

Notes on Judges

2024 Edition
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Introduction

TITLE

The title of this book in the Hebrew Bible is *Shophetim* (lit. "Judges"). The English title, "Judges," comes to us from the Latin translation (Vulgate), which the Greek translation (Septuagint) influenced. In all four languages, the title means "judges." This title is somewhat misleading, however, because most English-speaking people associate the modern concept of a judge with Israel's judges. As we shall see, judges then were very different from judges now. The book received its name from its principal characters, as the Book of Joshua did.

The judge in Israel was not a new office during the period of history that this book records. Moses had ordered the people to appoint judges in every Israelite town to settle civil disputes (Deut. 16:18). In addition, there was to be a "chief justice" at the tabernacle who would, with the high priest, help settle cases too difficult for the local judges (Deut. 17:9). Evidently there were several judges at the tabernacle who served jointly as Israel's "Supreme Court" (Deut. 19:17).

When Joshua died, God did not appoint a person to succeed him as the military and political leader of the entire nation of Israel. Instead, each tribe was to proceed to conquer and occupy its allotted territory. As the need arose, God raised up several different individuals who were judges, in various parts of Israel at various times, to lead segments of the Israelites against local enemies. In the broadest sense, the Hebrew word *shophet*, translated "judge," means "bringer of justice." The word was used in ancient Carthage and Ugarit to describe civil magistrates.¹

¹Charles F. Pfeiffer, "Judges," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 233.

The heroic judges of this book were like a mixture of a mayor, a marshal, a prophet, and a general. God endowed them with certain qualities and identified them in various ways, as being those He had chosen to lead His people. This leadership sometimes involved military command, but not always. As God had raised up Moses and Joshua, and as He would later raise up David (1 Sam. 16:13), so He raised up the judges. He evidently raised them up from eight of the tribes—all but Reuben, Simeon, Gad, and Asher, as recorded in Judges and 1 Samuel.¹

The writer also described Yahweh as a "Judge" in Judges ("may the LORD, the Judge, judge today," 11:27).² This points out the fact that the Israelite judges were God's agents in Israel—who judged under His authority—at this period in the nation's history.

"Though the judge enjoyed great prestige, he was in no sense a king. His authority was neither absolute, nor permanent, nor in any case hereditary; it rested solely in those personal qualities (the *charisma*) that gave evidence that he was the man of Yahweh's spirit. It was a type of authority perfectly expressive of the faith and constitution of early Israel: the God-King's direct leadership of his people through his spirit-designated representative."³

Though Bright wrote, as quoted above, that "the judge ... was in no sense a king," he wrote elsewhere that God's endowment of the judges with His Spirit "well represented the primitive theocracy of Israel; it was the direct rule of God over his people through his designated representative."⁴ Thus the judges exercised a kingly function, under Yahweh's sovereign authority over Israel, that was similar to that of Moses, Joshua, Saul, David, and David's successors.

"They [Israel's judges] had no power to make laws; for these were given by God; nor to explain them, for that was the province of the priests—but they were officially upholders of

¹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 241.

²Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from *The New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

³John Bright, *A History of Israel*, pp. 144-45.

⁴Idem, *The Kingdom of God*, p. 32.

the law, defenders of religion, avengers of all crimes, particularly of idolatry and its attendant vices."¹

"The judges were by no means men of identical character. Some (e.g., Gideon) rose to their task at the behest of a profound experience of divine vocation; one (Jephthah) was no better than a bandit who knew how to strike a canny bargain; one (Samson) was an engaging rogue whose fabulous strength and bawdy pranks became legendary. None, so far as we know, ever led a united Israel into battle. All, however, seem to have had this in common: they were men who, stepping to the fore in times of danger, by virtue only of those personal qualities (*charisma*) which gave evidence to their fellows that Yahweh's spirit was upon them, rallied the clans against the foe."²

William Wallace was such a figure in Scottish history.

Judges is the second book of the Former Prophets section of the Hebrew Bible. The fact that the Hebrews placed this book in this section of their canon is significant. It demonstrates that they recognized it as God's selective history of the period that was designed to teach spiritual lessons—through divine revelation—more than simply to record historical facts. God revealed Himself through the events of life (providence) and history, as well as through the messages of the prophets.

DATE AND WRITER

Internal references help us locate the approximate date of composition of this book. The clause, "In those days there was no king in Israel" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), suggests that someone wrote Judges during the monarchical period that followed the period of rule by judges (the so-called amphictyony, a term used by the Greeks to describe their leagues of city-states³). Someone probably wrote it after 1051 B.C., when Saul became king. However, at the time of writing, Jerusalem was still under Jebusite

¹Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 186.

²Bright, *A History ...*, pp. 156.

³Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, p. 193.

control (1:21). David captured Jerusalem about 1004 B.C. Therefore, the writing of Judges must date between 1051 and 1004 B.C.

The phrase "to this day," which occurs repeatedly in the book (1:21, 26; 6:24; 10:4; 15:19; 18:12), indicates that the conditions described could not have occurred too far in the past from the time of writing. (The same phrase occurs in Joshua: 4:9; 5:9; 6:25; 7:26; 8:28-29; 9:27; 10:27; 13:13; 14:14; 15:63; 16:10.)

Jewish tradition suggests that Samuel wrote Judges. This was the opinion of the writers of the Talmud, the collection of Jewish commentaries on revealed Scripture, that began very early in Israel's history. Samuel is a likely writer because of his major role in Israel during the later period of the judges. Samuel's ministry began about 1090 B.C., and apparently ended just a few years before Saul's death (ca. 1021 B.C.). If Samuel did write Judges, he probably did so between 1051 and about 1021 B.C.¹

SCOPE

In contrast to Joshua, which spans only about 35 years of Israel's history, Judges covers a much longer period of time. The book opens shortly after the death of Joshua (1:1). God did not give us sufficient information to enable us to fix the precise date of Joshua's death. Leon Wood figured that he died about 1390 B.C.² Eugene Merrill calculated his death at about 1366 B.C.³ The latest event the writer of Judges recorded is probably the death of Samson (16:30-31). Wood believed Samson died about 1055 B.C.,⁴ and Merrill wrote that he died near 1084 B.C.⁵ Consequently the Book of Judges records about 300 years of Israel's history (cf. 11:26). This is about 30 percent of the total history of the nation of Israel covered in the Old Testament—from about 1446 B.C., the probable date of the Exodus and

¹See Brian N. Peterson, "Could Abiathar the Priest be the Author of Judges?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170:680 (October-December 2013):432-52. See also Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 135-36, for further discussion of authorship.

²Leon J. Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, p. 11.

³Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 225.

⁴Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, pp. 14, 303.

⁵Merrill, p. 178.

the formation of Israel as a nation, to 430 B.C., the last recorded events in Israel in the Old Testament.

