

Judges Chapter 12

Verses 1-6

Ephraim's complaint here echoes the tribe's prideful words (in Judges Chapter 8).

Jephthah spurned Gideon's diplomatic approach and instead fought and defeated the Ephraimites.

His decision to seek revenge for the insult, combined with Israel's rejection of God's laws, only added to the trouble, causing the tribes to turn on each other rather than fighting their true enemies.

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."

Or, "went over northward"; that is, over the river Jordan, which lay between Gilead and Ephraim.

And when they had crossed the river, they turned northward.

For Mizpeh, where Jephthah lived, was in the north of the land near Hermon and Lebanon (Joshua 11:3).

"And said unto Jephthah, wherefore passedst thou over to fight against the children of Ammon?"

Not over Jordan, but over that part of the land of Israel from the plain where Jephthah dwelt, to the country of the children of Ammon.

"And didst not call us to go with thee?":

They quarrel with him just in the same manner as they did with Gideon.

"We will burn thine house upon thee with fire": That is, burn him and his house.

Which shows that they were in great wrath and fury, and argued not only the height of pride and envy, but wretched ingratitude, and a cruel disposition.

Who, instead of congratulating him as Israel's deliverer, and condoling him with respect to the case of his only child, threaten him in this brutish manner.

"Didst not call us to go with thee":

Ephraim's newest threat (compare 8:1), was their jealousy of Jephthah's success and possibly a lust to share in his spoils.

The threat was not only to burn the house, but to burn him.

It seems that the men of Ephraim were so puffed up with pride, they thought that everything done had to involve them.

They have no justification for burning his house.

He was doing just as he had been requested of his people.

Judges 12:2 "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."

Jephthah had probably asked for their help from the very beginning, even before he took on the job of leading the children of Israel in battle.

They had not volunteered when their help was needed.

God empowered Jephthah for this job, and then he did not need them.

They were not so eager to help until after the battle was won.

Or "cried"; got together by a cry or proclamation made.

In the Hebrew text it is, "a man of Ephraim"; not a single man, but a body of men, who met together and joined as one man.

It is highly probable that there were no less than 50,000 of them; for 42,000 of them were slain (Judges 12:6).

These Ephraimites were a proud and turbulent people, and especially were very jealous of the tribe of Manasseh, of which both Gideon and Jephthah were.

The one of the half tribe on this side Jordan, and the other of the half that was on the other side.

And they were jealous of both, lest any honor and glory should accrue thereunto, and they should get any superiority in any respect over them, since Jacob their father had given the preference to Ephraim.

And this seems to lie at the bottom of all their proceedings.

Judges 12:3 "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?"

Gave him no assistance against their common enemy, did not attempt to save him and his people out of their hands, but left them to defend themselves.

"I put my life in my hands":

Ready to deliver it up in the defense of his country.

The meaning is, that he exposed himself to the utmost danger, hazarded his life in going with a few troops into an enemy's country to fight him, and so liable to lose his life.

Which was in as much danger, as some observe, as any brittle thing contained in the hand is in danger of falling, or of being snatched out of it.

"And passed over against the children of Ammon":

Took a long and fatiguing march over the land of Gilead into that of the children of Ammon, to fight with them.

"And the LORD delivered them into my hand":

Gave him victory over them, which showed that his cause was just, and his call to engage in it clear.

"Wherefore then are ye come up unto me this day, to fight against me?"

Who rather should have come with thanks to him for the service he had done, not only for the Gileadites, but for all Israel.

For had he not fought against the children of Ammon, and conquered them, they would have soon not only overrun and oppressed Gilead.

But would have come over Jordan, and dispossessed the other tribes, and particularly Ephraim, as they had done already (Judges 10:9).

So that it was base ingratitude in these people to come to fight against Jephthah, who had fought for them, and wrought salvation for them.

It appears, they have a personal hate for Jephthah that has nothing to do with this incident.

If they fight against him, they will be fighting against the LORD who sent him.

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."

