

### Immediate Context

Israel's rebellion was complete. Their idolatry was rampant and widespread. God listed seven idols that they had served, while rejecting Him in the process. He also listed seven times that He had rescued them. Seven is a number of fullness and completion. God owed Israel nothing, yet when they demonstrated what appeared to be a degree of sincere repentance, He became impatient over their misery and called out a unique deliverer.

### Judges 10:17-18 – Everyone Wants a Leader

Who are the Ammonites? They were distant cousins of the Israelites through Lot. Ammon was the name of one of the sons born to Lot and one of his daughters after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (see *Genesis 19:38*)

Where is Gilead and Mizpah? Gilead is a mountainous region to the east of the Jordan River through which the Jabbok River flows (see the map on the next page). Gilead likely means "rocky region." The land of Gilead appears to be shared by both Gad and the half-tribe of East Manasseh. Mizpah was a prominent city within the tribe of Gad in the Gilead area. It means "watchtower."

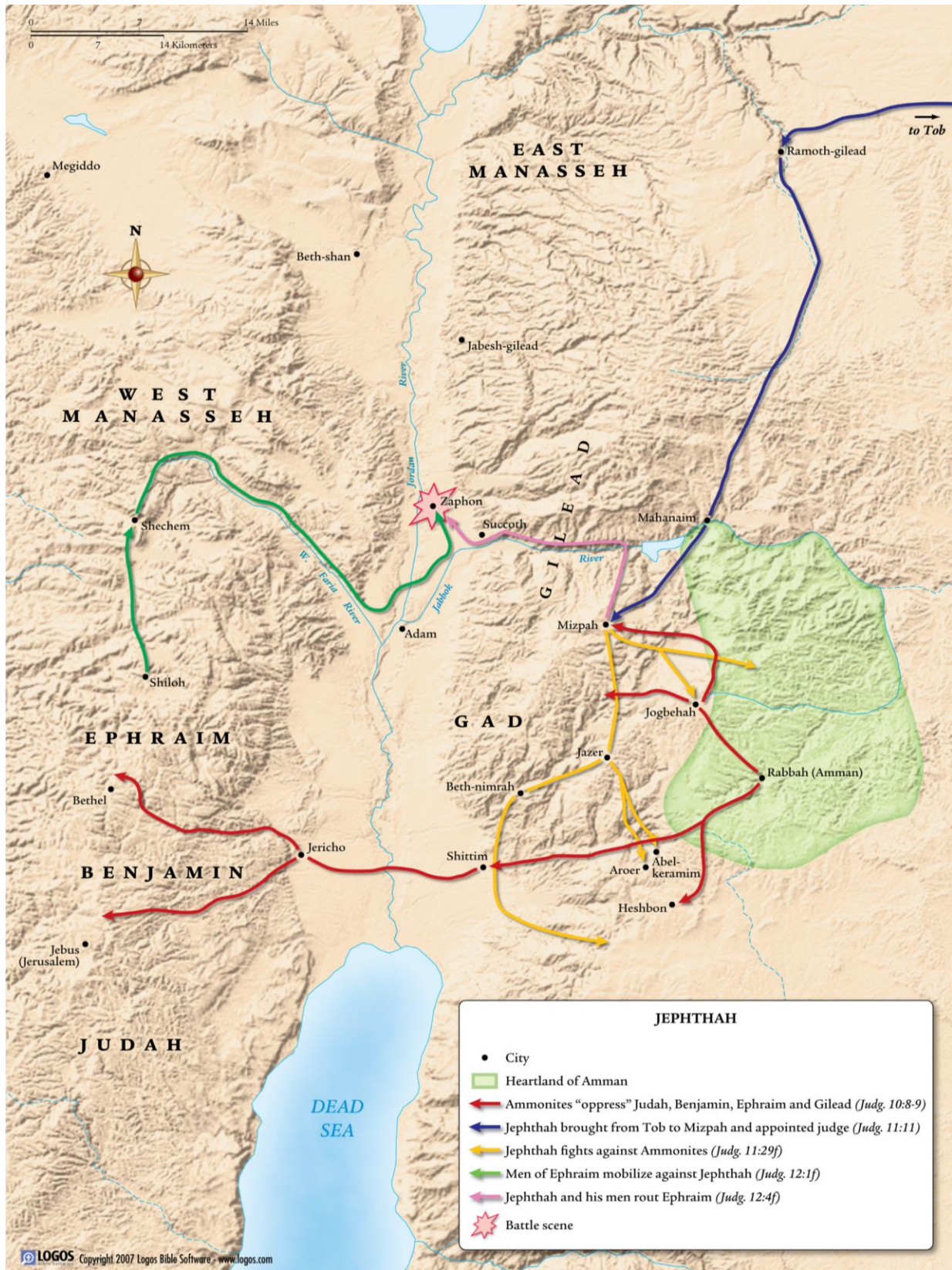
It is significant that there was no qualified leader in Gilead. They all felt oppressed and opposed the Ammonites, but either no one willing to stand and lead or whoever was willing was not supported by the people. The lack of skilled, faithful, and courageous leadership was a judgment from God; good and godly leaders are gifts from Him.

