

Jephthah

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In the Fellowcraft Degree in Craft Masonry is the first time we hear of this man Jephthah. All we are told of him is "...Jephthah, a judge of Israel," and "...after which Jephthah ruled quietly in Israel until the time of his death, in all six years."

When Jephthah's father Gilead was a young man he succumbed to urges of the flesh and took up with a harlot, Jephthah was the result of this union. Jephthah grew to be a man of valour but when Gilead's legitimate sons came of age they drove Jephthah from his home and his lands saying to him "You will have none of our inheritance you are the son of another woman."

We are told in the book of Judges Chapter 11 that Jephthah went into exile in the land of Tob "...and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him." This tells us that Jephthah was a good leader and that he had organized a small army that followed him and were quite successful in their endeavours.

It came to pass that the people of Ammon made war on the Israelites. The Israelites had no leaders of stature to fight the Ammonites, so, a delegation of elders were sent to seek the aid of Jephthah. Jephthah reminded them that they were the ones that permitted his brothers to exile him from Israel and his people. The elders desperate to protect their lands and families told Jephthah that if he would return and lead the army against the Ammonites he would be made head of Gilead.

Jephthah replied "If you take me back home to fight against the people of Ammon, and the Lord delivers them to me, shall I be your head?" To which the elders replied "The LORD will be a witness between us, if we do not do according to your words."

Jephthah returned to Gilead and in Mizpah they made him commander over the army and the head or leader of Gilead. Jephthah then set up negotiations with the Ammonites but they would not listen to anything he had to say. (The Ammonites were the descendants of Lot's son, and inhabited a tract of country east of the river Jordan and had always been hostile towards the Israelites.) So as he marched into battle against the Ammonites he made a vow; "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

Jephthah secured a great victory "..from Aroer as far as Minnith -- twenty cities -- and to Able Keramin." It was a very bloody battle with much loss of life and many great prizes were captured and the Ammonites "..were subdued before the children of Israel."

Upon Jephthah's return home his daughter came dancing and singing from the house to honour her father and to celebrate his great victory. But, Jephthah, seeing this said to his daughter, "Alas, my daughter, you have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it."

Jephthah's daughter agreed that the vow must be carried out but begged to be given two months, "...that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I." Jephthah permitted this and when the two months

were over the vow was carried out. To this day the daughter's of Israel go four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Now the Ephraimites started causing some trouble for Jephthah, the Ephraimites inhabited the centre of Judea between the Mediterranean and the river Jordan. They were described as "a stiff-necked and rebellious people," which coincides with history, which describes them as haughty and tenacious. The problem was that they had not been called upon to take part in the war with the Ammonites and felt that they had been deprived of their share of the rich spoils of the war. The Ephraimites attacked Jephthah's army and were defeated with great losses. The land of Gilead was on the west side of the Jordan river and the Ephraimites lived on the east. After their defeat they attempted to retreat to their lands but Jephthah set sentries at the fords of the river. His army detected their enemy by a defect in their dialect. They spoke the same language as the other tribes of Juda, they had a different pronunciation of some words and could not pronounce any word begging with "SH", which they pronounced "S". So, when called upon to say SHIBBOLETH they pronounced it SIBBOLETH, "which trifling defect" says the ritual, "proved them to be enemies."

This test to a Hebrew was a palpable one, for the two words have an entirely different signification: shibboleth means an ear of corn, and, sibboleth means a burden.

Because the Ephraimites could not "frame to pronounce this word" their fell on the field of battle that day forty-two thousand. From that day on it seems that Jephthah lived a life of peace and was a Judge in Israel until his death some six years later.

Thus is the story of Jephthah a man highly regarded by Masons, not because of his use of this word that we have adopted in our Ritual, but, because he was a man of honour, of truth and of duty. A man of honour in that he honoured the Grand

Architect of the Universe, and he held to his word. This promise which was so painful and costly; he knew his duty and carried it out.

Can we as Masons be any less, we must hold fast to our honour, our duties, and our promises. Ever remembering those promises solemnly made at the sacred altar of Freemasonry.

Research Material

The Freemason at Work By; Harry Car Published by: Lewis Masonic London
England

Encyclopedia of Freemasonry By: Albert G. Mickey and William J. Hughan
Published by: The Masonic History Company New York, 1921

The Holy Bible King James Version Thomas Nelson Publishers

The Ritual Work of the Grand Lodge of Nova Scotia