"Fugitives":

Here was a mockery referring to the Gileadites as low lifes', the outcasts of Ephraim.

They retaliated with battle.

Jephthah had no choice.

He had to stop Ephraim from burning his house.

Ephraim had always been jealous of Manasseh, and Manasseh was jealous of Ephraim.

They were both from the tribe of Joseph, and should have been helping each other.

Verses 5-6

The linguistic test used to examine whether an individual was an "Ephraimite" revolved around a distinction in "sh" sounds.

The common Hebrew word "Shibboleth", "ear of grain", was pronounced *sibboleth* by the Ephraimites (perhaps with a bit of lisp sound); hence, a person's tribal affiliation would be clearly identifiable.

Judges 12:5 "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;"

Being either swifter of foot, or going a nearer and shorter way, being better acquainted with their own country.

"And it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, let me go over":

The fugitives of Ephraim, as before called, who ran away from the battle, made their escape, and the best of their way to the passages of Jordan, to get over there to their own country.

"That the men of Gilead said unto him":

To every one of them, as they came up.

"Art thou an Ephraimite?":

Or an Ephrathite; for so it seems those of the tribe of Ephraim were called (as Jeroboam, 1 Kings 11:26).

"If he said, nay":

That he was not an Ephraimite.

It seems that, the men of Jephthah got to the Jordan first.

They blocked the passage ways back into the land of Ephraim.

Some of the men of the tribe of Ephraim tried to slip back across the border without being found out.

The men of Gilead caught them, and asked them if they were Ephraimites.

They said they were not, because they feared for their lives.

Judges 12:6 "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."

“Shibboleth” is a word that can be translated as either “stream” or “ear of grain”.

For whatever reason, the Ephraimites could not pronounce the word properly, making them easily identified.

The method used for discovering an Ephraimite was the way in which they pronounced this word.

If they mispronounced it by an “s” rather than a “sh” sound, it gave them away, being a unique indicator of their dialect.

We see that the man of Ephraim could not pronounce Shibboleth, and he said Sibboleth.

This gave him away as an Ephraimite.

They killed him.

They actually killed 42,000 Ephraimites.

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

Despite his foolishness (11:29-40), and his vengefulness (12:1-6), Jephthah is mentioned in the hall of faith in Hebrews, along with other flawed characters from Judges, Gideon, Barak, and Samson (Heb. 11:32).

Trust is so important to God that He responds to it even in the lives of flawed people.

His rule as judge was for just 6 years, but he accomplished a lot in that time.

He was buried in a city in Gilead, the land of his father.

Verses 8-15

The presence of three more “minor” judges in the storyline reminds readers that the book’s intent is not a detailed account of every judge in Israel but to tell the stories of certain judges to build an argument, namely, that God’s people deteriorate when they become like the pagan culture around them.

These lesser-known judges with their large families and king-like wealth (e.g., the “seventy donkeys” on which Abdon’s sons and grandsons rode) also highlight the emptiness of their predecessor, Jephthah, and their successor, Samson (5:10; 10:4).

Judges 12:8 "And after him Ibzan of Beth-lehem judged Israel."

There were two Beth-lehems, 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, Ibzan was of the tribe of Judah, of the city of Beth-lehem.

And because Boaz was of the same place, and lived in the times of the judges, the Jewish Rabbins are of opinion that he is the same with Ibzan; so Jarchi and Ben Gersom.

Some people believe that Ibzan here, is the same as Boaz.

Some historians say that he was of the tribe of Judah.

Judges 12:9 "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."

“Thirty sons”:

Very large families suggest the father’s marriage to several wives, a part of life tolerated but never matching God’s blueprint of one wife at a time (Gen. 2:24).

To have many children had the lure of extending one’s human power and influence.

There is little else known of Ibzan, except what we read here.

He believed in his children marrying outside of their tribe.

He reigned 7 years, which must have been without war, since there is nothing mentioned.

Judges 12:10 "Then died Ibzan, and was buried at Beth-lehem."

He died at the end of his seven years of government, and was buried in his native place.

