

Judges

Chapter 12

Jephthah and Ephraim

The men of Ephraim called out their forces, crossed over to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, “Why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We’re going to burn down your house over your head.”² Jephthah answered, “I and my people were engaged in a great struggle with the Ammonites, and although I called, you didn’t save me out of their hands.”³ When I saw that you wouldn’t help, I took my life in my hands and crossed over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave me the victory over them. Now why have you come up today to fight me?”⁴ Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because the Ephraimites had said, “You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh.”⁵ The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead asked him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he replied, “No,”⁶ they said, “All right, say ‘Shibboleth.’” If he said, “Sibboleth,” because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.⁷ Jephthah led Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died, and was buried in a town in Gilead.

12:1 *did not call us.* Ephraim, in its arrogance, chafed because it wanted leadership of the region and a share in the booty. Luth: “The sons of Ephraim were always prouder than the rest, for they had been adopted by Jacob and preferred to Manasseh, and they had been born of Joseph, a patriarch exalted above the others. Therefore they had grown haughty because of such privileges, as they were also proudly puffed up in opposition to Gideon and Jephthah” (AE 11:40). (TLSB)

burn down your house. The Philistines issued a similar threat to Samson’s wife (14:15). See also 20:48. (CSB)

12:2 *answered.* Again Jephthah tried diplomacy first (see 11:12, 14; see also note on 8:1). (CSB)

Ephraim wanted to share in the credit for victory after the fighting was already over. (TLSB)

I called. New information on the sequence of events. (CSB)

Not mentioned in ch 11 because it had no effect.(TLSB)

did not save. Ephraimites failed to come when Jephthah needed them. (TLSB)

12:3 *I took my life in my hand.* Jephthah risked his life for a victory but the Ephraimites did nothing but complain. (TLSB)

12:4 *Gilead.* Tribes of Gad, Reuben, and part of Manasseh lived east of the Jordan, outside the boundaries of the Promised Land. God approved this arrangement.

they. Ephraimites. (TLSB)

fugitives. Ephraim is insulting the Gileadites as an illegitimate mob living outside the tribal identities. Cf Jsh 22. (TLSB)

12:5 *fords of the Jordan.* Where the Ephraimites were trying to retreat back across the river to their homeland. (TLSB)

12:6 *Shibboleth.* Ironically, the word meant “floods” (see, e.g., Ps 69:2, 15). Apparently the Israelites east of the Jordan pronounced its initial letter with a strong “sh” sound, while those in Canaan gave it a softer “s” sound. (Peter was similarly betrayed by his accent; see Mt 26:73.) (CSB)

Tribes were already so dis-unified as to have acquired regional dialects. (TLSB)

42,000. Number of casualties in the war. (TLSB)

12:7 *led Israel ... years.* A new formula for closing out the account of a judge (see note on 3:11; see also Introduction: Literary Features). (CSB)

12:1–7 The tribe of Ephraim, in its pride and jealousy, is angry at not participating in the glory of Jephthah’s victory and threatens to kill the Gileadites. Instead, identifying their enemies by their regional dialect, the Gileadites defeat Ephraim, killing 42,000 of their fellow Israelites. God uses Jephthah, a sinner, to deliver His people. God’s grace to and through Jephthah may remind us of the deliverance He provides us through Christ, not by our own merit. This destroys human pride, but gives us a greater victory. • O Lord, forgive us for our desire for glory and for despising others. Give us the right word for crossing into eternity, namely, the right confession of Your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen. (TLSB)

Ibzan, Elon and Abdon

⁸ After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem led Israel. ⁹ He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. He gave his daughters away in marriage to those outside his clan, and for his sons he brought in thirty young women as wives from outside his clan. Ibzan led Israel seven years. ¹⁰ Then Ibzan died, and was buried in Bethlehem. ¹¹ After him, Elon the Zebulunite led Israel ten years. ¹² Then Elon died, and was buried in Aijalon in the land of Zebulun. ¹³ After him, Abdon son of Hillel, from Pirathon, led Israel. ¹⁴ He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys. He led Israel eight years. ¹⁵ Then Abdon son of Hillel died, and was buried at Pirathon in Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

12:8 *Bethlehem*. Probably the Bethlehem in western Zebulun. (CSB)

May be the city in Judah where David and Jesus were born or the other town of that same name in Zebulun (Jsh 19:15). (TLSB)

12:9 *outside*. Marriage outside the “clan,” or extended family unit, would have been proper. Marriage outside Israel would not. The Hbr does not specify “clan” but just says “outside,” so the meaning is not completely clear. (TLSB)

thirty sons and thirty daughters. See note on 10:4. (CSB)

One way to achieve civic order among such fractious tribes was through marriage alliances which may have kept the peace for the seven years of his judgeship. (TLSB)

12:11 *Elon*. Also the name of a clan in the tribe of Zebulun (Ge 46:14; Nu 26:26). (CSB)

12:12 *Elon ... Aijalon*. Name of the judge and name of his burial site have exactly the same consonantal spelling in Hbr. (TLSB)

Aijalon in the land of Zebulun. Archaeologists have identified possible sites for this city. (TLSB)

12:14 *forty sons and thirty grandsons*. A total of 70 (see notes on 8:30; 10:4). (CSB)

Polygamy was common. (TLSB)

12:15 *hill country of the Amalekites*. See note on 5:14. The background of this reference is unknown; the Amalekites are otherwise associated with the Negev (Nu 13:29). (CSB)

12:8–15 Three “minor” judges are mentioned, but nothing is said of their deeds, other than that two of them have large families. Unlike other judges, these deal with no invaders, no civil war, and no dramatic sins. Nevertheless, the people still need to be judged through God’s servants who apply His Law. Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon—living out both their spiritual offices (in their judgeships) and temporal offices (in their families)—stand as examples of the doctrine of vocation. Nothing is recorded of their good works. Yet, God was still pleased with them on account of their faith. • O Lord, make me faithful in my everyday callings. May I ever cling to Your Word, appreciate Your daily blessings, and call on You in every need. Through Christ, our Lord, I pray. Amen. (TLSB)