

A Pass at the River Jordan: You Say 'Tomato, I say To-Mah-To'

The following Biblical account is from the first seven verses of the twelfth Chapter of Judges. It is the source material for the familiar Masonic story as told by the Senior Deacon as he conducts a brother Fellowcraft on his way to the Middle Chamber.

Then the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the people of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down upon you with fire!"

And Jephthah said to them, "My people and I were in a great struggle with the people of Ammon; and when I called you, you did not deliver me out of their hands. So when I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the people of Ammon; and the LORD delivered them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?"



Now Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. And the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim. The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites arrived. And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No," then they would say to him, "Then say, 'Shibboleth'!" (תלבוש) And he would say, "Sibboleth," (תלבוס) for he could not pronounce the word right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan. There fell at that time forty and two thousand Ephraimites.

I raise a point for you to consider: The chances that forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at the passages of the Jordan is highly unlikely; forty, *plus* two thousand, is generally considered to be a much more likely figure. At the very least the words are open to either interpretation, and I'm sure have resulted in lots of questions about the way those words are presented in our ritual. To borrow another phrase... 'What means this confusion?'

Mispronunciation of a password, marking the user as true enemy, is a device used several times since Sibboleth betrayed the Ephraimites. On November 2, 1002, Saxons used *Chichester Church* as a test word; if pronounced softly, the speaker was a Saxon and spared; if hard, he was a Dane and killed. Then in 1282 as the French were massacred by Sicilians; the test was the word for dried peas. One pronouncing it *checkaree* satisfied the soldiers that he was a Sicilian; if he said *siseri*, he was known to be a Frenchman and was quickly dispatched.

In 1840 the Egyptians returned across the Jordan from a campaign to drive the Turks from their country. Resentful at being forced to help Egyptians, the Syrian Army seized some of the Jordan crossings and asked those who attempted to cross to pronounce the word for Camel: *Jamel*. The Egyptian language has no soft J sound, so when they answered *Gamel*, like their prototypes among the Ephraimites, they were slain at the passage of the river Jordan. History records yet another time a test word was used at the Jordan. In the great world war, the Turks were met at the fords by the Syrians who demanded of those who would pass that they pronounce the Syrian word for onion. Those who said *buzzel* passed safely; those who said *bussel* were immediately killed.

Shibboleth is a word of many meanings, both Masonically and Biblically. In my research for this Living Stone I consulted a friend who is a Rabbi. He accessed the Hebrew Bible for the meaning of the word, with the following interesting results:

Shibboleth appears in Zacharias 4:12, and is translated as *Branch*. In Isaiah 27:12, the translation is: *Channel*. From Genesis 41, Ruth 2, and Job 24 the translation is *Corn, or Ears of Corn*. And finally from Psalms 69 it comes to mean a *Water Flood*.



According to a modern dictionary shibboleth means ‘...a test word or pet phrase of a party; a watchword’. In my research I found this example: ‘Opposition to internal improvements became a Democratic shibboleth’ (that’s a quote from Harpers Monthly, July, 1892). Masonically, Shibboleth means a *stream of flowing water*, and *corn, or a shock of wheat*; and Masons around the world today recognize all three as emblems of plenty.

It is quite human to see our own ideas as correct and the other fellows as wrong. South Carolina ritual, Mackey’s home state, uses the word *waterfall*, Iowa, Colorado, and Virginia among others, use the word *Waterford*. So, you as a seeker of Light in your Masonic journey, must judge which is correct by argument rather than by weight of authority that is attached to such names as Mackey, Hunt, or Evans. Then again, I suppose it comes down to what the Grand Lodge Committee on Work ritualists have to say on the matter. So, there’s more to it than just calling it a tomato, or a ‘to- mah-to’.



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Sources: The author's research, with portions adapted from:
Volume 12, No.12 of the series, Short Talk Bulletin
Mackey's Encyclopedia, Vol. 3
Grand Lodge of Iowa: Masonic Readings-1924
The Holy Bible, King James, and Temple editions