According to Wood's figures, the book would span 335 years, and according to Merrill's, 282 years. The period of rule by the judges, however, extended well beyond the events that Judges recorded: all the way to Saul's coronation in 1050 or 1051 B.C. Wood and Merrill agreed on this date, which Edwin Thiele had earlier established.¹ This date assumes that Saul reigned 40 years (Acts 13:21), David reigned 40 years (2 Sam. 2:11; 5:5), Solomon reigned 40 years (1 Kings 11:42), and the kingdom split in 931 B.C. According to Wood's chronology, this was five years beyond the end of Judges, and according to Merrill's, it was 33 years beyond.²

The judgeships (rulership tenures) of some of the individual judges apparently overlapped. Some ruled in one area of Israel at the same time that one or more others ruled elsewhere, in some cases. The Book of Judges does not record the ministries of all of Israel's judges. Eli and Samuel were also judges, though not even mentioned in the Book of Judges, whose work the writer of 1 Samuel recorded. Only the particular judges whom the divine Author selected for inclusion appear in this book. Each one is spiritually instructive for the reader.³

PURPOSE

Arthur Cundall suggested that one of the purposes of Judges may have been to provide apologetic justification for Israel's monarchy.⁴ William

¹Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, p. 11; Merrill, p. 192; Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, pp. 51-52.

²See also Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pp. 276-77; the "Chronological Chart" in Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, pp. 409-11; and the "Time Chart" in John J. Davis, in *A History of Israel*, p. 16; J. H. John Peet, "The Chronology of the Judges—Some Thoughts," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 9:1-2 (1982-83):161-81; Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, pp. 59-63; Andrew E. Steinmann, "The Mysterious Numbers of the Book of Judges," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48:3 (September 2005):491-500; and the "Biblical Chronology of the Middle Israelite Period," from Daiqing Apollos Yuan, "A Proposed Chronology for Judges" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2006), p. 56, which is reproduced as an Appendix at the end of these notes.

³See Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 34-53, for a detailed study of the chronological framework of Judges.

⁴Arthur Cundall, "Judges—An Apology for the Monarchy," *Expository Times* 81 (October 1969-September 1970):178-81.

Dumbrell believed its purpose was primarily to show the sovereign grace of God in preserving Israel in spite of Israel.¹ Leon Wood wrote that its primary purpose was to show why Israel did not experience God's promised blessings.² Herbert Wolf believed the primary purpose was to show that Israel's spiritual condition determined its political and material situation.³ Daniel Block argued that it was to reveal the Canaanization of Israel in the pre-monarchic period of Israel's history.⁴ David Howard wrote that the purpose was "to show the consequences of disobedience to God and to point the way to a king, who, if he were righteous, would lead the people to God."⁵ Robert Chisholm believed that there are three purposes: to defend Yahweh's reputation in view of Israel's failures, to warn the Israelites of the danger of assimilation to their environment, and to demonstrate Israel's need for competent, godly leadership.⁶ All of these explanations seem to me to be in harmony with what the book records.

"The book of Judges deals with leadership, obedience, and politics. At least one other subject must join the list—God."⁷

OUTLINE

- I. The reason for Israel's apostasy 1:1—3:6
 - A. Hostilities between the Israelites and the Canaanites after Joshua's death 1:1—2:5
 1. Initial successes and failures ch. 1

¹William Dumbrell, "'In Those Days There Was No King in Israel; Every Man Did What Was Right in His Own Eyes.' The Purpose of the Book of Judges Reconsidered," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983):30-31. Cf. Robert Boling, *Judges*, p. 293; and Alvin S. Lawhead, "Grace in the Book of Judges," *Preacher's Magazine* 58:3 (March-May 1983):25-27.

²Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, p. 135.

³Herbert Wolf, "Judges," in *Deuteronomy-2 Samuel*, vol. 3 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 378.

⁴Block, p. 58. See also idem, "The Period of the Judges: Religious Disintegration under Tribal Rule," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, pp. 39-58.

⁵David M. Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, p. 101. See also *The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 396.

⁶Chisholm, pp. 58-62.

⁷Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. lxxx.

2. The announcement of God's discipline 2:1-5
- B. Israel's conduct toward Yahweh and Yahweh's treatment of Israel in the period of the judges 2:6—3:6
 1. Review of Joshua's era 2:6-10
 2. The pattern of history during the judges' era 2:11-23
 3. God's purposes with Israel 3:1-6
- II. The record of Israel's apostasy 3:7—16:31
 - A. The first apostasy 3:7-11
 - B. The second apostasy 3:12-31
 1. Oppression under the Moabites and deliverance through Ehud 3:12-30
 2. Oppression under the Philistines and deliverance through Shamgar 3:31
 - C. The third apostasy chs. 4—5
 1. The victory over Jabin and Sisera ch. 4
 2. Deborah's song of victory ch. 5
 - D. The fourth apostasy 6:1—10:5
 1. The story of Gideon 6:1—8:32
 2. Israel's departure from Yahweh 8:33-35
 3. The story of Abimelech ch. 9
 4. The judgeships of Tola and Jair 10:1-5
 - E. The fifth apostasy 10:6—12:15
 1. Renewed oppression 10:6-7
 2. Oppression under the Ammonites 10:8-18
 3. Deliverance through Jephthah 11:1—12:7
 4. The judgeships of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon 12:8-15
 - F. The sixth apostasy chs. 13—16
 1. Samson's birth ch. 13
 2. Samson's intended marriage to the Timnite ch. 14
 3. Samson's vengeance on the Philistines ch. 15

- 4. Samson's final fatal victory ch. 16
- III. The results of Israel's apostasy ch. 17—21
 - A. The idolatry of Micah and the Danites ch. 17—18
 - 1. The idolatry of Micah ch. 17
 - 2. The apostasy of the Danites ch. 18
 - B. The immorality of Gibeah and the Benjamites chs. 19—21
 - 1. The atrocity in Gibeah ch. 19
 - 2. The civil war in Israel ch. 20
 - 3. The preservation of Benjamin ch. 21

MESSAGE

Joshua reveals that victory, success, and progress result when God's people trust and obey Him consistently. Judges shows that defeat, failure, and retrogression follow when they fail to trust and obey consistently. In this respect, Joshua and Judges are like two sides of one coin. The former is a positive lesson (heads) and the latter a negative one (tails).

"This book is ... quite negative: it begins bleakly, continues darkly, and ends horribly."¹

Judges portrays the deterioration of the nation of Israel: what caused it, the course it followed, and the consequences that resulted. The Israelites failed because their hearts turned from Yahweh, and then their heads forsook His covenant.

"The writer writes throughout from a prophet's point of view. He applies the standard of the law to the spirit of the age by which the nation was influenced as a whole, and pronounces a stern and severe sentence upon all deviations from the path of rectitude set before it in the law."²

¹Abraham Kuruvilla, *Judges*, p. 6.

²C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 243.

We could visualize the structure of the book as a descending spiral. Israel departed from God, fell under His discipline, repented, experienced deliverance from her oppressors, dedicated herself anew to Yahweh, experienced His blessing, and then apostatized again. In each cycle, Israel seems to have sunk lower than she had been previously, even though each cycle included a spiritual revival.

