

Judges

Lesson 24

Now, let us focus on the words that say “*in the midst of Ephraim and in the midst of Manasseh.*” Here is the proof in the pudding. The Ephraimites, whose land was carved out of the land given to Manasseh by Joshua, are admitting that descendants of *Gilead* were living on both sides of the Jordan River. Specifically, descendants of Gilead were living on the west side of the Jordan River in the tribal area of Manasseh and Ephraim. But also notice that the Ephraimites called them *fugitives*. What does that mean? In Hebrew, a *fugitive* is a person *who roves or wanders* as a refugee would do. In most cases, they are *fleeing some form of evil*. In this case, the Ephraimites call these Gileadites *fugitives* because some of those fighting with Jephthah were natives of the west side of the Jordan River rather than the east side where they were aligned with Jephthah. Ephraim was trying to divide the loyalty of the troops. It is for that reason that the men of Gilead from both sides of the joined together in solidarity and “*defeated Ephraim.*” This statement was the writer’s first pass on this storytelling of the defeat of Ephraim.

(c) Gilead’s Response

But the writer makes a second pass through the story to tell how Gilead defeated Ephraim. Even though Ephraim accused the Gileadites of being fugitives in Ephraim, Gilead’s response turned that around and made Ephraim fugitives in the land of Gilead. Verse 5. “*The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan opposite Ephraim. And it happened when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead would say to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he said, “No,” then they would say to him, “Say now, ‘Shibboleth.’ ” But he said, “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it correctly. Then they seized him and slew him at the fords of the Jordan. Thus there fell at that time 42,000 of Ephraim.*” (12:5-6)

The stranded warriors of Ephraim could not get home without crossing one of the fords of the Jordan River from the east to the west. There at the fords, the Gileadites were waiting. Now, all the tribes of Israel were cousins, and they all had the same skin tones and looks. How would the Gileadite warriors determine who was an Ephraimite? The answer was the pronunciation of one word, *Shibboleth*. Even though the tribes were all cousins, and they all spoke the same language, they did not all speak the same dialect. One of my dearest friends in the world was Wally Cheddie. His real name was Taunkchun Cheddie. He was from British Guyana. English was his native tongue, but it was not American English, and it surely was not South Texas English. The last four digits of Wally’s phone number were 3333. We would pronounce that three, three, three, three. But Wally’s British Guyanan dialect would not let him say three, three, three, three. No matter how hard he tried, he always said, tree, tree, tree, tree. With all his might, he could not make his tongue say the “th” sound in the word three. Now, in Guyana, they would laugh at us for pronouncing a 3 as three when everyone in that country pronounced it “tree.” That same problem occurred with the Ephraimites. With all their might and power, their tongues could not pronounce the “sh” sound in *Shibboleth*. It was a sure, audible sign that identified a person as a member of the Ephraimite tribe. It also brought them death at the fords of the river. “*Thus, there fell at that time 42,000 of Ephraim.*”

(d) Jephthah’s Tenure

With that said, we come to Jephthah’s tenure as the judge of Israel. Verse 7. “*Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead.*” (12:7)

For six years, Jephthah kept Israel’s Gilead region safe from the oppression of surrounding nations. Adding six years to the time that Jephthah led the battle to defeat the Ammonites, we can determine that three hundred and six years had passed since Moses led the Nation of Israel out of Egypt.

f) Enter Three Regular Minor Judges of Israel

(1) Enter Ibzan – Israel’s Judge - Seven Years

After announcing the time served as a judge and the death of Jephthah, the writer presents three regular minor judges of Israel, all in the regular magistrate system set in place during the days of Moses for the Promised Land. Enter Ibzan first. Verse 8. *“Now Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel after him. ⁹ He had thirty sons, and thirty daughters whom he gave in marriage outside the family, and he brought in thirty daughters from outside for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years. ¹⁰ Then Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem.”* (12:8-10)

A varied discussion can be read among the scholars of the past concerning Ibzan’s seven years of work as a judge in Israel. In short, some say his birth in Bethlehem cannot be the Bethlehem of Judah that we know to be the birthplace of Jesus because Judah was basically isolated from the struggles of oppressive nations. But that is not a valid statement because in chapter 10, verse 9, we learned that the tribe of Judah was oppressed by the Ammonites, which resulted in the judgment at the hands of Jephthah. Because of that fact, it could have been Bethlehem of Judah. Be that as it may, it could have been Bethlehem of Ephratah (Micah 5:1), or it could have been Bethlehem of Zebulon (Joshua 19:15). Three Bethlehem’s existed in the Promised Land. We are hard-pressed to determine the true Bethlehem mentioned here.

Next, as with Tola and Jair, with whom in context seemed to have served at the same time, with Tola in the west Promised Land and Jair in the east Promised Land, it appears that Ibzan may have come into the office after Jephthah became the judge in Gilead on the east side of the Jordan River and served congruently on the west side of the Jordan River in the area of Judah. Jephthah would die after six years, Ibzan would die after seven years. The reason for this thought is found in an analysis of the phrase, *“Now Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel after him,”* with a focus on the word *“after.”* In our western mindset, we automatically conclude that Jephthah had to die before Ibzan became a judge, but that is not the case with this writer. As we have seen in this book, the writer will finish a story with the death of a person and then retrace the same time slot with a new story. That seems to be the case here. Jephthah became the judge, and then Ibzan became a judge *after* Jephthah came into office, but it does not mean after Jephthah died. Here is the reason why. The Hebrew word translated *after* can mean *after the manner of*, or, *in the order of.* In other words, Ibzan became a judge just as Jephthah became a judge. Wycliffe, in his translation, used the word *after* in this verse; however, in the Old English of his day, the definition for the word *after* simply meant *later in time* or *subsequent to the time.* Therefore, it is acceptable to interpret the writer’s intent to imply that Ibzan became a judge following the time that Jephthah became a judge without the need to wait for his death. With Jephthah judging in the normal magistrate system on the east side of the Jordan River for six years after the oppression of the Ammonites was gone, it seems advantageous to have Ibzan judging in the regular magistrate system on the west side of the Jordan River in the south.

