and said unto Jephthah, Wherefore passedst thou over to fight against the children of Ammon, and didst not call us to go with thee? we will burn thine house upon thee with fire.

- "...summoned" - the "mustered" themselves, with hostile intentions, and crossed the Jordan River and confronted Jephthah in the town of Zaphon

- The leaders of the tribe of Ephraim expressed to Jephthah the same pride and anger they had shown to Gideon (8:1)

— As before, they felt entitled to share the glory of victory even though they weren't willing to risk their lives in battle

— Ephraim considered themselves to be the most important tribe, so the failure to call them to war was taken as a deliberate insult

— They had only hostility to the new ruler of the tribes east of the Jordan. There was, apparently, a long standing disparagement of the tribes who remained east of the Jordan: Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh. They were looked down upon by the tribes west of the Jordan, exemplified by the Ephraimites.

- They threatened Jephthah with death because of this "insult" (Cf. 14:15)

- The Tribe of Ephraim is viewed as complainers in Scripture:

— When Joshua divided the Land, they were not happy with what they received (Joshua 17:14-16)

— They were offended by Gideon because they were not invited earlier to help fight the Midianites (8:1)

— Now, they found fault with Jephthah...

2 So Jephthah said to them, "I and my people were in a major dispute with the sons of Ammon; and I did call you, but you did not save me from their hand.

2 Jephthah said to them, "I and my people were at great strife with the sons of Ammon; when I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand.

2 But Jephthah replied to them, "My army and I were engaged in a serious fight with the Ammonites. I called for you, but you didn't deliver me from their control.

2 And Jephthah said unto them, I and my people were at great strife with the children of Ammon; and when I called you, ye delivered me not out of their hands.

- This fact was not previously recorded. If it were true, it would have come at the time when he was appointed leader and while he was negotiating with the king of Ammon.

— At that time he also issued a general call to arms, which would have included a call to Ephraim. Jephthah claims that they failed to answer the call.

3 When I saw that you were no deliverer, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the sons of Ammon, and the LORD handed them over to me. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?"

3 When I saw that you would not deliver *me*, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the sons of Ammon, and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?"

3 When I saw that you wouldn't be delivering me, I took my own life in my hands, crossed over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into my control. So why have you come here today to fight me?"

3 And when I saw that ye delivered me not, I put my life in my hands, and passed over against the children of Ammon, and the LORD delivered them into my hand: wherefore then are ye come up unto me this day, to fight against me?

- When Jephthah saw realized that no help was coming from the Ephraimites, he took action without them  
- Gideon had used flattery, but Jephthah took a more direct approach: he reminded them that:

- (1) His first concern was to defeat the Ammonites, not to please his neighbors
- (2) Furthermore, for 18 years, nobody from Ephraim had offered to come to their rescue
- (3) Jephthah had issued a call for the tribes to assist him, but Ephraim hadn't responded
- (4) It did not seem that the Lord needed their help...

4 Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought Ephraim; and the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, "You are survivors of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim *and* in the midst of Manasseh."

4 Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought Ephraim; and the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, O Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim *and* in the midst of Manasseh."

4 Then Jephthah mustered all the men of Gilead, fought the tribe of Ephraim, and defeated them, because they had been claiming, "You descendants of Gilead are fugitives in the midst of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh."

4 Then Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and fought with Ephraim: and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they said, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites.

- The dispute led to tribal war

— The disbanded army of Gilead was called back to arms to meet the threat from within

— This was vengeance for an insult, which was basically saying: You Gileadites are a mob gathered together from Ephraim that have run away; you are an obscure group of men of no name, living in the midst of the two most noble and illustrious tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh; you Gileadites may think yourselves to be brave soldiers, but you are actually comparable with the most despicable of the Ephraimites, who desert in time of war, to be found in the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.

### **Shibboleth vs. Sibboleth**

5 And the Gileadites took control of the crossing places of the Jordan opposite Ephraim. And it happened whenever *any of the survivors* of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," that the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No,"

5 The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan opposite Ephraim. And it happened when *any of the fugitives* of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say

to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No,"

5 The descendants of Gilead seized control of the Jordan River's fords along the border of Ephraim's territory. Later on, when any fugitive from Ephraim asked them, "Let me cross over," the men from Gilead would ask him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said "No,"

5 And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay;

- The slaughter of the Ephraimite fugitives begins with the capture of the crossing points along the Jordan River

— The purpose was to cut off the escape of the remnants of the army of Ephraim that had escaped the field of battle

— Ironically, under Gideon, the Ephraimites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Midianites; now the same tactic is used against the fugitives of Ephraim

- "...survivors" - *pahleet*, refugee, fugitive, renegade

— With the crossing points of the Jordan now guarded by Jephthah's men, they would question anyone attempting to cross to the trans-Jordan side

6 then they would say to him, "Just say, 'Shibboleth.'" But he said, "Sibboleth," for he was not prepared to pronounce it correctly. Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the crossing places of the Jordan. So at that time **forty-two thousand** from Ephraim fell.

6 then they would say to him, "Say now, 'Shibboleth.'" But he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it correctly. Then they seized him and slew him at the fords of the Jordan. Thus there fell at that time 42,000 of Ephraim.

6 they would order him, "Pronounce the word 'Shibboleth' right now." If he said "Sibboleth," not being able to pronounce it correctly, they would seize him and slaughter him there at the fords of the Jordan River. During those days 42,000 descendants of Ephraim died that way.

6 Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.

