

# Judges 12 Commentary

PREVIOUS

NEXT

CLICK VERSE

To go directly to that verse

- Judges 12:1
- Judges 12:2
- Judges 12:3
- Judges 12:4
- Judges 12:5
- Judges 12:6
- Judges 12:7
- Judges 12:8
- Judges 12:9
- Judges 12:10
- Judges 12:11
- Judges 12:12
- Judges 12:13
- Judges 12:14
- Judges 12:15

Chart from recommended resource [Jensen's Survey of the OT](#) - used by permission  
Chart on Judges - Charles Swindoll

RECYCLING SIN (The High Cost of Compromise)		
Jdg 1:1-3:6	Jdg 3:7-16:31	Jdg 17:1-21:25
Introduction	History of the Judges	Appendix
Causes of the Cycles	Curse of the Cycles	Conditions in the Cycles
THE REASON	THE RECORD	THE RESULTS
Failure to Complete Conquest Jdg 1:1-36 God's Judgment for Failure Jdg 2:1-3:6	Curse of the Cycles	Conditions in the Cycles
Living with Canaanites	War with the Canaanites	Living Like the Canaanites
Religious Laxity	Political Uncertainty	Moral Anarchy
About 350 Years of Israel's History - Almost 25%! From Compromise to Confusion!		
A TIMELINE OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY "in the days when the JUDGES governed" (Note: All dates are approximations & time gaps NOT to scale)		
Exodus	40 Years	Israel Enters Canaan
JUDGES		
Saul	David	Messiah

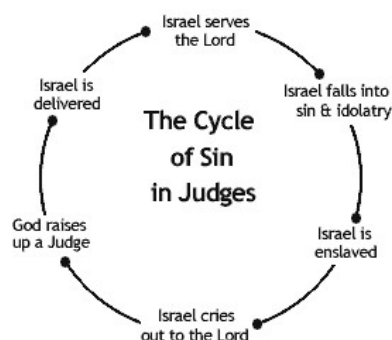
Redemption from Slavery	Wilderness Wandering	Canaan Conquered Joshua Dies	<b>LIGHT of book of RUTH Shines forth in Dark Days of Judges</b>	To obey is better than sacrifice	Man after God's Own Heart	The Lamb that was slain
--	40 yrs	~24 yrs	<b>350+ yrs</b>	40 yrs	40 yrs	Forever
MESSIAH'S LINE		To Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab	<b>To Boaz was born Obed by Ruth</b>	To Obed was born Jesse	To Jesse was born David the King	Jesus Christ the Lord
1445BC	1445 -1405	1405 -1381	<b>1381-1051</b>	1051-1011	1011-971	4AD

### Another Timeline of Israel's History

Click to Enlarge

from [Jensen's Survey of the OT](#)

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### Other ways to describe Israel's cycle...

- Rest > Rebellion > Retribution > Repentance (?) > Restoration
- Sin > Suffering/Servitude > Supplication > Salvation
- Apathy > Apostasy > Affliction > Answered Prayer
- Disobedience > Desperation > Deliverance
- Disobedience > Bondage > Misery > Liberation and Rest > Compromises

### Israel's deliverance (Judges 10:17-12:7) - Hannah's Bible Outline

1. **The preparations for battle** (Judges 10:17-11:28)
  - a. The armies gathered (Judges 10:17-18)
  - b. The leader secured (Judges 11:1-11)
    1. His background (Judges 11:1-3)
    2. His covenant (Judges 11:4-11)
  - c. The messages to Ammon (Judges 11:12-28)
2. **The vow and victory in battle** (Judges 11:29-40)
  - a. The vow made (Judges 11:29-31)
  - b. The victory secured (Judges 11:32-33)
  - c. The vow observed (Judges 11:34-40)
3. **The strife with Ephraim** (Judges 12:1-6)
  - a. Ephraim's jealousy (Judges 12:1-3)
  - b. Ephraim's defeat (Judges 12:4-6)
4. **The death of Jephthah** (Judges 12:7)

**John Butler** - JEPHTHAH, THE NINTH judge of Israel had a checkered career. It ended better than it started, however. His worth to Israel is his deliverance of Israel from the oppression of Ammonites, but he will always be a controversial character because of his

vow that affected his daughter. Judges 11 can be divided into seven major parts as follows:

- The Valor of Jephthah (Judges 11:1)
- The Vilification of Jephthah (Judges 11:1–3)
- The Visitors of Jephthah (Judges 11:4–11)
- The Villain for Jephthah (Judges 11:12–29)
- The Vow of Jephthah (Judges 11:30, 31, 35)
- The Victory of Jephthah (Judges 11:32, 33)
- The Vexation of Jephthah (Judges 11:34–40)

#### **Paul Apple (Judges 10:6-12:15) Cycle # 5 – Deliverance from Philistines and Ammonites Jephthah (Judge #8)**

God can use a man who is rejected by the world but appropriates His grace

##### **1. Judges 10:6-11:28 Rise of Jephthah – From Despised Reject to Desired Recruit --**

Don't Underestimate the Love of God in Remaining Faithful to His People Despite Their Repeated Apostasies . . . And Don't Underestimate the Grace of God in Transforming Human Outcasts Into Conquering Heroes

##### **2. Judges 11:29-40 Jephthah's Tragic Vow – Don't Bargain With God –**

Commitments Made to the Lord Must Be Kept Regardless of the Cost

##### **3. Judges 12:1-7 Jephthah's Legacy -- Internal Conflict Tears Apart the People of God –**

Inflated Egos and a Harsh Spirit Erupt in Tragic Conflict for the People of God

Remember what was prophesied of the Lord Jesus Christ: "the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." (1 Peter 2:7-8; Ps. 118:22 – "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." Acts 4:11-12) All of the judges point to the ultimate Deliverer in some form or fashion. Today we are going to be amazed at the love of God for His people and the grace of God to make leaders out of cast off rubble. Whatever our past may have been, by the providence of God it can be used to shape us and mold us for great usefulness to the Lord in the future.

**Judges 12:1 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."**

- **Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon:** Jdg 8:1 2Sa 19:41-43 Ps 109:4 Ec 4:4 Jn 10:32
- **We will burn your house down on you:** Jdg 14:15 15:6 Pr 27:3,4 Jas 3:16 4:1,2
- Judges 12 Resources

### **JEALOUSY OF JEPHTHAH LEADS TO CIVIL WAR**

**Holman Old Testament Commentary** The story of Ephraim and Jephthah graphically portrays the head-on collision of pride and jealousy with raw anger—in both cases the unrestrained outcome of sin.

**Then the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah** - The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were descendants of the two sons of Joseph of the same names. Their importance is confirmed by the way the whole of northern Israel is referred to as "the house of Joseph" in Jdg 1:22, 35.

Pride and jealousy motivated the tribe of Ephraim to confront Jephthah for now they wanted to share in the glory, whereas before they had not been willing to undertake the task.

Guzik feels that the prideful tribe of Ephraim "felt slighted by Jephthah, and was angry that they did not have a central and prestigious role in the victorious battle over the Ammonites. There is a tendency within all of us to not want to do a job unless we receive credit. It is evident that the people of the tribe of Ephraim were more concerned with getting the credit than with seeing a job done."

**Daniel Block** - The final recorded episode of his life reflects the political disintegration within Israel that accompanied the spiritual

declension. Jealousies drive east versus west, Gilead versus Ephraim. (Borrow [Judges, Ruth. Vol. 6: New American Commentary - archive.org](#) )

**NLT Life Application Study Bible** - Israel had just won a great battle, but instead of joy, there was pettiness and quarreling. The tribe of Ephraim was angry and jealous that they were not invited to join in the fighting (although Jephthah said he had invited them). The insults of the Ephraimites enraged Jephthah, who called out his troops and killed 42,000 men from Ephraim. Jephthah usually spoke before he acted, but this time his revenge was swift. It cost Israel dearly, and it might have been avoided. Insulting others and being jealous are not right responses when we feel left out. But seeking revenge for an insult is just as wrong and very costly. (Borrow [Life application study Bible](#))

**Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you?** They complained that they had not been called on to help fight against the Ammonites, a complaint similar to the one lodged against Gideon (Jdg 8:1-3). Instead of using a soft answer (Pr 15:1) to turn away wrath, Jephthah responded to the insults and threats of Ephraim with armed forces. This civil conflict in Israel cost the Ephraimites 42,000 lives, a high price for jealousy! This intertribal war spelled disaster for the tribe of Ephraim, which did not fully recover and achieve recognition and leadership until after the downfall of Solomon.

This incident also reveals that the separation of eastern and western tribes was even having linguistic results (Jdg 12:6).

Pride was at the bottom of the quarrel; only by that comes contention. It is ill to fasten names of reproach upon persons or countries, as is common, especially upon those under outward disadvantages. It often occasions quarrels that prove of ill consequence, as it did here. No contentions are so bitter as those between brethren or rivals for honour. What need we have to watch and pray against evil tempers! May the Lord incline all his people to follow after things which make for peace!

We have seen that the men of Ephraim also quarreled with Gideon (Jdg 8:1) when he didn't summon them to help him rout the Midianites. Now in a hostile way, they demanded that Jephthah give them the reason why he did not ask for their help in the battle. The jealousy of Ephraim was a real infection that led to a defection. Later on, when the kingdom is divided into north and south, you will find out that Ephraim is the center of all of the rebellion. And it probably goes back to their jealousy.

There is jealousy in the church today. It is one of our greatest problems. Paul speaks of vanity and envy (Php2:3) two things that cause problems in churches today. When you hear some person in a church complain that it is not being run the way he thinks it should be we need to wonder if he is jealous. When you find someone who is opposing the preacher all of the time, suspect there is jealousy behind it.

**George Bush - The men of Ephraim gathered themselves together.** Heb. יִצְטָאֵךְ אִישׁ אֶפְרַיִם yitzta'êk ish Ephrayim, the man of Ephraim was cried together; collective singular for the plural; i. e. summoned together by the voice of heralds passing to and fro through the tribe. The passive voice in Heb. often has a reciprocal import, and here probably is intended to convey the idea of a mutual stirring each other up, independent of the will of a superior, and a consequent flocking together in somewhat of a loose and tumultuary manner. With this as the leading idea of the passage before his mind, Jerome, in the Vulgate, has rendered it, 'And there arose a sedition in Ephraim;' on which Rosenmüller remarks, that he took the Heb. verb to imply that by mutual clamor and vociferation they excited themselves to sedition and tumult.

Went northward. Heb. יַעְבֹר צָפוֹנָה ya'abor tzâphonâh, passed over northward. Crossing the Jordan, they advanced in a northerly direction towards Mizpeh, where Jephthah now was. This region lay to the northeast, rather than directly north of the territory of Ephraim. See map.

**Wherefore passedst thou over, &c.** Not over Jordan, for he was on the farther side of that river already; but simply over the intermediate regions between him and the scene of conflict. We have here a second proof of the haughty and turbulent disposition of the Ephraimites. They had no just ground whatever for their present bitter crimination of Jephthah. Their jealous and envious spirit towards Manasseh, was the only cause of the injurious charge, and violent threat which they now uttered. Although from being both the sons of Joseph they were nearer akin than any other of the tribes, yet between none other of the tribes was there such a burning spirit of rivalry and disaffection as between them. The conduct of the Ephraimites on this occasion, compared with their complaints to Joshua, and their hostile attitude towards Gideon, clearly evinces a disposition to lord it over the other tribes, with an authority and pre-eminence to which they were certainly not yet entitled. We are reminded by the incidents of the narrative, (1) That quarrels between brethren are usually most bitter and violent. 'A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city; and their contentions are as the bars of a castle.' (2) They who have done the greatest service to the cause of God, are not secure from the greatest insults, even sometimes from the pretended friends of that cause. The most spotless characters are often the chosen marks for the fangs of envy to fasten upon. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A H Fausset** - And the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together [were called together, or gathered by summons], and went [Heb., "passed over," viz., the Jordan] northward, [crossing at the ford near Succoth. Or else for 'northward,' translate "to Zaphon," mentioned with Succoth in Josh. 13:27], and said unto Jephthah, Wherefore passedst thou over [the same word as in ch. 11:29] to fight against the children of Ammon, and didst not call us to go with thee? we will burn thine house upon thee [over thine head

**Cyril Barber** - John Marshall Lang described the scene:

Ephraim, the central tribe, had acquired a position in Israel which encouraged an overbearing spirit; and this spirit was manifest in an offensive attitude towards Jephthah.... [Their tone in approaching him was one of hostility] and he had not deserved such reproach.

"Why have you crossed over to fight with the sons of Ammon, and you have not called on us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire" (12:1).

[Jephthah's] answer, though sharp, is marked by dignity. He had given the haughty Ephraimites the opportunity of helping in the war. They had declined it, leaving him and his people to do battle alone. He correctly picked up on the attitude of the men of Ephraim, and asks,

"Why have you come to me today to fight against me?" (12:3).

But remonstrance is in vain, and for the most miserable of causes, there ensues a fierce contention. The statement of the historian is that "there fell forty-two thousand Ephraimites at the passage of the Jordan."

Many condemn Jephthah for not preventing this war, but the fact remains that the people of Ephraim approached him intent on bloodshed. Their spirit was such that Jephthah could not placate them. He had become God's representative to the people as a whole; and to fight against him was tantamount to fighting against the Lord. That the Ephraimites did not recognize this indicates their spiritual insensitivity.

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**Keith Krell** - **Scene 5: Jephthah turns on his own people (12:1-7)**. Just when you thought things couldn't get any worse, they do! The author of Judges writes in Jdg 12:1, "**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?'**" The word "us" is emphatic in the Hebrew text. Ephraim's gripe is that they are somebodies and you don't treat somebodies like nobodies. This tribe wants to be on the front page of the Jerusalem Times. They are glory hounds! So in their outrage, Ephraim exclaims, "**We will burn your house down on you.**" This statement is dripping with irony, for Jephthah just finished burning his own house (i.e., lineage) down. In 12:2-3, Jephthah responds by explaining that he had called on the Ephraimites, but they had left him in the lurch. In fact, Ephraim had eighteen years to step up and get involved in the battle, but they never did. Nevertheless, the Lord Himself gave Israel the victory over Ammon.

