

# Tola, Jair, Jephthah, and Three Minor Judges

## *Judges 10-12*

### **Introduction**

Following Abimelech, two lesser-known judges, Tola and Jair, ruled over Israel, though their accounts lack the dramatic events typical of earlier judges. Their periods did not feature the significant battles or the divine interventions seen during the tenures of figures like Ehud, Deborah, or Gideon, and the historian does not mention any periods of rest during their time, suggesting a phase of ongoing unrest rather than catastrophic turmoil.

### **10:1-2 - Tola's Judgeship**

Tola, from the tribe of Issachar, served as a judge for twenty years (circa 1171–1148 BC) and lived in Shamir in Ephraim's hill country. His role is seen positively; he is credited with stabilizing and benefiting Israel after Abimelech's oppressive rule. Tola's leadership seems to have been a corrective force against Abimelech's negative influence on Israel.

### **10:3-5 - Jair's Judgeship**

Jair, the seventh judge and a Gileadite, judged Israel for twenty-two years (circa 1148–1126 BC). He is noted for having thirty sons, who each rode donkeys—a sign of their status—and governed thirty towns in Gilead collectively known as Havvoth-jair. His rule hints at political and moral decline, marked by polygamy and nepotism, suggesting a further erosion in the judgeship's integrity. Jair's death and burial place in Kamon are briefly mentioned, with no further details provided.

These accounts indicate a period when Israel was perhaps without catastrophic crises but also lacking notable divine or military interventions, reflecting a subtle decline from the golden days of earlier judges.

### **10:6-16 – Israel falls into Further Apostasy**

The story of Shechem, Abimelech, and his successors highlights a significant decline in Israel's faithfulness, reaching a new low as detailed by the biblical author. The text reiterates Israel's recurring sin, stating that they once again committed evil by worshipping not only the Baals and Ashtarothe of the Canaanites but also the gods of neighboring peoples, including Aram, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, and the Philistines. This diverse idolatry led them to neglect their worship of God, effectively forgetting their covenant by ignoring His laws and claims to exclusivity.

This widespread apostasy set the stage for severe consequences. By around 1126 BC, Israel faced simultaneous oppression from the Philistines in the west and the Ammonites in the east, leading to significant suffering and distress across the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim. This dual threat marked a period of intense difficulty for Israel, encapsulating their "great distress."

Amidst their oppression, Israel's cry for help evolved into a confession of sin, acknowledging their abandonment of God for foreign gods. However, His response, possibly through a prophet, questioned the sincerity of their repentance. He reminded them of past deliverances—from Egypt under Moses to various victories under Joshua—and expressed reluctance to rescue them again, urging them to seek help from the gods they chose to worship instead.

Faced with this divine rebuke, Israel intensified their repentance by discarding foreign gods and sincerely turning back to God. Moved by their renewed commitment, He could not bear their misery and began to respond to their plight. This sequence of sin, suffering, repentance, and redemption illustrates a recurring pattern in the Book of Judges, highlighting the consequences of idolatry and the redemptive power of genuine contrition and return to faithfulness.

### **10:17-12:15 – Jephthah**

The Ammonites intensified their military efforts in Transjordan by stationing their forces in Gilead, prompting the Israelites to assemble their troops at Mizpah to counter the threat. Amid this escalating tension, the Gileadite leaders lacked a qualified military leader. Desperate, they decided to offer the position of ruler of all Gilead to whoever could effectively lead their defense.

Jephthah emerged as the prime candidate for this role. Despite his prowess as a warrior, Jephthah's social standing was low. He was the son of a prostitute and had been ostracized by his family, losing his inheritance. After being driven away, he settled in the land of Tob, where he became the leader of a group of disreputable men.

When the threat of an Ammonite invasion became imminent, the Gileadite elders, who had previously supported his expulsion, approached Jephthah in Tob to request his leadership. Jephthah seized the opportunity to assert his conditions, forcing the elders to reaffirm their offer to make him the ruler of Gilead upon his victory. After receiving a solemn oath from them, Jephthah agreed and returned to Mizpah, where he was officially appointed as the leader in a formal ceremony conducted in the presence of Yahweh.

### **11:12-28 – Jephthah and the King of Ammon**

Jephthah, despite his warrior background, initially sought to resolve tensions with the Ammonites through diplomacy. He sent messengers to inquire why the Ammonite king had invaded Israel, to which the king responded by claiming that Israel had seized his land during their exodus from Egypt, specifically the territory between the Arnon and Jabbok rivers.

