

The Book of Judges

Lesson 19 - Chapters 12 and 13

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 vow was to sacrifice as an 'Olah (usually translated as burnt offering) the first thing to greet him out of the door of his home when he returned from battle. The vow was in exchange for the Lord giving Jephthah and his army (consisting mainly of men from Gilead) victory. It is key to note that nowhere do we have the Lord acknowledging that validity of this vow.

As Jephthah was indeed victorious he returned home only to be (unexpectedly) greeted first by his virgin daughter. Later we are told that he did to her what he had vowed to God. The subject is controversial on a number of levels; first, because there has been much doubt cast on whether or not Jephthah actually offered his daughter as a human sacrifice. We find that later scholars (Hebrew and gentile) suggested that instead of her being sacrificed, she was simply given over to the Levites to serve in perpetuity as a female Tabernacle worker, and thus the difficult consequence of her father's vow required her to remain an unmarried virgin all of her days.

The second controversy is that this notion that Jephthah's daughter was NOT sacrificed only arose 2000 years after the fact. All written documents and all oral Tradition prior to 500 A.D. claimed that Jephthah's daughter was killed. Only after that time did a new breed of scholars say that she wasn't and they found an alternative explanation.

The third controversy is that in fact the ancient Hebrew makes it quite clear that it was not any THING that came first out of his door that Jephthah said he would sacrifice, but rather any PERSON. In other words the usual rationale for this story is that Jephthah envisioned an animal running to greet him when he returned from the war, and was thus shocked to see his daughter emerge from his doorway. The Hebrew term referring to that object of sacrifice that Jephthah's promised to God is *asher*, and it refers to a human not an animal. Further the idea that a sheep or a cow or some type of clean animal suitable for a sacrifice would run to greet him first is illogical. A dog might, I suppose, but a dog is an unclean animal. Rather in that era it was expected and required that when the master returned from a journey that the chief house servant would be on the lookout for him and then would run to meet him to wash his feet and offer him refreshment. Only after that would his family greet him. Thus Jephthah more likely fully expected, and had in his mind, to sacrifice a servant (when he made that vow), but was grief-stricken when his daughter broke standard Middle Eastern protocol and greeted her father before the chief house servant did.

The fourth controversy is that even in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, Jephthah is listed as one of the great heroes of Israel and lauded for his service to God. It is this biblical mention that caused some Christian scholars to surmise that such praise lavished upon Jephthah would not have been allowed had he actually done such an abominable thing as committing a human sacrifice (especially upon his own daughter).

I concluded by admitting while there might be reasonable room for disagreement on this subject, my position is that it is always best to take Scripture for what it plainly states, within its context, and with the critical understanding of what specific kind of literature we are reading (poetry, history, accounting, narrative, legend, etc. all of which appears in the bible). Thus it is nearly impossible for me to think that the plain meaning of the Scripture in Judges 11 (which is a historical account), and the continual 2000 years of commentary and oral tradition (without opposition) that confirmed the biblical story about Jephthah's ill-fated daughter, ought to suddenly be set aside for another and newer interpretation that more meets with modern expectations and sensibilities that makes us feel better. I maintain that indeed Jephthah did sacrifice his daughter, even though it was a terrible wrong and completely against Torah and counter to all of the Lord's principles.

As we read Judges 12 we will see even more of Jephthah's flawed character revealed as evidence that he would not at all have seen killing his own daughter as a pious (albeit painful) religious act as anything but expected and proper, even if it was devastating to him personally.

Open your bibles to Judges chapter 12.

READ JUDGES CHAPTER 12 all

This short chapter 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 3 to 4 hundred 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.

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 it's ugly head throughout biblical history) in the book of Judges. And one of those aspects is that Ephraim sees himself (or "Its self") 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

venerated 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 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 Manassah any way. 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 band of bandits and raid Israelite and other caravans to make a living; and then later the leading men of Israel (when their 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.

Let me paint a picture for you at this point. I want you to 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 ½ tribes living inside Canaan saw themselves as better than the 2 ½ tribes who had chosen to live on the east bank of the Jordan River (outside of the Holy Land). Those 2 ½ 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. And 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 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 **Shophetim**. 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.

There had to be, in the minds of the ancient sages, a good reason for such a short duration of judging considering the great victories that Jephthah had won over God's enemies and to explain how he could have buried in multiple cities. They determined that because of Jephthah's great sin of killing his daughter to complete his vow, that the Lord punished him. Listen to an excerpt from this Midrash in the Talmud on the subject:

“Because he was stricken with leprosy as a punishment, his death was lingering, and his limbs fell off one by one, and were buried in different cities where they happened to drop off”.