Judges reveals the course and process by which Israel deteriorated as a nation. The same process takes place on the personal level as well as on the national level, but it is easier to observe on the national level in Judges.

The root cause of Israel's deterioration was religious apostasy. The Israelites turned away from God. They did not drive out the Canaanites as God had commanded (1:21, 27-33). Instead, they made covenants with them (2:1-3). Rather than destroying the pagan altars, the Israelites served idols and forsook the LORD (2:11-12, 17, 19).

Their apostasy began with toleration of things that God had condemned and prohibited. In time, the Israelites began to admire these things. Finally, they embraced them. The story of Micah and the Danites (chs. 17—18) is a typical example of the religious apostasy in Israel at this time.

Religious apostasy led to political disorganization in Israel. Shortly after Israel departed from God, it began to come apart as a nation. The people stopped working together toward their God-given goal of possessing the entire land, and they began fighting with one another instead. At the beginning of the amphictyony (rule by judges), the tribes were fairly united, but by the end of this period of Israel's history, anarchy prevailed (21:25).

The government in Israel deteriorated from theocracy (rule by God)—to anarchy (no rule or government). Israel became fragmented, weak, and unable to withstand her enemies. This is ironic, because after Joshua died, Israel was in position to begin to enjoy the benefits of the theocracy in the land for the first time! Until Judges opens, God was preparing Israel to enjoy the theocracy in the land.

There are several examples of tribal jealousies in Judges (e.g., 8:1-3; 12:1-6), but the worst example of political disorganization is the vignette that concludes the book. This was the Israelites' civil war, in which 11 of the tribes almost annihilated the twelfth: Benjamin (chs. 20—21). Instead of utterly destroying the Canaanites, God's people had allowed them to live

among them, while the Israelite tribes proceeded to destroy one another. This pattern is observable in modern life too. When Christians stop carrying out their God-given task (cf. Matt. 28:19-20), they often become critical of one another and fight with one another.

Another evidence of Israel's deterioration as a nation was social chaos.

Three characteristics marked the social chaos in Israel during the period of the judges: Lawlessness characterized national life. People were afraid to go out in public, and traveled the byways rather than the highways of the land (5:6). People committed violent crimes without fear of punishment (ch. 19). Blindness (spiritual and mental) also characterized the people. They were blind to what was happening in their midst, namely, God using discipline after apostasy to bring them to repentance and deliverance. They were also blind to God's dealings with their ancestors in the past. Third, immorality marked Israel's social life. Even Samson, one of the judges, was a victim of this cancer.

The story of the Levite and his concubine, who visited the town of Gibeah (ch. 19), is a slice of life out of the period of the judges that shows the immorality that characterized Israel's social life. The behavior demonstrated in this story was the fruit of departure from God. The very sins that had previously characterized the wicked men of Sodom (Gen. 19), now marked God's people! Chapter 19 comprises a third part of the appendix to the book.

God revealed this process of deterioration to warn all people in every age. Spiritual apostasy leads to political disorganization and social chaos. Social and governmental evils rise out of spiritual conditions. When the Israelites repented and rededicated themselves to God, He brought political deliverance and restored social order. Therefore, it is very important to deal with the spiritual issues that lie at the root of other problems in modern life. Christians who deal with these issues are to be commended and encouraged.

Judges not only reveals what causes deterioration, but it also clarifies the steps to restoration. As already mentioned, Israel's history during this period resembles a downward spiral. The general trend was downward. Nevertheless, in Judges, there were six revivals of the peoples' faith in God and commitment to Him. These revivals cycled on and off in Israel's history at this time.

Israel began from a privileged position of divine blessing.

In time, the people apostatized by turning away from God—and His covenant—to the gods and practices of the Canaanites.

To bring them back to Himself, God disciplined His people by allowing them to fall under the control and domination of their enemies. Since Israel chose to bow down to idols, God allowed the Canaanite idolaters to bend her over in bondage. The Israelites tolerated the Canaanites, but God made the Canaanites intolerant of them. The people with the birthright to the land, namely, the Israelites whom God had granted the land, had to hide in caves and among the rocks, fearing to show themselves (6:2)! God disciplined them severely for their apostasy.

In Joshua, God dealt with sin primarily among the Canaanites, but in Judges, He dealt with it primarily among the Israelites. However, God's discipline was always remedial. God designed it to bring the Israelites back to a consciousness of their sin and their need for God.

When the Israelites cried out to Yahweh in repentance, God heard their cry and delivered them mercifully. I mean "repentance" in the general sense of turning to God, not in the specific sense of cleaning up the life.¹ God did not give deliverance as a reward the people had earned, but out of grace in response to their helpless cry.

When they truly repented, God delivered them by raising up a judge. In each case, deliverance came at the right moment. It always came by the right instrument. God raised up the right, perfectly appropriate person to meet the hopeless, disastrous situation in each case. In almost every case, God used one person, either a man or a woman. Judges reveals how remarkably God works through all types of different individuals to accomplish His purposes. He raised up each unique judge, whom He had individually prepared, for the needs of his or her time and place. Each judge was just right for his or her mission.

In almost every case, God used one single individual to change the whole course of history in Israel. A majority was not required. God can still use

¹See JoAnna Hoyt, "Reassessing Repentance in Judges," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:674 (April-June 2012):143-58.

single individuals to change the whole course of history, as He used these judges.

As a result of this deliverance, the people rededicated themselves anew to Yahweh. Spiritual revival was the result of God's physical deliverance.

The people then began to enjoy God's blessing again. God gave them rest from the oppression of their enemies. Arthur Cundall labeled these stages "sin, servitude, supplication, and salvation."¹ G. Campbell Morgan called them "declension, discipline, and deliverance."²

God's methods are the same today as they were in the days of the judges. The fact that the writer recorded the repetition of this cycle of events six times in Judges points to its timeless quality and its universality.

"If ever there were history with a purpose it is here."³

I would state the message of the Book of Judges, therefore, as follows: Apostasy leads to disorganization and chaos, but repentance results in deliverance and blessing. This is true both nationally and personally.⁴

¹Arthur Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth* (Cundall wrote the section on Judges), p. 46.

²G. Campbell Morgan, *An Exposition of the Whole Bible*, p. 103.

³Charles L. Feinberg, "Notes on the Book of Judges," (unpublished class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, n.d.), p. 2.

⁴Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:117-30.

Exposition

I. THE REASONS FOR ISRAEL'S APOSTASY 1:1—3:6

The first major section in the book (1:1—3:6) explains very clearly why the period of the judges was a dark chapter in Israel's history. God revealed the reasons for Israel's apostasy and consequent national problems in terms too clear to miss.

The years immediately following Joshua's death saw a transition from success to failure. The events of this period set the scene for the amphictyony (rule by judges), and provide a background for the main part of the book (3:7—16:31).

