

## Shibboleth --- by Ed Halpaus

Jephthah Judge of Israel was to do battle with the Ammonites, and he made a vow to the Lord; “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.” (Judges 11: 30, 31 NIV)

When he returned to his home at Mizpah his only child, a Daughter, came out to meet him, dancing to the sound of tambourines. When he saw his Daughter he tore his clothes and cried in anguish; “My Daughter! My heart is breaking! What a tragedy that you came out to greet me, for I have made a vow to the Lord and cannot take it back.” (Judges 11:35 NLT)

After an event like that, when the Ephraimites gathered together an army to rise up against Jephthah in rebellion because they were not invited to fight, and share in the spoils of the just completed war with the Ammonites, is it any wonder that Jephthah would do all he could to kill all of the Ephraimites.

In Judges 12: 1 – 4, the story is told of how Jephthah, led the men of Gilead against the Ephraimites, who rebelled, because Jephthah had not invited them to fight, and share in the spoils of the war against the Ammonites; it tells how the victorious men of Gilead first seized the fords, (in the bible explained as the shallows,) of the River Jordan and intercepted the fleeing Ephraimites, attempting to cross back into their own land, who, denying their identity, were required to pronounce a word which they invariably mispronounced. --This all took place about 1100 B.C.E.

Ephraimites who wanted to escape would simply claim not to be Ephraimites; the Gileadites discovered these imposters by having them pronounce the word written in the Hebrew text as *sibbolet*, (Judges 12:6)

The two dialects had different pronunciations for the same word, the story might mean that the Ephraimites simply slipped and used their own pronunciation. The Bible says, however, that the Ephraimites were not able to pronounce a consonant that existed in the Gileadite dialect.

It is said that at the time of the Ephraimites there fell 40 and 2000. Some people have questioned that it really meant not 42,000 but 40 plus 2000 or 2040, however, while the KJV of the Bible says 40 and 2 thousand, the New International Version, New Living Translation, and the New American Standard Bible all use the total of 42,000.

Since that time, the word Shibboleth has come to be used generally to indicate a password, or other safety devise. And on that subject of a Password being used to detect the enemy, in a book by Jonathan Kirsh he recounts the story from World War II in which Dutch Resistance Fighters were able to cull out Nazi infiltrators who couldn’t pronounce a particular Dutch Name. The Dutch may have used two names to detect Nazi infiltrators one name is spelled “Scheveningen,” the other is spelled “ ‘S-Gravenhage,” which is the Dutch name and pronunciation of a town in the Netherlands we here in the U.S. call “The Hague.”

So we, in modern times, the (1900’s) have a prime example how a word spoken by two different peoples are inherently pronounced two different ways so as to prove whom they are.

Maybe now when we see the word **Shibboleth, or Mizpah**, we will remember how it cost the Lives of so many Ephraimites, and the vow that cost a young girl her life.

As it says in the book “*Don’t Know Much About The Bible,*” Shibboleth has come to mean a word or catchphrase that is distinctive to one group.

By the way the Bible says; Jephthah led Israel for 6 years, died, and was buried in a town in Gilead.

## References

Holy Bible, KJV

Holy Bible, NIV

Holy Bible, NLT

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The Oxford Companion to the Bible

Coils Masonic Encyclopedia

An un-named Dutch Translator and Educator