

# JUDGE IBZAN OF BETHLEHEM: JUDAH OR ZEBULUN? *PESHAT AND DERASH*

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*After him [Jephthah], Ibzan from Bethlehem led Israel. He had thirty sons, and he married off thirty daughters outside the clan and brought in thirty girls from outside the clan for his sons. He led Israel seven years. Then Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem (Judg. 12: 8-10).*

Ibzan, the tenth judge of Israel, ruled for seven years (approximately 1094 – 1087 BCE), following Jephthah's eventful and turbulent reign. Jephthah's stewardship was occupied with fighting bloody foreign and civil wars, and his private life was marked by immense personal tragedy.

Ibzan's reign was of a totally different sort. He is considered a minor judge because his entire career is described in three brief verses from which epic battles, theological confrontations, and other national events are entirely absent. His tribal affiliation is not even mentioned and is in fact somewhat controversial. Our hypothesis here is that by critically analyzing his life, as described in the text, and juxtaposing it with the description of his ancient ancestors, it will become evident that he belonged to the tribe of Zebulun.

## IBZAN OF BETHLEHEM-JUDAH

There are two separate towns named Bethlehem. One is located in the southern territory of Judah (I Sam. 17:12) and the other, Beit Leḥem ha-Gelilit, in the northern territory of Zebulun (Josh. 19:15).

The Sages identify Ibzan with Boaz (Ruth's husband in the Book of Ruth) because Boaz, like Ibzan, came from Bethlehem (TB *Bava Batra* 91a) which, they assume, is the Bethlehem in Judah. This makes exegetical sense, because traditionally Bethlehem-Judah has far greater historical importance and associations than Bethlehem-Zebulun. Furthermore, Boaz is identified as a *man of substance* [gibbor ḥayil] (Ruth 2:1), an appropriate way of describing a judge.

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To account for the discrepancy between what is stated in Judges (that Boaz had sixty children) and the Book of Ruth (where they are never mentioned), the Sages further speculate that when Ibzan married off his sixty children, he refused to invite Samson's parents who were childless at the time, thus humiliating them. As a divine punishment, all of his sixty children died prior to his meeting Ruth, hence there was no need to mention them (TB *Bava Batra* 91a). Intertwining Ibzan, Boaz and Bethlehem-Judah, no matter how contradictory and/or minimal the textual basis may be, serves to romanticize King David as descending not just from Boaz, but also from Boaz/Ibzan, a judge of Israel. Such eminent ancestry is bound to enhance David's prestigious lineage. While there are traditional sources that do not identify Ibzan with Boaz, e.g. *Seder Olam Rabbah* (chapter 12), which rejects the idea on chronological grounds, this is understood to be the general approach of the Sages.<sup>1</sup>

#### IBZAN OF BETHLEHEM-ZEBULUN

With all due respect to the midrashic interpretation of the Sages, the weight of textual evidence is that Ibzan came from Bethlehem-Zebulun, not Bethlehem-Judah. This is also the approach of most academic Bible scholars.<sup>2</sup> The first reason, a *peshat* approach, is based on the context of Ibzan within the Book of Judges itself; the other reasons, representing a *derash* approach, are based on the context of Zebulun within the Book of Genesis.

If we look at the five judges prior to Ibzan: Gideon, Abimelech, Tola, Jair, and Jephthah, we see that they are from the north. Gideon and Abimelech are of the tribe of Manasseh, Tola is of the tribe of Issachar, Jair and Jephthah are Gileadites. If we look at the two judges after Ibzan, Elon and Abdon, we find that they are also northerners, from the tribes of Zebulun and Ephraim respectively. The judges immediately before and after Ibzan are from the northern tribal territories; not one of them is from the southern tribal regions. The nucleus of Israelite judges thus resided in the North.<sup>3</sup> It would be unusual for Ibzan to constitute the one southern standout in this succession of northern judges and, if he was the exception, that would have been noted in the text. Judges typically arose during periods of crisis, and it is most likely that the greatest external threats from foreign invasion were focused on the North during the era of these judges.

