

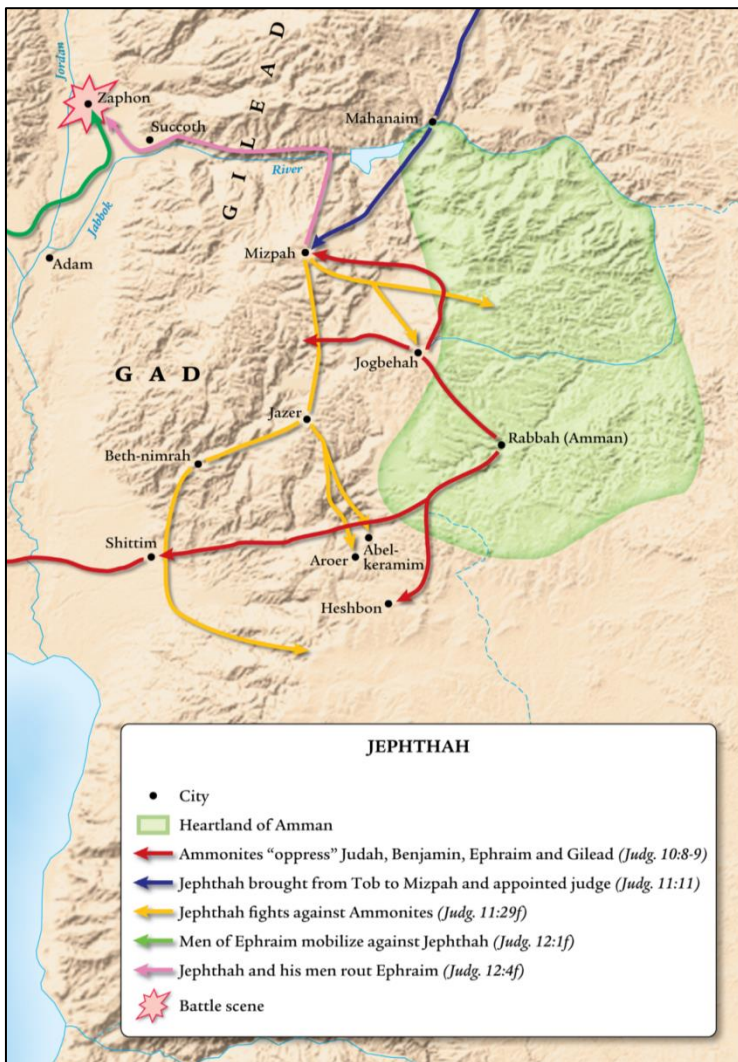
Immediate Context

Jephthah and the Gileadites have defeated the Ammonites by the grace of God and Jephthah is mourning the loss of his only daughter and heir because of his foolish vow and inadequate understanding of God’s Word. Ephraim comes along at the wrong time with the wrong message and Jephthah will show no mercy on foolishness.

Judges 12:1-7 – Internal Strife

Recall that Ephraim was the youngest of Joseph’s sons and was prophetically given the firstborn blessing by Jacob/Israel on his deathbed (see *Genesis 48:8-20*). Both Ephraim and Manasseh were destined to be great tribes, but Ephraim would be the greatest. This is not the first encounter one of Israel’s judges has had with the Ephraimites. Read *Judges 8:1-3* to recall the conflict between Gideon and the Ephraimites.

What was the intention of the Ephraimites when they came to Gilead? They came to fight... at least to intimidate.



What have we learned about the tribe of Ephraim? What appears to be their root issue/sin? They had a tribal pride that went beyond smugness and imposed itself upon the other tribes. They were so insecure in their identity that they threatened war again their own brethren if they determined that they were being slighted in the least.

Did Jephthah want this conflict? No, he tried to talk his way out of it.

What are the similarities between Gideon’s conflict with the Ephraimites and Jephthah’s? Like with Gideon, the Ephraimites are upset about being excluded from a victorious battle. Like Gideon, Jephthah talks with them and tries to prevent bloodshed.