This scene concludes with a tragic civil war. Initially, the Israelites were fighting together, against their common enemies. Now, the Israelites are fighting among themselves. In Jdg 12:4-6, Jephthah and his men fight Ephraim, capture the land, and play a game of Bible Password. The Ephraimites who tried to escape are asked to say the word "**Shibboleth**," meaning "stream." (NOTE - Because of this story, the word "shibboleth" has become a part of our English vocabulary and is now found in our dictionaries. It stands for any kind of test that a group gives to outsiders to see whether they really belong.) Unfortunately, the Ephraimites cannot pronounce the "sh" sound so they say "**Sibboleth**." This hits particularly close to home for me. When I first came to my present church, I would frequently say "tanks," instead of "thanks." For whatever reason, I did not pronounce the "th" in the word "thanks." People gave me a hard time about this and I was eventually able to change my ways. (NOTE: Depending upon the region one lives, there are different pronunciations of words such as aunt, almond, theater, lawyer, and root. I also get a kick out of Oragon vs. Oregon and Wershington vs. Washington.) Unfortunately, the Ephraimites were not able to do so! So every Ephraimite who played Bible Password that day lost. The death toll reached 42,000! Jephthah exacts revenge when offended and does not know the true character of the Lord or the content of His law. (NOTE: In contrast to Ehud who took the fords of the Jordan against a Gentile army (Jdg 3:28-30), Jephthah is fighting against Israel.) ([Judges 10:6-12:7: Failure of the Family](#))

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**Gary Inrig** - Strangely, Jephthah's victory not only provoked a family crisis but also a national one. It is hard to imagine a more obnoxious attitude than that displayed by the Ephraimites. They had reacted to Gideon in a similar way in the middle of his battle with Midian. Ephraim was always brave after the battle. Obviously, the Ephraimites were an arrogant, critical, envious, self-important group. They were very sure of their own rights but totally unwilling to accept their responsibilities. They were the kind of people who are always brave only after the battle. For eighteen years they had done nothing to resist Ammon themselves. But now they came with their petty complaints and their outrageous threats. Imagine threatening to burn down Jephthah's house with him inside because they didn't get summoned to join in the victory. They seem always ready to fight with their brothers but never against the enemy.

This time they had made a serious mistake. They had totally misread Jephthah. Gideon had been willing, in the middle of a battle, to humor Ephraim to keep Israel united. But this battle was over, and Jephthah was not Gideon. At first he responded gently. He pointed out that he had, in fact, called them, and they had not come. Then, at the risk of his life, while Ephraim basked in safety, he had rushed into battle against Ammon, and the Lord had given him victory. The Ephraimites had nothing about which to complain.

The Ephraimites were not willing to listen to logic or truth. They began to sneer at Jephthah's men, mixing false accusations with tribal arrogance and social slurs ("renegades"). They aggravated them and goaded them on until, finally, Jephthah and his men could contain their anger no longer. They turned in fury on the men of Ephraim.

It is important that we realize the kind of ignorance the Ephraimites represent. It was an ignorance of their God-given responsibility. They were happy gathering up the spoil, and they were very quick to defend their rights and privileges, but they had no taste for battle. God had called them to join in the fight against the people on the land, but Ephraim was only willing to stand back and criticize until the battle was won.

I am afraid that there are far too many Christians who are Ephraimites when it comes to understanding their God-given responsibilities. They are more than willing to let other believers move out into the world and to let other Christians confront the world with the gospel. Other people should get involved in teaching Sunday school or doing menial work or going to the mission field or engaging in Christian service. But these people reserve the right to criticize from the sidelines or even to condemn what these other Christians do. They are very critical of their brothers and sisters, but they are not involved in confronting the enemy. As someone has said, their prayer is, "Lord, use me in your work, but in an advisory capacity!"

I am reminded of the story of the man who came up to D. L. Moody and said, "Mr. Moody, I don't like the way you preach the gospel."

"You know," Mr. Moody said, "I'm always willing to learn. Tell me about the method you use."

"I guess I don't really have one," the man said.

"I'll tell you what," Moody said, "I like the way I do it better than the way you don't do it."

The Ephraimite attitude is destructive and divisive. The church of Jesus Christ does not need grandstand quarterbacks or armchair generals. It needs believers who are willing to take their God-given responsibility to serve God and other believers. It is contemptible to have the heart of an Ephraimite. Do not complain and criticize. Instead, lead by example, encouragement, and edification!

The final stage of the story brings us back to Jephthah. Once again we see the destructiveness of zeal without understanding.

The church of Jesus Christ does not need grandstand quarterbacks or armchair generals. It needs believers who are willing to take their God-given responsibility to serve God and other believers. (Borrow [Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay](#))

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### **Phil Newton - A tragic footnote, Judges 12:1-6 Pride goes before a fall**

Ephraim was at it again, boasting of being the biggest, baddest and the best! They had not lifted a finger to help Gilead for 18 years. Now they feel their pride crushed over this "nobody" leading an insignificant group in victory. Pride cannot accept the sovereign work of God. Jephthah gave testimony - Jdg 12:3 - but it was not enough. He shot straight while Gideon appeased them (Jdg 8:1-3). Pride always battles against the reality of our own weak, sinful flesh.

The cost of pride, Judges 12:4-6

This is where an accent proved costly. It was a tell-tale on the Ephraimites so that eventually 42,000 died.

Confusing times, indeed! Israel's chaotic ways of pursuing their own way against the Lord left the pockmarks of rebellion in their own people. Jephthah delivered the Gileadites from Ammon, but his own lack of trust and his mindset that thought God could be manipulated and controlled by his vow ended up costing him. Ephraim's pride left them in a tragic shape so that they never regained their position of dominance after this.

### **What do we learn?**

1. Fragmented spirituality laced with doses of the world can never profit us or honor the Lord.
2. Vows must be made thoughtfully, without any hint of manipulating the Lord, but only out of love and devotion to Him. He is not in the bargaining business.
3. We must esteem honor and integrity even to our own hurt.
4. We must beware of pride that lurks about us to destroy.
5. God uses even weak, unesteemed instruments to accomplish His purposes. ([Sermon](#))

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**Bob Deffinbaugh** - Now, once again we find the Ephraimites talking big after the battle is won, suffering from wounded pride because they wanted greater glory.

I confess, aside from Jephthah's vow, I like this guy. Unlike the ego flattery employed by Gideon, Jephthah deals with the Ephraimites as he did with the king of Ammon. He is polite, but he speaks the truth in a forthright manner. There is no "mealy mouthing" going on here. His diplomacy employs plain speech, the meaning of which cannot be missed. And it is also clear that he is unwilling to bend the truth in order to avoid conflict. He speaks the truth and is willing to back it up with military might if need be.

Notice two things about the Ephraimites' words. First, they were untrue. They accused Jephthah of failing to give them the opportunity to join in the battle against the Ammonites (now that the battle had already been won). Jephthah sets the record straight. He did summon the Ephraimites for the battle. The problem wasn't his failure to call them to battle; it was the Ephraimites' failure to answer the call and to assist in the battle. These folks talk big, but they do little. They want to be there when the battle is won and the medals are being passed out, but they don't want to engage in the battle. When Jephthah realized that they weren't coming, he went to battle without them, facing the dangers that presented. And there was something else these Ephraimites needed to know. The battle was the Lord's. Had the Ephraimites engaged in this battle, the glory for victory would not have been theirs to claim. It was God who won the battle, and it was God alone who should receive the glory.

The second thing we should note about the words of the Ephraimites is the violence that is threatened. Those who were not courageous enough to engage the Ammonites in battle were now "mighty in word" when it came to their threats against their Israelite brethren. They actually threatened to burn down Jephthah's house, no doubt with him and his family (a guess that just leaves his wife) inside. The Ephraimites seem prone to anger. (See 2 Chronicles 25:10) ([Jephthah: Words Matter Judges 10:1-12:15](#))

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### Judges 12.1 G Campbell Morgan

We will burn thine house upon thee with fire. Judges 12:1

We draw attention to these words in the story because they illustrate the arrogance with which injustice often speaks, and the sequel shows the utter futility and folly of such boasting. The men of Ephraim could have had no reason for this complaint and threat, other than that of hatred of Jephthah. They complained that he had not called upon them to help as he went forth to war with Ammon. The folly of that complaint is evidenced by the fact that he had gained a complete victory without their aid. If he had failed, they might have had some reason for complaint. The answer of Jephthah to the complaint and threat was logical and final. He first told them why he had not called them. When he and his people had been at strife with Ammon, he had asked the help of Ephraim, and it had been withheld. Why then should he appeal to them again? Having thus given an answer to the complaint, he replied to the threat by severe punishment. It may safely be affirmed that behind arrogance and threatening, there is invariably injustice; and further, that these things are the sure signs of incompetence. A frantic boast is proof positive of fundamental weakness. To threaten frightfulness is to declare the consciousness of wrong. Those who are strong in the sense of the justice of their cause, are never arrogant in their speech; they do not threaten, they act. When we are tempted to loud protestations of ability, we may well seek for the weakness which inspired us to such wordiness. When we are inclined to threaten, we are wise if we ask ourselves what injustice prompts such action. (Borrow [Life applications from every chapter of the Bible](#))

**Judges 12:2 And 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.**

- **I and my:** Jdg 11:12-33
- Judges 12 Resources

### Related Passages:

Judges 8:1-3+ Then the men of Ephraim said to him, "What is this thing you have done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian?" And they contended with him vigorously. 2 But he said to them, "What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? 3 "God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb into your hands; and what was I able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that.

**And 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.** There is no mention that he had sent out a call to help in Judges 11. His reaction is surprising in light of his attempts at diplomacy with the king of Ammon! [As recorded above](#) a similar situation arose with Gideon but here Jephthah reminds them he had given them ample opportunity but they had failed to respond. This same problem often arises in church conflicts today. Gideon answered Ephraim with softness and conquered (cf Pr 15:1+) but Jephthah replied with vigor.

**George Bush - And Jephthah said unto them, &c.** Jephthah's answer, at once firm but temperate, shows that their charge was as

false as malicious; that he had called them, and they refused to come. The greatest boasters and loudest pretenders are usually the greatest cowards; and they who are themselves most in fault, are often prone to shield themselves, by accusing the innocent.

**I and my people were at great strife, &c.** Heb. 'I was a man of strife, and my people, and the children of Ammon greatly.' As if he had said, 'Although the quarrel was chiefly between us Gileadites and the Ammonites, and not between you and them, yet out of respect to you as brethren and confederates, I gave you an invitation to join our forces, yet you declined.' In reality, therefore, he had more cause to condemn them for their indifference to the fate of their brethren, than they him for taking the field without them. Reason is very apt to forsake those who renounce right. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A H Fausset** - And Jephthah said, I and my people were at great strife [Heb., "A man of strife have I been, I and my people" (so Isa. 41:11, margin). We were engaged in such desperate strife, as ought to have enlisted your help, as brethren] with the children of Ammon; and when I called you [distinct Hebrew from 'call' in ver. 1: Ez'aqu, "I implored you." Either he or they told an untruth; probably they: as proud and angry people are reckless of what they say], ye delivered me not out of their hands [the call to Ephraim is not detailed before. Jephthah speaks not merely in his own person, but in the person of his people, who appealed for help virtually, when encamped in Mizpeh (Judges 10:17, 18). Jephthah went over Gilead and Manasseh, gathering forces, which also was a virtual appeal to all patriotic Israelites (Judges 11:29). The Gileadites may have expressly invited Ephraim, and been refused, just because Jephthah had been appointed without consulting Ephraim]. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**Judges 12:3 "And 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?"**

- **I took:** Jdg 9:17 1Sa 19:5 28:21 Job 13:14 Ps 119:109 Ro 16:4 Rev 12:11
- **Why then have you come up:** Jdg 11:27 2Ch 13:12
- Judges 12 Resources

**And when I saw that you would not deliver**([yasha'](#); Lxx - [sozo](#) - rescue) **me - NET** = "When I saw that you were not going to help."

**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?** - The phrase **I took my life in my hands** pictures one carrying his very life in his hands and is used of risking one's life through a daring, dangerous action.

**George Bush - I put my life in my hands** Heb. בכפרי bekappi, in my palm. A strong orientalism, implying, 'I risked my life in a seemingly desperate undertaking.' 'The Hindoos use the same figure; and the idea seems to be taken from a man carrying something very precious in his hands, and that under circumstances of great danger. When a son who has been long absent returns home, his father says, "My son has returned from the far country with his life in his hand;" which means, he has passed through many dangers. "Last night as I went home through the place of evil spirits, I put my life in my hands." "The other day in passing through the forest, I put my life in my hands, for the beasts were near to me in every direction." "Danger! truly so; I put my life in my bosom." "O that divine doctor! my son was at the point of death, but he brought his life in his hand." '—Roberts. The same phrase occurs 1 Sam. 19:5, and 28:21; Job 13:14; Ps. 119:109.

**Wherefore then are ye come up unto me this day, to fight against me?** If God was pleased to give me the victory without you, and so far to make use of me for his glory, why should you be offended? Should not your resentment rather become gratitude, that you were spared both labor and danger? Have you any reason to fight against me? Is it not in effect to sin against God, in whose hand I have been only an unworthy instrument? ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A H Fausset** - And when I saw that ye delivered [Heb., "thou deliveredst"] (me) not, I put my life in my hands [Heb., palm (1 Sam. 19:5, 28:21; Job 13:14), put my life in extreme risk], and passed over against the children of Ammon, and the LORD [JEHOVAH] delivered them into my hand [which ye made no effort to do (Jdg 12:3; compare Ps 118:8, 9)]: wherefore then are ye come up unto me this day, to fight against me? ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

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**Deliver** ([03467](#)) **yasha'** (See also [yeshua](#) from which we get our word "Jesus") is an important Hebrew verb which means to help, to save, to deliver. The root in Arabic is "make wide" which underscores the main thought of yasha' as to bring to a place of safety or broad pasture in contrast to a narrow strait which symbolizes distress or danger. **TWOT** adds that the concept of "wide" "connotes freedom from distress and the ability to pursue one's own objectives. To move from distress to safety requires deliverance. Generally the deliverance must come from somewhere outside the party oppressed. In the OT the kinds of distress, both national and individual, include enemies, natural catastrophes, such as plague or famine, and sickness. The one who brings deliverance is known as the "savior." (THINK OF GIDEON IN THE PRESENT PASSAGE). It is notable that almost 20% of the uses of yasha' are found

during the dark days of Judges (dominated by the heart attitude of Jdg 21:25), which surely speaks of the undeserved mercy of God!

