

Judges

Lesson 22

Now we come to the next problem with Jephthah's disputed family. The Gilead mentioned as the son of Machir had been dead far too long to be the father of Jephthah. As such, the name Gilead must have been a common name in the Gileadite family of descendants of the tribe of Manasseh. It just so happens that Jephthah's father was named Gilead, the patriarch of the Gileadite family in the tribe of Manasseh.

Here is where similarities begin to confuse, and some scholars have tried to mix the two stories into one. Reading on, we find that Jephthah was the son of a *"harlot."* A *harlot* is not a legal wife. We should not confuse this word with that of a *concubine*; his mother was not a concubine. Had she been a concubine of Gilead, the Hebrew word *pilgesh* would have been used in this verse. Instead, the harsh Hebrew word *zonah* was used, and it means *harlot*. However, sometimes *zonah* is also used by Israelites of a woman, not of Israelite heritage. *Asriel*'s mother was a concubine not of the Israelite heritage; therefore, the writer might have used the harsh *zonah* purposefully with Jephthah because he was not a full-blood legal son of this Gilead, just as *Asriel* was not a full blood legal son of Machir's son also named Gilead.

But this Gilead did have legal sons with legal wives for the passage says, "*Gilead's wife 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."*"³ *So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows gathered themselves about Jephthah, and they went out with him.*" Did the legal sons of this particular Gilead have the right to run this son of a harlot away from the family? According to the law in Deuteronomy, they did. "*No one of illegitimate birth shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of his descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall enter the assembly of the LORD.*" (Deuteronomy 23:2) They did not want Jephthah around in the land, and they made it so hard on him that he fled from his brothers to the land of Tob. Where was the land of Tob? Its location is unknown. However, because of the context of this passage and other places where it is mentioned, it must have been located outside of the Promised Land, yet, still nearby. Because the land of Gilead was in the northern portion of the Promised Land on the east side of the Jordan, it could have been in the area of Aram that border the Promised Land to the north. In Chapter 12, we will learn that Jephthah's home in the land of Tob was in a village called Zaphon. It sits outside the promised land, northeast of Manasseh's land.

With that as a thought, some scholars have presumed that the land of Tob was controlled by the descendants of *Asriel*'s mother and her relatives, who were Aramean. In a way, it does make sense. Jacob ran to his relatives in the Aramean area when he bought his brother's birthright for a bowl of soup. Before Jacob, Abraham had sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac in the same Aramean area. Even in the days of Manasseh, Machir, and Gilead, relatives were still living in the Aramean area, and a concubine or harlot from that area would have still been called an Aramean of the line of Noah's son, Shem, the same line as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But as we can see, Jephthah was not the best quality of a man, at least on the surface. He was a marauder, a leader of a band of thugs, who came along in the package deal with their leader, Jephthah. But he would not be the first thug Israel would employ for help. Remember Abimelech?

(b) His Desperate Family

(i) The Invitation

Jephthah's family was desperate for a leader to rid them of the oppression of Ammon. Israel was in a battle for their lives against Ammon. What could they do? The oppression was going on

and on. Verse 4. “*It came about after a while that the sons of Ammon fought against Israel.⁵ When the sons of Ammon fought against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob;⁶ and they said to Jephthah, “Come and be our chief that we may fight against the sons of Ammon.”*” (11:4-6)

No doubt Israel was desperate. The elders of Gilead were desperate. But their thoughts were on the only person they thought could lead the warriors in the battle to stop the oppression – Jephthah. So, the elders reached out to Jephthah and invited him to be their chief.

(ii) The Question

With the invitation, Jephthah had a question. Verse 7. “*Then Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “Did you not hate me and drive me from my father’s house? So why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?”*” (11:7)

Jephthah’s question gives us some insight into the structure of the rule in the land of Gilead. Some of Jephthah’s half-brothers must have been serving among the elders of Gilead. They participated in driving him from his father’s home, and now they are participating in begging for his help. His question presents a situation that most of us have faced in our lives. Jephthah basically said to the elders, “You did not want anything to do with me when things were good; why do you want me now that things are bad?” It is a fair question in family and community relationships. Often, those who can help the most when times get rough are those who are rejected by the establishment when things are good.