In response, Jephthah sent another delegation to present a robust defense of Israel's possession of the land in Transjordan. He first provided a historical argument: Israel had avoided conflict with the neighboring territories of Edom and Moab and had only engaged in battle with the Amorites, who controlled the land at that time after their king Sihon attacked them. Israel's victory, granted by God, legitimized their claim to the land.

Next, Jephthah presented a theological argument, stating that the God of Israel, had divinely awarded the land to Israel after driving out the Amorites. He contrasted this with the Ammonites, whose land was given by their god, Chemosh.

His third argument cited historical precedent: Balak, king of Moab, and no Ammonite king over the past three hundred years had contested Israel's claim to the land.

Jephthah concluded that Israel had not wronged Ammon; rather, Ammon was the aggressor. He asserted that God, as the ultimate judge, would decide the rightful claim to the territory. Despite his efforts for peace, Jephthah anticipated the Ammonite king's refusal to negotiate, setting the stage for an inevitable military conflict.

### ***11:29-40 – Jephthah's Tragic Vow***

Jephthah's story is a poignant example of God's grace, as He chose to use a man of humble and troubled origins to deliver Israel. Jephthah, the son of a prostitute and leader of a band of outlaws, was equipped by God for leadership despite not being divinely appointed in the traditional sense. His rise to power culminated in a tragic vow made before battle.

### **Judges 11:29–33 - The Background**

Empowered by the Spirit of God, Jephthah organized his forces in Gilead and Manasseh before confronting the Ammonites. Before battle, he vowed to God that if victorious, he would sacrifice as a burnt offering whatever first emerged from his house upon his return. The battle ensued, and God granted Jephthah a decisive victory, with a significant defeat of the Ammonites across twenty cities.

### **11:34-40 – The Vow Fulfilled**

The victory turned to despair when Jephthah's only child, his daughter, came out to greet him with dance and music. Realizing she would fulfill his vow; Jephthah was distraught but felt compelled to uphold his promise to God. His daughter bravely accepted her fate but requested two months to mourn her impending celibate life, given that she would never marry or bear children. Upon her return, Jephthah fulfilled his vow, dedicating her to a life of celibate service to God. It's noted she remained a virgin, and her sacrifice was commemorated annually by Israelite women.

Scholars debate whether Jephthah's daughter was offered as a literal burnt sacrifice or consecrated to a lifetime of celibate service at the Tabernacle, given that human sacrifice contradicts Mosaic law. The text leaves this ambiguous but highlights the severity of Jephthah's decision and the complex interplay of faith, commitment, and the profound consequences of vows made to God. This story illustrates the potential consequences of rash vows and reflects on the profound faith and integrity involved in fulfilling one's promises, even at great personal cost.

### **12:1-7 – Jephthah and Ephraim**

The Ephraimites, who had been called to assist in the war against Ammon, arrived after the battle had concluded. Upset at not being included, they confronted Jephthah, accusing him of acting independently and threatening to burn his house. Jephthah explained that he did summon them but had

to proceed when they did not arrive in time. Despite this, the Ephraimites continued to show hostility, fueled by their bruised pride.

Adding further to the situation, the Ephraimites insulted the Gileadites, labeling them as renegades and possibly indicating a desire to take over Gilead's territory. This provoked a conflict among the Gileadites. Jephthah then led his forces against Ephraim, seizing strategic crossings at the Jordan River. To identify and intercept Ephraimites trying to return home, the Gileadites used the pronunciation of the word "Shibboleth," as Ephraimites could not articulate the "sh" sound, leading to the death of about 42,000 Ephraimites in this conflict.

Jephthah's tenure as a judge lasted only six years, marked by significant military success against Ammon but overshadowed by his fateful vow, the stubbornness of the Ammonite king, and the devastating internal strife with the Ephraimites. His death was noted with a brief mention that he was buried in one of the cities of Gilead, concluding a period characterized by triumph and tragedy.

## **12:8-15 – Three More Minor Judges**

Following Jephthah, three minor judges—Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon—presided over Israel. Each exemplified a further decline in the role of the judge, particularly marked by the absence of the God-given rest mentioned with earlier judges. These judges appear to have operated primarily within their own tribal regions during a period of Philistine oppression in the south.