What are the differences between Gideon’s conflict and Jephthah’s? Gideon flattered the Ephraimites in order to subdue their anger. Jephthah exposes their failure to respond to a request for

help, identifies Yahweh as the deliverer, and therefore asks why they would come to accuse him of wrongdoing, again exposing their foolishness. Gideon was trying to talk his way out of a fight. Jephthah didn't want a fight but was not going to back down from one either.

What do these differences teach us about Jephthah? He was not the politician that Gideon was and he was not as concerned about the unity of the nation as Gideon. He was not a man of negotiation; he was a man of action and contention.

In verse 4v, the Ephraimites hurl an insult at Jephthah and the Gileadites that move the Gileadites to war. What did it mean when they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh."? A fugitive is a "refugee" or "an escaped one." It is interesting that when the Ephraimites uttered these words, they were actually to the east of the Jordan in the land of Gilead allotted to the tribe of Gad, but were near the southern border of the Transjordan half-tribe of Manasseh, which was considered a part of Gilead.¹ The Ephraimites were in the land of Gilead; the Gileadites were not in Ephraim or even technically in Manasseh. One commentator suggests that the best way to interpret this is, "*being in Ephraim is like being in Manasseh, that is, they would find no refuge in Manasseh, their homeland.*"²

Consider the threat the Ephraimites made to Jephthah (verse 1b) and the insult against Jephthah and the Gileadites. How would Jephthah have received these words? They would have been personally painful. He had just killed his daughter due to his foolish vow and now they threaten to burn his house down. He had also been driven from his own home earlier in life, becoming an outcast/refugee. He had only recently been restored to Gilead and now the Ephraimites threatened to make him an outcast again.

Jephthah used their differences (the Ephraimite dialect) to distinguish the Ephraimites from other Israelites and then destroy them. He literally made them "fugitives" in Gilead and ultimately killed 42,000 who had crossed over to fight.

Did Jephthah do the right thing in fighting the Ephraimites? Ephraim was certainly to blame for instigating the fight, but so deeply defeating one of the Lord's tribes appears to go beyond teaching them a lesson and ventures into vengeance. Jephthah was a man who did not rule his own spirit (see *Proverbs 25:28*). He was impulsive and too easily angered. Even though he appeared to be successful when he was impulsive (defeating the Ammonites and the Ephraimites), the price was great. **True success is not measured by accomplishing your goals but by advancing God's agenda.**

National chaos followed international chaos, but all resulted from spiritual chaos. Jephthah and his turbulent reign was the product of harlotry, which is the disruption of God's divine decree for the home

¹ The city of Zaphon was assigned to Gad by Joshua (*Joshua 13:27*).

² Block, Daniel, *The New American Commentary, Volume 6, Judges, Ruth*. Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group. 1999, p383.

and moral life. Spiritually, Israel had been unfaithful to God and when you sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind. Because of their spiritual state, even though Israel subdued its enemies, they had never been more divided as a nation.

After Ephraim's defeat, no one would stand in the way of Jephthah's leadership; however it only lasted six years as he soon died and was buried in Gilead.

Judges 12:8-10 – Ibzan

Ibzan means "swift." He was from Bethlehem (either in Judah or Zebulun... we don't know). What characterized Ibzan's term as a judge? He was a man of connections. His sons and daughters all married outside of their clan, which increased and strengthened and consolidated his influence.

Judges 12:11-12 – Elon

Elon means "oak." We know nothing about him except that he is from Zebulun and reigned for 10 years.

Judges 12:13-15 – Abdon

Abdon means "service." He was an Ephraimite. What do we learn about him from this description? He had the ideal number of sons and grandsons (70) and was very wealthy (each had their own camel). His influence was probably significant by virtue of his connections and wealth.

What theme do we see across the years in which Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon judged Israel? We see a reconnection of the people of Israel, which is a contrast to Jephthah's reign, bookended by division.

What is missing in the description of these last three judges? There is no mention of the Lord. Israel may have been drawing together more as a people but there is no indication that they were drawing nearer to the Lord as a people. In fact, we find at the beginning of Judges 13 that *"the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord..."* **Beware of false peace; it often masks the greatest division, the division between God and man.**