"The prologue [1:1—3:6] is by way of *explanation*. The epilogue [chs. 17—21] is by way of *illustration*."¹

"The Book of Judges may be viewed as having a two-part introduction (1:1—2:5 and 2:6—3:6) and a two-part epilogue (17:1—18:31 and 19:1—21:25). Parallel ideas and motifs link the first introduction (1:1—2:5) with the second epilogue (19:1—21:25), and in like manner the second introduction (2:6—3:6) with the first epilogue (17:1—18:31)."²

Kenneth Hanna charted the book as containing three parts: the causes (chs. 1—2), the conditions (chs. 3—16), and the consequences (chs. 17—21) of Israel's apostasy. In the introduction, the seeds that the Israelites sowed are identified: incomplete obedience led to intermarriage, which led to idolatry. In the conclusion, the harvest that the Israelites reaped is identified: idolatry (chs. 17—18) led to immorality (ch. 19), which led to anarchy (chs. 20—21).³

¹J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 2:17.

²J. Paul Tanner, "The Gideon Narrative as the Focal Point of Judges," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:594 (April-June 1992):149.

³Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Moses to Malachi*, pp. 117, 126.

A. HOSTILITIES BETWEEN THE ISRAELITES AND THE CANAANITES FOLLOWING JOSHUA'S DEATH 1:1—2:5

"... archaeology shows that the superpowers (Babylonia, Assyria, the Hittites, and Egypt) were relatively weak during the days of the judges and the monarchy. Internal affairs kept them busy at home. This, humanly speaking, made possible the survival of the nation of Israel. The smaller, local enemies were trouble enough for her armies."¹

1. Initial successes and failures ch. 1

The attitude of the Israelites toward the Canaanites changed in the years following Joshua's death: They weakened.

The leadership of Judah 1:1-21

1:1 The Book of Judges begins with a conjunction translated "now" or "and." God intended Judges to continue the narrative of Israel's history where the Book of Joshua ended (cf. Josh. 1:1). This verse provides a heading for the whole Book of Judges, with the actual events following Joshua's death apparently not being narrated until after the record of his death in 2:8. This view is based on the fact that some of the events in 1:1—2:5, such as Caleb's exploits, were first recorded in Joshua 14—15, suggesting that at least some of the opening verses of Judges constitute a recounting of events that took place before Joshua's death.

Another, second view of the connection between 1:1—2:5 and the death of Joshua, is that all of 1:1—2:5 records events after Joshua's death, and 2:6 gives a recapitulation of his death.

A third view is that 1:1—2:5 begins after Joshua's death, but what happens after 1:9 (1:10—2:5), like a flashback, occurred before his death.²

¹Arthur H. Lewis, *Judges and Ruth*, p. 13.

²See F. Duane Lindsey, "Judges," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 376.

In any event, Judges begins as Joshua began: with a reference to the death of Israel's former leader—to Moses' death in Joshua 1:1, and to Joshua's death here. The difference is that God had appointed Joshua to succeed Moses, but He did not appoint anyone to succeed Joshua.

The Israelites wisely sought God's strategy in proceeding against their foe. They may have done this by consulting the high priest, and requesting his use of the Urim and Thummim (cf. Num. 27:21). Each of the major divisions of 1:1—2:5 opens with a form of the verb *'alah* ("to go up," 1:4, 22; 2:1). This verb also appears in 1:1, 2, and 3.

1:2 The LORD's appointment of Judah as the first tribe to initiate hostility was in harmony with Jacob's prophecy that Judah would be the leader of the tribes (Gen. 49:8-12). Josephus wrote that this revelation came to the Israelites through Phinehas, who had succeeded his father Eleazar as high priest.¹

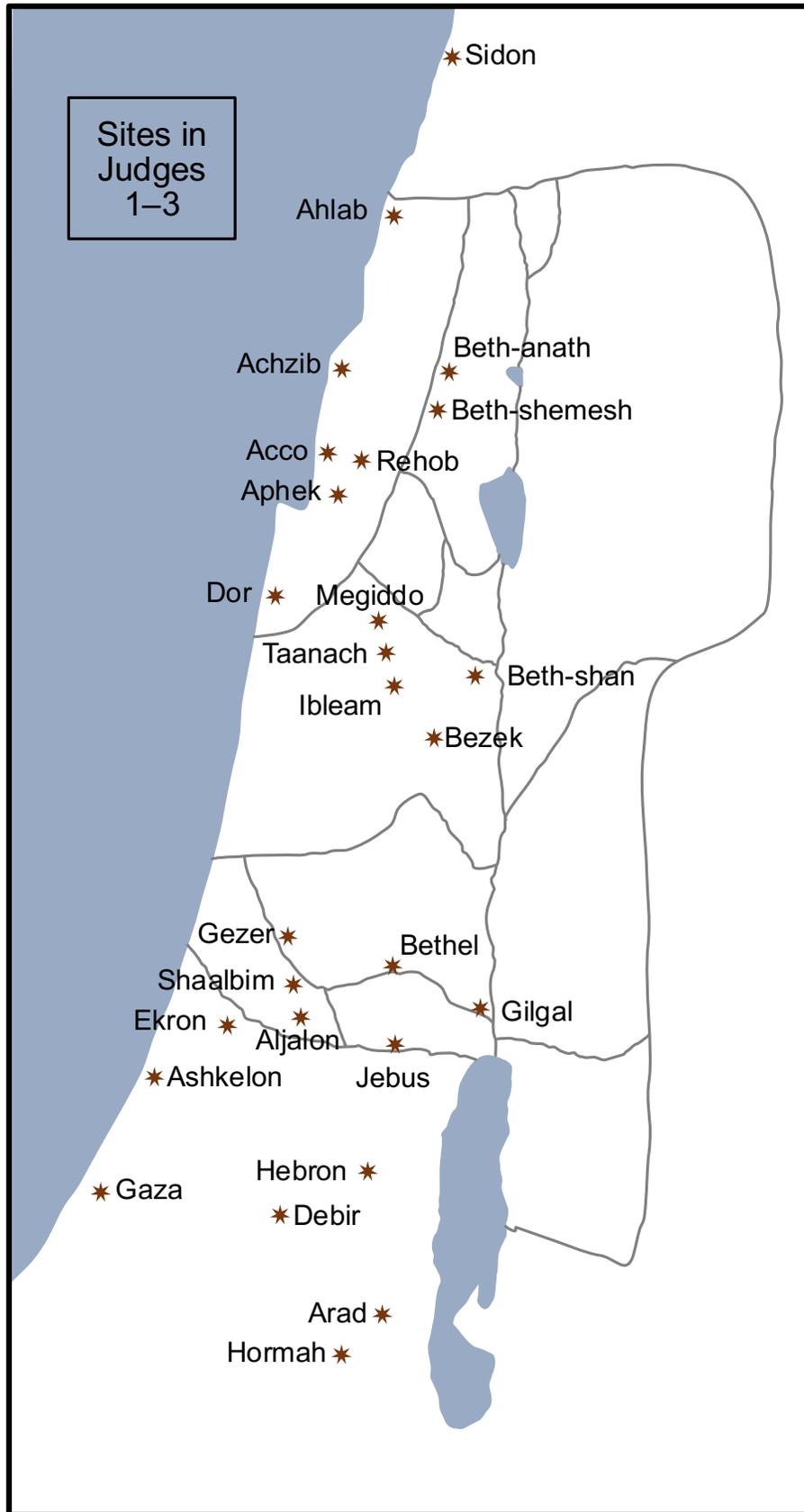
"The opening scene of the book offers so much promise. The theocratic system is still in place. Israel is sensitive to the will of God, and God responds to the overtures of his people. ... By raising the reader's expectations this way the narrator invites us to share the intensity of his own and God's disappointment with his people in the period of settlement. Verses 1-2 throw the remainder of the chapter and the book into sharpest relief."²