While that may be accurate or not, it again points out that even though on the one hand Jephthah had done some great things for the Lord, on the other he had committed some dastardly and nearly unthinkable sins.

We've spoken of one of those great sins; but another is that because Ephraim insulted Jephthah in a very sensitive area of his psyche, Jephthah went on an unabated binge of revenge and killing against Ephraim. There is no evidence that Ephraim ever harmed Jephthah; rather it merely threatened and insulted. But in response Jephthah attacked and ruthlessly killed 42,000 of Ephraim. In fact he went so far as to blockade the fording points of the Jordan River and then to murder soldiers who had dropped their weapons and were merely trying to return home. Again: this was NOT some foreign enemy Jephthah was dealing with, it was his Hebrew brethren he was slaughtering for no other reason than that the leaders of Ephraim had slighted him and deeply upset him. These were not Canaanites who were to be expelled from the land at God's instructions, they were fellow Israelites. So Jephthah was a man whose bloodthirsty ways were used by the Yehoveh for His purposes, but when not under Holy Spirit guidance and control these same attributes led him to do monstrous things.

The era of Jephthah is over, and after him came Ibzan. Practically nothing is said of him, we're not even sure of his tribal affiliation. Some say that he must have been of the tribe of Judah because he was from Beit-Lechem. But just like other place names, there were a number of Bethlehems in Canaan; and since Ibzan took over from Jephthah he would either have ruled over the north central part of Canaan, or over Gilead on the east bank of the Jordan, maybe both. Its exceedingly unlikely therefore that this Bethlehem is the one we think of today, in the territory of Judah, in the south of Canaan.

That the **Shophet Ibzan** had 30 sons and 30 daughters indicates a wealthy aristocrat. It draws an interesting contrast between this man who immediately followed Jephthah, and Jephthah who had only ONE child total, and that was a daughter who was ultimately killed in her youth. The 30 daughters were actually daughters-in-law, wives for his sons that he brought in from abroad. The CJB, I think, has a pretty bad translation where it states that Ibzan had 30 biological daughters AND also brought in 30 foreign women for his biological sons to marry.

Rather it was the same 30 “daughters”, and they were foreigners.

This fits well with the constantly deteriorating condition of Israel (to get non-Hebrew women as wives for his Hebrew sons). Not only is this against the Torah commands, but also highlights how the Israelites were more interested in following typical Middle Eastern customs as practiced by their gentile neighbors than in obeying God. This bringing in of foreign wives was predicated on one purpose alone: making peace treaties with nearby pagan kingdoms. Inter-marriage was then, and remained for centuries, the primary means of creating an alliance between nations.

We see that **Ibzan** only judged for 7 years, one more than Jephthah. Again we need only compare his short rule with his poor leadership and lifestyle to understand why such a relatively brief period of judging. Yet, by all accounts, he was a Shophet anointed by God to judge Israel and in no way a pretender.

After **Ibzan** came the Shofet **Elon** of the tribe of Zebulun. Even less is told of him; he ruled 10 years and died.

Next came **Abdon** who had 40 sons and 30 grandsons. That these sons rode on ass colts says that this was a very royal and aristocratic family. So many children also indicate many wives (he probably had well more than 40 daughters in addition to his sons), but also that he ruled during a time of peace and prosperity (although from the time of his divine anointing until his death was but a mere 8 years).

OK. Let's move on to Judges chapter 13 and the story that we've all heard since we were children of the muscle-bound Samson.

Before we read the chapter allow me to briefly set the stage.

Bible scholars and bible students alike have often looked at the story of Samson and said that he certainly was not a typical judge. But after we have now studied the majority of the judges, we could easily counter that question with one of our own: “So, what IS a typical judge?” They each invariably operated in a different way, each invariably had their own set of character flaws and strengths to go with their own personal agendas and at times to bring about God's agenda, and thus we find that like all the rest Samson was also in a category all his own. I think after so many weeks of in-depth study of these **Shophetim** that can say with some certainty that a tight or all-encompassing definition of what a judge was and what a judge did rests only within our imaginations! It varied all over the map.

Samson lived during a time of Philistine oppression; in fact it had been ongoing for about 40 years. It is important for us to visualize that we have an overlap in time frame between the lives and missions of Samuel (who we've yet to read about) and Samson. In fact the Philistine oppression in the west, near the Mediterranean Sea, was beginning at the same time as the judge Jephthah was operating and was anointed to fight back against the oppression of the Ammonites over that portion of Israel who lived in the Trans-Jordan. The point being that Israel was fighting off severe aggression in some cases, and simply overpowering pagan social

pressure in other cases, in several areas simultaneously. There wasn't a single tribe of Israel who wasn't fighting for their lives or way of life in one form or another during Samson's era.