**Yasha' in Judges** - Jdg. 2:16; Jdg. 2:18; Jdg. 3:9; Jdg. 3:15; Jdg. 3:31; Jdg. 6:14; Jdg. 6:15; Jdg. 6:31; Jdg. 6:36; Jdg. 6:37; Jdg. 7:2; Jdg. 7:7; Jdg. 8:22; Jdg. 10:1; Jdg. 10:12; Jdg. 10:13; Jdg. 10:14; Jdg. 12:2; Jdg. 12:3; Jdg. 13:5

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## THE TOUCHY TRIBE John H. Paterson

**"Ephraim** shall say, What have I to do any more with idols? I have heard him, and observed him: I am like a green fir tree. From me is thy fruit found." Hosea 14:8

THE history of the Children of Israel forms one of the principal themes of the Old Testament. It is the theme of God's dealings with a chosen group of men and women, through whom He wished to make Himself known to the rest of mankind.

That being the case, have you ever wondered why the Bible dwells at such length upon the fact that, although there was only one people of Israel, there were twelve tribes? About some of these tribes -- Judah, for example -- we know a great deal, but of others very little. For all twelve of them we have a most detailed listing of their borders, their territory and their cities. We also know -- though what to make of it would be hard to say! -- that two and a half tribes decided not to enter the land of promise, but to settle east of the River Jordan. Nothing in their subsequent history shows them to have suffered by this decision, in which case we are left to wonder about their choice.

That the tribes were different from one another early emerges from the story. The point is made by Jacob's thumbnail sketches of his twelve sons in Genesis 49. The successive censuses of the people (e.g. Numbers 2 and 26) show that some tribes became much more numerous than others as time went by, and we can read of the rivalries and conflicts between them which help to explain some of these differences (e.g. Judges 20:35). We know of the special priestly role to which the tribe of Levi was called. And we know that the birthright due to Jacob's oldest son, Reuben ("unstable as water, thou shalt not excel", Genesis 49:4), was forfeited and transferred to Joseph (1 Chronicles 5:1-2).

What all this suggests is that, if we can but trace them, we have here twelve histories rather than just one. To pick out these histories in some cases may well prove difficult, for we know so little of the tribe concerned. But it is my guess that, if we could do so, we should be led to the conclusion that the twelve tribes were intended by God to portray through their experiences different aspects of His work and character in human lives. Together, the twelve would then make up a united testimony that "blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Psalm 33:12).

Some of the tribes never really began to fulfil this role; their testimony never "got off the ground". In one or two cases we can see, I believe, what the lesson was supposed to be, and we can also see where the tribe failed. If any reader can do this for all twelve tribes, then I hope that the editor will afford him or her space in these pages for an appropriate series of articles! For myself, I am taking the easy course of dealing here with only one tribe, the one which seems to me most clearly to exemplify the ideas I have so far suggested. That is the tribe of Ephraim.

### The History of Ephraim

Let me start by recalling to you some incidents from the tribe's history in the land of promise, incidents which seem to fit a pattern. In the first place, we find the tribe complaining to Joshua (who was, of course, an Ephraimite himself), that he had not allocated them a large enough territory for a tribe of their size and importance (Joshua 17:14-18). But Joshua knew how to handle his relatives. He said to them, in effect, "Certainly: take all the space you want! All you have to do is to drive out the people in your way!" [110/111] But the natives had chariots of iron, and Ephraim complained that this made the task too difficult; in fact, they never did drive out those inhabitants. The implication was that it was up to Joshua to send along someone to help them: they were a great tribe, but not that great! "The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle" (Psalm 78:9).

Then there are two incidents in Judges, both of which reveal a common character trait. When Gideon had defeated the Midianites, he sent word to the tribe of Ephraim to block the fords of Jordan and cut off the enemy's retreat. This they did, apparently very effectively; it was a manoeuvre of which any general might be proud (Judges 7:24-25), but notice the reaction of Ephraim: "Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest out to fight with the Midianites? And they did chide him sharply" (Judges 8:1). To be used just to block a retreat, rather than to be first-choice troops to fight the battle, was not good enough for Ephraim, the super-tribe!

Almost unbelievably, they did the same thing again, a few years later. This time, the Israelite leader was Jephthah, but the treatment he received was even worse than that meted out to Gideon: "Wherefore passedst thou over to fight against the children of Ammon, and didst not call us to go with thee? We will burn thy house upon thee with fire" (Judges 12:1). But Jephthah did not take this lying down; he pointed out that before the event, when actual danger threatened, they had been deaf and blind to his need for help. It was

only after he had won the victory that they came accusing him of acting without reference to them.

We get the impression that, as a tribe, Ephraim was touchy in the extreme: status-conscious is a modern word which we might use. Nobody was supposed to do anything without giving Ephraim first refusal!

In this respect, if there was one tribe more than another which worried proud Ephraim, it was Judah. The birthright of Reuben, as we are told in 1 Chronicles 5:1-2, might have been transferred to Joseph, Ephraim's father, but "Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him came the chief ruler" -- the royal house. On this basis, any priority, any preeminence among the tribes of Israel that Ephraim might claim had to be shared with Judah. This so worried Ephraim that the prophet Isaiah, in that wonderful eleventh chapter which begins, "there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse" (a man of Judah!), can foresee no greater bliss, in that great and coming day, than that "the envy also of Ephraim shall depart ... Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall not vex Ephraim" (Isaiah 11:13).

### **The Role of Ephraim**

Now all of these characteristics are, you may feel, simply indicative of human weakness: we all know "me-too" people like Ephraim and, indeed, there is a bit of Ephraim in all of us. However, if we bear in mind God's often-declared purpose that His people should represent Him and, by their quality, should testify to His power and greatness, then we are entitled to enquire a little further into this matter and ask: what was it that this tribe, in particular, might have been expected to exhibit in its character, and how does its actual conduct contrast with this intention?

Well, Ephraim, far from being the super-tribe it evidently considered itself to be, was the tribe that had no right to be there at all. Ephraim was not one of the twelve sons of Jacob, but one of Jacob's grandsons. Ephraim and Manasseh were just there to make up the numbers! Levi, as the priestly tribe, was not to be counted as one of the twelve, and Joseph was to be counted twice, because his descendants had become so numerous (Joshua 17:17).

But this was only the last in a long series of events that brought Ephraim to a position of power -- a sequence of divine choices which no human logic could justify. Consider: Ephraim was where he was because Jacob had blessed him ahead of his elder brother, Manasseh (Genesis 48:10-20). Ephraim's father Joseph was where he was, the ruler of Egypt and holder of the family birthright, because he had been blessed ahead of all his brothers: God had made him "to be fruitful in the land of my affliction" (Genesis 41:52), which was how and why Ephraim (-- fruitful) had received his name. [111/112]

But then we go on: Jacob was where he was because he had been preferred, in his turn, to his elder brother Esau (Genesis 25:23), and that quite independently of his own strenuous efforts at self-advancement. And Jacob's father, Isaac, was where he was because he, in turn, had been preferred to his elder brother, Ishmael (Genesis 17:18-19).

What an extraordinary series of events! Four times over, at least, God allowed the natural sequence to be overturned and, at the end of the sequence, there was Ephraim, the product of God's successive interventions. Perhaps we can visualise a modern parallel of someone who joined a firm as an office-boy and then, without ever going near the office in question, was promoted to departmental head, to managing director and, a few days later, to chairman of the board!

Now when we are thinking of God and His actions towards men and women we have a name for this kind of unmerited preferment that Ephraim received. We call it Sovereign Grace. Of the twelve tribes of Israel, Ephraim was the one which, more than all the others, ought to have been aware of God's amazing grace, and lived in the light of it -- of a four-times-over promotion, at the end of which the tribe enjoyed a status that, by nature, it could never for a moment claim.

Here, then, was a tribe whose true destiny was, surely, to be a prime exemplar of God's grace at work in human lives. If anybody could appreciate the meaning and extent of that grace it should have been Ephraim. But, as we have seen, the reverse was the case: touchy, status-conscious, this tribe saw an entitlement where it should have seen the gift of God's grace.

Grace is, I think, the hardest of God's gifts for men and women to appreciate. Indeed, in the whole of the Scriptures, how many men -- and, especially, women -- can you think of who accepted it, humbly and immediately? Ruth and Mary the mother of Jesus would certainly head my list; after them perhaps Hannah; perhaps David in 2 Samuel 7. But the list cannot be much longer than that: for all the others, let alone for ourselves, the acceptance of grace caused, and causes, awful problems!

Think of Joseph, Ephraim's father, who when he was young, sounded exactly as his son was later to sound: "Behold, I have dreamed a dream ... the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me" (Genesis 37:9). What a long and weary way Joseph had to go, through hatred, injustice and neglect, before he came to accept that "God meant it unto good" (Genesis 50:20)!

Think, too, of Jacob, Ephraim's grandfather who, before he learned the meaning of grace, had cheated and been cheated halfway across the Middle East. What travels and trials before the startling realisation came: "God hath dealt graciously with me and ... I

have enough" (Genesis 33:11)! It is a lesson which most of us will finally learn only in the glory of another Day -- to be recipients of the grace of God and to recognise that we have nothing to do but to accept it. And the most difficult "status" of all to maintain is that of the recipient who says, "I have done nothing. I deserve nothing. I am where I am because of God's grace and nothing else."

## Ephraim and Israel

Let me, if I may, add another dimension to this story of grace unappreciated. One has only to spend a few minutes with a concordance to realise that the name Ephraim is not used in the Bible for this one tribe alone. It is also frequently used to cover all those ten tribes which broke away from the rule of Judah's royal house and formed the northern kingdom of Israel. This is probably true, for example, of the passage I have already quoted in Isaiah 11, and is certainly true of such other references as Isaiah 7:8 and 17. Most of all, however, it is true of the prophecies of Hosea.

Now it is evident that this use of the name Ephraim to cover the whole kingdom of the ten tribes is a habit of particular prophets. But I want to suggest that it is also largely confined to passages, or prophetic messages, of a particular kind. If you read the words of Isaiah or Hosea, I think you will find that where the name Ephraim is used in this way, it is nearly always in relation to the love of God for Israel. It is a message to Israel of God's love and grace and their failure to appreciate them; a message of endearment for the undeserving. [112/113]

Families and friends commonly have what we call pet names for each other. They are used in private messages of love or friendship, but almost never when, say, a husband and wife are angry with one another, or when a parent is rebuking a child. A friend of mine told me that he always knew when his father was angry with him; ordinarily, he was known as "Glennie", but if his father called out "Glenn", he knew he was in for trouble!

I hope that it is neither improper nor irreverent to suggest that "Ephraim" was, in a way, God's pet name for His people. Simply by using it, He was identifying Himself as a God of love and grace, no matter how serious were the charges against Israel. And so we turn to the prophecies of Hosea, and read those remarkable phrases in which the pet name appears:

O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee?  
I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms.  
How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? ...  
Mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.  
I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God, and not man.

The "Ephraim theme" of Hosea is a message of love betrayed. There is a note of incredulity in God's words to His people, as when we say to someone who we thought was our friend, "I don't understand: how could you do this to me?" If it were just a matter of sin, law and punishment, there would be no feeling, no emotion involved. It would be like a traffic warden writing out parking tickets for offenders, dispassionately, without emotion. But this time it is Ephraim that is the culprit: God's special Ephraim. Of course He feels involved: He faces the dilemma of love betrayed:

"Is Ephraim my dear son? is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him: I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 31:20).

What lesson is there for us in this brief Bible study? This, perhaps: firstly, that it is perilously easy to presume upon grace; to start out feeling grateful for a gift and, in no time at all, to convince ourselves that what at first looked like grace was, in reality, no more than our entitlement. Secondly, that there is a difference in quality between sin as a legal concept and sin as lack of appreciation: that is, between a relationship covered by law and a relationship created by grace. Ephraim was intended in God's purpose to demonstrate how a relationship with Himself can be created by grace alone. Let their failure alert us to the perils of presuming upon that grace.

"For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

**Judges 12:4 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."**

- **Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead:** Jdg 11:10 Nu 32:39,40 Dt 3:12-17
- **fugitives:** 1Sa 25:10 Ne 4:4 Ps 78:9 Pr 12:13 15:1
- Judges 12 Resources

## EPHRAIM'S INSULT FANS FLAME OF WAR

**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 - NET** = The men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because the Ephraimites insulted them, saying, "You Gileadites are refugees in Ephraim, living within Ephraim's and Manasseh's territory." **NLT** = "Ephraim responded, "You men of Gilead are nothing more than fugitives from Ephraim and Manasseh." **NIV** "because the Ephraimites had said, "You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh." implies that the tribes on the east side of the Jordan had deserted from Ephraim and Manasseh on the west side. **MacArthur** agrees that calling the Gileadites fugitives was essentially "a mockery referring to the Gileadites as low lifes, the outcasts of Ephraim. They retaliated with battle." ([MacArthur Bible Commentary](#))

**NET Note** - If the Hebrew text is retained, then the Ephraimites appear to be insulting the Gileadites by describing them as refugees who are squatting on Ephraim's and Manasseh's land. The present translation assumes that "Ephraim" is a genitive of location after "refugees."

**King James Bible Commentary** . - The taunt of the Ephraimites against the Gileadites claiming that they were **fugitives** implies that they looked upon the Transjordanian tribes as deserters.

**George Bush** - **Then Jephthah gathered together, &c.** Finding all his remonstrances vain, and the Ephraimites intent upon a quarrel, he was prompted, perhaps under the influence of undue excitement, to undertake to chastise their insolence. It is, at any rate, extremely difficult to justify such a signal revenge, though it be admitted that the provocation was very great. Even good men often lack the self-command which would enable them to bear with becoming calmness the ingratitude and calumny of others, and in a just cause are apt to be hurried on by their passions to unwarrantable lengths.

**Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim, &c.** From the ambiguity of the original, it is not easy to ascertain precisely where the point of this reproach lies. According to the present translation, it is an insulting intimation that the Gileadites were the very scum and refuse of the two tribes here mentioned; but the following may be proposed as a more correct rendering of the Hebrew; 'And the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they (the Gileadites) said, Ye are fugitives of Ephraim;' i. e. a mere party, a remnant of the whole tribe, who have come hither without being sent, to molest and insult us, whereas the majority of the tribe would be more just and generous than to treat us in this manner. The ensuing words, גלעד בתוך אפרים בתוך מנשה Gil'ad bethok Ephrayim bethok Menass'eh, Gilead was intermediate between Ephraim and Manasseh, are probably to be enclosed in a parenthesis, intimating that Jephthah's army had taken a position between their own territory, and that of Ephraim, probably at the fords of the Jordan, in order to cut off their retreat. Accordingly it is said in the next verse, as we would translate the words, 'For the Gileadites had taken the passages of the Jordan,' &c. As the successive companies of the Ephraimites approached the banks of the stream, to pass over into their own country, we suppose they were addressed in the manner above mentioned by the Gileadites. Still the clause is one of very dubious import. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A H Fausset** - (Judges 12:4) Then Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and fought with Ephraim [contrast Gideon's gentleness under Ephraim's provocation, and the result (Judges 8:1-3; Pr 15:1-[note](#)). Their grievous words stirred up anger]; and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they [the Ephraimites] said, Ye Gileadites (are) fugitives of Ephraim, among [Heb., in the midst of] the Ephraimites, (and) among [in the midst of] the Manassites [because the Ephraimites had taunted the Gileadites with being fugitive runaways (so 1 Sam. 25:10) from Ephraim (which the Ephraimites in their arrogance identified with Israel), in the midst of Ephraim and of Manasseh (i.e., dwelling in the midst of those two noble tribes which sprung from Joseph's two sons, but unworthy to bear the name of either). The Ephraimites do not deign to notice Reuben or Gad. In Judges 12:5, the same phrase "fugitives of Ephraim" (Engl. version, 'those Ephraimites which were escaped') is used of the Ephraimites in the ordinary sense, and not of the Gileadites in the contemptuous sense. Their sneer was aimed at Jephthah, who had been a fugitive of the half tribe of Manasseh, cast out of his father's house, and his followers with him (Judges 11:3). Those who had called others 'fugitives,' proved to be the 'fugitives' themselves. Their words proved prophetic of their own doom (Ps. 64:8)—a fire that burned themselves (James 3:6): they were paid in their own coin, with realities answering to their contemptuous words]. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**Judges 12:5 And 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,"**

- Jdg 3:28 7:24 Jos 2:7 22:11
- Judges 12 Resources

## FORDS SEIZED TO CUT OFF RETREAT

**And 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,"** For the third time in Judges, the capture of the fords of the Jordan was crucial (Jdg 12:5; 3:28; 7:24-25). The Gileadites applied a linguistic test to screen out the Ephraimites, who pronounced Shibboleth as Sibboleth.

**NLT Study Bible** - The *Jordan River* could only be forded at **shallow crossings** where tributaries had deposited silt, as was probably the case where the Jabbok flowed into the Jordan.

**George Bush** - Those Ephraimites which were escaped. Heb. פליטי אפרים pelitē Ephrayim, the fugitives of Ephraim; precisely the same phrase with that occurring in the verse above, and confirming the interpretation there given. We consider the drift of the writer in v. 5, 6, to be, to state in fuller detail, and with some additional particulars, the circumstances of the slaughter mentioned, v. 4. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A H Fausset** - And the Gileadites [after defeating the Ephraimites in battle] took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites [i.e., facing them: to cut off their retreat (see Jdg 3:28+, Jdg 7:24+)]: 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. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

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**Gary Inrig** - The battle with Ephraim was not Jephthah's fault. The Ephraimites richly deserved to be taught a lesson. But in the midst of that lesson, Jephthah once again showed his ignorance of God's will and God's way. Ephraim was beaten, and the Ephraimites began to stream back toward the Jordan, fleeing for their lives. But Jephthah and his men seized the crossings of the Jordan. Then they gave each refugee a simple test. You can often tell people by their speech. A Canadian says "Eh!" It doesn't take long to recognize a native of Brooklyn or Texas. Apparently, the Ephraimites had a dialect that did not use the "sh" sound. So they pronounced the word Shibboleth "Sibboleth." Whenever a man came along who could not say Shibboleth, Jephthah's men put him to death, and, by the end of the battle, forty-two thousand Ephraimites were dead. Those numbers are staggering. In one event Jephthah kills more of his fellow Israelites than all the judges combined killed of the enemy, with the exception of Gideon's destruction of the Midianites. Israel has become its own worst enemy, more dangerous to itself than the surrounding nations. Do you see the problem? Jephthah treated fellow Israelites as if they were Ammonites. It is one thing to be provoked to battle, but it is quite another thing to stand at the fords of the Jordan and cold-bloodedly execute Ephraimites.

**Jephthah was a hardheaded legalist. He had experienced God's grace in his own life, but he did not practice it in his relations with others. He knew nothing of the tenderness and love and grace of God.**

Jephthah is not alone, unfortunately. Many times Christians have treated their brothers and sisters as if they were enemies. Martin Luther led God's people into the truth of justification by faith and the authority of God's Word, but he also turned in fury on some of his followers who wanted to practice God's Word as they understood it. The great Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich participated in the drowning of some Anabaptists who had come to the conviction of believer's baptism. The Puritans fled England to find religious liberty in New England, and then they denied that same liberty to Roger Williams and others. Many other Christians have seized on their differences with other believers and treated them as if they were enemies of the gospel. **Legalism** is a deadly thing, and, more than that, it is a disaster. Jephthah's view of God was that He was stern and joyless, an unhappy judge who robbed life of joy. How sad it is to see Christians bound up in the ignorance of legalism. There is a great old hymn based on Psalm 100 that originally went like this: "All people that on earth do dwell, Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice, Him serve with [mirth](#). His praise foretell, Come ye before Him and rejoice (emphasis added)." Now that is beautifully biblical and faithful to what the psalmist wrote. But someone viewed it as flippant and as a result changed it to "Him serve with *fear*." Of course reverence has its place in worship, but so does [mirth](#), and how sad it is that someone with a long-faced God found it necessary to change the hymn. There is no substitute for the knowledge of God that comes through the knowledge of His Word. It is God's cure for spiritual ignorance.

**If there is one great message from this sad story of Jephthah, it is the danger of spiritual ignorance. To be ignorant of God and of God's Word is the pathway to spiritual disaster.**

The last time Harry Ironside lectured at Dallas Theological Seminary, he was almost blind. His wife would read the text of Isaiah, and he would expound it. Now Dr. Ironside had been a lifelong student of God's Word and one of the great Bible teachers of his day. He was a great reader of all kinds of books, but, during that series of lectures, he held up his Bible and said, "Men, I wish I had read other books less and this Book more!" There is no substitute for the knowledge of God that comes through the knowledge of His Word. It is God's cure for spiritual ignorance.

**In the end, Jephthah is a tragic figure. Gifted, ambitious, magnetic, zealous—he had so much in his favor. But all of this came to little lasting positive influence because of ignorance. He did not**

adequately know the Word of God or the God of the Word, and the price he, his daughter, and his nation paid for that ignorance was very high. (Borrow [Hearts of Iron. Feet of Clay](#))

Judges 12:6 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.

- Say: Mt 26:73 Mk 14:70
- there fell: Pr 17:14 18:19 Ec 10:12 Mt 12:25 Ga 5:15
- Judges 12 Resources

#### Related Passages:

Matthew 26:73 A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; for **even the way you talk gives you away.**"

Mark 14:70 But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders were again saying to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean too."

### WHEN ONE WORD SAVES YOUR LIFE

Of course there is one "word" which can save your life and that is the Name above all names "Jesus." In this OT example, failure to pronounce one word resulted in death. Failure to confess Jesus as Lord will result in eternal death (Ro 10:9-10).

**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.** - Listen to [Shibboleth pronounced](#). Note the tragic irony in this section - the very ones who called the Gileadites **'fugitives'** were the ones who was slaughtered trying to flee back to their home in Ephraim! Since the Israelite tribes had no other easily observed distinctions, this dialect feature served to sift them out. The people of Ephraim had their own regional pronunciation for the word shibboleth, which means "stream" or "floods." ([another source says it means "ear of corn!"](#)) They said "sibboleth," and this gave them away. It was a simple test, but it worked. Because of this story, the word shibboleth has become a part of our English vocabulary and is now found in our dictionaries. It stands for any kind of test that a group gives to outsiders to see whether they really belong.

**ILLUSTRATION** - The sibilants are notoriously difficult in Semitic languages. During World War II, the Nazis identified Russian Jews by the way they pronounced the word for corn: "kookoorooza." During the American Civil War soldiers from "border states" spoke very much alike whether they fought on the side of the Union or the Confederacy. Consequently, it was easier for spies from these areas to work undetected behind the lines in enemy territory. Conversely, soldiers from far northern or southern states had a more pronounced accent and were betrayed by their speech. Likewise, during WWII Nazi spies who learned English in the German classroom were often exposed when they were asked to say English words that a German speaking person finds difficult to pronounce. **Shibboleth** has become a part of the English language. It means a catch-word or slogan; a language that is distinctive of a particular group of people; the use of some test that is given to make sure that a person or persons belong to a particular body of people.

Why did this distinction in pronunciation of this word arise? 300 yrs in their separate provinces in Canaan could make a significant difference in local pronunciations, even between two tribes of Israelites (compare differences between Brooklyn and Birmingham accents today). If they mispronounced it by an "s" rather than "sh" sound, it gave them away, being a unique indicator of their dialect.

There is an element of reaping and sowing evident in this story for it was the tongue of the Ephraimites that kindled the flame in Judges 12:1 (probably because they feared dying in battle) and it was the tongue that betrayed them Jdg 12:6 resulting in death. Tragically, many times since this sad event, strife among the people of God has occurred because of the same sort of pride, jealousy, and/or hurt feelings. As someone said the Christian army is the only army that shoots its own "wounded."

**Eugene Merrill** points out that this [Shibboleth](#) test "is graphic evidence that language distinctions had begun to mark the rapidly widening division of the nation." (See context [Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel](#))

**Arthur Cundall** says "The Ephraimite dialect appears to have been similar to that of the Amorites and Arabs, with taking the place of *sh*, so their approximation of *Sibboleth* immediately revealed their identity and led to their execution....The number of Ephraimites

slain (**42,000**) appears abnormally high for this period of Israel's history. The use of large numbers in the Old Testament is one of its unsolved problems; possibly an answer lies in the various meanings of the word 'thousand' (Heb. 'elep which is translated thousand ('elep) is also used to refer to clan or family units (as in Jdg 6:15; 1Sa 10:19; Micah 5:2) and possibly to denote the officers over the military divisions). (Borrow [Judges & Ruth: Tyndale Old Testament Commentary](#))

**Constable** - Unfortunately Jephthah treated his own brethren, the Ephraimites, as he had dealt with Israel's enemy, the Ammonites. He unleashed his zeal and took vengeance far out of proportion to what might have been legitimate.

**Pfeiffer** notes that "the existence of distinct dialects of Hebrew during the period of the Judges is consistent with the concept of tribal, rather than national, consciousness that appears throughout the book." (Borrow the [Wycliffe Bible Commentary](#))

**King James Bible Commentary** - Bruce (p. 251) notes that this linguistic test shows that the Ephraimite dialect followed the Arabic influence in which s took the place of sh. This pronunciation test would be very similar to the efforts of northern and southern soldiers during the Civil War in the United States to discover one another by certain words. (See context [King James Version Bible Commentary](#))

**Expositor's Bible Commentary** on **42,000** - With the loss of 42,000 men, Ephraim's military capability was virtually wiped out (cf. Nu 1:33 = "numbered men of the tribe of Ephraim were 40,500."). Jephthah was vindicated and his position as leader of Gilead was strengthened. Nevertheless, the intertribal warfare illustrated the serious problems that confronted the nation as a whole.

**Stone** on **42,000** - On any interpretation of "thousand," this is more Ephraimites than are listed in any Old Testament census and constitutes the most devastating loss of Israelite lives in the book so far. However justified Jephthah's complaint with Ephraim, his treatment of them as a common enemy rather than errant kin marks Jephthah for vindictive cruelty. (Cornerstone Biblical Commentary – Volume 3: Joshua, Judges, Ruth)

**Easy English** on **42,000** - As a result, that tribe was now much smaller. It was never the biggest tribe again. The Hebrew word 'thousand' can also mean a family group rather than an actual number. So maybe Jephthah and his men killed 42 families rather than 42 000 people. Nobody is quite sure about this. \*Israel's people were becoming foolish. And as a result, the 12 \*tribes were not helping each other so much any more. Jephthah did what he had said. He was like the man in Psalm 15:4. He 'did what he had promised, even when it hurt'. Jephthah still needed to learn a lot about God. But he was loyal to what he knew.

**Bush** on **42,000** - Heb. ארבעים ושנים אלף arbaim ushenayim aleph. As the Hebrew mode of enumeration is peculiar, the copulative ו vau here may perhaps imply simply addition, so that the sum will be 2,040 instead of 42,000. At the last census, Num. 26:37, the whole tribe of Ephraim only amounted to 32,500, compared with which the last number appears far too great; especially as it is reasonable to believe that only a part of the tribe crossed the Jordan on this expedition.