1:3 The tribe of Judah naturally and properly, I believe, invited the tribe of Simeon to join in this battle. After all, the Simeonites lived within the territory of Judah, and therefore enjoyed an unusually close relationship with the people of Judah.³

¹Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 5:2:1. This is Jewish tradition but not divine revelation.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 87.

³See Chisholm, p. 121.



1:4 Bezek was obviously a stronghold of the Canaanites and the Perizzites at this time, since the Israelite forces were able to smite them near this town. The Perizzites are believed to have been an aboriginal people of different race from the Canaanites, who settled in Canaan before Abraham arrived there (cf. Gen. 13:7).¹

The Hebrew word *elep* translated "thousand" can also mean "military unit." In 20:10, it refers to a unit of 10 men. Consequently, its meaning here may be 10 military units rather than 10 thousand" soldiers.²

1:5-7 Adoni-bezek (lit. "lord of Bezek") was the title of the king of Bezek (cf. 1 Sam. 11:8-11), rather than his proper name. The modern town's name is Khirbet Ibziq.³ The Israelites probably cut off this man's thumbs so he could not wield a sword, and his big toes so he could not run away, as well as to humiliate him. These were evidently only temporary measures, until they could carry out God's will and slay him. The loss of these digits also made it impossible for him to serve as either a priest or warrior, which were dual functions among many ancient eastern kings.⁴

This king's boast, that he had in similar fashion crippled 70 kings, seems to have been an exaggerated one. Such boasts by warriors were common in the ancient world. Joshua had defeated fewer than 70 kings, and yet in so doing, had subdued the major part of Canaan (cf. Josh. 12). If he had indeed subdued 70 kings, Judah in effect conquered them by conquering Adoni-bezek.⁵ Gathering crumbs under the table like dogs (v. 7; cf. Matt. 15:27) represented "the most shameful treatment and humiliation."⁶ The Judahite soldiers evidently took Adoni-bezek with them to Jerusalem, the site

¹Pfeiffer, p. 234.

²See my note on 20:10.

³Lindsey, p. 378.

⁴Wolf, p. 386.

⁵J. B. Lightfoot, cited by Henry, p. 242.

⁶Keil and Delitzsch, p. 253.

of their next offensive, where he either died from his wounds or was executed.

"The focus on Judah and Jerusalem invites attention to the larger context of the prophetic canon. The humbling of Adoni-bezek, for instance, happens in Jerusalem (1:7). The later humbling of the Judean monarchy will also happen in Jerusalem, suggesting ultimately that God plays no favorites. God wills justice and righteousness, and the failure to embody it will eventually bring any people down."¹

1:8 Even though on this occasion the soldiers of Judah and Simeon captured and burned part of Jerusalem, the Israelites were not able to keep the Jebusites from returning to control their ancient capital (cf. v. 21; 19:11-12; Josh. 15:63).

"The Jebusites were a mixed people who descended from early colonies of Hittites and Amorites in Canaan."²

Jerusalem became Israel's permanent possession years later, when David finally exterminated the Jebusites (2 Sam. 5:6-9). The Israelites' unfaithfulness in subduing the land is one of the major emphases of Judges.³

1:9-10 Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi (v. 10) were evidently the ruling lords of Hebron (lit. "confederacy"), the highest city in elevation in Judah (ca. 3,040 ft.).

"The three names of those killed are Aramaean, suggesting that the city was occupied by tribes related to the people who later had a powerful kingdom with Damascus at [*sic*] its capital."⁴

¹J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, p. 29.

²Lewis, p. 22. See also *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Jebusite," by D. J. Wiseman, pp. 601-2.

³Thomas L. Constable, "A Theology of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 107-8.

⁴Pfeiffer, p. 235.

"These names also appear as Canaanite names in the Ras Shamra Tablets, showing that they fit in the same general period as the time of the judges."¹

The older name of Hebron was Kiriath-arba, meaning "City of Four." This name may have its origin in an alliance of four communities in that area, or possibly from Arba, the father of Anak, who may have been the founder of the town or towns (cf. 1:20; Josh. 14:15; 15:13; 21:11).² The Anakim, giant descendants of Anak, had become proverbially great and fearsome foes (cf. Deut. 9:2). Anak means "men of (long) neck," hence "men of great height."³

1:11-15 Othniel was a bold warrior who followed in the train of his uncle Caleb (cf. 3:9). God later raised him up to be the first of the heroic judges listed in this book (3:7-11).

"In fact, the real hero of Judges is God Himself, who alone remains faithful despite the failings of His people—and even of the judges."⁴

The incident related here is also in Joshua (Josh. 15:15-19), and took place before Joshua died. The writer probably recorded it again, specifically here, because the event was a significant part of the conquest of Judah's inheritance (cf. v. 20), and because it introduces the reader to Israel's first judge.

Caleb rewarded Othniel's bravery by giving him his daughter's hand in marriage. The "blessing" (v. 15) she asked for was the springs of water over which Caleb had authority. These springs watered the area around Debir, Othniel's prize for conquering the town. Being in the Negev, water would have been essential for the people of Debir to flourish.

"Another aspect of 1:11-15 that anticipates the rest of the book of Judges is the prominence of

¹Joseph P Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, p. 141.

²Lindsey, p. 379.

³Pfeiffer, p. 236.

⁴*The Nelson ...*, p. 396.

the female character Achsah. ... [S]he is not just the trinket that her name might suggest ('Achsaah' seems to mean an ornamental anklet or bangle). Rather, she demands 'a blessing' (1:15; NRSV¹ 'present'), and she gets it!