What is the danger of Israel's offer of headship to the one who will lead in the fight against the Ammonites? See *Deuteronomy 17:14-15* and *1 Samuel 17:23-27*. They were supposed to look for God-appointed leaders, not take matters into their own hands. By comparison, Saul made an offer to bless and enrich the man who would defeat Goliath. This obviously intrigued David, but his heart also burned for the vindication of God's name and God's people above all else. **One whose heart was motivated solely by power would not become a great leader of the people.** A leader who truly honored the Lord and desired the best for the people would make the best ruler.

Why do the Israelites, who were prepared to fight, feel like they need a special leader? That is how God had worked in the past (Moses, Joshua, Othniel, Ehud, Barak, Gideon, etc...). They wanted someone to rally behind. They were unorganized, without a strategy, and without courage.

### Judges 11:1-3 – Jephthah's Origin Story

Jephthah's name means, "he opens." It is likely a reference to Jephthah being the first-born of his mother and therefore the one who "opened" her womb. Though his father was Gilead (likely named after his homeland), his biological mother was not Gilead's wife but a prostitute. It appears that Gilead had only one wife (the reference to "wife" is singular) and through her had multiple sons that were half-brothers to Jephthah. We don't know whether Jephthah's mother was an Israelite or a Canaanite. We only learn of her moral failures and that of Gilead as well.



Why weren't Jephthah's gifts as a warrior sufficient reason to allow him to remain in Gilead's house? Jephthah must have been uniquely and obviously gifted above all other men in Gilead when it came to his fighting skills, leadership, and abilities as a strategist. However, their jealousy/hatred of him was greater than their appreciation of his skills and gifts.

Where did the conflict between Jephthah and his brothers originate? It likely originated with the parents. Jephthah would have been a constant reminder to Gilead and his wife of his sin. It appears unlikely that Gilead's wife served as a loving surrogate mother to Jephthah or her boys would not have grown up with such hatred toward him. Their behavior was likely an extension of the strife between Gilead and his wife. **This was not a home of mercy, grace and forgiveness, but a home in which a cloud of anger and strife brewed and yielded a fatal storm.**

Where was Tob? Tob means "good," but it was not good for Jephthah. Tob was an Aramean city to the northeast of Gilead. It was the land of Jephthah's exile and a place where he was negatively influenced by its culture and his new "friends." Although he appears to be knowledgeable of the Lord and some of His ways, we will see the effects of the influence of this pagan land later in Jephthah's story.

What does verse three mean when it says that the worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and "went out with him"? It appears to mean that they were robbers, thugs, or perhaps mercenaries. Jephthah's abilities in warfare were being used, but not for God's glory.

Although much of Jephthah's life was distorted by the sins of others, he could have chosen to run toward Israel rather than into the land of the Canaanites. **Even when our lives are deeply impacted by the sin of others, we can choose whether to run towards God or away from Him and we will bear the burden for that choice.**

### Judges 11:4-11 – Jephthah's Restoration to Gilead

Who are the elders of Gilead? It appears that some (or all) of Jephthah's brothers were part of the elders of Gilead who came to Jephthah, or other men outside his family were also involved in running him off. They did not deny Jephthah's accusation.

What is the initial offer of the elders of Gilead? They offered to make him a chief or leader, meaning the commander of their military.