**George Bush - Say now Shibboleth; and he said Sibboleth.** The original differs only in the first letter, ס samech, instead of ש sheen. It is well known that several nations cannot pronounce certain letters. The sound of th, so familiar to English organs, cannot be pronounced by the people of some European countries, nor by the Persians, though a common sound among the Arabians. To this day, many of the German Jews cannot articulate this sound in reading their own Hebrew Scriptures, but substitute ss, as baiss for baith, a house, bereshiss for bereshith, the beginning. It has been remarked also, that sh, which is entirely wanting in many languages, is of peculiarly difficult pronunciation to persons whose organs have not in childhood been inured to it. The word chosen by the Gideonites as a test-word, signifies ear of corn, and also a stream, and was, perhaps, suggested by being the name of the object immediately before them, the river on the banks of which they stood. 'Sibboleth,' on the other hand, denotes a burden, and how these different objects were distinguished in the pronunciation of the Ephraimites, it is difficult to say. Differences of pronunciation, however, even among those speaking the same language, or the same dialect, are nothing extraordinary. In later times, Peter was easily distinguished as a Galilean in Pilate's hall by his pronunciation, Mark. 14:70, and travellers in the East inform us, that the Arabic of Cairo, of Aleppo, and of Bagdad, is so different, that one who has made himself master of this language in one of these cities, cannot, without great difficulty, understand or be understood in the others. England itself offers considerable variety both of dialect and modes of pronunciation, and so probably does every other country.

**He could not frame to pronounce it right.** Heb. לא יכל לדבר כן lā yākin ledabbēr kēn, he did not direct to speak it so; i. e. so as he was required. The original does not say that he could not, but that he did not; because, perhaps, not suspecting the design, he may have uttered it rapidly in his usual manner. Still the present translation is by no means a bad one.

**And slew him.** The predominant usage of the original is in reference to that kind of slaughter which was common in the case of animal victims offered upon the altar; i. e. by cutting the throat, jugulation; as if they made the inability of the organs of speech in the throat to utter certain sounds, a pretence for putting them to death in this manner. In view of the means here adopted by the Gileadites for detecting the fugitives of Ephraim, we can scarcely fail to reflect how closely they resemble those tests or standards of uniformity in religion, which under the pretence of promoting brotherly union are often made the means of persecution and exclusion. "Say now Shibboleth:" say exactly as we say, hold exactly as we hold, without the liberty to vary a single letter in your profession of faith, or we cannot let you pass for a Christian at all. May God teach us a better way of communion, a more

comprehensive standard of truth! May He give us at once the spirit of a sound mind, and the feelings of a charitable heart! ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A H Fausset** - (Judges 12:6) Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth [a stream. The Ephraimites commonly left out the aspirate by defective pronunciation. "Ask leave to cross the Shibboleth"]; and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame [Heb., "He was not preparing," viz., his heart (the omission is so supplied in 2 Chron. 12:14, 30:19). He took no heed] 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 [probably the whole number of invaders, part slain in battle, and part at the fords of Jordan (so Judges 4:16). Those who begin strife, generally suffer in the end (Prov. 17:14, 26:17)]. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

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#### QUESTION - [What is the meaning of shibboleth in the Bible?](#)

**ANSWER** - A word occurring only once in the Bible (in Judges 12:6), *shibboleth* literally means "ear of corn" or "river." However, it is not the literal meaning of *shibboleth* that marks its significance but its clever use by the tribe of Gilead to distinguish between enemy and ally.

During the time of the judges, there was a mighty warrior from [Gilead](#) named [Jephthah](#) who had been banished by his half-brothers because his mother was a prostitute. However, when the king of the Ammonites began to war against Gilead, the elders of Gilead approached Jephthah, begging that he might become their commander (Judges 11:1–3). Jephthah accepted the call and, filled with the Spirit of the Lord, led a great victory against the Ammonites (verses 29–32). This victory was won without the help of the Ephraimites, who had refused to help Gilead (Judges 12:2).

The use of the word *shibboleth* figures into Jephthah's story this way: the tribes of Israel were divided by the Jordan River—some located on the west and some on the east. The eastern tribes, including Jephthah's, had adopted certain pronunciations and practices of foreign nations, distinguishing themselves from their brothers in the west. The word *shibboleth* was an example. Those in Gilead pronounced it "*shibboleth*," but those in Ephraim, west of Jordan, pronounced it "*sibboleth*." The dialect was different.

After Jephthah's great victory against the Ammonites, the men of Ephraim crossed the river to fight against their brothers from Gilead. The Ephraimites' stated reason for fighting was that they were enraged they had not been included in the battle (Judges 12:1), although it is more likely they just wanted part of the spoil.

In the ensuing fight, Jephthah's men captured the fords of the Jordan leading back to Ephraim, but many Ephraimites still tried to cross over, hoping their Gileadite brothers would not be able to distinguish friend from foe. However, the men of Gilead knew the people of the west could not pronounce the *sh* sound, as they had not mixed with foreigners as their brothers from the east had. So the Gileadite soldiers asked each man who tried to cross over the fords to say, "*Shibboleth*." Every man who was from Ephraim would respond, "*Sibboleth*," therein revealing his identity. With the help of this clever tactic, Jephthah's men caught forty-two thousand men and put them to death that day (Judges 12:2–6).

*Shibboleth* is one of many words that the English-speaking world has borrowed from the Bible. In modern contexts, a shibboleth is any identifying word, manner of speaking, or behavior that shows someone to be part of a particular group. A person's reference to gasoline as "petrol" is a shibboleth pointing to British influence. The word *shibboleth* can also refer to an old, oft-repeated idea that is widely believed but of questionable veracity; for example, a trite saying such as "great minds think alike" could be considered a shibboleth. [Gotquestions.org](#)

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**Deffinbaugh** - Now it is the Gileadites under Jephthah who capture the fords of the Jordan, blocking the Ephraimites from crossing the Jordan and fleeing for their lives. There was a problem, however. Many people crossed the Jordan River. How would the Gileadites be able to distinguish their Ephraimite enemies from the rest of those seeking to cross the Jordan? They devised a very simple, but effective test. The Ephraimites could not pronounce the "sh" sound. The best they could do was to produce a simple "s" sound. This is true today. My Indian brothers have difficulty producing the "v" sound; it comes out more like a "w" sound. Other races have their own unique pronunciation problems. There are sounds in Spanish that I cannot even begin to approximate. So, when a person came to one of the fords of the Jordan River, they were asked if they were an Ephraimite. Naturally, an Ephraimite would deny their origins because they knew that they would be killed if they admitted to being one of the enemy. And so those who denied being Ephraimites were given a simple test, "**Say 'Shibboleth.'**" A non-Ephraimite could easily do so, but no matter how hard an Ephraimite might try, the best they could do was to say "**Sibboleth**" (without the "sh" sound). And when they did so, they were executed. In all, 42,000 Ephraimites died in this conflict.

*our text teaches us that words really do matter.* The title of this message is "Words Matter." The words of Scripture which record the history of God's dealings with Israel matter. The words of Jephthah's vow mattered. Had he chosen his words more carefully, it would not have cost him his daughter. Words mattered to those Ephraimites who attempted to cross the Jordan River, and who tried

to say the word “**Shibboleth.**”

The Scriptures have much to say about the importance of our words:

- Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love its use will eat its fruit (Proverbs 18:21).
- “Let your word be ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no.’ More than this is from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37).
- “I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will give an account for every worthless word they speak” (Matthew 12:36).

Our words, like those of Jephthah, can have unintended consequences. I am convinced that Jephthah never intended that his words would cost him his daughter, but that is what happened. I know that my words have many unintended consequences. This past week the House of Representatives narrowly passed a nearly 2,000-page health care reform bill. It is frightening to me to think of all the intentional consequences of such a bill, but can you imagine the immensity of unintentional consequences this monstrous bill will have? No wonder Proverbs contains a warning concerning many words

- When words abound, transgression is inevitable, but the one who restrains his words is wise (Proverbs 10:19).

Now think about the Bible, with all of its pages and many words. If it were merely a fallible book written by men and containing human error, how would we ever be able to stake our present and eternal well being on such a book? Words do matter, and no words matter more than the words of Scripture:

- But he answered, “It is written, ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4).
- “You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39).

God’s Word is inspired, inerrant, relevant, and reliable. His words are without error, so that we can trust them (and the God they present) without hesitation:

- “Look, today I am about to die. You know with all your heart and being that not even one of all the faithful promises the Lord your God made to you is left unfulfilled; every one was realized – not one promise is unfulfilled! (Joshua 23:14; see also 1 Kings 8:56).
- The Lord’s words are absolutely reliable. They are as untainted as silver purified in a furnace on the ground, where it is thoroughly refined (Psalm 12:6).
- Every word of God is purified; he is like a shield for those who take refuge in him (Proverbs 30:5).
- After God spoke long ago in various portions and in various ways to our ancestors through the prophets, 2 in these last days he has spoken to us in a son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he created the world. 3 The Son is the radiance of his glory and the representation of his essence, and he sustains all things by his powerful word, and so when he had accomplished cleansing for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:1-3).
- Therefore we must pay closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. 2 For if the message spoken through angels proved to be so firm that every violation or disobedience received its just penalty, 3 how will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was first communicated through the Lord and was confirmed to us by those who heard him, 4 while God confirmed their witness with signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Hebrews 2:1-4). ([Words Matter](#))

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## Judges 12:6 F B Meyer Our Daily Homily

And he said Shibboleth.

It was only the omission of “h,” but it meant the death of the man who missed it. One little letter, and the whole wonder and beauty of a human life was forfeited. It is only recently that the peace of an empire was in jeopardy, because a full-stop was misplaced. This scene has become proverbial of those who exact compliance with some arbitrary test, before admitting their fellows into their sect or church. But how thankful we should be, that our admission to the privilege of the Kingdom of God does not depend upon our pronunciation; that the reality of the new-birth is not tested by the accuracy with which we utter the creed; that we shall not be

excluded from the gates of the New Jerusalem because we fail in the utterance of an “h”!

Our acceptance with God does not depend on how much we believe. The woman who was healed had very inadequate notions of faith and Christ. She thought that his garment would communicate blessing, yet she was cured. The dying thief had but a glimmering ray of knowledge of the majesty and power of Jesus, but he entered Paradise in His company. The prime necessity with us, is not faith in the sense of creed, but as standing for trust. It is not our belief about Christ, but our trust in Him; not our ability to answer the questions of the Catechism, but our coming to Him, and finding rest to our souls — this only is necessary to pass us across the fords of Jordan. “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Romans 10:10).

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## Today in the Word

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a system for marking pronunciation in any language. It was first published in 1888 by a group of French language teachers and is used by singers, dictionaries, and language-learning textbooks to transcribe sounds from any language into a consistent, universal system. Anyone using it properly should be able to pronounce sounds correctly even if they don't know the language.

The IPA might have helped the Ephraimites pass the deadly pronunciation test in today's narrative. Jephthah is presented as a mighty warrior who was also a social outcast due to his mother being a prostitute (the story begins in Judges 10:6). He defeated the Philistines and Ammonites and rescued Israel from their oppression, but he also made a foolish vow to sacrifice the first thing he saw when he returned home (it turned out to be his daughter).

The conflict in today's reading took place because the Ephraimites were upset about being left out of this victory. Perhaps they were irritated that God had used people whom they saw as disreputable renegades. Jephthah argued that they hadn't responded to his call for help and gave God the credit for the victory. Somehow this petty conflict escalated into a battle in which Jephthah's Gileadites soundly defeated the Ephraimites. The Gileadites may have been forced to defend themselves initially, but in victory things got ugly. They slaughtered the Ephraimites (an extreme violation of today's verse). In this story, words and language became a vehicle for the worst human impulses. If a person pronounced the word “shibboleth” with the wrong accent, they were identified as the enemy and killed, even though the battle was over. A single word fueled this grotesque revenge.

Apply the Word - Pronunciation or accent remains a source of sinful prejudice in today's world. In the United States, this is particularly true of ethnic variations, such as African-American or Hispanic English, but it can also occur with geographical variations, such as a Southern accent. We should love our neighbors whatever they sound like.

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## Luke Wiseman - SHIBBOLETH

IT not seldom happens that men whom the course of events has raised to the pinnacle of fame are in themselves miserably dejected. It is perhaps too flattering to Jephthah to compare him with St. Paul, who, to keep him humble amidst the abundance of the revelations, was buffeted by a thorn in the flesh; but how often, in the order of Divine providence, are great achievements and proud successes accompanied by humiliating trials! Just as we were felicitating ourselves upon the accomplishment of some cherished purpose, and expecting pleasure in the enjoyment of our finished plan, misfortune dashed from our lips the cup, and left us to contemplate the instability of earthly hopes. The conqueror of the Ammonites, already dejected by the loss of his only child, soon found that to be elevated to the judgeship, was to be burdened with cares such as had never before perplexed him.

This trouble arose from the seditious turbulence of the tribe of Ephraim. As formerly in the time of Gideon, they were annoyed at not having been summoned to the battle with the children of Ammon; and perhaps equally annoyed at not having been invited to share in the booty. Their reputation for courage, certainly was not the highest. “The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle.”\* They were numerous, haughty, and powerful. During the whole period of the Judges they were in possession of the precedency; and the sanctuary of God at Shiloh was in the heart of their tribe. They did not disguise their jealousy when other tribes were preferred before them; and now that a despised Gileadite had been raised to the supreme authority, and had succeeded in defeating a dreaded enemy without any help from their side of the Jordan, Ephraim could brook it no longer. A war-cry was raised: “The men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and went northward,” to Mizpeh probably, and menacingly demanded of the judge the reason why they had not been sent for to assist in the defeat of the Ammonites? The blame was even laid at Jephthah's door, and their exasperation was greater against him than it had been against Gideon.† Not satisfied with “chiding with him sharply,” they threatened summary vengeance: “We will burn thy house upon thee with fire,” and offered battle; so that he appeared to have no alternative but to fight.\* A discouraging recompense to a man who had just saved his country!

Before engaging with the army, he endeavoured to show them the justice of his cause. He denied the accusation that he had never summoned them to the enterprise; and told them plainly that they had refused to come to his assistance—true to their character of

cowardly bowmen, as depicted in the 78th Psalm: "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. 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?"† There is a striking resemblance in general conception and in style between this reply and that to the Ammonites: nothing ideal or ingenious, but a plain, straightforward statement of the facts. It has often been contrasted with the felicitous reply of Gideon to the same tribe. But it has not so often been remembered, that the circumstances were widely different. Gideon's life was not threatened, nor was an army brought against him. Besides, insolence cannot always escape chastisement. The peace-makers are indeed blessed: but "the haughty and quarrelsome will at length meet with those who are as ready to revenge, as others have been to endure, their affronts;"\* and if the wrath, which a soft answer should have permanently turned away, re-appears with exacerbated bitterness, it is time that it should be dealt with in another way.