"... the prominence of Achsah also clearly anticipates the major roles that women will play throughout the book of Judges. Like Achsah, several women are portrayed as active and assertive in the public sphere, especially Deborah and Jael (chaps. 4—5). But, as the book of Judges proceeds, the portrayal of women changes considerably. They become not leaders like Achsah, Deborah, and Jael, but rather the victims of abuse. ... The next time a woman is riding on a donkey is in Judges 19:28; and the woman, the Levite's concubine, is a corpse, having been brutally abused, raped, and killed. Thus, by way of the contrast between Achsah and the Levite's concubine, 1:11-15 is yet another way that 1:1—2:5 anticipates the progressive deterioration that characterizes the book of Judges."²

1:16

The "descendants of the Kenite," Jethro (Reuel): "... were probably a branch of the Kenites mentioned in Gen. xv. 19 along with the other tribes of Canaan, which had separated from the other members of its own tribe before the time of Moses and removed to the land of Midian, where Moses met with a hospitable reception from their chief Reguel [Reuel] on his flight from Egypt. These Kenites had accompanied the Israelites to Canaan at the request of Moses (Num. x. 29 sqq.); and when the Israelites advanced into Canaan itself, they had probably remained as nomads in the neighborhood of the Jordan near Jericho [the

¹NRSV stands for *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*.

²McCann, pp. 32-33. See also Kuruvilla, p. 39; and Chisholm, p. 126.

"city of palms," v. 16], without taking part in the wars of Joshua."¹

Caleb was a Kenizzite (Num. 32:12; Josh. 14:6), the Kenizzites being descended from the Edomites (Gen. 36:11, 15, 42; 1 Chron. 1:36, 53). Jethro, on the other hand, was a Kenite (Gen. 15:19), which clan descended from the Midianites (Num. 10:29; Judg. 1:16; 4:11).

1:17-21 The soldiers of Judah and Simeon also conquered Hormah (lit. "devotion" or "destruction"), Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron (vv. 17-18). The valley from which the Israelites could not drive out the Canaanites (v. 19), probably refers to the flat Coastal Plain. This inability was, of course, due to a failure in Israel's trust and obedience (2:1-5; cf. Josh. 1:5-8; 17:16-18).

The reference to iron chariots (v. 19) has caused problems for some readers, since archaeologists have dated the Iron Age as having begun in 1200 B.C., about 150 years after the event recorded here took place. However, the Hittites had mastered the production of iron by 1400 B.C. Evidently the Canaanites and Philistines had iron implements by 1350 B.C. The Iron Age is, after all, a general description of the period during which iron was the most important metal.²

Caleb had driven out the Anakim in Hebron earlier (v. 20; cf. Josh. 15:13-14). The writer probably repeated the account here, as previously explained, in order to fill out, review, and summarize the record of the subjugation of Judah's territory. "Then" (v. 20) can also mean "and." It does not mean that the events of verse 20 followed those of verse 19 in chronological sequence.

Jerusalem (v. 21) was on the border of Judah and Benjamin, but mainly within Benjamin's territory. The Hinnom Valley on the southern edge of the city was the boundary. Even though

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 255. See also Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 97-98.

²See Jacquetta Hawkes, *The First Great Civilizations*, p. 113; V. Gordon Childe, *New Light on the Most Ancient East*, p. 157; Leonard Cottrell, *The Anvil of Civilization*, p. 157; and Volkmar Fritz, "Conquest or Settlement? The Early Iron Age in Palestine," *Biblical Archaeologist* 50:2 (June 1987):84-100.

the soldiers of Judah and Simeon captured Jerusalem, the Benjamites were not able to completely drive out the Jebusites, and therefore could not retain Jerusalem. This was evidently why the writer referred to the Benjamites at this point.

This failure was another significant incident of inadequate trust and obedience (cf. v. 19). It also foreshadowed the Benjamites' role in the final disastrous chapters of the book (chs. 19—21). This verse appears in Joshua 15:63 almost verbatim, though there it is the Judahites who are said to have failed to drive out the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

"In the early period [of Israel's occupation of Canaan], Jerusalem did not strictly belong to either tribe. ... Apparently Judah took the unfortified southwestern hill, while the tribe of Benjamin failed to take the walled city on the eastern hill."¹

"The fact that Israel did not take Jerusalem is confirmed by the Amarna Tablets, which show that the king of Jerusalem remained loyal to the Pharaoh of Egypt."²

One writer summarized the central lesson of Judges as "failure through compromise."³

The activities of the other tribes 1:22-36

1:22-26 The writer described Ephraim and Manasseh jointly as "the house of Joseph" (v. 22). First, in this section, he narrated Ephraim's activity (vv. 22-26). The Ephraimites' special treatment of the man coming out of Bethel, who gave them information, violated God's orders. They should have put him to death, along with the rest of the Bethelites whom they killed. This incomplete obedience is what the writer again emphasized, in this passage, which also alludes to Bethel's

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 382.

²Free, p. 141.

³Baxter, 2:13.

illustrious history (Gen. 28:18-22; 35:1-15; 48:3), and its tragic future (1 Kings 12:25-33; 13:1-19; 2 Kings 23:15-17). According to Charles Pfeiffer, Bethel is "the city mentioned more often in Scripture than any other except Jerusalem."¹ The former name of Bethel ("House of God") was Luz ("Almond" tree).

"According to the Bible, Bethel was destroyed during the early period of the judges (1:23-25), and excavations there in 1924 showed that the town was completely destroyed during that period ..."²

- 1:27-28 Manasseh failed, too, to be strong in faith and trust. Rather than exterminating the Canaanites, as God had commanded, the Israelites made them their servants.
- 1:29 The writer mentioned Ephraim again here, because he was reviewing and summarizing the Israelites' treatment of the Canaanites, as well as the failure of each tribe.
- 1:30-33 The tribes of Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali also failed to drive the Canaanites out of their territories, and instead compromised with these enemies—allowing some of them to live alongside them, and forcing others of them into servitude.
- 1:34-36 The Amorites in the Shephelah (foothills), in the territory of Dan, did not even allow the Danites to occupy the coastal areas of their possession. They forced them to stay in the eastern hills of their territory. Mount Heres (lit. "Sun Mountain") seems to be the equivalent of Beth-shemesh (cf. Josh. 15:10) and Ir-shemesh (Josh. 19:41).³

"One does not have to look far for an explanation of Dan's difficulties in settling its tribal allotment. The International Coastal Highway passed directly through its territory. This meant that any attempt

¹Pfeiffer, p. 236.

²Free, p. 141. On comparisons and contrasts with the fall of Jericho, see Chisholm, pp. 132-33.

³Pfeiffer, p. 237.

to take control of the region automatically cut the main land link between Africa (Egypt) and Asia (Mesopotamia). Local centers and peoples in the area would be expected to resist any Danite offensive action. This is brought out vividly in the first chapter of the book of Judges, which in a few sentences [vv. 34-35] accurately describes this region of valleys (Sorek and Aijalon) and nearby Hill Country (just east of the Aijalon-Eshtaol route)."¹

The Amorites retained domination of a large section of territory in southern Canaan, as far south as Sela (near Petra), a stronghold in the land of Edom (v. 36). Like the earlier reference to the Benjamites' failure (v. 21), this mention of the Danites' weakness anticipates that tribe's tragic role in chapters 17 and 18.

