



Judges - Chapter Twelve

II Judges 3:7-16:31 - The Downward Spiral of Israel's Apostasy (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twelve

Jephthah had crossed the Jordan while pursuing the Ammonites and he was challenged by the Ephraimites because they believed he had not invited them to fight alongside him. Unable to pacify the Ephraimites, Jephthah fought with them. This civil war cost the lives of many thousands of men from Ephraim.

Following the death of Jephthah, the chapter concludes with brief accounts of three further judges: Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.

II.k Judges 12:1-7 - Intertribal Dissension

This episode recalls Ephraim's earlier challenge to Gideon in Judges 8:1-3. In the first incident, Gideon was able to pacify Ephraim, whereas in the second, Jephthah did not, and a civil war erupted. The Ephraimites were defeated, and they never again played any important role in Israel's history.

¹ The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, 'Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down over you!'

Judges 12:1

The men of Ephraim crossed to Zaphon. Zaphon was in the territory allocated to the tribe of Gad; refer to Joshua 13:24-28.

Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites, and did not call us to go with you? The 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. Why should the Ephraimites complain about a victory accomplished through God's intervention for the benefit of all the tribes? It was a strange and costly jealousy that spurred on Ephraim.

This seems to be a consistent problem with the people of the tribe of Ephraim; they gave a similar response to Gideon in Judges 8:1-3. Then Gideon answered the complaining men of Ephraim with tact and diplomacy. Jephthah was a very different sort of man.

We will burn your house down over you! The people of Ephraim also backed up their anger with a threat. They threatened to burn down Jephthah's house with him in it. This again clearly reveals the sad disintegration of the nation. The consciousness of the unity of the people seems largely to have been lost.

² Jephthah said to them, 'My people and I were engaged in conflict with the Ammonites who oppressed us severely. But when I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand. ³ When I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hand, and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day, to fight against me?'

Judges 12:2-3

But when I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand. It appears that Jephthah had sent word to the fighting men of Ephraim but they had not responded when initially called, leaving the Gileadites to cross the Jordan and fight alone. The people of Ephraim here seem to be simply chronic complainers. When they had a chance to step out boldly for God they did not do it. Yet when the work was done and God was glorified, they complained that they did not get to participate, presumably for their own glory and share of the spoils.

The fact that a victory had been gained over their common enemy appears to have been overlooked. Accusation and counter-accusation followed in bewildering succession; the claim that they had been passed over was met by the charge that an appeal had been made to them to which they had not responded.

The Lord gave them into my hand. Jephthah's idea was clear. God had won a great victory through him when the Ephraimites stood by even though they had the opportunity to assist: <<*for it is the Lord your God who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to give you victory*>> (Deuteronomy 20:4). In this he pointed out the essentially unjust character of their complaint.

⁴ Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim; and the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, ‘You are fugitives from Ephraim, you Gileadites – in the heart of Ephraim and Manasseh.’ ⁵ Then the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. Whenever one of the fugitives of Ephraim said, ‘Let me go over’, the men of Gilead would say to him, ‘Are you an Ephraimite?’ When he said, ‘No’, ⁶ they said to him, ‘Then say Shibboleth’, and he said, ‘Sibboleth’, for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites fell at that time.

Judges 12:4-6

The men of Gilead defeated Ephraim. Apparently the men of Ephraim were better at talking than fighting, because the men of Gilead seemed to conquer them easily. Perhaps this is why they did not respond to the first call to arms.

You Gileadites – in the heart of Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim and Manasseh were both descended from Joseph and shared a common bond: <<*To Joseph in the land of Egypt were born Manasseh and Ephraim, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him*>> (Genesis 46:20). Gilead was in Transjordan and was part of the land given to the half tribe of Manasseh as well as Reuben and Gad. It seems there was friction between those living in the Promised Land and those who had taken land east of Jordan.

Shibboleth, Sibboleth. The Gileadites devised a test to catch the Ephraimites using an insignificant word, which means either ‘a flowing stream’ or ‘an ear of grain,’ a word that was seemingly difficult for outsiders to pronounce correctly. In modern English usage, Shibboleth may refer to words, expressions, ideas, or beliefs used by insiders to detect outsiders. The terrible tragedy is that Israel is again turning upon itself in internal strife; refer also to Judges 8:17.

⁷ Jephthah judged Israel for six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died, and was buried in his town in Gilead.

Judges 12:7

Jephthah judged Israel for six years. This was a relatively short term of office for a judge but at least the elders kept their word to allow him to continue after defeating the Ammonites. Despite his conflict with Ephraim, the statement indicates that he did judge the entire nation. Whether he did so with their consent or because they feared him can only be a matter for speculation.

II.1 Judges 12:8-15 - Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon

This section briefly describes three further judges.



The above map shows Ibzan as being from Bethlehem in Judah but as the following narrative will indicate it is believed by many commentators to be Bethlehem in Zebulun that is the town that he came from.

⁸ After him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. ⁹ He had thirty sons. He gave his thirty daughters in marriage outside his clan and brought in

thirty young women from outside for his sons. He judged Israel for seven years. ¹⁰ Then Ibzan died, and was buried at Bethlehem.

Judges 12:8-10

Ibzan was the ninth judge. He was distinguished for marrying his thirty sons, assuming monogamous marriage is intended here, and his thirty daughters to outsiders. Although God intended people to marry within their own clans to ensure the land remained within the tribe, it was common cultural practice for people to marry outsiders for the purpose of forming political and military alliances.



The Two Bethlehems

The Talmud identifies Ibzan as Boaz, who would marry Ruth and was the great grandfather of King David (Ruth 4:18-22).

In contrast to Jephthah, left childless by his own actions, the judges who immediately preceded and followed him, Jair and Ibzan, both had thirty sons.

Although his tribal origin is not given, it is generally accepted that it is Bethlehem in Zebulun and not Judah that is intended here. This town is referenced in the land allocation to Zebulun in Joshua 19:10-16. Refer to the image above.

¹¹ After him Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel; and he judged Israel for ten years. ¹² Then Elon the Zebulunite died, and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.

Judges 12:11-12

Elon was the tenth judge, but nothing of significance is reported about him other than the length of his rule - ten years. He was next in a succession of briefly-reigning judges. He is also from a different tribe from the past few judges from before him. God called leaders from various tribes, instead of from one tribe only.

¹³ After him Abdon son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. ¹⁴ He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys; he judged Israel for eight years. ¹⁵ Then Abdon son of Hillel the Pirathonite died, and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

Judges 12:13-15

Abdon was the eleventh judge; he, like Jair and Ibzan, had many children, and he too was relatively wealthy, having donkeys for all his sons and grandsons to ride on. His tenure of office was eight years.

Pirathon was the birth-place of David's captain Behaiah; refer to 2 Samuel 23:30, and 1 Chronicles 11:31 and 27:14.

In the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites. These were the same Amalekites that God had put a curse upon for their treatment of the weakest and most vulnerable in the wilderness wanderings out of Egypt; refer to Exodus 17:8-13, Deuteronomy 25:17-19, and 1 Samuel 15:2-3. That Ephraim and Amalekites are again referenced in this way seems to indicate they were becoming integrated by this time: <<*Some came from Ephraim, whose roots were in Amalek*>> (Judges 5:14a NIV).