Jephthah had evidently no wish for this fratricidal contest. He did his best to prevent it. But being put upon self-defence, he found no difficulty in rallying the Gileadites around him. The scurrility of the men of Ephraim on former occasions, in calling the Gileadites runaways and deserters from Ephraim and Manasseh, had aroused in the men of Gilead a resentment so deep, that they evidently were not sorry to have this opportunity of taking their revenge. Where the precise point of this taunt lay, cannot now easily be ascertained; probably in some event not preserved in history. But cowards are ever the most ready to accuse others of cowardice; and it was perfectly in character for the mock-valiant bowmen, who had themselves "turned back in the day of battle," to reproach their neighbours across the Jordan as "fugitives of Ephraim"† as the worthless refuse of the descendants of Joseph, who had fled from justice and settled beyond the Jordan. Their fate illustrated the words of Solomon, that "the wicked is snared by the transgression of his lips."‡ Their provoking ribaldry cost them dear. Even the best of men cannot always endure contemptuous taunts with perfect equanimity; and considering the state of society at that day, it is not surprising that at length the insolence of this hectoring tribe met with a fearful revenge.

There appears to have been, first, a regular pitched battle on a great scale, in which, under the command of Jephthah, the Gileadites routed the men of Ephraim;\* and after their defeat, the Ephraimites, flying towards the Jordan and attempting to cross that river, found themselves intercepted by strong parties of the men of Gilead who had placed themselves so as to command the fordable places. Their better knowledge of the practicable fords, and of the roads leading to them, may easily account for their reaching the river before the flying enemy could reach it. The rout of Ephraim may be inferred from the fact that they did not reach the Jordan in anything like an orderly march, but in a scramble—every man taking care of himself. It was under these circumstances that the memorable test of "Shibboleth" was applied, with which, however, the name of Jephthah is not connected.

"The Gileadites took the passages of the Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped"—namely, from being slain in the pitched battle, wherein Jephthah had just defeated them—"said, Let me go over, that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said Nay, 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 the Jordan; and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand."\*

Many illustrations have been collected of this variety of dialect in the same language, which it can scarcely be necessary to reproduce here. That the language of Palestine was diversely spoken in its different provinces in the days of Christ, is evident from the ready recognition of Peter by the high-priest's servant as a Galilean, his "speech betraying him." In the present day, the Arabic of one part of Syria is so different from that of another, that a person well able to understand the people of Smyrna finds great difficulty in understanding those of Aleppo; and even in the small island of Malta, where a corrupt Arabic is spoken, the peasants of the several villages are said to be nearly unintelligible to each other. Our own country affords ample illustration. A vanquished army of Northumbrians, retreating across the Tees, might with equal facility be detected by being required to say the word "River," as were the Ephraimites on the banks of the Jordan by being required to say the word "Shibboleth," or "stream." As our Northumbrians cannot pronounce the R, but utter instead of it a guttural sound resembling a W, the Ephraimites, unable to pronounce the Sh, discovered themselves at once by their saying Sibboleth for Shibboleth; and so fierce was the revenge of those whom they had taunted, that the blood of forty-two thousand men mingled with the stream of the Jordan.

In this tragical scene, the vindictive fury of the men of Gilead cannot escape heavy censure. They had been irritated and exasperated by bitter words; but in this, as in many other instances in history, we see the terrific madness of popular revenge. No contentions are so bitter as those which arise among brethren: "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city." Civil wars are usually carried on under greater exasperation of feeling than wars between nations of a different race; nor is the breach, when once made, so readily healed. As the sweetest wine, when acetous fermentation has set in, turns to the sourest vinegar, so it is in families and in Churches. How dismally protracted are some family feuds! And how embittered against each other are the adherents of the two opposed parties in a riven Church! Envy and variance set the world in flames, and the Church, too, alas! from age to age.

How many "Shibboleths" have been invented to divide the Church of Christ; to be watchwords of angry disputants, and pretexts for professed disciples of the same Lord abusing and excommunicating each other! Let us not be too prodigal of our anathemas upon

these cruel Gileadites at the fords of the Jordan, at least until we have taken leisure to compare the mutual aspect of civilized nations, and the mutual aspect of Christian Churches, in the later centuries, when a conduct so much less violent might have been expected. Are there not Church parties in our own day which set up Shibboleths of their own, and refuse the interchanges of brotherhood to all who do not pronounce the test-word in precisely the same manner as themselves? Does not the Established Church of England, for example, insist on her Shibboleth of Episcopal ordination with a rigour so relentless, that, not to say a word of nonconforming Churches, the ministers of her sister Established Church in these realms,—that of Scotland,—because they have received Presbyterian ordination, are as jealously excluded from preaching in her pulpits and from ministering at her altars, as if they were Mohammedans or infidels? The spirit of Jephthah's Gileadites has not yet ceased to exist, nor is the common language of all the tribes of the Lord's Israel as yet a passport to brotherly recognition; but one of the tribes, and one, too, which more than any other, lives upon the resources of the rest, presumes to treat as foreigners and as aliens all the others, whose pronunciation of the Shibboleth differs from its own! Still, the spirit of blessed charity is extending; and surely we live in the early dawn of that promised day when the tribes shall no longer cherish their ancient discordances: when "Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall not vex Ephraim"; when all the divisive Shibboleths of sectarian warfare, having been forgotten, as childish quarrels are forgotten in the discretion of riper years, the Churches shall advance and act in concert in combined and successful invasion of every point of the devil's kingdom: "They shall fly upon the shoulders of the Philistines toward the west; they shall spoil them of the east together; they shall lay their hand upon Edom and Moab; and the children of Ammon shall obey them."\*

After the massacre on the banks of the Jordan, we read of no other event during the administration of Jephthah. The period of his elevation was only six years; and the Hebrew text informs us that he was buried "in the cities of Gilead," which our version interprets to mean, "in one of the cities of Gilead."† Jewish ingenuity, however, as usual, has invented more than one fable to account for this peculiar mode of expression. According to one account, he died of a slow disease, which caused his limbs to drop off, one after the other, in the course of his official journeyings, and that each limb was buried where it dropped off; so that it was literally true, that he was buried "in the cities of Gilead." Another account states that his body was cut up after his death, and the several portions buried in different places. It is a presumption in favour of the manner of his administration, that no traces occur of a public relapse into idolatry, either during his own time, or that of his successors in office to the commencement of the period of the kings.

**Judges 12:7 And Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead.**

#### **Related Passage:**

Hebrews 11:32+ And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets,

### **JEPHTHAH'S JUDGESHIP ENDS**

Some writers say Jephthah was not raised up as a judge as some of the other judges had been, but this passage seems to solidify the fact that he did function as a judge of Israel.

**And Jephthah judged ([shaphat](#)) Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead** This is a "new formula" in the book of Judges... previously we would read "Then the land had rest \_\_\_\_years... " But after Gideon we never read of peace in the land. Notice it says he judged Israel, but that is not likely to be the entire 12 tribes. More likely he was just the judge over the eastern tribes because as Cundall says "he would be *persona non grata* west of the Jordan after the slaughter of the Ephraimites!"

**Arthur Cundall** makes an interesting comment - The decimation of the tribe of Ephraim was decisive, for this tribe, which aspired to a position of leadership, never regained its pre-eminence. This was not without importance in the adoption of a monarchical system, for up to this point Ephraim was too strong to accept a king from another tribe. On the other hand intertribal jealousy would make it difficult for the other tribes to accept an Ephraimite king. When a king was eventually chosen it is significant that a man of Benjamin, a weak tribe (especially after the events of chapter 20), was selected. He was succeeded by David, of the powerful tribe of Judah, and it was not long before the intertribal rivalries revived. It may be observed that there is no mention of the amphictyonic league, or of any mediation or intervention by the other tribes to prevent this act of fratricide. The decay of the intertribal structure is apparent in this period, but the lack of intervention may also be explained in part by the remoteness of the Transjordan region from the central sanctuary, and by the speed with which the crisis developed. (Borrow [Judges & Ruth: Tyndale Old Testament Commentary](#))

Jephthah is cited in Hebrews 11:32+ along with Gideon, Barak, and Samson. All these men had their faults, but they all, at one time

or another, demonstrated great faith. It is often said that God does not save us and use us because of who or what we are but because of what we may become by His grace and in His power.

**Reformation Study Bible** - Previous judges led for forty or eighty years, and peace lasted a generation or two. Jephthah's abbreviated rule, the increased number of gods being worshiped, and the civil war with Ephraim contribute to a picture of Israel's downward spiral.

**Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible – Pride** caused the civil war within Israel. Pride almost always causes division, contention, and strife. An evil pride exalts a person above others as though he were better than others. This attitude causes division between that person and those he considers to be underneath him. If the prideful person is out to subject others or to take something of value away from them, then strife and struggle take place. Pride or self-exaltation is forbidden by God.

**George Bush - Was buried in one of the cities of Gilead.** Heb. בערי גלעד *beârê Gilâd*, in the cities of Gilead. A curious specimen of Rabbinical conceit and of the not infrequent style of their exposition, is afforded in Rashi's remarks upon these words. From him we learn that the ancient Jewish doctors maintained that Jephthah, as a punishment for putting his daughter to death, was visited by a disease that loosened the joints of the different limbs and members of his body, and caused them to fall off one after another, from time to time, as he was passing to and fro over the country, and that they were buried separately, wherever they happened to drop, so that when he died, it could be said, from this general distribution of his members, that he was 'buried in the cities of Gilead!' But how a man could be in a travelling condition, while his body was thus falling to pieces, is a part of the story which is wisely passed over in silence. The phraseology is doubtless idiomatic, the plural being put for the singular, as Gen. 19:29, where Lot is said to have dwelt, 'in the cities,' i. e. in one of the cities. So Jonah 1:5, the sides of the ship appears to denote one of the sides. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A H Fausset** - And Jephthah judged Israel six years; then died Jephthah the Gileadite, and was buried in (one of) the cities of Gilead [the sacred historian does not define which city, but says indefinitely (Hebrew) "in the cities" (so in Gen. 13:12, 19:29; Neh. 6:2, Hebrew. But the Septuagint "his city" (ἡ for ἱ), viz., Mizpah: for the burial places of other judges are given (Jdg 8:32, 10:2, 5). ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**Keith Krell** - Judges 12:7 concludes with these words: "**Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead.**" The Jephthah cycle ends without declaring that the Ammonite menace has been eliminated or that the land was secured during his tenure, let alone attributing this newfound security to the Lord. I own a high-tech piece of computer software called Bible Works. I have been using Bible Works since 1994. Over the course of many years, I have moved from version 3.5 to the brand new version 8. Yet, I am ashamed to admit that I have never read the user manual or watched the online videos. I keep saying, "I've spent hundreds of dollars on Bible Works and the various updates; I really need to learn all of the potential of this software program." But I never do. I have all kinds of great intentions, but the tyranny of the urgent always keeps me from mastering the potential of this valuable software. When I talk with Bible Works users, I admit that I am probably only utilizing 5–10% of the software's capacity. When it comes to the Bible, you may know just enough to be dangerous. Maybe you get by on the bare minimum. Yet, you know God has entrusted you with a great deal of knowledge and many resources. Perhaps the following statements reverberate through your heart and mind, "To whom much is given, much is required." "Right theology and a thorough understanding of the Bible are essential." If so, make a commitment that today you will seek to live out God's Word like never before. *A biblical mind is a terrible thing to waste* ([Judges 10:6-12:7: Failure of the Family](#))

**Judged** ([08199](#)) **shaphat** is a verb that means to judge or govern. While it frequently translated judge, this is somewhat misleading as shaphat is not typical of the modern concept of judge (as in a court of law), but is much more inclusive -- to function as ruler or governor - individuals (Jdg. 16:31; 1 Sa 7:16), king (1 Ki. 3:9); even God Himself (Ps. 50:6; 75:7) because He is the source of authority and will eventually conduct all judgments (Ps. 96:13). In a judicial sense shaphat could refer to the arbitration of civil, domestic, and religious disputes (Dt. 25:1), fulfilled by the congregation (Nu 35:24), by individual judges (Ex 18:16; Dt. 1:16), by the king (1 Sa 8:5, 6, 20) or by God Himself (Ge 16:5; 1 Sa 24:12, 15). The **Septuagint (LXX)** uses the Greek **krites** = Judges or **krino** meaning to judge.

**Uses of shaphat in Judges** - Jdg. 2:16; Jdg. 2:17; Jdg. 2:18; Jdg. 2:19; Jdg. 3:10; Jdg. 4:4; Jdg. 10:2; Jdg. 10:3; Jdg. 11:27; Jdg. 12:7; Jdg. 12:8; Jdg. 12:9; Jdg. 12:11; Jdg. 12:13; Jdg. 12:14; Jdg. 15:20; Jdg. 16:31

**Cyril Barber - Jephthah was a leader of men.**

Thomas Carlyle, in *Heroes and Hero Worship*, emphasized the "great man" theory of leadership. Basing his study on history, he concluded that leadership was explicitly associated with the exercise of special powers. An outstanding leader was one who possessed the ability to grasp the dynamics of a given situation, choose the right course of action, and, using coercion if necessary, compel others to accomplish that which would ultimately be of benefit to them.

The counterpart of Carlyle's "great man" theory is today's "strong natural leader" (or SNL). Recent history has shown that an SNL may get an organization started; but as it grows, it soon exceeds his ability to control it. When this happens, the organization invariably goes into a period of decline.<sup>28</sup>

Realizing the weakness of the SNL theory, Dr. Douglas MacGregor, in *The Human Side of Enterprise*, propounded two separate styles of leadership. These he called "Theory X" and "Theory Y." (Although MacGregor's ideas have since undergone refinement, his basic thesis remains the same.) The failure of his theory may be traced to the fact that he believed the average worker to be externally motivated, and he made no allowance for those who are motivated from within. He worked from a premise similar to the ones adopted by Max Weber (that man is essentially an irrational component within the organization, has to be told what to do, and has to be supervised closely to ensure that the job is done correctly) and Frederick W. Taylor (who instituted methods to ensure "cost efficiency," thereby paving the way for the present depersonalization in such areas as commerce, industry, government, and education). As a result, Dr. MacGregor believed that man has an inherent dislike for work and will avoid it if he can. He excluded from his considerations those people who enjoy their work and derive fulfillment from it.