### **12:8-10 - Judgeship of Ibzan**

Ibzan, likely from Bethlehem in Zebulun rather than the more famous one in Judah, led Israel for seven years around 1105–1098 BC. He had thirty sons and thirty daughters whom he married off to non-Israelites, indicating a disregard for the biblical laws against such intermarriages. His tenure, marked by these familial alliances, suggests a diplomatic but unfaithful approach to leadership. Ibzan died and was buried in his hometown.

### **12:11-12: Judgeship of Elon**

Elon, another Zebulunite, judged Israel for ten years (1097–1087 BC). The record of his judgeship is minimal, noting only his duration in office and his burial in Aijalon, a location in Zebulun. His leadership left no notable impact on the historical or biblical record, reflecting perhaps a period of uneventful or ineffective governance.

### **12:13-15: Judgeship of Abdon**

Abdon from Pirathon in Ephraim's hill country served as judge for about eight years (1089–1081 BC). His era might have seen a regain in tribal prestige for Ephraim following previous humiliations. Known for his wealth and authority, symbolized by his forty sons and thirty grandsons riding seventy donkeys, Abdon's time was also characterized by apparent nepotism and lack of significant military or judicial achievements. He was buried in Pirathon, near a region still inhabited by Amalekites, suggesting possible failures in securing his territory completely for Israel.

These accounts highlight a period in Israel's history where the role of the judge had diminished significantly in spiritual and political strength, contrasted starkly against the more dynamic and divinely interactive judgeships of earlier times.

## What's In This for Us?

**Leadership Integrity and Accountability:** Jair's leadership was marked by nepotism and polygamy, which contributed to a moral decline. This serves as a reminder of the importance of integrity and accountability in leadership today. Leaders in any context—whether in government, business, or the church—should uphold ethical standards and be accountable for their actions to ensure they positively impact those they lead.

**The Consequences of Compromise:** Ibzan's disregard for the laws against intermarriage with non-Israelites represents a compromise of foundational values for personal or political gain. Compromising core values for short-term benefits can lead to long-term detrimental effects on our spiritual life.

**The Importance of Togetherness in Times of Crisis:** During periods of oppression and distress, the Israelites' response fluctuated between turning to God and pursuing foreign gods. This highlights the significance of coming together to encourage right actions and spiritual growth, especially in challenging times.

**The Impact of Leadership on Society's Direction:** Leaders' actions directly influenced the spiritual and moral direction of Israel. This highlights the significant impact that leaders can have on those they serve. It is crucial for modern leaders to be aware of their influence and strive to lead in ways that promote God, peace, and justice, reflecting on how their leadership will be remembered and what legacy they will leave behind.

## Conclusion

The biblical account of Tola, Jair, and Jephthah, offers rich lessons for us. It emphasizes the crucial roles of leadership integrity, community support, and moral accountability. Each judge's tenure reflected their personal virtues or flaws and the broader consequences of their actions on those they led. We can draw parallels to the need for ethical leadership and the importance of maintaining core values despite societal pressures and challenges. By understanding the impact of our decisions and the influence we wield, we can aspire to lead in ways that foster resilience, uphold what is right, and ensure the betterment of those we serve.

## For Discussion

1. How do the actions and moral choices of the judges Tola, Jair, and Jephthah reflect the importance of leadership in shaping our values?
2. How do the stories of these judges illustrate the consequences of compromising ethical or religious principles?
3. How can modern leaders apply the lessons learned from the judges' failures and successes to their leadership practices today?
4. What role do we play in maintaining moral and spiritual standards?
5. How does the concept of divine intervention in the judges' stories influence our understanding of accountability and justice?
6. Can the decline in the judges' moral and spiritual leadership be seen as a reflection of the society's overall spiritual health? How does this parallel with modern societal issues?
7. Discuss the impact of Jephthah's vow on his personal life and leadership. What does this story teach about the importance of careful decision-making?
8. How do the themes of repentance and redemption in the story of Israel's idolatry apply to contemporary issues of personal and collective responsibility?
9. What can the modern world learn from the biblical emphasis on the consequences of nepotism and polygamy observed in the judges' leadership?
10. How does the story of the minor judges like Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon illustrate the importance of legacy in leadership? What legacy do modern leaders hope to leave, and how do they plan to achieve it?