The writer's primary purpose in this chapter is quite clear. It was to relate his selective narrative of Israel's victories and defeats in order to impress the reader with the increasing failure of God's people to drive out their enemies, as the passage unfolds.

"The story as here given reveals that whereas the work began in earnest, it gradually weakened."²

"This pattern of progressive failure is a fitting introduction to the book of Judges, because it anticipates the rest of the book in two ways. First, chapter 1 moves geographically from south to north ... The series of judges, beginning in 3:7-11, is not identical geographically; but it also moves from south to north ... Second, and more important, the increasing failure evident in chapter one anticipates the progressive deterioration that occurs throughout the rest of the book ..."³

"The lesson of Judges 1 is very clear. The people of Israel chose deliberately to obey God only partly. Rather than following the LORD wholeheartedly, they compromised. They

¹James Monson, *The Land Between*, p. 183.

²Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 102.

³McCann, pp. 29-30.

went part way, and that compromise meant inevitable catastrophe."¹

"Thus men cherish and indulge their own corrupt appetites and passions, and therefore God justly leaves them to themselves under the power of their sins, which will be their ruin."²

In the Pentateuch, we read of God preparing the chosen people to live under His theocracy in the Promised Land. In Joshua, we saw Him establishing them in the land, so they could function as a theocracy. In Judges we see Israel, for the first time, in a better position to live under theocratic rule in the land. From the very beginning of Judges, we see that they failed to take advantage of their great privilege to be a unique nation in the world. They failed because they would not trust and obey God consistently and completely. They chose to allow the Canaanites to remain in the land that God wanted them exclusively to occupy.

"God may give many privileges, but He never gives the privilege to *sin*."³

Theocratic rule began to break down as soon as Joshua's generation died out. Consequently, God raised up special judges to act as His spokespersons and ambassadors in the theocracy. Eventually, He replaced them with the kings. The only time in Israel's history when the theocracy functioned as God intended it to was in the later years of Joshua and the early years of the next generation.⁴ The first part of this chapter describes that period.

"Its [the Book of Judges'] primary purpose is to let the readers know why Israel did not experience the blessings that were available."⁵

¹Gary Inrig, *Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay*, p. 18.

²Henry, p. 244.

³Baxter, 2:18.

⁴See Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, pp. 24-27, 45.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 135.

2. The announcement of God's discipline 2:1-5

The events of this pericope tie in directly with those of the previous one. Israel's failure, recorded there, led to God's discipline, announced here.

"The narrator moves from chap. 1 to chap. 2 like a modern preacher moves from text to exposition. The differences here are that the text of the author's sermon derives from events of history, not a printed page, and the interpretation comes from God himself or from his messengers, be they the envoy of Yahweh or the author of the book."¹

The writer seems to have included the statement, "the angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim" (v. 1), in order to connect the angel's appearance here (at Bochim), with His last recorded appearance at Gilgal (Josh. 5:13-15). On that occasion, the angel appeared after the people had consecrated themselves to God. Bochim was probably located somewhere between Bethel and Shiloh.² The angel had promised to lead the Israelites in victory against their enemies. On this occasion, the angel promised that He would not drive out the remaining Canaanites, because Israel had been disobedient to God, specifically to the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Exod. 24:3, 7; Josh. 24:18, 21, 24).

Of the 59 references to "the angel of the LORD" in the Old Testament, 18 (30.5 percent) appear in Judges. He appeared on four separate occasions: in 2:1-5; 5:23; 6:11-24; and 13:1-25. Additionally, the other title, "the angel of God," appears nine times in the Old Testament, and at least three times in Judges: in 6:20 and 13:6 and 9.³

"This messenger, referred to as 'the angel of the Lord,' may have been a prophet, for the word rendered 'angel' may with equal accuracy be rendered messenger. On the other hand it may have been a special divine and angelic personality."⁴

The issue, both at the beginning of the Book of Judges and throughout the book, is whether Israel will be faithful to the covenant. The issue for the reader is similar: whether he or she will worship and serve God alone. God

¹Block, *Judges ...*, p. 78

²Pfeiffer, pp. 237-38.

³See the discussion of this person in Howard, pp. 113-16.

⁴Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 102.

had stated clearly and repeatedly that His people were to destroy or drive out all the former Canaanite inhabitants of the land (Exod. 23:31b-33; 34:11-16; Num. 33:51-56; Deut. 7:1-5; 12:3).

"The deplorable spiritual condition of the Israelites, not their lack of chariots, lay behind their failure to dispossess the Canaanites. To expose Israel's sinfulness, the 'angel of the Lord' appeared to them (v. 1)."¹

The angel's announcement caused great sorrow in Israel that led to weeping and the offering of sacrifices to Yahweh (vv. 4-5; cf. Exod. 23:28-31; 34:11). The people could not change God's sentence even by repenting (cf. Josh. 24:19). Their disobedience resulted in God's discipline (cf. God's judgment at Kadesh, Num. 14:1-10). Nonetheless, this warning contained a manifestation of God's grace to Israel: God promised that He would never break His covenant with His people (v. 1). Evidences of God's grace are numerous in Judges.²

"The Canaanite system represents forces that yield death, so its presence in the land is as intolerable as Pharaoh's death-dealing policies were in the land of Egypt. To oppose the Canaanite system is, in essence, to choose life as God intends it. But it is precisely this choice that the people have *not* made in chapter 1, and will not make throughout the book of Judges. Quite appropriately, therefore, the events in 2:1-5 unfold at a place called Bochim, 'Weeping (Ones)' (2:5).

"As it turns out, the name 'Weeping' is another way in which 1:1—2:5 anticipates the rest of the book. Just as 1:1 is echoed in chapter 20, so are 2:1 and 2:5. That is to say, the people are still weeping at the end of the book of Judges."³

"This change from Gilgal to Bochim is the key to the book; it is so, alas, but too often, the condition of God's children."⁴

¹Wolf, p. 392.

²See Constable, pp. 108-9.

³McCann, p. 31. Cf. Marvin E. Tate, *From Promise to Exile: The Former Prophets*, p. 34.

⁴J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 1:406.

B. ISRAEL'S CONDUCT TOWARD YAHWEH AND YAHWEH'S TREATMENT OF ISRAEL IN THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES 2:6—3:6

This section of the book provides a theological introduction to the judges' deeds, whereas 1:1—2:5 gives a historical, if not completely chronological, introduction. It also explains further the presence of Canaanites in the Promised Land. The first introduction (1:1—2:5) is from Israel's perspective, and the second (2:6—3:6) is from God's.¹ The first deals with military failure, and the second with religious failure.²

1. Review of Joshua's era 2:6-10

This paragraph is almost identical to the one in Joshua 24:28-31. Its purpose is to resume the history of Israel at this point, where the Book of Joshua ended, and to contrast the era of Joshua with the era of the judges (cf. 2 Chron. 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-3). The key issue was whom the Israelites "served" (v. 7, or "worshiped" NRSV). The Hebrew verb so translated (*'abad*) forms an envelope structure around this passage (2:7; 3:6), as well as appearing in its middle (2:11, 13, 19).