- If a person questioned denied being an Ephraimite, they had a test: they would have to pronounce the word "Shibboleth"

— An Ephraimite would pronounce it "Sibboleth," illustrating the dialect difference between the tribes; they apparently could not pronounce the "sh" sound

— If one could not pronounce it correctly, they would be slaughtered on the spot

- "...forty-two thousand" - this does not mean that 42,000 were slaughtered at the fords of the Jordan; this was the total for the entire war

— However, it was quite a slaughter. Perhaps Jephthah could have practiced Prov 15:1; 17:14, but it seems that the time had come to call their bluff (Jephthah had attempted diplomacy with the Ammonites, so it seems he knew how and when to employ it)  
— The Ephraimites are never again viewed as making such arrogant claims, so it appears they learned their lesson

### **Shibboleth**

The Hebrew word Shibboleth means “a stream” or “ear of grain.” The Ephraimites were unable to pronounce the aspirate (as indeed the Greeks also have no “sh” sound), and said Sibboleth, so, for them, it was a dead give away! (Sibboleth means “burden”; to the Ephraimites, it sure was!)

This same dialectical issue surfaces in the NT:

Matt 26:73 - And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech betrayeth thee.

Mark 14:69-70:

69 And a maid saw him again, and began to say to them that stood by, This is one of them.

70 And he denied it again. And a little after, they that stood by said again to Peter, Surely thou art one of them: for thou art a Galilaean, and thy speech agreeth thereto.

Matt 12:37: Jesus also said our words will either justify or betray us: For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.

### **The Judgeship and Death of Jephthah**

**7** Jephthah judged Israel for six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in *one of the cities of Gilead.*

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**7** Jephthah governed Israel for six years. Then Jephthah died and was buried somewhere in the cities of Gilead.

**7** And Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then died Jephthah the Gileadite, and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead.

### **The Judgeship of Ibzan**

**8** Now **Ibzan** of **Bethlehem** judged Israel after him.

**8** Now Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel after him.

8 After he died, Ibzan from Bethlehem governed Israel for ten years.

8 And after him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel.

- Another judge of whom there is little detail...

- "...Ibzan" - "swift"

- "...Bethlehem" - not the Bethlehem in Judah (Ephrathah); rather, the Bethlehem up north in Zebulun, about 6 miles from Nazareth

— Josephus, however, records that Ibsan was of the tribe of Judah

9 He had thirty sons, and thirty daughters *whom* he gave in marriage outside *the family*, and he brought in thirty daughters from outside for his sons. And he judged Israel for seven years.

9 He had thirty sons, and thirty daughters *whom* he gave in marriage outside *the family*, and he brought in thirty daughters from outside for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years.

9 He had 30 sons and 30 daughters, but he gave his daughters in marriage to outsiders and brought in 30 outsiders for his sons. He governed Israel for seven years,

9 And he had thirty sons, and thirty daughters, whom he sent abroad, and took in thirty daughters from abroad for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years.

- 60 children was obviously the result of polygamous relationships

- Josephus [*Antiquities*, 5:7.130] says that, except being the head of a very numerous family, he did nothing in the seven years of his administration that was worth recording or deserved a memorial

— So he died an old man and was buried in his own country

— Every Jew was to teach his sons three things: The law, a trade, and to find a wife. Ibzan apparently had his hands full...

10 Then Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem.

10 Then Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem.

10 then he died and was buried in Bethlehem.

10 Then died Ibzan, and was buried at Bethlehem.

### **The Judgeship of Elon**

11 Now **Elon** the Zebulunite judged Israel after him; he judged Israel for ten years.

11 Now Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel after him; and he judged Israel ten years.

11 Elon the Zebulunite governed Israel after him for ten years.

11 And after him Elon, a Zebulonite, judged Israel; and he judged Israel ten years.

- Another judge of whom there is little detail...

- "...Elon" - "plain"

- 12 Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.  
12 Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.  
12 Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried in Aijalon within the territory of Zebulun.  
12 And Elon the Zebulunite died, and was buried in Aijalon in the country of Zebulun.  
- Elon and Aijalon are identical in unpointed Hebrew. Aijalon is not listed among the Zebulunite cities in Joshua 19:10-16; perhaps it was named from Elon, its possessor.

### **The Judgeship of Abdon**

- 13** Now **Abdon** the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel after him.  
**13** Now Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel after him.  
**13** Hillel the Pirathonite's son Abdon governed Israel after him.  
**13** And after him Abdon the son of Hillel, a Pirathonite, judged Israel.  
- Another judge of whom there is little detail...  
- "...Abdon" - "service"  
— Appears as a name of a Benjaminite in 1 Chr 8:23,30, although the town of Pirathon was in Ephraim, so he was likely an Ephraimite

14 He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy **donkeys**; and he judged Israel for eight years.

14 He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys; and he judged Israel eight years.

14 He had 40 sons and 30 grandsons who rode on 70 donkeys. He governed Israel for eight years.

14 And he had forty sons and thirty nephews, that rode on threescore and ten ass colts: and he judged Israel eight years.

- This implies a time of peace and prosperity

- "...donkeys" - may refer to horses

15 Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

15 Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

15 Then he died and was buried at Pirathon in the territory of Ephraim, in the mountainous region of the Amalekites.

15 And Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died, and was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the mount of the Amalekites.

- After the victories of Jephthah, and the leadership of his three successors, Israel had 31 years of peace and security

— How paradoxical: the hero of the defeat of the Ammonites—and the trouncing of Ephraim—had no family, and yet his successors had numerous children and grandchildren

From 10:6–12:7, Jephthah judged Israel and conquered the enemies in the east. The next four chapters (Judges 13-16) will review the career of Samson, dealing with the Philistines in the west.