

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

The Ephraimites are incensed against Jephthah, because he did not call them to war against the Ammonites; and threaten his destruction, Judges 12:1. He vindicates himself, Judges 12:2, Judges 12:3; and arms the Gileadites against the men of Ephraim; they fight against them, and kill forty-two thousand Ephraimites at the passages of Jordan, Judges 12:4-6. Jephthah dies, having judged Israel six years, Judges 12:7. Ibzan judge seven years, Judges 12:8. His posterity and death, Judges 12:9, Judges 12:10. Elon judge ten years, and dies, Judges 12:11, Judges 12:12. Abdon judge eight years, Judges 12:13. His posterity and death, Judges 12:14, Judges 12:15.

Verse 1

The men of Ephraim gathered themselves together - וַיִּצְטַקוּ (vaiyitstsaek), they called each other to arms; summoning all their tribe and friends to arm themselves to destroy Jephthah and the Gileadites, being jealous lest they should acquire too much power.

Verse 3

I put my life in my hands - I exposed myself to the greatest difficulties and dangers. But whence did this form of speech arise? Probably from a man's laying hold of his sword, spear, or bow. This is the defender of my life; on this, and my proper use of it, my life depends. When a man draws his sword against his foe, his enemy will naturally aim at his life; and his sword in his hand is his sole defense. It is then, Fight and conquer, or die. Thus Jephthah took his life in his hand. This phrase occurs in some other places of Scripture; see 1 Samuel 19:5; 1 Samuel 28:21. And the words of the Conqueror, Isaiah 63:5, seem to confirm the above view of the subject: I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered there was none to uphold; therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me; i.e., by mine own arm I saved my life, and brought destruction on mine enemies.

Verse 4

And fought with Ephraim - Some commentators suppose that there were two battles in which the Ephraimites were defeated: the first mentioned in the above clause; and the second occasioned by the taunting language mentioned in the conclusion of the verse, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim. Where the point of this reproach lies, or what is the reason of it, cannot be easily ascertained.

Verse 6

Say now Shibboleth; and he said Sibboleth - The original differs only in the first letter ש (sheen), instead of ס (seen); שִׁבּוֹלֶת (shibboleth), סִבּוֹלֶת (sibboleth), (vaiyomer Sibboleth). The difference between ש (seen), without a point, which when pointed is pronounced (sheen), and ש (sheen), is supposed by many to be imperceptible. But there can be no doubt there was, to the ears of a Hebrew, a most sensible distinction. Most Europeans, and, indeed, most who have written grammars of the language, perceive scarcely any difference between the Arabic (seen) and (saad); but as both those letters are radical not only in Arabic but in Hebrew, the difference of enunciation must be such as to be plainly perceivable by the ear; else it would be impossible to determine the root of a word into which either of these letters entered, except by guessing, unless by pronunciation the sounds were distinct. One to whom the Arabic is vernacular, hearing a native speak, discerns it in a moment; but the delicate enunciation of the characteristic difference between those letters ש (seen) and ש (sheen), and (saad), is seldom caught by a European. Had there been no distinction between the (seen) and (sheen) but what the Masoretic point gives now, then ש (sheen) would not have been used in the word שִׁבּוֹלֶת (sibboleth), but ש (seen), thus שִׁבּוֹלֶת: but there must have been a very remarkable difference in the pronunciation of the Ephraimites, when instead of שִׁבּוֹלֶת (shibboleth), an ear of corn, (see Job 24:24), they said שִׁבּוֹלֶת (sibboleth), which signifies a burden, Exodus 6:6; and a heavy burden were they obliged to bear who could not pronounce this test letter. It is likely that the Ephraimites were, in reference to the pronunciation of sh, as different from the Gileadites as the people in some parts of the north of England are, in the pronunciation of the letter r, from all the other inhabitants of the land. The sound of th cannot be pronounced by the Persians in general; and yet it is a common sound among the Arabians. To this day multitudes of the German Jews cannot pronounce th, but put ss in the stead of it: thus for שֵׁת (beith) (a house) they say bess. Mr. Richardson, in his Dissertation on the Languages, Literature, and Manners of the Eastern Nations, prefixed to his Persian and Arabic Dictionary, p. ii., 4th. edition, makes some observations on the different dialects which prevailed in Arabia Felix, the chief of which were the Hemyaret and Koreish; and to illustrate the point in hand, he produces the following story from the Mohammedan writers: An envoy from one of the feudatory states, having been sent to the tobba, (the sovereign), that prince, when he was introduced, pronounced the word (T'heb), which in the Hemyaret implied, Be seated: unhappily it

signified, in the native dialect of the ambassador, Precipitate thyself; and he, with a singular deference for the orders of his sovereign, threw himself instantly from the castle wall and perished.â€• Though the Ephraimites had not a different dialect, they had, it appears, a different pronunciation, which confounded, to others, letters of the same organ, and thus produced, not only a different sound, but even an opposite meaning. This was a sufficient test to find out an Ephraimite; and he who spake not as he was commanded, at the fords of Jordan, spoke against his own life.

For he could not frame to pronounce it right - This is not a bad rendering of the original yachin (yachin); and they did not direct to speak it thus.â€• But instead of yachin , to direct, thirteen of Kennicott's and De Rossi's MSS., with two ancient editions, read yabin ; they did not understand to speak it thus.â€• The versions take great latitude in this verse. The Vulgate makes a paraphrase: Dic ergo Shibboleth, quod interpretatur spica: qui respondebat Sibboleth; eadem litera spicam exprimere non valens.â€• Say therefore, Shibboleth; which interpreted is an ear of corn; but he answered, Sibboleth; not being able to express an ear of corn by that letter.â€• In my very ancient copy of the Vulgate, probably the editio princeps, there is sebboloth in the first instance as the test word, and thebboloth as the Ephraimite pronunciation. But cebboloth is the reading of the Complutensian Polyglot, and is supported by one of my own MSS., yet the former reading, thebboloth, is found in two of my MSS. The Chaldee has shubbaltha for the Gileaditish pronunciation, and subbaltha for that of Ephraim. The Syriac has (shelba) and (sebla). The Arabic has the same word, with (sheen) and (seen); and adds, He said Sebla, for the Ephraimites could not pronounce the letter (sheen).â€• These notices, however trivial at first view, will not be thought unimportant by the Biblical critic.

Verse 8

And after him Ibzan - It appears that during the administration of Jephthah, six years - Ibzan, seven years - Elon, ten years - and Abdon, eight years, (in the whole thirty-one years), the Israelites had peace in all their borders; and we shall find by the following chapter that in this time of rest they corrupted themselves, and were afterwards delivered into the power of the Philistines.

1. We find that Ibzan had a numerous family, sixty children; and Abdon had forty sons and thirty grandsons; and that they lived splendidly, which is here expressed by their riding on seventy young asses; what we would express by they all kept their carriages; for the riding on fine asses in those days was not less dignified than riding in coaches in ours.

2. It does not appear that any thing particular took place in the civil state of the Israelites during the time of these latter judges; nothing is said concerning their administration, whether it was good or bad; nor is any thing mentioned of the state of religion. It is likely that they enjoyed peace without, and their judges were capable of preventing discord and sedition within. Yet, doubtless, God was at work among them, though there were none to record the operations either of his hand or his Spirit; but the people who feared him no doubt bore testimony to the word of his grace.