

Judges 12:1-15

Jephthah's War with Ephraim

<https://www.torahclass.com/old-testament-studies-tc/40-old-testament-studies-judges/334-lesson-19-judges-12-13>

Judges 12:1 - "And the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and went northward, and said unto Jephthah, Wherefore passedst thou over to fight against the children of Ammon, and didst not call us to go with thee? we will burn thine house upon thee with fire."

A large contingent of Ephraimites show up to confront Jephthah, who had just dismissed his own army after defeating the Ammonites. They traveled far from home - Mizpeh was in far northern TransJordan near Mt. Hermon.

Their complaint was almost exactly the same one they had with Gideon in **Judges 8:1**. As the most populous tribe, they felt entitled to lead in all things. This time their complaint was more harsh and accompanied by a real threat to burn Jephthah out. Gideon had turned Ephraim away from anger with diplomatic words. Jephthah was not a diplomat.

They should have thanked him and congratulated him for delivering Israel from Ammon, and perhaps even consoled him on the loss of his daughter.

Remember that later in Israel's history the pride of Ephraim would lead to the split with Judah and take them into idolatry before the 10 northern tribes allied under Ephraim were carried away by Assyria, and never heard from again.

- **Hosea 4:17** - "'Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone'"

Judges 12:2-3 - "And Jephthah said unto them, I and my people were at great strife with the children of Ammon; and when I called you, ye delivered me not out of their hands. 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?"

Jephthah calls them on their interpretation of events. Apparently the Ephraimites had originally considered the looming battle as a disagreement only between the Gileadites and the Ammonites, which did not concern them.

Judges 12:4 - "Then Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and fought with Ephraim: and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they said, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites."

The accusation that Jephthah's Gileadites were fugitives - the offscouring and unwanted from both Ephraim and Manasseh - was largely true.

Jephthah soundly defeated the Ephraimites, and then sent a detachment to the fords at the Jordan to cut off any Ephraimites who escaped as they tried to cross back to their land.

'Shibboleth'

Judges 12:5-6 - "And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand."

Remember that in Hebrew the number was "forty-two *eleph*" of Ephraimites. An *eleph* is usually translated 1,000, but more likely it just means "a military unit" of unknown size. Still, it was a bunch of Ephraimites.

(See <https://www.balashon.com/2010/01/shibolet.html>)

After several centuries in the Promised Land, the different tribes had developed differing dialects. This was still true in the time of Jesus, when Galileans could be identified by how they spoke:

- **Matthew 26:73** - "And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you."

The two other places Shibboleth is used may reflect a spiritual meaning to its appearance here as a determiner of loyalty or identity.

- **Psalms 69:2** - "I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods (*šibōleṯ*) overflow me."

- **Isaiah 27:12** - "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall beat off from the channel of the river unto the stream of Egypt, and ye shall be gathered one by one, O ye children of Israel."

...or "beat out and thresh (*ḥābaṯ*) the ears of grain, or branch or 'flow of the stream' (*šibōleṯ*)"

- **Isaiah 27:12** - And in that day, the Lord will beat out (thresh = *ḥābaṯ*) [the peoples like grain] from the flowing stream (*shibolet*) of the River [Euphrates] to the Wadi of Egypt; and you shall be picked up one by one, O Children of Israel!

Here we have a wonderful play on words. On the one hand, we have the beating of the *shibolet* of grain (see **Ruth 2:2,17**) and on the other the *shibolet* of a river.

RaDAK (the medieval rabbi David Kimchi - 1160–1235 A.D.) - on Shoftim 12:6 - The two meanings of *shiboleth* have two separate etymologies: "ear of corn" comes from the root *sh-b-l* שבל, whereas the meaning "flood, torrent" comes from a distinct root: *th-b-l*. Therefore, the Ephraimites pronounced the word as "thibolet," which gave them away.

Other scholars reverse this, saying that the Gileadites were influenced by the Ammonites, and pronounced *shibboleth* with the "th" sound.

Whichever is true, the word used for identification emphasized the differences and divisions in Israel, not their unity, and portray the time of the judges as a time of threshing and separating of the wheat from the chaff, as well as a time for crying out in repentance, as in **Psalm 69** when the overflowing waters threaten to swallow up Israel.