(iii) The Answer

Jephthah put the elders of Gilead in a tough spot. They did not have a good answer. Verse 8. “*The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “For this reason we have now returned to you, that you may go with us and fight with the sons of Ammon and become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.”*” (11:8)

Now the elders of Gilead wanted Jephthah to fight for them. Now the elders of Gilead want Jephthah to be their chief, their head, their leader of the people living in Gilead. The answer did not answer Jephthah’s question. The elders were at the end of their rope with no rope left. They were desperate. They admitted that they were willing to accept Jephthah as their regular leader if he would come to lead the battle to rid Israel of the Ammonite oppression.

(iv) The Inquiry

With the answer from the elders of Gilead, Jephthah made a deeper inquiry into their intent and challenged their words. Verse 9. “*So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “If you take me back to fight against the sons of Ammon and the LORD gives them up to me, will I become your head?”*” (11:9)

Jephthah was intrigued by the thought of being the head of the Gilead family. Would the elders keep their word to make Jephthah the head of Gilead if he won the battle?

(v) The Pledge

Jephthah had put the elders between a rock and a hard place. He was not openly willing to lead the war if the elders were unwilling to keep their word. Thus, if the elders wanted Jephthah that badly to be their military leader, they had to pledge to him. Verse 10. “*The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “The LORD is witness between us; surely we will do as you have said.”*” (11:10)

The elders used the LORD as the witness to assure Jephthah that he would be the chief of Gilead if he won the battle. There is no higher witness in this world than the LORD. The elders of Gilead may break their promise to Jephthah, but the LORD will hold them to their pledge. The elders of Gilead could not turn back now and unsay their words. The LORD was involved. As we learned in the words written by Moses, it was better not to pledge than to make a pledge and break it. Breaking a pledge would be deadly. The elders had pledged. Breaking it would be fatal.

(vi) The Announcement

The elders had no choice but to announce to the people of Gilead that Jephthah would be their new head and chief. Verse 11. *“Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.”* (11:11)

Jephthah left the land of Tob and joined the warriors at Mizpah, where he was pronounced as head and chief of the people of Gilead. There, Jephthah spoke to the people. If you will remember, in chapter 10, verse 17, we learned that *“the sons of Israel gathered together and camped in Mizpah.”* Mizpah was the campground of Israel’s warriors. They were just a short distance from Ammon’s camp there in the land of Gilead. What did Jephthah say to the warriors at Mizpah? We are not told by the writer. Be that as it may, Jephthah probably accepted the call to be the chief of Gilead and gave the warriors a game plan.

(2) The Strategy of Jephthah

(a) The Inquiry of Ammon’s Complaint

We now come to the strategy of Jephthah to end the oppression by Ammon. The first step in Jephthah’s strategy was an inquiry of Ammon’s complaint against Israel. Jephthah wanted to know why Israel’s cousins, who Israel had not harmed in any way, were oppressing Israel. Verse 12. *“Now Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, saying, ‘What is between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?’”* (11:12)

It is a fair question. Jephthah needed to know the reason Ammon was oppressing Israel. Messengers were sent by Jephthah to retrieve the answer. And so, Jephthah waited for the messengers to return with the answer.