Nothing memorable having happened during his being judge.

This is all that is recorded of him.

There was a Beth-lehem in Judah, and a Beth-lehem in the land of Zebulun.

We would be guessing, to say which it was.

Judges 12:11 "And after him Elon, a Zebulunite, judged Israel; and he judged Israel ten years."

One of the tribe of Zebulun.

"And he judged Israel ten years":

Administered justice to them, preserved them in the true religion, and from idolatry.

Though it does not appear that any enemies arose in his time against them, from whom he delivered them.

It is unlikely that two judges in a row would be from the same tribe.

Since it is recorded here that Elon was of Zebulun, it is highly unlikely that Ibzan was.

Elon was judge 10 years.

Judges 12:12 "And Elon the Zebulunite died, and was buried in Aijalon in the country of Zebulun."

At the end of his ten years of government.

"And was buried in Aijalon in the country of Zebulun":

Which is added to distinguish it from another Aijalon in the tribe of Dan (Judges 1:35).

When there is so little written about a judge, it probably means there were no great events during his judgeship.

Judges 12:13 "And after him Abdon the son of Hillel, a Pirathonite, judged Israel."

So called from Pirathon, where he was born, and which was in the tribe of Ephraim, as appears from (Judges 12:15).

Pirathon was of the territory of Ephraim.

This just means that Abdon lived in Pirathon.

Judges 12:14 "And he had forty sons and thirty nephews, that rode on threescore and ten ass colts: and he judged Israel eight years."

Or sons' sons, that is, grandsons.

So that he lived not only to see his sons married, but his grandchildren grown up to be men, since it follows.

"That rode on threescore and ten ass colts":

Who were either employed by him to ride about on these animals, which in those times were honorable (see Judges 5:10).

To administer justice throughout the nation in their circuits.

Or rather, not following any trade, or being concerned in husbandry, or feeding cattle, but being men of estates, rode about like gentlemen.

"And he judged Israel eight years":

In his time it is said the city of Troy was destroyed.

So Eusebius, who calls this judge Labdon, though he elsewhere places it in the times of Eli (see note on Judges 12:9).

The fact that he had 40 sons riding on ass colts means that he was probably a wealthy man.

Most scholars believe the 30 nephews are speaking of his grandsons.

They too rode on ass colts.

His time of judgeship lasted 8 years and very little is known of him.

Judges 12:15 "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."

At the end of his eight years' government.

"And was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the mount of the Amalekites":

In the place where he was born, and from whence he had the name of a Pirathonite.

And this was in the tribe of Ephraim, and the particular spot was Mount Amalek.

So called either from the name of the person to whom it belonged, or because the Amalekites formerly dwelt in it.

Or rather because of some remarkable advantage gotten over them at this place.

Here, Josephus says, this judge had a magnificent funeral.

It seemed he lived and served as judge 8 years, and died after a very quiet, peaceful life.

He was buried in his hometown of Pirathon.

Chapter 12 Questions

1. Who complained to Jephthah that they had been left out of the war?
2. What did they threaten to do to Jephthah?
3. Who did he say, he and his people had been at great strife with?
4. What had he asked of them, and they did not do it?
5. When had they become eager to help?
6. Who delivered them into Jephthah's hands?
7. Why did they really come to fight him?
8. Who did Jephthah gather to help him fight Ephraim's tribe?
9. Ephraim and Manasseh were both from the tribe of _____.
10. Who took the passage of the Jordan?
11. Who did they catch trying to cross?
12. What question did they ask them?
13. How did they catch them in a lie about who they were?
14. How many of Ephraim's tribe died in battle?
15. How long did Jephthah judge Israel?
16. Who was judge after Jephthah?

17. Where was he from?
18. How long did he judge?
19. Who judged after Ibzan?
20. What tribe was he from?
21. How many years did he judge?
22. Who took his place as judge?
23. Where was he from?
24. What tribe is that from?
25. How many sons did he have?
26. What did they ride?
27. The nephews could be _____.
28. How long did he judge?