Other students of leadership have alternately focused on the functions or skills of noted leaders. After spending an entire lifetime examining different theories, Dr. Ralph Stogdill, in his *Handbook of Leadership*, concluded that because there are so many different functions of leadership, there has consequently arisen an almost equal number of definitions. He also pointed out that research has failed to describe for us the traits of a good leader or describe for us what leadership is.

In light of this, it is important to consider the biblical criteria of a good leader. Like Gilead, we are faced with a chronic shortage of good leaders. Those in positions of authority are often improperly equipped for the task. Self-seeking, exploitation, and abuse of power abound. (Christian organizations are by no means exempt from these traits; in fact, sometimes "Christian" organizations are the worst offenders.)

Jephthah illustrated the leadership principles of godliness, proven ability, wisdom, discernment, a knowledge of people, tact, courage, and determination to follow through on difficult or unpleasant tasks. These characteristics can be summarized in five statements.

First, a good leader must be a person of integrity who can be looked up to, whose personal judgment is trusted, and who can inspire others to follow him with confidence. He must gain the trust of those he leads, outline for them a plan of action, and motivate them to succeed.

Second, a good leader must have a thorough knowledge of human nature. He must be a good judge of character. He must be able to separate those who are reliable from those who are not. Those he picks for different positions or tasks must be able to accomplish their assigned duties efficiently and in keeping with established goals.

Third, a good leader must be able to win the hearts of the men and women under his control. He must be able to unite them behind a common purpose and infuse them with confidence. He must be able to foresee problems and warn his followers. He must also give them some assurance of tangible rewards.

Fourth, a good leader must be able to handle opposition wisely and act decisively. Jephthah took the initiative. He did not wait for the king of Ammon to choose the battlefield that most suited him. Instead he rallied what men he could and pressed the attack. After the initial engaging and routing of the enemy, he pursued them until they were subdued. These enemies of Israel did not have the military strength to oppose God's people again until the time of David.

Finally, and most important of all, a good leader must be a man of impeccable honesty. His personal life must be above reproach. Jephthah was such a man. He fulfilled the vow he had made to the Lord. His sincerity and selflessness were not substitutes for an unfeeling and implacable spirit. In his heart was all the tenderness and compassion of a great man. His integrity was matched by his daughter's commitment to principle, and they subordinated their personal hopes and aspirations to their devotion to God.

Jephthah was a wise and versatile leader. He was resourceful in battle and just in administering the peace. Though he began life as the son of a prostitute, his name is enshrined with the noblest of God's people. At his death the people accorded him the honors of a true Gileadite and buried him in one of the cities of his people. In the providence of God, all the things denied him by his half-brothers and the elders of the people were restored to him during his lifetime.

Jephthah's perseverance in doing what was right sets him apart as a leader whose example is worthy of emulation. ([Judges: A Narrative of God's Power: An Expository Commentary](#))

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**Barry Webb** - What can we say about Jephthah, given all that this story has shown us about him? Like most Biblical characters he is a complex individual. As I have written elsewhere: Jephthah is a capable man—capable with words, capable in battle; he has a

strong, decisive personality and is a leader of men. At his best he can exercise exemplary faith. But he has a background, a personal history, which helps us to understand his limitations even if we cannot condone them. He is insecure and self-centered. He can never fully engage with anyone's interests but his own. This is the hardness in the man and the reason he can never be truly great. It is to this insecurity and self-interest that his daughter is sacrificed; Jephthah cannot truly be a father. For the same reason he cannot be a Moses or a Joshua. "Jephthah the Gileadite, head and leader of all the inhabitants of Gilead," is as high as Jephthah can rise. He may judge Israel—even save it—but he can never really care about it as God does.

Insecurity and self-interest are serious character flaws. All of us fallen human beings are afflicted with them to some extent. However, they can be exacerbated by experiences of rejection, as they were in Jephthah's case, and become extremely damaging in a leader. They do not absolutely disqualify a person from leadership. God did use Jephthah to save his people, and Jephthah is honored in Hebrews 11 for his faith and achievements. But he is also a warning to would-be leaders. Leadership of God's people is a terrible responsibility, with great potential for doing both good and harm. Those of us who are called to it need an acute sense of our own sinfulness and the need of God's sanctifying grace in our lives. We also need the humility to be able to acknowledge when we have damaged others by our poor judgment or by acting out of insecurity and selfishness rather than out of genuine love for those we lead. I was very touched recently when a great Christian leader in our city, in his farewell address, sought forgiveness from those he had hurt by his mistakes. It was hardly necessary; he had done much more good than harm, and all but a very few had already forgiven him for his wrongs. But his apology modeled for us qualities that are the marks of true greatness in the kingdom of God—an awareness of our sinfulness and the harm it can do, and a deep desire to be more like our Lord Jesus Christ in the way we treat those he has entrusted to our care (1 Peter 5:1–5).

Finally, what does the Jephthah story as a whole teach us about negotiation? Jephthah is skillful with words. He knows that the elders of Gilead have no genuine regard for him, but Jephthah uses negotiation to arrive at a deal with them that is good for himself and ultimately for Israel as a whole. He knows that the king of Ammon is set on war, but Jephthah uses negotiation to buy time, claim the moral high ground, enhance his credentials as a national leader, and present his case to Yahweh, the divine Judge. His great mistake at the climax of the story, though, is to "open his mouth to Yahweh" (11:35) in the same way that he has opened his mouth to men. That is, he tries to negotiate with God as he has negotiated with human beings, and in so doing overreaches his hand and brings disaster on himself and his daughter. He makes the fundamental error of thinking that God, the divine Judge, can be bribed, that salvation is an arrangement that can be negotiated by offering God incentives instead of casting ourselves utterly on his mercy. He fails to see that salvation is a gift. That is his fatal mistake, and from there he begins to lose his integrity, not just as a man of faith, but as a father and as a judge of Israel. At the end of the story he gives up negotiation altogether and uses words only as a pretext for slaughtering his fellow Israelites. In short, the story of Jephthah shows us two things about negotiation. It has a legitimate place in human affairs in a fallen world but has severe limitations; and in the hands of an insecure man like Jephthah it can end up doing more harm than good. More importantly, it shows us that negotiation is the antithesis of faith and has no place at all in our relationship with God.

There is a great difference between the kind of religion that arises from our own insecurity and desire to get God to meet our needs and that which is based on God's own revelation of himself. The former is a reflection of our own sinful natures; the latter is a gift of the God who made us and has reached out to us in Christ. The former conceives of our relationship with God in terms of negotiation: God gives us what we want from him in return for actions that please him; we get in proportion to what we give. True religion, on the other hand, understands that our relationship with God is based on his generosity and free grace. We bring nothing to the table. We have nothing to offer God that can make him love us more than he already does. Our true need is for his forgiveness and adoption as his children, and all that is necessary to have this need met is faith in God and what he has already done for us in Christ.

Religion that arises from our own fallen natures is essentially idolatrous. It dishonors God by denying his sovereignty and grace and making us little gods ourselves, co-negotiators and co-contributors to our own salvation. Such religion is not pleasing to God and, rather than securing salvation from him, exposes us to his righteous wrath. To try to add anything to faith in God's sovereign grace, as Jephthah did, is to lose the heart of true religion and bring disaster on ourselves (Romans 1:18–25; Isaiah 2:6–22). This aspect of the teaching of the Jephthah story is vitally important in a world where evangelicalism has become so broad and the teaching of Christian doctrine so weak that it has become difficult to distinguish between true and false gospels, and many perish for want of hearing the true one. ([Preaching the Word: Judges and Ruth](#))

**Judges 12:8 Now Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel after him.**

- **Bethlehem:** Ge 15:19 1Sa 16:1 Mic 5:2 Mt 2:1
- Judges 12 Resources

## IBZAN FOLLOWS JEPHTHAH

**Now Ibzan of Bethlehem judged (shaphat) Israel after him. - Meaning** of Ibzan - "their whiteness," "splendid," "illustrious." It is not indicated whether this was Bethlehem in Judah or (more likely) Bethlehem in Zebulun located about 10 miles N of Megiddo a town N of Megiddo. Ibzan appears to have been only a civil judge in NE Israel.

**The Reformation Study Bible** - Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon are briefly mentioned (Jdg 10:1-5). Nothing more is known about these men. They bring the total of judges mentioned in the Book of Judges to twelve

**George Bush - Ibzan of Beth-lehem.** The Bethlehem here mentioned, if we may believe Josephus, was that in the tribe of Judah, and not that in Zebulun, of which see Josh. 19:5. The Jewish critics, for the most part, consider this Ibzan to have been the same person with Boaz, spoken of in the book of Ruth; but the opinion rests upon conjecture alone. Nothing memorable is related of him except the circumstance mentioned in the next verse. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A R Fausset** - And after him Ibzan of Bethlehem [not Bethlehem of Judah or Ephratah; or else it would have been so expressed (Jdg 17:7, 9; Ruth 1:2; Mic. 5:1); but Bethlehem of Zebulun (Josh. 19:10, 15). So Elon was a Zebulonite (Jdg 12:11). The men of Zebulun had already proved their patriotic bravery (Jdg 4:10, 5:18). The three Judges succeeding Jephthah ruled the tribes east of Jordan, and the northern tribes west of Jordan] judged Israel. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

[International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#) - ib'zan (אִבְזָן , 'ibhcān): The 10th judge of Israel. His city is given as Bethlehem (whether of Judah or Zebulun is not stated). He judged Israel 7 years, and when he died he was buried in his native place. The only personal details given about him in the Biblical narrative are that he had 30 sons and a like number of daughters. He sent all of his sons "abroad" for wives and brought husbands from "abroad" for all his daughters. The exact meaning of *ha - ḥūc* , "abroad," is mere matter of speculation, but the great social importance of the man and, possibly, alliances among tribes, are suggested in the brief narrative ( Judges 12:8-10 ). Jewish tradition identifies Ibzan with Boaz of Bethlehem-Judah (Talmud, *Bābhā' , Bathrā' , 91a* ).

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**Bob Deffinbaugh comments on the "Minor Judges"** - Interspersed among the accounts of the "major judges" are some very brief comments regarding "minor judges." We must understand "major" and "minor" the way these terms are used with reference to the prophetic books of the Bible. "Major" Prophets are not necessarily prophetic works that are more important than the "Minor" Prophets; they are simply shorter books. So, too, the "minor judges" are those judges about whom we are given very little information. For one reason or another, the author has chosen to focus on a few of the judges, giving much more detail about their lives and their role in God's deliverance of His people.

At the beginning of our text, we are introduced to Tola and Jair (Jdg 10:1-5). At the end of our text, we encounter Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15). The reason these men are referred to as "minor judges" is that we are not given any details about the way these men were used to deliver the Israelites. Instead, we are given a few basic facts about them. We are told something about their family. In each instance, we know the tribe of the judge that is mentioned. In the case of Jair and Ibzan, we are told that these judges had 30 sons. Ibzan also had 30 daughters, whom he gave in marriage to those outside his clan. (**Note:** The consensus of those commentaries that I have consulted is that these "outside" marriages were outside the clan or tribe, but not outside of Israel. Personally, I'm not so certain that the language limits "outsiders" to merely those outside the clan or tribe. The author felt it worth mentioning.)

In addition to family or genealogical information pertaining to the minor judges, we are also told the length of their rule and the place of their death. Why was it important to know where these folks died? I'm not sure, but perhaps their tombs were to be a memorial, a reminder of the deliverance God had given through these judges.

But why mention these minor judges so briefly without supplying more information? I believe that one of the author's reasons for including these brief references to minor judges is that he wants us to be well aware of how many judges God raised up. This would serve as an indication of the degree to which sin (and divine discipline) was prevalent in Israel. If there were many judges, then Israel was given over to oppressors many times, and this would be because the Israelites had so frequently given themselves over to heathen gods and practices. The more judges, the greater God's grace is shown to have been.

There is yet another reason, I believe, for including these minor judges in the Book of Judges. There were many judges who ruled during the period of the judges, and so far as I can tell none of them ruled over all of Israel. In each case, judges were raised up to deliver certain tribes or even smaller groups. When all of the judges are taken into account, most of the tribes are accounted for.

When we come to expressions like **"the sons of Israel," "men of Israel,"** or **"Israel,"** we almost automatically assume that the author is speaking of the nation Israel as a whole, but this is often – perhaps most often – not the case in the Book of Judges. We can see this in Judges 9 where we are told that Abimelech **"ruled over Israel for three years"** (9:22). Abimelech's rule was over Shechem and a few cities in the valley near Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. In verse 55, we are told that when the **"Israelites saw**

**that Abimelech was dead they went home.”** Once again, this is not all Israel, but the Israelites in that limited geographical area.

Thus, when we come to these five “minor judges” at the beginning of chapter 10 and at the end of chapter 12, we should recognize that their rule was limited to a smaller area than all of Israel. This can be seen by our author’s words regarding Jair in Judges 10:3-5. He had 30 sons who rode 30 donkeys, and they ruled over 30 towns in Gilead, not all of Israel. The realm of each judge was a limited kingdom, rather than a national kingdom.

It seems to me that one of the things we see in the Book of Judges is the disintegration of the unity and solidarity of the Israelite tribes. It began with the tribes acting somewhat independently of one another. Granted, there was some cooperation between the tribes, but united effort was limited to a few of the tribes at most. Eventually, the Israelites would become “rugged individualists,” with each Israelite doing what seemed right in his own eyes.