(b) The Accusation of Ammon’s Complaint

Because the sons of Ammon were camped in the land of Gilead, it did not take long for the messengers to return to Jephthah with the accusation of Ammon’s complaint against Israel. We find it in verse 13. *“The king of the sons of Ammon said to the messengers of Jephthah, ‘Because Israel took away my land when they came up from Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok and the Jordan; therefore, return them peaceably now.’”* (11:13)

The accusation of Ammon’s complaint did not make sense on two levels. First, the charge is totally false, and Jephthah will address that in detail in the following passage. But second, the excuse that Israel had taken the land of Ammon *“from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok and the Jordan”* begs the question, “Why are the Ammonites in the far north part of the Promised Land, on the east side of the Jordan River, in the land of Gilead, fighting for the land in the far south part of the Promised Land, on the east side of the Jordan River in the land given to the tribe of Rueben?” Why did the sons of Ammon not try to capture the land directly from Rueben instead? In addition, why did Ammon participate in the oppression of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, as well as the Gilead portion of Manasseh when they wanted Rueben’s land? As a wise counselor often said to me, “the problem is never the problem,” and I would always correct him by saying, “the reason is never the reason.” The reason Ammon was oppressing Israel probably had nothing to do with the land Rueben was inhabiting. Either the history of Rueben’s land had been taught incorrectly to the Ammonites, or it was a smokescreen to throw Jephthah off track. Nevertheless, Jephthah knew the history of Rueben’s land.

(c) The Reply to Ammon’s Complaint

Therefore, the writer inserts Jephthah’s reply to Ammon’s complaint. We will read it in its entirety. Verse 14. *“But Jephthah sent messengers again to the king of the sons of Ammon,¹⁵ and they said to him, ‘Thus says Jephthah, Israel did not take away the land of Moab nor the land of the sons of Ammon.¹⁶ For when they came up from Egypt, and Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh,¹⁷ then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, ‘Please let us pass through your land,’ but the king of Edom would not*

listen. And they also sent to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh.¹⁸ Then they went through the wilderness and around the land of Edom and the land of Moab, and came to the east side of the land of Moab, and they camped beyond the Arnon; but they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the border of Moab.¹⁹ And Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, “Please let us pass through your land to our place.”²⁰ But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory; so Sihon gathered all his people and camped in Jabaz and fought with Israel.²¹ The LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them; so Israel possessed all the land of the Amorites, the inhabitants of that country.²² So they possessed all the territory of the Amorites, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and from the wilderness as far as the Jordan.²³ Since now the LORD, the God of Israel, drove out the Amorites from before His people Israel, are you then to possess it?²⁴ Do you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the LORD our God has driven out before us, we will possess it.²⁵ Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive with Israel, or did he ever fight against them?

²⁶ While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time?²⁷ I therefore have not sinned against you, but you are doing me wrong by making war against me; may the LORD, the Judge, judge today between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon.”²⁸ But the king of the sons of Ammon disregarded the message which Jephthah sent him.” (11:14-28)

We can gather three crucial points from Jephthah’s reply to Ammon. First, the nation of Israel had in no way harmed Ammon by taking any of its lands. The land Israel took belonged to the Amorites, not the Ammonites.

Second, in verse 26, Jephthah has placed a time marker to indicate that three hundred years had passed since the Nation of Israel defeated the Amorite King, Sihon, under the command of Moses and gifted the land to the tribe of Rueben. At the end of cycle three of the sin of Israel, in lesson 11, we learned that according to the time markers to that point in the books of Joshua and Judges, Israel had experienced two hundred and six years which included the rule of Joshua, the oppression under other nations and then the periods of freedom under the judges not including the length of the time that Israel sinned against the LORD by worshiping Baal and Ashtaroth which caused the LORD to send the nations to oppress Israel. Therefore, ninety-four years remained in the three hundred years to this point in the text where Jephthah just became the chief of the tribe of Israel of his rule as a judge for six years. With that in mind, we can look back at the cycles and include the time markers for Gideon, Abimelech, Tola, and Jair.

