

Week #:	209	Series:	God's Judgment	Title:	Judge #8 – Jephtha – Jephtha's Conflict with Ephraim
Scriptures:	Judges 12:1-7				
Songs:	Medley: Come Now is the Time to Worship / Open the Eyes of My Heart / Here I Am to Worship				
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Judge #8: Jephtha's Conflict with Ephraim

This week we conclude the story of Jephthah, the Judge who liberated the northern tribes of Israel from the oppression and threats of the king of Ammon. Last time we spent a good deal of study on the matter of Jephthah's only child, a daughter, who became the subject of a rash vow made by Jephthah.

This short chapter 12 ties up some loose ends and brings an era to a close. Remember: the book of Judges is NOT a work authored by any one person. Rather it is a compilation of tradition and history that ancient editors put together to give an accurate and cogent account of the 300-400 year time span in between the death of Joshua and the anointing of King Saul. Thus, just as a person giving an account of WWII would have to pick and choose which of the countless events and actions during that period would paint the best picture of what happened, so he would have to weave it together in a logical way for it to be effective and have meaning for future readers. This is what the book of Judges is, and why we even find the need for what is written down in chapter 12.

Judges 12:1-7

¹ The men of Efrayim assembled, crossed into Tzafon [Zaphon] and said to Jephtha, "Why didn't you call us to go with you when you went over to fight the people of 'Amon? We're ready to burn down your house with you in it!" ² Jephtha answered, "When my people and I were in a serious dispute with the people of 'Amon, I called you; and you didn't rescue me from their power. ³ When I saw that you weren't rescuing me, I put my life in my own hands and went over to attack the people of 'Amon; and *ADONAI* gave them over into my power. So why have you come up today to fight me?"

⁴ Then Jephtha gathered together all the men of Gil'ad and fought with Efrayim, and the men of Gil'ad defeated Efrayim; because they were saying, "You Gil'ad men who live in Efrayim and M'nasheh have deserted Efrayim!" ⁵ The men of Gil'ad cut off Efrayim from the crossings over the Yarden, and whenever anyone from Efrayim tried to escape and said, "Let me go across," the men of Gil'ad would ask him, "Are you from Efrayim?" and if he said, "No," ⁶ they would tell him to say "*Shibbolet*." If he said, "*Sibbolet*," because he could not make his mouth pronounce it right, they took hold of him and killed him on the spot at the Jordan crossing; at that time 42,000 men of Efrayim died.

⁷ Jephtha judged Isra'el for six years. Then Jephtha from Gil'ad died, and he was buried in one of the cities of Gil'ad.

The main thrust here revolves around the tribe of Ephraim. Those who have been around the Hebrew Roots movement know that Ephraim plays a critical role in Israel's past, present, and future. While there is no consensus on the precise role of Ephraim in the end times, we can

apprehend some aspects of Ephraim's inherent nature (that would show its ugly head throughout biblical history) in the book of Judges. And one of those aspects is that Ephraim sees itself as a bit above the other tribes, as feeling self-important, displaying quite a lot of arrogance and self-righteousness.

Part of the reason that Ephraim had this overblown sense of national grandeur is that Ephraim was probably the largest of all the tribes, and had a historical importance because the conqueror of Canaan, Joshua, was an Ephraimite. That said, the tribe of Judah might have been its equal. So, while Ephraim was definitely preeminent in the northern area of Canaan, Judah held sway in the south. We can be sure that if Ephraim were truly powerful enough it would have taken on the tribe of Judah.

Thus, in chapter 12 we have the leaders of Ephraim coming to Jephthah with a familiar complaint: you didn't invite us to the party. A few chapters ago they did the same thing with Gideon. After Gideon had beaten Israel's enemies Ephraim shows up and wants to be praised, bowed down to, and given its place at the head of the line for the lion's share of the spoils of war won by Gideon and the other tribesmen of Israel.

Gideon showed himself to be an able diplomat as well as a superb leader of warriors, and thus appeased Ephraim. Jephthah on the other hand is not Gideon and has no interest in granting Ephraim's demands nor does he have the patience to give their ridiculous assertions any credibility. Jephthah is a pure warrior and when challenged reacts in one way: attack.

Ephraim made a fatal mistake in judgment; in verse 1 it says they came to Jephthah and threatened to kill him and his whole household for supposedly insulting Ephraim by not consulting them regarding the war with Ammon. Jephthah refutes this and says that in fact he came to them for help, and they stood on the sidelines instead (and this is undoubtedly exactly what happened knowing Ephraim's history).

