

Judges

Lesson 23

(d) The Reaction to Ammon's Complaint

With his message disregarded, we come to the reaction to Ammon's complaint. The LORD moved upon Jephthah. Jephthah was chosen by the LORD, and Jephthah advanced to meet the sons of Ammon. Verse 29. *"Now the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, so that he passed through Gilead and Manasseh; then he passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he went on to the sons of Ammon."* (11:29)

Most scholars focus on the writer's words, *"he passed through Gilead and Manasseh"* to mean that Jephthah passed through the land of Gilead to gather troops and support, and then he crossed to the west side of the Jordan River to do the same in Manasseh's land. But I disagree. Those scholars are reading into the Scripture something that is not there and failing to consider what has already been said and the scene's geography.

First, in chapter 10, verse 27, we learn that *"the sons of Israel gathered together and camped in Mizpah."* All the warriors in Israel who wanted to fight and all the support Jephthah needed was already located at Mizpah. They had been summoned before Jephthah was selected. He did not need to garner support for the tribe of Manasseh living on the west side of the Jordan River because they were already in Mizpah.

Second, the writer is simply giving us the geography of the area. Jephthah was in Gilead, in the land of Manasseh, in Mizpah. From Mizpah, with the army of Israel, Jephthah moved to the camp of Ammon, which was also in Gilead. Simply, in our western English mindset, we would have written it as follows. *"Now the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Mizpah in Gilead in the area of Manasseh to the camp of Ammon nearby."* But as we will see in the following passage, the camp of Ammon was extensive. During their years of oppression of Israel, Ammon had taken over and camped in twenty cities over a distance from Aroer to Able-keramim. We do not know the location of Able-keramim; therefore, we do not know the extent of Ammon's control in miles.

(3) The Vow of Jephthah

Before going to battle with the sons of Ammon, Jephthah made time with the LORD. We do the same thing when we face struggles for which we do not know the outcome. But for Jephthah, he made a vow to the LORD. It was a vow that would turn out to be foolish in the end. Verse 30. *"Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, 'If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand,'³¹ then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."*³² So Jephthah crossed over to the sons of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand.³³ He struck them with a very great slaughter from Aroer to the entrance of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the sons of Ammon were subdued before the sons of Israel." (11:29-33)

The LORD granted Jephthah the victory over the Ammonites. Was there any doubt? The LORD moved ahead of all His chosen judges and fought for them in the battles. After all, Jephthah was chosen by the LORD. But what about the vow? Jephthah said, *"...whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."* Now the LORD is serious about vows and oaths. Let us look at some of the verses that tell us the seriousness of a vow or oath. First from Leviticus 5, verse 4.

Or if a person swears thoughtlessly with his lips to do evil or to do good, in whatever matter a man may speak thoughtlessly with an oath, and it is hidden from him, and then he comes to know it, he will be guilty in one of these. (Leviticus 5:4).

Now from Numbers 30, verse 2.

If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. (Numbers 30:2).

Now from Deuteronomy 23, verses 21-23.

When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you. However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God, what you have promised. (Deuteronomy 23:21-23)

Three books address the seriousness of a vow or oath made to the LORD. A vow is a solemn promise made to God to perform something or to abstain from something. An oath is a formal promise that binds an individual to do as pledged under the threat of some penalty. Jephthah made a vow to the LORD on that day to offer to the LORD as a burnt offering the first thing that came out of his house, if, the LORD, allowed him to defeat the sons of Ammon. Indeed, the LORD allowed Jephthah to defeat the sons of Ammon. Now, Jephthah was headed home to see what came out of his house.

(4) The Promise of Jephthah

From the vow of Jephthah, we come to the promise of Jephthah, for he never expected what was going to happen next. Verse 34. Listen to the story in its fulness.

“When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one and only child; besides her he had no son or daughter.”³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot take it back.”³⁶ So she said to him, “My father, you have given your word to the LORD; do to me as you have said, since the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon.”³⁷ She said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go to the mountains and weep because of my virginity, I and my companions.”³⁸ Then he said, “Go.” So he sent her away for two months; and she left with her companions, and wept on the mountains because of her virginity.³⁹ At the end of two months she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man. Thus it became a custom in Israel,⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.” (11:34-40)

I wish from the very core of my being that I could find a way to explain this passage adequately, but I cannot. I wish that I could say that Jephthah did not keep his vow to the LORD, but I cannot. Why? Because the writer tells us that he “*did to her according to the vow which he had made....*” I cannot for the life of me find a way to say that Jephthah found a way to keep from offering his daughter as a burnt offering. I cannot.

Some preachers say that Jephthah did not offer her as a burnt offering because that would be an abomination to the LORD. Instead, he forbade her to have relations with a man, and therefore she remained a virgin the rest of her life. How do they come to that point? The preachers focus on the last part of the line instead of the first as the two together say, “*who did to her according to the vow which*

he had made; and she had no relations with a man.” But the writer had already told us that she was a virgin in verse 37. Two months later, when she came back to her father to complete his vow, she was still a virgin. The last phrase in the sentence of verse 39 simply confirms that which has already been stated. It means that Jephthah had no more sons or daughters after her. Perhaps it was his punishment for a hasty vow to the LORD that the LORD required him to keep. I rarely use the works of Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary, but I think he makes several excellent points here. Matthew Henry speaks of lessons to be learned from this passage, and he says the following.