Furthermore, Elon, the immediate successor of Ibzan, is from the tribe of Zebulun. Since the narrative descriptions of these two judges are so brief, and as it is most unusual for Ibzan's tribal affiliation not to be mentioned, the text may have been written sparingly on the assumption that there was no need to identify Ibzan as a Zebulunite because Elon, his immediate successor, was so identified. One might therefore surmise that the textual and chronological proximities of their judgeships imply that they were both from Zebulun; and only the tribal affiliation of Elon was mentioned to indicate that they were both from the same tribe.

Another narrative element connecting Ibzan with Zebulun may be found in the parallels between the Hebrew root origin of Zebulun's name, detailed in Genesis, and Ibzan's actions which further illuminate his tribal identity:

*Leah said, 'God has given me [zevadani] a choice gift [zeved tov]; this time my husband will dwell with me [yizbeleni], for I have borne him six sons.' So she named him Zebulun [Zevulun] Last, she bore him a daughter, and named her Dinah (Gen. 30:20-21).*

The name Leah gave to Zebulun stems from her frustrated desire and yearning for Jacob's love. The Targum translates *yizbeleni* as "will dwell with me," an interpretation followed by Saadia Gaon, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Radak, although it can also mean "exalt." Leah's dream of "dwelling" with her husband never materializes in her lifetime, but through Ibzan her wistful hopes are realized centuries later in the shape of Zebulun's descendants.

What is the essence of Ibzan's judgeship? What is the only event of his reign worthy of mention in the text? The answer is the multiple marriages and pairings of Ibzan's sons and daughters, with particular emphasis on the fact that the daughters went outside to dwell with their husbands.<sup>4</sup> Abrabanel comments that the verses describing the marriages of Ibzan's children show that it was customary in his time for married sons to live near their parents and for married daughters to move away and live with their in-laws. These verses demonstrate the fulfillment of Leah's unrealized hopes through the daughters of Ibzan.

Furthermore, of all the four mothers of Jacob's children, it is Leah alone who has a daughter. Dinah's birth is mentioned immediately after Zebulun's, thereby textually (and perhaps metaphorically) linking these two siblings. The idea of dwelling with a husband is in fact at the epicenter of Dinah's life,

and matches between son and daughters of differing clans, the only activity ascribed to Ibzan, is a central feature of the negotiations in the Dinah narrative.

*Hamor spoke with them [Israel], saying, 'My son Shechem longs for your daughter. Please give her to him as a wife and we will then intermarry: your daughters you will give to us and our daughters you will take for yourselves. You will settle among us and the land will be open before you; settle, trade, and possess it.' Then Shechem said to her [Dinah's] father and brothers, 'Do me this favor, and I will pay whatever you like. Ask me for a dowry and gifts ever so large and I will pay what you tell me; just give me the maiden as a wife' (Gen. 34:8-12).*

The above paragraph could describe what Ibzan accomplished, though not with Shechem but with other Israelite clans. It is as though Ibzan is providing a resolution to the hopes expressed in Zebulun and a rectification to the Dinah narrative.

The town of Bethlehem's name also suggests marital and domestic bliss. Its root words are *beit* (dwelling) and *lehem* (bread). The staff of life in ancient times, *lehem* means not only bread in particular but food and sustenance, the warmth of hearth and home in general. Hence Bethlehem is also an appropriate alternative expression for Zebulun (dwelling), fulfilling Leah's hopes.

#### NOTES

1. Abraham Shoshana, *The Book of Judges: A New Traditional Commentary* (Jerusalem: Ofeq Institute, 1988) p. 181.
2. Barry G. Webb, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012) p. 344. The same approach is adopted by Yehudah Elitzur in *Da'at Mikra – Sefer Shofetim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1993) p. 134.
3. Yaira Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) p. 151, note 45. See also Gregory Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges* (Leiden: Brill, 2006) p. 242.
4. Barry G. Webb, op. cit., *ibid*.