

Judges 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Judges chapter 12. The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed over to Zephon 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 over you with fire. And Jephthah said to them, I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites, and when I called you, you did not save me from their hand.

And when I saw that you would not save 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? Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim. And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, because they said, You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh. And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites.

And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, Let me go over, the men of Gilead said to him, Are you an Ephraimite? When he said, No, they said to him, Then say Shibboleth. And he said, Sibboleth, for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time, forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites fell. Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead.

After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. He had thirty sons and thirty daughters he gave in marriage outside his clan, and thirty daughters he brought in from outside for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years. Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem. After him, Elon the Zebulonite judged Israel, and he judged Israel ten years. Then Elon the Zebulonite died and was buried at Eidolon in the land of Zebulon. After him, Abdan the son of Hillel the Pirithonite judged Israel.

He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys, and he judged Israel eight years. Then Abdan the son of Hillel the Pirithonite died and was buried at Pirithon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites. In Judges chapter 12, following Jephthah's battle against the Ammonites, the Ephraimites got angry with Jephthah for not calling them to the fight.

[2 : 1 2] We've already seen the Ephraimites causing trouble like this back in Judges chapter 8 verses 1-3. Then the men of Ephraim said to him, What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?

And they accused him fiercely. And 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 grape harvest of Abiezah? God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, or Ebez. What have I been able to do in comparison with you?

Then their anger against him subsided when he said this. Gideon had assuaged the Ephraimites' anger, appeasing them with a soft answer. But the Ephraimites are far more aggressive in their attitude to Jephthah, threatening to burn him alive. Jephthah had crossed over the Jordan during part of his fight against the Ammonites, not confining the fighting to the Transjordan.

However, he hadn't involved the Ephraimites. A great battle had been won in Israel, but the Ephraimites hadn't received the share of the glory from it that they believed was their Jew as the dominant northern tribe. Ephraim seemingly have an exalted sense of their importance.

But we are also seeing the fact that the Jordan is a fault line in the land, between the Transjordanian tribes and the tribes of the Promised Land proper. Ephraim are none too pleased to see a powerful leader arising in Gilead. This might threaten Ephraim's dominance.

[3 : 34] Unlike Gideon, who was in the middle of his battle against the Midianites and could not afford direct conflict with the Ephraimites, Jephthah has defeated the Ammonites so he can afford to deal with the Ephraimites far more directly. Unlike the Ephraimites, however, Jephthah isn't spoiling for a fight. He begins, as he did with the Ammonites, by trying to communicate with them, with an act of diplomacy. The Gileadites were the ones that had conflict with the Ammonites, and he argues that he called for the assistance of the Ephraimites at that point, when they really could have made a difference and aided their brothers. But they did not provide any help. They had left Gilead to its fate. When there was a risky and costly battle to be fought, they were nowhere to be found. However, when there was glory to be won, they were concerned to be first on the scene. As they hadn't come to Jephthah's initial summons, he didn't summon them when there was far easier glory to be gained. Jephthah, without the aid of the Ephraimites when he had needed it, had taken his life into his hands. However, the Lord had assisted Jephthah in the battle, even when the Ephraimites had not. The Ephraimites presumably did not respond favourably to Jephthah's message, because the next thing we see he is gathering all of the men of Gilead for battle. Jephthah led the Gileadites in battle against the Ephraimites. There are times when people fall out over a seemingly secondary matter, and it blows up into a great argument, in which someone says something in which a deep underlying tension between them erupts, and is brought to the surface.

And this seems to have happened here. The Ephraimites declare that the Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim. It isn't exactly clear what their taunt means, but it might be suggesting that the Gileadites had no true identity of their own, and were little more than illegitimate outcasts of Ephraim and Manasseh.

The fault line between the tribes in the Promised Land and the tribes in the Transjordan had been apparent in Joshua chapter 22, in the incident with the altar. Here we see it again, and we should see the parallels between what Gilead is to the Ephraimites, and what Jephthah is to the sons of Gilead in chapter 11 verses 1 to 3. Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah, and Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman. Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tov, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him.

The sons of Gilead didn't recognise Jephthah as a true brother and heir, but made him a fugitive and an outcast. The Ephraimites treat the Gileadites in the same way. Fittingly, the conflict occurs at the fords of the Jordan, which is the ugly scar dividing the face of the nation, the tribes of the Transjordan on one side, and the tribes of the Promised Land on the other.

And there is a sort of immediate poetic justice here. The Gileadites capture the fords of the Jordan. It's a hugely strategic location. It's mentioned in Judges chapter 3 verse 28 in Ehud's conflict with the Moabites, and in chapter 7 verse 24 in Gideon's battle against the Midianites.

[6 : 51] While the Ephraimites had accused the Gileadites of being fugitives, now the Ephraimites are the fugitives, inspected by the Gileadites. They are all tested at the fords. If they could pronounce the word Shibboleth, they could cross. But if they used a characteristic Ephraimite mispronunciation, Sibboleth, they were killed. The Ephraimites, despite seeing themselves as the greatest of the tribes presumably, and perhaps elevating their dialect over others, as maybe the received pronunciation of Israel, could not pronounce the word Shibboleth correctly. This also reveals that the tribes are sharply divided by dialect, in a sort of mini-Babel. And for all of their self-importance, the Ephraimites are the ones with the mispronunciation. 42,000 Ephraimites were killed.

About 40,000 of the Transjordanian tribes had crossed over the Jordan to fight for their brothers in Joshua chapter 4 verse 13. And now the Ephraimites, who had denied the Transjordanians' part in the nation, lost 42,000 people at the crossing of the Jordan. Is there a significance to this number? Beyond being a weak reminder of the 40,000 Transjordanians who crossed the Jordan to fight in Joshua, 42,000 is also 12,000 multiplied by three and a half, a broken seven. I can't see much significance, but there might be something there. This was a truly devastating defeat.

It would likely have left Ephraim as a spent or crippled military force for decades afterwards. Following this, Jephthah establishes dominance over the Ephraimites and judges Israel for six years.

But in this great civil battle, we see how fractured Israel has become. The account of Jephthah is followed by records of three judges, Ibsen, Elon and Abdon. They complete the chiasm or the bookend pattern that began with Gideon. 70 sons, no sons, 30 sons, no sons, 30 sons, no sons, 70 sons and grandsons. This pattern foregrounds the issue of aspirations to dynastic succession, something that is a central aspect of the stories of both Gideon and Jephthah.

However, it is also subtly present in the details of the other stories. The large numbers of sons suggest the multiplying of marriages, and the involvement of the sons in ruling cities or riding on donkeys suggest proto-dynastic elements emerging. Ibsen gives 30 daughters outside of his clan, and he brings 30 daughters in. This reveals a man who was shrewdly developing patriarchal marriage alliances between different groups, treating his children as chips that he could bargain for greater power politically. He was multiplying wives so that he could multiply children so that he could multiply marriage alliances so that he could gain power. Abdon is only a judge for eight years, but he already has two generations of potential princes lined up.

[9 : 51] A question to consider, what are some of the reasons why dynasty building might be a problem? What are some of the obstacles that the Lord presented to pursuing it?