

## Jephthah

You probably have not heard of me, but I will tell you that my name is Jephthah. I was an illegitimate child of a dysfunctional family – to say the least. My mother was a prostitute and my half-brothers, sons of the wife of my father, Gilead, drove me away. Yet when the town, Gilead, was in trouble, the elders chose me to lead them in battle. I was skeptical, naturally, and even feared a double-cross that might put my life in jeopardy. But they vowed before the LORD that I would be their leader.

The problem was an attack by the Ammonites. It was not just the attack but the rationale behind it. The king of the Ammonites claimed that the Israelites were illegally occupying his land. Now maybe part of the reason the elders chose me, in addition to my military skills, is that I was what I believe you call a “history buff.”

Centuries before, the Ammonites, along with Edom and Moab had refused to allow Moses and the Israelites permission to peacefully pass through their countries. The Ammonites went even further and actually attacked Israel – and, by the way, were defeated. They lost their territory in a fair fight which they started!

So why after 300 years are, they bringing up this issue? I thought that was a fair question. Since the LORD God of Israel gave the land to us, I asked the Ammonite king, “Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you?”

He paid no attention to that argument and the Spirit of the LORD came upon me. I passed through the land to gather an army and advanced against the Ammonites. In my enthusiasm I made a rash vow – do not make rash vows to the LORD! I said that if given the victory, I would sacrifice whatever comes out of my door to meet me on my return home. Not just a “rookie mistake” but a deadly error, rooted in forgetting to take everything to the LORD in prayer. My precious only daughter came out the door. When she understood what was happening, she showed more maturity than me – she acquiesced because it was a vow to the LORD. She asked for time in the hills with her friends, to mourn the loss of a chance for marriage. In her honor a tradition was established for young women of Israel to spent time in the hills each year.

As if that was not enough, I was next accosted by the Ephraimites, complaining that they were not allowed to participate in the victory. They weren’t just filing a grievance, they wanted to wipe me out! I noted that they missed their chance to join the army when the conflict began and I had risked my life to protect their interests, but that did not seem to make a difference. So, they actually battled us Gileadites, their very brothers! When they tried to infiltrate our camp from across the Jordan, claiming they were NOT Ephraimites, we asked them to say “Shibboleth.” Ephraimites pronounce it as “Sibboleth.” Once we knew they were imposters, they died.

What a tragic and senseless loss of life! But they were deadly serious in fighting us over what they, in their warped sense of pride considered a major slight. We had no choice but to fight back. Forty-two thousand of them became our enemies and died over NOTHING!

I led Israel for 6 years. I am not proud of my record. But after entering the eternal kingdom I was allowed to see that my name had been recorded by a later prophet as a “hero of the faith.” My name was mentioned alongside Noah, Moses and Joseph! Can you believe the grace of the LORD God of Israel? Praise his holy name! Do not forget that even when carrying out a duty he assigned you that you must inquire of him about every decision.