After Jephthah's initial hesitation, what is the second offer the elders of Gilead made? He was offered to be the head and chief over all the people.

In verse 11, what does the text mean when it says, "And Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah?" As you can imagine, a man who had been scorned and run off wanted a more binding agreement than the words of these elders. At a formalized ceremony before the Lord in Mizpah, the words were solemnized and ratified before all the Gileadites.

### Judges 11:12-28 – Jephthah Provides an Important History Lesson

What is Jephthah doing in verses 12-13? He is trying to determine whether there can be a peaceful means of resolving this conflict and also to understand the Ammonites' rationale for their attack.

Is there truth to the King of Ammon's claim in verse 13? No, to the contrary the Israelites avoided the land of Ammon at the command of the Lord (see *Numbers 21:24-26* and *Deuteronomy 2:37*).

What is Jephthah doing in verses 14-28? His purpose is not only to set the record straight for the enemy, but also to give the people a reason to fight for the land. The contents of this letter were likely known throughout Gilead. **A good military leader must define the reason for the fight and keep it before the troops throughout the fight, holding the banner aloft.**

The territory in dispute lay between the Jabbok and Arnon rivers. The Jabbok River was in the midst of Gilead and is a tributary of the Jordan River (refer back to the map). It also appeared to serve as the boundary between East Manasseh and Gad. The Arnon River is much further south and flows into the midst of the Dead Sea. It was the southern extent of the Israelite inheritance and separated Israel from Moab (the Ammonites' cousins).

Jephthah's response to the King of Ammon lays out a thorough argument in response to the false claims. He begins by providing a historical argument (verses 16-22), a theological argument (verses 23-24), a personal argument (verse 25), and finally a chronological argument (verses 26-27).

#### The Historical Argument (verses 16-22)

- Israel treated all of the inhabiting nations on the east side of the Jordan with respect See *Deuteronomy 2:16-22*. They specifically treated the Ammonites fairly too.
- Israel only fought when provoked and they had no other choice.
- Israel defeated the Amorites (not the Ammonites) and therefore gained the land that was in dispute in this conflict.

#### The Theological Argument (verses 23-24)

- It would not be right to give away what the Lord had given to them to possess as an inheritance. This is an important spiritual truth. **We should not return to weak and worthless things the Lord God has helped us to overcome.** (see *Galatians 4:9*)
- You get what your god has given to you.

At this point, it is important to ask whether Jephthah is making a statement like that in Psalm 95:3, "*For the LORD is a great God And a great King above all gods,*" or whether he really believes that each nation has its own legitimate god who controls their lands and destinies. It is difficult to know which one it is because of what we will read later in this chapter. It is also worth noting that Jephthah cites Chemosh as the god of the Ammonites. Chemosh was typically identified as a Moabite god, not an Ammonite god. This could either be an error on Jephthah's part or more likely, there are historical facts that we are ignorant of.

**A Personal Argument (verse 25)**

- Who do you think you are when a mightier king (Balak) did not dare to invade Israel? We know that Balak sought to curse Israel, but he was afraid of an invasion (see *Numbers 22-24*).

**A Chronological Argument (verse 26)**

- Where have you been the last 300 years? If this land was yours, why didn't you claim the villages along the Arnon (their nearest border)?

**The Conclusion (verse 27)**

In Jephthah's conclusion, we notice that he is identifying with the people (using the first person "I" and "me"). He is not a leader for hire; he is a man fighting for his homeland and his people. Based upon the clear and convincing arguments, he declares their innocence before God and clearly defined the sin of the Ammonites.

In a wise and masterful stroke, He calls upon Israel's God, the Lord Jehovah, to be the Judge above all nations (an insult to the Ammonites' god) and to determine who is right and wrong in this dispute. This is theologically significant because it demonstrates that even if Jephthah believed in the legitimacy of other gods, he recognized that they were all under the authority of the God of Israel.

**The Response (verse 28)**

The Ammonite response to the letter was to ignore it. Diplomacy and logic failed to convince the Ammonites and they were foolishly bound to their opposition against God's people. At some point after speaking truth, God's people must recognize that not all are willing to be convinced; not all want peace. There is a point at which we must wipe the dust off of our feet and move on. Unfortunately, for Israel that would mean war. Yet, the Lord would be with them, even with imperfect leadership.