Apparently this pow-wow with Ephraim happened some weeks after Ammon had been defeated, because Jephthah had already dismissed his army. So verse 4 says that he now "gathered together all the men of Gilead" (brought them back again) and fought with Ephraim. It seems as though the final straw was an irretrievable insult that Ephraim hurled at Jephthah in their meeting; Ephraim basically says that the men of Gilead are really only deserters from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh anyway. Ephraim is describing the army of Gilead as nothing but a rag-tag mob, probably not to be counted among their brothers as Israelites, anything but a legitimate army, who has no status to lead or govern because they are not noble enough, as Ephraim sees itself as so illustrious and thus automatically deserving of ruling status.

No doubt this accusation brought up a long held burning bitterness within Jephthah as he had been exiled from Israel because his mother was a prostitute. He had been banished from his own family because they saw his status as too lowly. It was this exile that caused him to put together his group of bandits and raid Israelite and other caravans to make a living; and then later the leading men of Israel (when they were in dire straits) asked Jephthah to come home

and use his army to fight for them. It was Jephthah's band that was now the lead troops in ending Ammon's oppression over Israel, but Ephraim (who didn't even participate in the battle) says that the men of Gilead were never worthy of such a task.

We can see just how divided Israel had become by Jephthah's era since the days of Moses and then Joshua. Ephraim was a rival with Judah, not a united family. They both lived on the west side of the Jordan. Gilead was located on the east side and thus seen and treated by those on the west as practically another nation even though they were Hebrews. Ephraim and Judah were well aware that even though Moses had legitimized some of the Israelite tribes living in the Trans-Jordan, in fact that was not the holy Promised Land as described to Abraham. Thus those 9 1/2 tribes living inside Canaan saw themselves as better than the 2 1/2 tribes who had chosen to live on the east bank of the Jordan River (outside of the Holy Land). Those 2 1/2 tribes were quite sensitive to this reality and not just a little bit touchy when the subject was brought up. So we see that there was an enormous and growing schism between the Israelite tribes who lived in the Trans-Jordan versus those who lived in Canaan; between those Israelite tribes who lived in Canaan, but were more aligned with Ephraim in the north, versus those who were more aligned with Judah in the south.

This reality is demonstrated in verses 5 and 6 especially. Because after Jephthah has attacked Ephraim and routed them; after Ephraim realizes that despite their large number of loyal soldiers they have no chance against this experienced and tough army of men from Gilead; we find the Ephraimite troops fleeing in all directions trying to save themselves and lying about their identities when they are caught.

The fight between Jephthah's men and Ephraim was occurring mainly on the east side of Jordan River, and the Ephraimite soldiers were trying to get back over the Jordan to their own land in the west. Knowing this, Jephthah sent his men to guard the fording points. But it seems that when the Ephraimite men were caught and questioned they denied that they were Ephraimites; but some clever officer from Gilead devised a simple test. Every male who was trying to ford the Jordan was required to say the word "shibboleth". If they couldn't properly pronounce it and instead said "sibboleth" then it identified them as an Ephraimite and they were killed on the spot.

Shibboleth, like so many Hebrew words, has two entirely different meanings. It can mean ***an ear of corn*** or it could mean ***the flood of a stream***; its use depended on its context. Since the context here is that this questioning took place at the fords of the river Jordan, it's obvious that the meaning was "flood of a stream" and not "ear of corn".

So what we see is that the split among the Israelite tribes had become so serious, deep and had developed over such a long period of time that each tribe (or coalition of tribes) had by now even gained their own dialect. Just as in America we have developed different dialects of English that enable us to readily tell when a person is from the south, or the northeast, or from the west, so it was among the Israelites. Apparently the Ephraimites had lost their ability to pronounce the letter sheen, which is the "sh" sound, and instead could only say it as an "s"

sound. This dead give-away proved to be fatal; Jephthah's army devastated the Ephraimite army and killed 42,000 of them, many because they couldn't make an "sh" sound and thus hide their allegiance in order to escape. This no doubt would have (for many years) greatly curtailed Ephraim's ability both to protect itself and to project its power over others, so its status would have diminished for a time as a result of its arrogance that led to this ill-conceived and completely unnecessary battle with Jephthah and the highly insulted men of Gilead who had done such a good service for Israel.

Next, we're told that Jephthah judged Israel for 6 years and then died. This didn't go unnoticed by the ancient Hebrew sages and we ought to make note of it as well. Judging for only 6 years was a very short length of time; anywhere from 20-80 years was more the norm for earlier judges. Further, the original Hebrew states that he was buried in some undisclosed cities (plural, multiple cities) in Gilead, not in one city selected from several cities in Gilead.