

# The Battle That Created Shibboleth

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*Editor's Note: Rt. Wor. Stormy Thorson, a long-time member of Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777, laid down his working tools on October 10, 2024. This article appeared in the Virginia Masonic Herald (Fall 2024) which had just been published days earlier. Although it is customary for us to share papers that had been presented at a Masonic event, we felt it appropriate to honor his last published words to the craft.*

Around 1170 BC, the Israelites completed their forty-year journey through the wilderness and are now in the Promised Land. They are content and being led by Joshua, who assumed command after the death of Moses, and worshiping God. To get a feel of when in history we are talking about, King Tut is the ruler of Egypt, and the Greeks will defeat Troy with the use of the famous Wooden Horse.

Of course, all history from this period comes from the Bible and in this case, the Book of Judges, Chapter 11. The Book of Judges is all about battles and conflicts of the Israelites with their enemies, such as the Ammonites, the Canaanites, the Jebusites, etc. After Joshua's death, the Israelites' new generation forgets "the ways of the Lord" and all that it took to get them where they are. They begin to worship false Gods, like Baal, and Astarte. God had given them ten Commandments while they were wandering through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. The first Commandment, the number one Commandment was . . . "Thou shall have no other gods before (in the presence of) me." In anger, God allows them to be given over to their enemies who plunder and enslaved them.

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After years of oppression, the Israelites beg the Lord for help and promise to worship and follow only Him. God gives in and gives them Othniel as their leader. They defeat the Edomites and there is peace, and they worship only God for the next forty years, until Othniel dies. Then they again forget and begin to worship false gods. God gets angry and allows them to be conquered by the Moabites. It is then they repent and beg for God's help, which he gives them. Then they forget again. This pattern has continued for well over a hundred years.

The ninth time it happens, the Ammonites are the enemy. For eighteen years, the Ammonites have been raiding the Israelites towns and camps, attacking and tormenting them, abusing their women and pillaging their stores. During these eighteen years, a fellow named Jephthah was born. He was the son of a man called Gilead and his mother was a harlot.

The King James Version of the Bible says "harlot", other versions use the term "prostitute". An etymological search of the word "harlot" shows that it only took on the sexual connotation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Prior to that it meant "a lower-class woman," not necessarily roguish, nasty, or sexual. The King James Version also describes Rahab (Joshua 2:15) as a harlot and she was an ancestor of David and Jesus. Other sources use the term "whore." An etymological search on this word shows its origin to mean "lover." This might just be the most accurate description of Jephthah's mother. The great Hebrew Historian, Josephus puts it this way "He was born of a strange mother that was introduced among them by a father's fondness."

Jephthah's father had other sons by his wife. As Jephthah grew up, his half-brothers cast him out, so he could not inherit their father's estate. Jephthah went to Tob, which is roughly northeast of Gilead, up toward Damascus. Jephthah fell in with a group of bandits

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and became their leader. He became renowned for his skills as a fighter and warrior as well as a leader.

Because of his reputation, the leaders of Gilead sought out Jephthah and begged him to lead their people against the Ammonites. If victorious, he would become their Leader. After some cajoling, he agreed. It was understood that his commission from them was witnessed by God. To solidify his pact with God, he announced, unsolicited, unrequired, and unnecessarily that the first thing to exit his house after his victory would be offered as a sacrifice.



Jephthah tried negotiation, but the Ammonites were not listening and said that the Israelites were merely refugees and had no claim to the area in which they lived. Jephthah raised a mighty army and defeated the Ammonites, conquering twenty cities. When he arrived home after the victory, his daughter ran out to greet him. Sadly, Jephthah honored his vow to God. There was peace in the land, but not for long.

An army of Ephraimites crossed the River Jordan, traveled to Gilead and demanded to know why they were not made part of the army that beat the Ammonites and therefore be entitled to the glory and spoils of the victory. Prior to the conflict with the Ammonites,

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Jephthah had asked all tribes to help, but this answer was not acceptable to the Ephraimites, and they became more and more belligerent, threatening to take the spoils and even more, by force. Jephthah assembled his mighty army once more and attacked the Ephraimites, who were no match for the Army of Gileadites. With substantial losses mounting up, the Army of Ephraimites fled. Knowing that they would have to cross the river to regroup or gather fresh troops, Jephthah stationed men at the ford of the river, with instructions to kill any Ephraimites attempting to cross. When an Ephraimite attempted to cross, they were tested by asking them to describe the Waterford. This was a trap because only the Gileadites could say "Shibboleth." He knew that the Ephraimites did not have the "sh" sound in their dialect and would therefore say, "Sibboleth." This would betray their homeland and cost them their life.

Why not use the word "ship" or "sheep" or even "shell"? Very old definitions of Shibboleth show it to mean "stream" or "flowing stream." Jephthah's men were at a ford of the Jordan, so "stream" sounds logical. Seventeenth century definitions, 2,500 years later, show it to mean "an ear of corn." Corn had not been brought to the old world before Christ so clearly, that is not the definition we are looking for, however that is likely how it got into Masonic ritual. Remember this all took place two hundred years before King Solomon. Masonic ritual began to solidify around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so the timeline fits.

The King James Version of the *Holy Bible* says there fell on that day forty and two thousand. That is a lot of bodies. In the Bible, thousand is a term used for immensity or "more than can be counted". The term thousand is mentioned in the Bible hundreds of times. Samson slew a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass, Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings to God, the devil was bound to a bottomless pit for a thousand years, etc., so saying forty and two thousand could be like us saying "forty and a gazillion." Forty and two thousand should not be taken at today's face value.

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Jephthah's tenure as a Judge lasted only six years, but was hailed, in the New Testament, by the author of Hebrews (over a thousand years later) as a hero of faith. He was buried in a city in Gilead.

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