CYCLE ONE through THREE

Total of oppression and freedom (not including years of sin) 206

CYCLE FOUR

Israel’s unknown years of the sin of worshiping Canaanite idols	?
Israel under the oppression of Midian for seven years	7
Gideon frees Israel for forty years	40
Abimelech’s evil rule	3
Tola’s time of judging at the prison city for twenty-three years	23
Jair’s time of judging in Gilead for twenty-two years	22

CYCLE FIVE

Israel’s unknown years of the sin of worshiping Canaanite idols	?
Israel under the oppression of Midian for seven years	18
Enter Judge Jephthah	0

Total of oppression and freedom (not including years of sin) 319

With the total years of oppression and freedom, not including the years of Israel's sin being three hundred and nineteen to this point, we have a problem that we must consider. First, was Jephthah rounding off the number of years down to three hundred years instead of pronouncing the correct number of years? Doubtful. Jews were sticklers for genealogies and times. Second, did the LORD only allow the nation of Israel to sin against Him for less than a year before He sent the oppressors? Doubtful. Repeatedly we have seen in the Scripture that the LORD moves much slower than man, and He gives man every opportunity to dig the biggest hole he can before the LORD reacts. Third, to justify the time to this point in the story, our only answer is to look back to the judging times recorded in the lives of Abimelech, Tola, and Jair. Not one of those three judges was called by the LORD to deliver the entire nation of Israel, as was Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, and Gideon. As we mentioned in lesson 20, the writer included the mention of Abimelech, Tola, and Jair, because of what they did in certain places in Israel, which did not affect the entire nation of Israel. Abimelech did his evil in his hometown of Shechem and a few neighboring villages where his mother's relatives lived, but not the whole nation of Israel. We can discount Abimelech's three years as part of the time while Israel was sinning after the death of Gideon. Also, in our last lesson, lesson 20, we learned that Tola was a native of the tribe of Issachar who was stationed as a judge in the town of *Shamir*, a prison village. For twenty-three years, Tola managed the prisoners in that town. He did not manage the whole of Israel as a judge. In lesson 20, we also learned that Jair managed as a regular magistrate in his home area in Gilead. Neither did he manage the whole nation of Israel. Between Abimelech, Tola, and Jair, we can discount as many as forty-seven years from the timeline. A new timeline would therefore look as follows.

CYCLE ONE, TWO, and THREE

Total of oppression and freedom (not including years of sin) 206

CYCLE FOUR

Israel's unknown years of the sin of worshiping Canaanite idols	?
Israel under the oppression of Midian for seven years	7
Gideon frees Israel for forty years	40
Abimelech's evil rule	-
Tola's time of judging at the prison city for twenty-three years	-
Jair's time of judging in Gilead for twenty-two years	-

CYCLE FIVE

Israel's unknown years of the sin of worshiping Canaanite idols	?
Israel under the oppression of Midian for seven years	18
Enter Judge Jephthah	0

Total of oppression and freedom (not including years of sin) 271

Under this scenario, twenty-nine years are unaccounted for to come to a total of three hundred years. As such, the LORD could have allowed the nation of Israel to rebel against Him for six years at the beginning of each cycle. Why would six years be the appropriate time for the LORD to wait? Here is where we must delve back into Israel's history and the LORD's instruction for the nation of Israel. An important instruction was given to the Nation of Israel by the LORD through Moses and Joshua. What was that instruction? The Nation of Israel was instructed to read the covenant and the

law's commandments every seventh year as a reminder, so the Nation of Israel would not forget its relationship with the LORD. Deuteronomy 31:10-13 reads as follows.

Then Moses commanded them, saying, “At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of the release of debts, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which He will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel so that they hear it. Assemble the people, the men, the women, the children, and the stranger who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to follow all the words of this Law. And their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess. (Deuteronomy 31:10-13)

Therefore, when the Nation of Israel sinned against the LORD, the Scripture reading to everyone in the nation would warn that the people who worshiped Baal and Ashtaroth were without excuse and out of the will and covenant of the LORD. In short, the LORD would only need to wait until the seventh year when the law was read to give the people time to repent and destroy their idols and stop their idol worship. When they did not, he would send the oppressors.

Third, the Ammonites “*disregarded the message which Jephthah sent*” because their accusation was a fabricated lie, a flimsy excuse for why they were oppressing Israel. Oppression meant tax revenue. The Ammonites surely did not care about the land of Rueben, or they would have been in that land fighting to take it back – but it never belonged to the sons of Ammon in the first place.