The word is also used in Ruth, as a symbol of hope through identifying with Israel as a whole, as Ruth the Gentile did. Since she is in the lineage of King David, it also points to the hope of the Messiah:

- **Ruth 2:2** - "And Ruth the Moabitess said unto Naomi, Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn (*shiboleth*) after him in whose sight I shall find grace. And she said unto her, Go, my daughter.

This was a sort of antitype of Israel's first miraculous crossing of the Jordan to begin the conquest. The time of the judges was a time of threshing, and testing for Israel. This crossing now involved by Israelites fleeing but then facing a deadly test.

The Targum of **Isaiah 27:12** says the nations would be beaten/threshed and "fall dead" from the Euphrates to the stream of Egypt, and then He would collect the Israelites one by one who had been taken into exile in both Assyria/Babylon and Egypt.

But instead, here the conflict between Ephraim and the Gileadites - a civil war - would only strengthen Gentile nations like the Philistines (in the next chapter).

The story of the "*shibboleth*" test is telling us that Israel would only be brought back to obedience and faith either through threshing (separating the seed from the chaff) or by baptism ("falling dead" by the flowing of a stream).

Why didn't the Ephraimites figure out what was going on and simply pronounce the word like the Gileadites did?

Some scholars say it was their pride again. They refused to adopt the "wrong" pronunciation. In addition, by pronouncing it their way as "*saboleth*," they were calling the "lower-class" Gileadites "porters" or servants who should help them cross the stream of the Jordan.

The term "shibboleth" has entered the English language meaning a certain pronunciation or attribute that reveals your identity, usually in a way that allows you to look down on someone else.

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

Ibzan's Judgeship

Judges 12:8-10 - "And after him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. And he had thirty sons, and thirty daughters, whom he sent abroad, and took in thirty daughters from abroad for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years. Then died Ibzan, and was buried at Bethlehem."

There were two Bethlehems, one in the tribe of Zebulun (**Joshua 19:15**) of which some think this man was; and another in the tribe of Judah, the city of Jesse and David, and of the Messiah; and Josephus says (Antiqu. l. 5. c. 7. sect. 13.), Ibzan was of the tribe of Judah, of the city of Bethlehem; and because Boaz was of the same place, and lived in the times of the judges, the Rabbis (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra, fol. 91. 1.) are of opinion that he is the same with Ibzan; so Jarchi and Ben Gersom.

30 daughters - i.e. these were foreign women married to his sons probably to cement treaties. This also shows how far Israel had fallen. There was a commandment against marrying Canaanites:

- **Deuteronomy 7:3-4** - "Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly."

Exceptions are Rahab and Ruth, and this may be why the rabbis saw Izban to be Boaz - he married the Moabitess Ruth. The rabbinical solution to this problem was that the foreign wives converted to Judaism first.

For instance, Joseph married the daughter of an Egyptian priest. Moses married a Cushite (**Numbers 12:1**) and Zipporah was a Midianitess. Samson married a Philistine woman. Solomon's foreign wives (**I Kings 11:4-10**), who turned him toward idolatry and built temples and altars to other gods, had first converted to Judaism, but later reverted to their original religious practices, according to the rabbis.

It is not until Ezra spoke against intermarriage in **Ezra 9:2, 12**, and **10:3**, and Nehemiah did so in **Nehemiah 13:23-27**, that there was a blanket prohibition.

Elon

Judges 12:11-12 - "And after him Elon, a Zebulonite, judged Israel; and he judged Israel ten years. And Elon the Zebulonite died, and was buried in Aijalon in the country of Zebulun."

Abdon

Judges 12:13-15 - "And after him Abdon the son of Hillel, a Pirathonite, judged Israel. And he had forty sons and thirty nephews, that rode on threescore and ten ass colts: and he judged Israel eight years. And Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died, and was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the mount of the Amalekites."

Pirathon was located in Ephraimite territory. Josephus says (Antiqu. I. 5. c. 7.), Abdon had a magnificent funeral.

The focus on how many asses he had and his big funeral reveal how little wisdom and humility were valued in judges at this time.