

SHIBBOLETHS¹

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh
AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Matins
on the 20th Sunday after Trinity, 13 October 2024**

This sermon is about shibboleths; customs or traditions, usually a choice of phrasing or single word, that distinguishes one group of people from another.² The term comes from the tragic story of Jephthah. The book of Judges tells us that he was from Gilead, an area east of the Jordan and now in the Kingdom of Jordan. Moses allocated the area to the tribes of Gad, Reuben and the eastern half of Manasseh.³ The region was bordered by the kingdoms of Ammon and Moab. The capital of Ammon is the site of the now Jordanian capital, Amman. Our reading today is set in one of the Ammonite attempts to expand into Gilead.

Jephthah's father was called Gilead,⁴ but it is more probable that he is unnamed and identified only by the region of his birth. His mother was a prostitute. He was apparently acknowledged by his father because, when Gilead died, Jephthah's half-brothers ejected him from the family. He fled to the "land of Tob" to the east of Gilead and in Ammon. There he became renowned as the warlike leader of an outlaw band.

When the Ammonites declared war on Israel and attacked Gilead, its elders called Jephthah home. When negotiations failed and war became imminent, Jephthah vowed to God that, if he was successful in battle, he would, on his return, make a burnt offering of the person who came out of his house to greet him. He was successful and, when he approached his house, he was greeted by his daughter, his only child. He ultimately sacrificed her as he had promised.

As Laura Smit⁵ has commented, the book of Judges describes a downward spiral in the life of the Hebrews. They are shown to depart

¹ Readings: Judges 12:1-6; Galatians 3:23-29

² [Shibboleth - Wikipedia](#)

³ Deuteronomy 3:13, Numbers 32:33-42

⁴ Judges 11

⁵ Laura A Smit and Stephen E Fowl, *Judges & Ruth*, Brazo Press, 2018, Chapter 9

from the ways set out by Moses, particularly in following other gods. Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter shows how, while he was away, he had followed practices of Chemosh, the Ammonite god associated with child sacrifice, a practice forbidden to the Jews.⁶ In effect, he made a bargain with God, as though God was a character in this world, with whom one could do deals. Honour made him keep his promise, even though the Mosaic law said that he could have made an animal sacrifice instead.⁷

One of the consequences of Jephthah's success against Ammon was a form of civil war with the tribe of Ephraim, which clearly wanted part of the action but was defeated by Gilead. This is today's reading. Since both Gilead and Ephraim were Jewish tribes, speaking the same language, how could the victors identify the defeated as they sought to cross the river on the way home? They found an answer by exploiting small differences in pronunciation. The word "shibboleth" means either "an ear of wheat or rye" or a "flood or torrent". Its pronunciation in the two dialects separated the parties.

The word entered the English language through John Wycliffe's 1382 English translation of the Bible.⁸ It is now used to refer to signals that allow differences between groups to be identified.

Shibboleths can have a positive side. Belonging to a supporting and accepting community is an important part of living well. We know that in our community of St James. We recognise each other through subtle signs. When a visitor appears, we can easily determine how familiar they are with our liturgy, we can detect whether they feel at home, whether they are of us. We do not need to reassure them, they will

⁶ Deuteronomy 18:9-14

⁷ Leviticus 5:4-6; 27:1-8

⁸ And the men of Galaad ocupieden the forthis of Jordan, bi whiche Effraym schulden turne ayen. And
12:5 whanne a man fleyng of the noumbre of Effraym hadde come to tho forthis, and hadde seid, Y biseche,
that thou suffre me passe; men of Galaad seiden to hym, Whether thou art a man of Effraym? And
whanne he seide, Y am not,

12:6 thei axiden hym, Seie thou therfor Sebolech, `whiche is interpretid, `an eer of corn. Which answeride,
Thebolech, and myyte not bryng forth an eer of corn bi the same lettre. And anoon thei strangeliden
hym takun in thilke passyng of Jordan; and two and fourti thousynde of Effraym felden down in that
tyme.

[John Wycliffe Bible 1382 Textus Receptus Bibles](#)

know. This is not to say that we do not need to welcome them; it is just that they already know that they are at home.

There are those who do not want to belong to our community. If they arrive here, they can use similar signs to know that they should find another faith home. We do not need to be unfriendly or hostile, they will know. It is not that we should or do reject them; it is just that they already know that this is not their home. In that sense, shibboleths can oil the wheels of social life.

What is true of us is true in many other places. The real issue, however, is not social lubrication, it is power. That, of course, is the lesson of Jephthah. He and his men used shibboleth to determine who to kill, so that their victory would be complete. It is a short step from identifying people to rejecting them. That is the principal use of shibboleths.

We do not need to look very far to see shibboleths in action. They lie behind the so-called “cancel culture”, where a single item is used to determine a person’s acceptability in public life or various social circles. Sometimes the disqualifying events are old, and the person may have moved on or changed their mind. Possibly the shibboleth may be eliminated by an apology, but a stain once applied is not easily removed.

This is not to say that persons should not be responsible for their actions. It is to ask whether shorthand identifiers should be used so frequently in complex situations. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East highlights how powerful our words can be. The division between criticism of Hamas and Hezbollah and islamophobia may seem paper thin, as does the division between criticism of the State of Israel and antisemitism.

We should not imagine that the negative use of shibboleths is something that others do but is foreign to us in the church. We have no such immunity. The relatively recent changes in thinking about sexuality have turned what might once have seemed to be a question of ethics or discipline, or a difference of biblical interpretation, into a distinguishing identifier of the “true Christian”.

In an online blog, Scott Hozee commented on a 2018 lecture by Rowan Williams.⁹ In this lecture, Williams spoke about how preachers should be careful of the language that they use. Hozee summarised Williams as saying:

We set up a de facto shibboleth. By how we talk about God or Jesus or the wider issues of the day, we may subtly send the message “If you do not think thus-and-so about these matters, you have no place here.” Again, we may do this inadvertently or sometimes with malice aforethought. Either way, such a use of words will never be conducive to an inclusive community where we can help challenge each other to be better, more Christ-like, more thoughtful.

We can also do this by characterising ourselves always in the same way: always as victims; always innocent; always correct; always strong. We know that, while we do occupy those categories, we do not do so all the time. The light is not always with us and the darkness elsewhere.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul warned them about the divisions to which they were subject:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.¹⁰

Kathryn Greene-McCreight notes that Paul here has three couplets of which the first two are binary, *A or B*. The first couplet, Jew or Greek, refers to a current dispute in the young church, the second, slave or free, refers to the local social context. The third couplet, male *and* female, is not binary and refers not to gender but to the shared created identity of everyone in their community.¹¹ This analysis alerts us to the need to identify the chief divisors in our own community, which will not be the same as those in Galatia. That requires reflection on our internal

⁹ [Watching What We Say - The Reformed Journal Blog](#)

¹⁰ Galatians 3:28

¹¹ Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Galatians*, Brazos Theological commentary on the Bible, Brazos, 2023, pp. 90=91

disputes, on how we react to the divisions in our society, and how we acknowledge our common created identity.

Beware the shibboleths!