By the time of Samson the Philistines had already taken the Hebrews' precious Ark of the Covenant from them, the result of a disastrous war and sad defeat of the Israelites during the closing years of Eli, the High Priest of Israel. Now because the stories of Eli and then Samuel appear in the bible AFTER this story of Samson, it would seem as though the war with Philistia and the loss of the Ark of the Testimony to them happened at a later time; but in fact these are merely accounts of different things going on in different places in roughly the same narrow slice of time.

Let's be clear: at the time of Samson we need to be careful in our use of the term "oppression" when referring to the Philistines. Indeed they held the upper hand, they were the masters of the region, but they weren't trying to annihilate the local Israelites by any means. When we read scripture closely and also examine some extra-biblical sources we tend to see a political and social landscape along the west coast of Canaan whereby the Philistines were at once generally not liked, yet in some ways were admired and accepted, by the adjacent Israelite tribes and clans. Think for a minute about Iraq in 2008; many of the people in Iraq for various reasons are more than willing to have the USA armed forces present, while others resent it deeply and would give up their lives to see the American forces ejected. Few if any Iraqis are enthusiastic to have a foreign occupying force in their country (anymore than would we), but a growing number would like to leave behind the ancient backwards ways of fundamental Islamic economics and law for some of the more advanced ways of the West. They don't want to abandon Islam, but they would like to incorporate less violence, some additional personal freedoms and more prosperity into their system, and have material things available to them that the more developed world has. Many (maybe most) Iraqis see that the US is not a bunch of barbarians looking to loot their nation of its riches, or who want to control every aspect of their lives, or who drive around in armored vehicles hoping to kill anything that moves, or who even want to be there permanently.

Yet the USA is so advanced in comparison, so wealthy and so overwhelmingly powerful, that it causes a major portion of Iraqi society to feel jealous and bitter at our presence. Although there may be elements of western culture they would like to mold and adopt into their ancient traditional ways (especially the young are open to radical changes), the older residents are quite agitated as some of the less desired attributes of Western society creep in (unwelcomed) and become attached to their traditional eastern culture. Naturally the USA is blamed for this development.

In this illustration just replace Iraq with Israel, and the United States with the Philistines and you have a pretty good idea of how things proceeded, and how life was lived among the Israelites, and how the two sides interacted in Samson's era. The Philistines weren't FORCING their ways on the Israelites, but the Philistines' advanced society with its leading edge technology, tremendous societal organization, unstoppable armed forces, prosperity and wealth, and an attractive religion lured many Israelites towards it like a steel ball towards a powerful magnet. For the young Hebrews, they saw no threat; for the old, there was nothing but threat. They knew that succumbing to the ways of the pagans would eventually lead to

God's anger upon them for idolatry.

The Israelites always had a dangerous affinity to the Mystery Babylon religions and the Philistines' methods of religious practice were no less inviting. Intermarriage between Hebrews and Philistines was now common, and few Israelites even spoke out against it because it would have been seen as bigotry. Business partnership between Israelites and Philistines were usual; it brought advantage to both sides. Only the most expert modern archaeologists can distinguish between Hebrew and Philistine pottery from the 12th or 11th century BC (Samson's era), so intertwined had the two societies become.

Here's some things to watch for as we unfold this fascinating story; first is about Samson's character. He was like an overgrown and uncontrollable juvenile delinquent. He understood his tremendous strength advantage, the admiration of the young men and girls that it brought with it, and he had no problem using it for personal enjoyment. Second is that Samson was almost schizophrenic in behavior; one moment he was willing to risk his life for the purer ways of Israelite religion, and the next he was partying with the pagans. Third is that while Samson recognized his status as a Nazarite (something given to him while he was still in the womb), of the several Torah requirements placed upon a Nazarite the only one he seemed to care about was his long hair. We'll find him drinking alcohol, touching dead things, and eating foods he ought not.

Let me close today with this: I wonder sometimes if the Apostle Paul didn't reflect upon Samson and his personal inability to do what right before the Lord even though he KNEW what he should and should not do. Because in the book of Romans we see the prolific and thoughtful Sha'ul ponder his own frustrating condition that eerily resembled this man of nearly unlimited strength, who lived 1200 years before him.

Turn your bibles to Romans 7.

READ ROMANS CHAPTER 7: 14 – 24

I think Samson may well have thought these same exact thoughts after he had foolishly allowed his hair to be shorn, then his eyes were burned out and he was imprisoned by the Philistines and given humiliating tasks to perform in public.

The difference is that while Samson didn't know the answer to question, " what a miserable creature I am, who will rescue me from this body bound for death?", Paul did. Because in verse 25 Paul boldly and with great relief proclaims, "Thanks be to God, **He** will. Through Yeshua the Messiah, our Lord".