Politically, it looks to me as though government in Israel has diminished to that of numerous “city states,” not unlike we find practiced by the Canaanites. This was not the way it was supposed to work in Israel, but what we find in Judges is that it will take a strong king to unify this nation so that the Israelites in all the tribes stand together against their moral and political enemies. This will happen for a short time under David and Solomon, but soon thereafter Israel becomes a divided kingdom with Israelites fighting amongst themselves.

I believe we see the same kind of individualism today in the West, particularly in the United States. We see individualism in the church as well. Churches act independently of each other, and unfortunately some see themselves as being in competition with other churches (for status, members, and money). And even within a local church, there are many who avoid shepherding groups and or other means of holding them accountable. The only perfect and permanent solution is the coming of the King of Kings, who will unite not only all the tribes of Israel, but also all believers, whether they be Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, slave or free (see Galatians 3:28-29). The church in this age is to foreshadow this full and final unity. ([Words Matter](#))

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#### **Keith Krell - “God’s Honorable Mentions” (Judges 10:1-5; 12:8-15)**

The judgeship of Jephthah (Judges 10:6–12:7) is framed by a brief mention of the five so-called “minor judges” (Jdg 10:1–5; 12:8–15). For several reasons, their role in ancient Israel seems to have differed from the other judges:

1. Each is mentioned only briefly in a notation containing primarily genealogical information.
2. Missing is any indication that they led Israel in battle against a foreign enemy.
3. The length of time which each served is given in an exact number of years rather than as a round number.

A brief biography of the five Judges follows:

- Tola (Judges 10:1–2): A bare minimum is recounted about Tola. He saved Israel and judged for twenty–three years.
- Jair (Judges 10:3–5): Jair had thirty sons who rode thirty donkeys and controlled thirty towns. He judged Israel twenty–two years.
- Ibzan (Judges 12:8–10): Ibzan, from Bethlehem, judged Israel seven years. He had thirty sons and daughters.
- Elon (Judges 12:11–13): Elon, from Zebulun, judged Israel ten years.
- Abdon (Judges 12:14–15): Abdon, from Ephraim, judged Israel eight years. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode seventy donkeys.

The ministries of these minor judges teach two lessons, one negative and the other positive. Negatively they did not change any of the previous problems in Israel but seem to have maintained the status quo. The fact that several of the judges fathered extremely large families points to their living like the eastern kings of their day. This is further evidence that Canaanite culture was influencing the Israelites adversely. Positively these accounts indicate God’s gracious blessing of His apostate people despite themselves. McCann writes, “Elsewhere in the Old Testament, children are gifts from God [Ps 127:3]; they indicate God’s blessing. So amid the increasing chaotic and violent stories that indicate the Israelites are abandoning God, the two lists of minor judges suggest that God is not abandoning the Israelites (see Judges 2:1, where God says, ‘I will never break my covenant with you.’).”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, for forty–five years, the people of Israel enjoyed peace and security, thanks to the leadership of Tola and Jair. This fact suggests that God is working behind the scenes in and through the family and political institutions to promote stability and prosperity. ([God’s Honorable Mentions](#))

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**Judges 12:9 And 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.**

- Jdg 12:14 10:4
- Judges 12 Resources

## **A WEALTHY POLYGAMIST AND JUDGE**

**And 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 ([shaphat](#)) Israel seven years** - Very large families suggest the fathers' marriage to several wives (polygamy), a part of life tolerated but never matching God's blueprint of one wife at a time (Ge 2:24). To have many children had the lure of extending one's human power and influence. **Outside the family** probably means from outside his clan which suggest his seeking political alliances & extension of his sphere of influence that were associated with marriages in the Ancient East.

**George Bush - Had thirty sons and thirty daughters.** Where polygamy was practised, such a numerous progeny is not surprising. Parallel instances in modern times are recited in abundance by eastern travellers.

**Whom he sent abroad.** Or, Heb. החוצה ha'hutzâh, out of doors. That is, disposed of in marriage to other families. Hence the Vulg. paraphrastically, but not incorrectly, 'Whom he sending abroad gave to husbands;' and so in the ensuing clause, 'Took wives for his sons of the same number, bringing them into his house.' Ibzan's lot, in this respect, contrasted strikingly with that of his predecessor Jephthah. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A R Fausset -** And he had thirty sons, and thirty daughters, (whom) he sent abroad [gave in marriage to husbands abroad], and took in [their stead] thirty daughters from abroad for his sons [what a contrast to Jephthah, whose only child, a daughter, was doomed to perpetual virginity!]. And he judged Israel seven years. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**Judges 12:10 Then Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem.**

- Judges 12 Resources

## **IBZAN'S DEATH**

**Then Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem** - It is interesting that there is no phrase "and the sons of Israel did evil" as we see with death of other judges.

**[IBZAN \[ISBE\]](#)** ib'-zan (ibhtsan): The 10th judge of Israel. His city is given as Bethlehem (whether of Judah or Zebulun is not stated). He judged Israel 7 years, and when he died he was buried in his native place. The only personal details given about him in the Biblical narrative are that he had 30 sons and a like number of daughters. He sent all of his sons "abroad" for wives and brought husbands from "abroad" for all his daughters. The exact meaning of ha-chuts, "abroad," is mere matter of speculation, but the great social importance of the man and, possibly, alliances among tribes, are suggested in the brief narrative (Jdg 12:8-10). Jewish tradition identifies Ibzan with Boaz of Bethlehem-Judah (Talmud, Babha', Bathra', 91a). Ella Davis Isaacs

**Judges 12:11 Now Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel after him; and he judged Israel ten years.**

- Judges 12 Resources



Location of Zebulun

## ELON FOLLOWS IBZAN

Now Elon the Zebulunite judged ([shaphat](#)) Israel after him; and he judged Israel ten years- He was from Zebulun (see above) but his area of serving as judge is not stated.

**Judges 12:12 Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.**

- **Aijalon:** Jos 19:42 1Ch 6:69 8:13
- Judges 12 Resources

**Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun-** The fact that Elon was born and buried in Zebulun suggests he may have been a judge over this restricted area, but we cannot be dogmatic.

**Judges 12:13 Now Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel after him.**

- Judges 12 Resources

## ABDON'S ORIGIN

**Now Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged ([shaphat](#)) Israel after him.**

**ABDON [ISBE]** - ab'-don (ˈabhdon, perhaps "service"; Abdon): A judge of Israel for eight years (Jdg 12:13-15). The account says that he was the son of Hillel the Pirathonite, and that he was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim. No mention is made of great public services rendered by him, but it is said that he had seventy well-mounted sons and grandsons. So far as we can judge, he was placed in office as a wealthy

elderly man, and performed the routine duties acceptably. Very likely his two next predecessors Ibzan and Elon were men of the same type.

An effort has been made to identify Abdon with the Bedan mentioned in 1 Sam 12:11, but the identification is precarious.

A certain importance attaches to Abdon from the fact that he is the last judge mentioned in the continuous account (Jdg 2:6 through 13:1) in the Book of Jgs. After the account of him follows the statement that Israel was delivered into the hands of the Philistines forty years, and with that statement the continuous account closes and the series of personal stories begins--the stories of Samson, of Micah and his Levite, of the Benjamite civil war, followed in our English Bibles by the stories of Ruth and of the childhood of Samuel. With the close of this last story (1 Sam 4:18) the narrative of public affairs is resumed, at a point when Israel is making a desperate effort, at the close of the forty years of Eli, to throw off the Philistine yoke. A large part of one's views of the history of the period of the Judges will depend on the way in which he combines these events. My own view is that the forty years of Jdg 13:1 and of 1 Sam 4:18 are the same; that at the death of Abdon the Philistines asserted themselves as overlords of Israel; that it was a part of their policy to suppress nationality in Israel; that they abolished the office of judge, and changed the high-priesthood to another family, making Eli high priest; that Eli was sufficiently competent so that many of the functions of national judge drifted into his hands. It should be noted that the regaining of independence was signalized by the reestablishment of the office of judge, with Samuel as incumbent (1 Sam 7:6 and context). This view takes into the account that the narrative concerning Samson is detachable, like the narratives that follow, Samson belonging to an earlier period.

**HILLEL [ISBE]** hil'-el (hillel, "he greatly praised"; Septuagint Ellele): An inhabitant of Pirathon in the hill country of Ephraim, and father of Abdon, one of the judges of Israel (Jdg 12:13,15).

**PIRATHON; PIRATHONITE** [ISBE] - pir'-a-thon, pir'-a-thon-it (pir'athon, pir'athoni; Codex Vaticanus Pharathom; Codex Alexandrinus Phraathom, Pharathuneites): The home of Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite (Jdg 12:13 ff the King James Version), where also he was buried, "in the land of Ephraim in the mount of the Amalekites." The latter name may have clung to a district which at some former time had been held by the Amalekites. From this town also came Benaiah, one of David's chief captains (2 Sam 23:30; 1 Ch 11:31; 27:14). It is probably to be identified with Fer'ata, about 6 miles Southwest of Nablus. A possible rival is Fir'on, 15 miles West of Nablus. G.A. Smith suggests a position at the head of Wady Far'ah (HGHL, 355). Moore thinks it may have been in Benjamin, Abdon being a Benjamite family (1 Ch 8:23,30; 9:36). It is just possible that the place may be identical with Pharathon, one of the towns fortified by Bacchides (1 Macc 9:50). W. Ewing

#### Judges 12:14 And he had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys; and he judged Israel eight years

- **rode:** Jdg 5:10 10:4
- Judges 12 Resources

### ABDON'S WEALTH

**And he had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys; and he judged (shaphat) Israel eight years** - His wealth is apparent from the number of offspring and donkeys.

**J Vernon McGee:** "Abdon did nothing except "out-Jair" Jair. Talk about keeping up with the Jones family! As we have seen in chap 10:3-5, Jair had 30 sons—but Abdon had 40 sons and 30 nephews besides. It must have been quite a sight to see that man ride out of town with his sons and nephews. You would have seen a parade of Jaguars, Mustangs, Pintos, and Cougars like you had never seen before. They call the little donkey the "mockingbird" or "lark" of the desert because he can really bray. Just think of all of those braying donkeys! That is all Abdon contributed. That isn't much, friend."

**George Bush** - Thirty nephews. That is, grandsons; Heb. בְּנֵי בָנִים benê bānim, sons, of sons. On the opulence and dignity implied in riding upon white asses, see Jdg 5:10, and Jdg 10:4. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A R Fausset** - And he had forty sons and thirty nephews [rather in modern English, grandsons; as 'nephew' means, in Spenser and Shakspeare, and other old English writers], that rode on threescore and ten ass-colts [implying their dignity (ch. 5:10, 10:4; see notes and remarks); and he judged Israel eight years. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**Judges 12:15 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.**

- **Pirathonite:** 2Sa 23:30
- **in the hill country of the Amalekites:** Jdg 3:13,27 5:14 Ge 14:7 Ex 17:8 1Sa 15:7
- Judges 12 Resources

## ABDON'S DEATH

**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**

**George Bush - In the hill country of the Amalekites.** For a probable account of the reason why this place was so called, see on Jdg 5:14. It does not appear certain that any thing remarkable took place in the civil state of the Israelites, during the time of these latter judges, though Lightfoot supposes, with some plausibility, that the forty years' oppression of the Philistines commenced in the days of Elon the Zebulonite, and was gradually waxing more and more severe through the subsequent administrations. Previous, however, to the birth of Samson, it had not gained sufficient head to make it worthy of particular record in the inspired narrative. But it has been well remarked, that the happiest life of individuals, and the happiest state of society, is that which affords the fewest remarkable events. The people, in the main, enjoyed peace without, and freedom from discord and sedition, though still the leaven of their idolatrous propensities was secretly working and preparing them for new troubles in the end. As to these several judges, the principal fact mentioned in regard to each is, that he lived, acted as judge, and died. Death, the lot of man, at last claims his due of the great and the good, and whatever else we may hear of any man, we are sure to hear one thing—that he died: unless indeed our own departure hence anticipates his. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

**A R Fausset** - And Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died, and was buried in Pirathon [now Fer'ata, six miles west of Shechem (Nablous). Or Fer'aun (Palest. Explor. Quart. Stat.)], in the land of Ephraim, in the mount of the Amalekites [who had an early settlement in the neighbouring highlands, subsequently occupied by Ephraim (see Jdg 3:13, 5:14, 6:3)]. ([Judges 12 Commentary](#))

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### JUDGES 12 "SHIBBOLETH" F B Meyer

**Judges 12:1-6 Fratricidal strife.** -- This is the worst of all. There is no war to be compared to civil war. Ephraim had contended thus with Gideon (Jdg. 8:1-note). Pride lay at the root of all. They could not endure that there should be honor and glory from which they were excluded.

Men are very unreasonable; like these children of Ammon, they are reluctant to take up a difficult cause. Then they are annoyed not to share in the glory when it has passed out of its narrowness into a large place. This comes of calculating results, and considering what will make for name, or fame, or prosperity. No man can live happily or honorably who has one eye towards his own interests and the other towards God's.

Oh, for the single eye, the united heart; the devoted purpose fixed on doing the will of God! When once the soul elects to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, he is indifferent to human praise or blame, success or failure, as the world may deem it, and turns away from the heated faces and words of critics and opponents, saying, "I put my life in my hands, and the Lord delivered" (Judges 12:3).

The word "shibboleth" means river. Forty and two thousand is 2040. This scene had led to the use of shibboleth, to indicate the tests which Christians impose on each other, and by which they condemn those who differ from them in matters trivial as an h, while they ignore the great bonds of a common brotherhood (Ro 14:19-note).

There are many among us who might pass as allies and brothers, but they cannot adjust to pronounce certain words which to us are as dear as life. They utter them, indeed, with their lips, but there is a certain dialect, a color, an indefinable defect which we can instantly detect, and which betrays the false professor. God help us to speak plainly!

**Judges 12:8-15** Some minor Judgeships succeed, which call for very slight notice, and yet in these quiet days the people were able to recoup themselves for the grievous rages made in their prosperity during the preceding years. We all of us need quiet, growing days in our lives, in which, although we may not be winning conspicuous victories or making remarkable progress, we are righting ourselves, striking our roots deep, and repairing the mistakes of the past. (F. B. Meyer. CHOICE NOTES ON JOSHUA THROUGH 2 KINGS)