1. There may be remainders of distrust and doubting, even in the hearts of true and great believers.
2. Our vows to God should not be as a purchase of the favor we desire, but to express gratitude to him.
3. We need to be very well-advised in making vows, lest we entangle ourselves.
4. What we have solemnly vowed to God, we must perform, if it be possible and lawful, though it be difficult and grievous to us.

And so, we end this dreadful passage with this thought found in the Scripture. We read it a few minutes ago. Let us reread it. *“If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”* (Numbers 30:2). The man of God must be careful in what he says to the LORD.

Chapter 12

(5) The Rejection of Jephthah

(a) Ephraim’s Accusation (12:1)

The Nation of Israel was out from under the oppression of Ammon because of Jephthah. He was also the new chief of the people of Gilead. The oppression was stopped because of the elders of Gilead, who reached out to Jephthah to rid the whole nation of Israel of the oppression of Ammon. But the elders of Gilead did not have the full approval of all the tribes of Israel. That point is proven by the rejection of Jephthah by Ephraim’s accusation. Chapter 12, verse 1. *“Then the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, ‘Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you.’”* (12:1)

Evidently, the chief of Ephraim summoned all its elders to make a journey to visit Jephthah in his hometown of Zaphon, with the complaint and accusation that the tribe of Ephraim had once again been left out of the decision-making process and thwarted the opportunity to participate in the salvation of the nation from its oppression under Ammon. At least two months had passed since the defeat of the Ammonites, and the Gilead forces had been dispersed back to their homes. The men of Ephraim wanted to know why they were omitted, and they were there to threaten Jephthah. Undoubtedly, Ephraim had not forgotten the bad blood it had with Gideon previously, and this was a reaction that had festered through the years of Gideon’s reign. But we must ask Ephraim this question. *“Why did Ephraim’s warriors not join the others from Israel in Mizpah when the summons went out to fight against Ammon before the selection of Jephthah?”*

(b) Jephthah’s Reaction

With the men at his home, we hear Jephthah’s reaction. Verse 2. *“Jephthah said to them, ‘I and my people were at great strife with the sons of Ammon; 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 hands and crossed over against the sons of Ammon, and the LORD gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?’”*⁴ Then Jephthah

gathered all the men of Gilead and fought Ephraim; and the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, O Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and in the midst of Manasseh." (12:2-4)

Had Jephthah reached out to the tribe of Ephraim and Ephraim not responded? Did Jephthah reach out personally, or did the Gileadites reach out previous to Jephthah being selected? The clue is found in Jephthah's words, *"I and my people were at great strife with the sons of Ammon; 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 hands and crossed over against the sons of Ammon, and the LORD gave them into my hand."* We must take this passage at face value and accept it for what it says. Jephthah must have reached out to the tribe of Ephraim with no response from Ephraim; therefore, Jephthah proceeded without them. No other explanation can clear away this scenario. Evidently, the elders had to return to the tribal area of Ephraim to gather their forces, which gave Jephthah time to gather the Gilead forces who defeated Ephraim.

The last statement the Ephraimites said in this passage was, *"You are fugitives of Ephraim, O Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and in the midst of Manasseh."* When they say, *"you are fugitives of Ephraim, O Gileadites,"* it is an internal proof statement that we addressed in Judges 7, verse 3. If you will remember, the land on the east side of the Jordan River was given by Moses to half of the tribe of Manasseh, and the nickname for that area was called *Gilead*. Joshua gave the other half of the tribe of Manasseh land on the west side of the Jordan River, and the nickname for that area was called *Machir*. If you will remember, as we have stated many times, Gilead was the son of Machir. Also, Gilead had many descendants with many family clans. It may have been the most populated line of the descendants of Machir. In Judges 7, verse 3, Gideon was at the Valley of Jezreel, culling down the number of troops that would go to fight the Midianites with him that night. He said to the thirty-two thousand troops, *"Whoever is afraid and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead."* How could that be? The land of Gilead was on the other side of the Jordan River. In fact, Gideon was standing on Mount Gilboa, not Mount Gilead. Did Gideon misspeak? Did the writer miswrite? No. Mount Gilboa stands in the tribal area of Manasseh. As stated in the commentary for Judges 7, verse 3,

Descendants of Gilead lived on both sides of the Jordan River; therefore, in Gideon's camp, there were Gileadites from the east and the west. The camp of Gideon was first and foremost the camp of a commander of Manasseh – Gideon. He and his tribal kin were supported by men from Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, but it was no less a camp of Manasseh in origin with Gideon at the lead. Therefore, the nickname of *Gilead* was fully appropriate for the camp under Gideon's command. As we have studied in the past, it was very common for geographical locations to have more than one name or nickname. The case is the same here. Gideon was camped on Mount Gilboa, but because it was his camp, the camp of the warriors of Manasseh, Gideon nicknamed it *Mount Gilead*. Thus, those who were *afraid and trembling* were to leave the camp of Gideon, the camp of *Mount Gilead*.