Furthermore, why would the writer mention this judge at this time unless he was the judge who helped protect the nation from the Ammonite and possibly the Philistine oppression in Judah? The reason for the mention of this minor judge from the magistrate system probably has nothing to do with the oppressive nations; it has to do with his sin that he perpetrated in his family. It is in the text. *“He had thirty sons, and thirty daughters whom he gave in marriage outside the family, and he brought in thirty daughters from outside for his sons.”* This judge broke the law by marrying his thirty sons and thirty daughters to non-Israelite spouses. These spouses came from outside the family of Israel, which was a sin. Here is the law in Deuteronomy 7:1-6.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the

Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you,² and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them.³ Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons.⁴ For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and He will quickly destroy you.⁵ But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire.⁶ For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. (Deuteronomy 7:1-6)

Ibzan broke this law. The writer probably inserted the name of Ibzan because with the marriages he garnered in his family, he contributed to the sin of Israel that would lead to the final sixth cycle of the sin of Israel against the LORD – the worship of false gods and graven images of Baal and Ashtaroth. More than likely, Ibzan served his seven years in the magistrate system in the tribal area of Judah, where the Philistines, who helped with the Ammonite oppression, were just a few miles to the west.

(2) Enter Elon – Israel’s Judge - Ten Years

Most likely, while Ibzan was judging in the south area of Judah, Elon was judging in the magistrate system in the north, in the tribal region of Zebulun. Enter Elon, Israel’s judge, for ten years. Verse 11. “*Now Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel after him; and he judged Israel ten years.¹² Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.*” (12:11-12)

Notice that the writer tells us nothing but where Elon lived and where he was buried. What good did that do to the story? Only one thing. The writer is telling us that shortly after Jephthah became a judge in Gilead, Ibzan became a judge in Judah. Then, after Ibzan became a judge in Judah, shortly after, Elon became a judge in Zebulun, and he served in that position for ten years. Therefore, the east side of the Jordan had a judge. The southern portion of the west side of the Jordan River had a judge. In addition, the northern part of the west side of the Jordan River had a judge. What was missing? The LORD did not disappoint. He has the writer fill-in that which was lacking.

(3) Enter Abdon – Israel’s Judge - Eight Years

Enter Abdon, Israel’s judge for eight years. Verse 13. “*Now Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel after him.¹⁴ He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys; and he judged Israel eight years.¹⁵ Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.*” (12:13-15)

The name *Abdon* means *servant*. However, the name *Hillel* means to *praise*, and the name *Pirathaonite* means *native or dweller*. Therefore, Abdon was a judge who served with praise dwelling in the tribal area of Ephraim. This tribal area sits in the middle of the Promised Land on the western side of the Jordan River. For all practical purposes, the Promised land had strong judges in the magistrate system in the north, central, and south of the western Promised Land and on the upper central section of the eastern Promised Land.

The mention of the donkeys, in this case, is the same as the mention of the donkeys ridden by Jair’s sons. The riding of donkeys was a sign of distinguished rank in those times when the Israelites had no horses. Horses would come into the hand of Israel later, but not until the time of Solomon, even though David would have a few. The law prohibited Israel from having great herds of horses. In a prophecy delivered from Moses, Israel is told that one day in the Promised Land, the nation will set its heart to have a king instead of allowing the LORD to be their King. In Deuteronomy 17, verse 14, we hear the following.

When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,'¹⁵ you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman.¹⁶ Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way.' (Deuteronomy 17:14–16).

But the desire for a king is still a few years away from this time in the story of the book of Judges. For now, if they had horses, they were few. Donkeys, on the other hand, were plentiful among the highly esteemed.

Finally, in this passage, we learn that Abdon judged in the area inhabited by the Amalekites. This entry is simply for location purposes only because, at this time in the story, the Amalekites no longer lived on the land. However, previously, the Amalekites were allies of Eglon, the king of Moab, who oppressed Israel. During his oppression, the Amalekites had inhabited the surrounding areas in the eastern sections of the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin. If any Amalekites remained in the land, they were few. Therefore, Abdon served as a praised judge in that area of Ephraim.

If these three judges served in the four areas of the Promised Land semi-simultaneously, after Jephthah defeated the Ammonites, they were probably all dead within twelve years, which means about three hundred and twelve years had passed since the nation left Egypt under Moses. With this judge gone, Israel could fall into sin against the LORD again, starting cycle six with the Philistine takeover that has been brewing since the oppression of the Ammonites began, yet were held back by Ibzan. With the timing of three hundred and twelve years since the Exodus, we will see that it fits nicely with the timing of the rest of the book of Judges and the decision to ask for a king in 1st Samuel chapter 8 with the selection of King Saul. By the fourth year of the reign of King Solomon, we learn in 1st Kings 6:1 that four hundred and eighty years had passed to the day that Moses led Israel out of Egypt. We are at three hundred and twelve years now. As such, according to our discussion here, we have approximately one hundred and sixty-eight years remaining in the time to complete the forty years oppression of the Philistines, the twenty-year judging of Samson, the forty-year rule of King Saul, the forty-year rule of King David, and four years into the reign of King Solomon. Altogether, that totals one hundred and forty-four years, leaving just a mere twenty-four years for the sin of Israel in cycle six and the time when Samuel judged Israel after the death of Samson as close to a perfect timeline as we can make this far away from the actual events found in the books of Deuteronomy, Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel, and 1st Kings.