"After a chapter that summarizes the incomplete wars of occupation, the reader is introduced to the threatening wars of liberation that characterize the period of the judges. To explain how Israel fell prey to powerful oppressors, the author reviews events since the death of Joshua."³

"The meaning of *did not know* [v. 10] is that the people deliberately refused to acknowledge God's authority. It is not simply that they were ignorant, but that they were in unbelief."⁴

"Here [2:10] we come to the heart of the second-generation syndrome. It is a lukewarmness, a complacency, an apathy about amazing biblical truths that we have heard from our childhood, or from our teachers. ... It is a pattern which

¹Lilian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, p. 13.

²K. Lawson Younger Jr., "Judges 1 in Its Near Eastern Literary Contest," in *Faith, Tradition, and History*, pp. 222-23.

³Wolf, p. 393.

⁴*The Nelson ...*, p. 401.

challenges churches and even nations, and nowhere does it work with more devastating effect than in Bible colleges and theological seminaries where, day after day, we come in contact with God's truth. ... History tells us that not even the most vivid display of the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit will prevent this problem.

"But why? Why did it happen then, and why does it happen to us? ... We must realize two things about this kind of complacency. The first is something Erich Fromm once pointed out when he said, 'Hate is not the opposite of love. Apathy is.' To be complacent in the face of Calvary is the greatest possible rejection of God. The second is that complacency grows like a cancer. ... Maybe part of the problem lay with the first [Joshua's] generation. Interestingly, however, the book of Judges puts none of the blame there. The second generation was held responsible for their failure, and God would not allow them to shift the blame."¹

"People cannot thrive on the spiritual power of their parents; each generation must personally experience the reality of God."²

2. The pattern of history during the judges' era 2:11-23

Having revealed the roots of Israel's apostasy (vv. 6-10), the writer proceeded to examine its character. In this section, a cyclical pattern of Israel's history during this era becomes clear. This section is also chiasmic in its literary form (in which words or phrases are repeated in reverse order), focusing on Israel's pursuit and worship of other gods:

First, Israel would depart from Yahweh and serve idols (vv. 11-13; cf. 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). Next, the LORD would discipline His people by allowing them to fall under the domination of their enemies (vv. 14-15).³ Then, God would raise up a judge to deliver Israel (v. 16). Next, the people would apostatize again (v. 17), beginning a new cycle, and leading to more discipline. Then God would raise up another judge, in response to His

¹Inrig, pp. 26-27.

²Wolf, p. 393.

³See Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, ch. 5, "The Oppressing Nations."

people's distress (v. 18). When each judge died, the people would wander away from God again (v. 19).

This continual rebellion, and repeated cycle, resulted in God not driving out Israel's enemies from their land (vv. 20-21), but instead leaving them in Canaan in order to test Israel's love and commitment to Him (vv. 22-23). That is, God used Israel's rebellion as an opportunity to teach them, as He had previously done with their forefathers in the wilderness.¹

One writer called the stages in each cycle: sin, slavery, supplication, salvation, and silence.² Another called them: disobedience, discipline, despair, and deliverance.³ Others have labeled them: rebellion, retribution, repentance, and restoration.

"This simple routine of events cannot be projected at will over all cultures and circumstances, yet it does provide some guidelines for the interpretation of history. No corrupt nation can presume upon the grace of God indefinitely; sooner or later its lawlessness will bring disaster, either from within or without."⁴

"... It is precisely this pattern that is the primary means by which the book serves as a condemnation of idolatry and disobedience and their inevitably violent and destructive consequences."⁵

2:11 The writer used Baals here to describe all the Canaanite false gods: the "other gods" of verse 12.

2:12 "The greatest sin a human being can commit is not murder or rape or other despicable acts of atrocity. It is to turn his back on the living God to serve man-made gods."⁶

¹See Frederick Greenspahn, "The Theology of the Framework of Judges," *Vetus Testamentum* 36:4 (October 1986):385-96.

²Wolf, p. 394.

³Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary/History*, p. 100. Cf. G. Campbell Morgan, *The Unfolding Message of the Bible*, p. 108.

⁴Lewis, p. 18.

⁵McCann, p. 21.

⁶Inrig, p. 37.

2:13 Baal was the sun and fertility god. The Canaanites believed he was the source and communicator of physical life. They credited him with generating the reproductive powers of nature from his own being. This ability included human, as well as animal and plant, reproduction and fertility. The Canaanites believed that Baal manifested himself in storms.

"Since Baal was not omnipresent in the strict sense, each cult center would have its own local Baal. Thus there could be Baal-Peor, Baal-Berith, Baal-Zebub, and so on. This explains why the gods of Canaan are sometimes called Baalim ('the Baals') in the Old Testament. There was only one Baal theoretically, but he was lord of many places."¹

Many scholars now identify "Asheroth" (plural, v. 7) with the Canaanite goddess "Asherah" (singular) and the Ugaritic "Athirat." They distinguish her from the Mesopotamian female deity "Astarte."²

"She was frequently represented as the tree of life, which is often depicted in Canaanite art as flanked by caprids which reach up to its fruit. ... The tree of life is stylised [*sic*] in Canaanite art, and in the fertility cult was represented either by a natural tree, which was planted in the sanctuary, or by a stylised wooden pole, the '*aserah*."³

"Asherah" also denotes a cult object in the Hebrew Bible, specifically a wooden pole or stone pillar associated with Asherah worship.

¹Merrill, pp. 159, 161. His section on the nature of Canaanite idolatry, pp. 159-61, is a good introduction to this subject. See also Howard, p. 107, for explanation of the Canaanite pantheon.

²E.g., Butler, p. 63. See John Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105:3 (September 1986):385-408;

³Gray, p. 248.

She was "worshipped as the feminine principle of nature embodied in the pure moon-light, and its influence upon terrestrial life."¹

"Because Asherah can be equated with the Ugaritic goddess Athirat, the consort of Baal, it is quite likely that the Israelites, who borrowed many of El's attributes and ascribed them to Yahweh, also saw Asherah as Yahweh's consort. ... It is perhaps enough to say that the Israelites, in their daily fight to survive in a marginal environment, found that calling on both Yahweh and a Canaanite goddess or her cult object was not incongruous."²

There were five major Canaanite deities: (1) "El" was the chief god, who supposedly fathered all other gods and mortals, though he was not the most powerful god. (2) "Asherah" [or "Asheroth"] was El's wife, the mother of the gods and the goddess of the sea. (3) "Baal" was the Canaanite storm-god, who was supposedly responsible for rain and fertility, as well as the cycle of the seasons. (4) "Ashtoreth" was a female fertility goddess, and a goddess of love and war, closely associated with Baal. She also had some association with the stars. (5) "Anath" was Baal's sister and wife, who was also a goddess of love and war, and who was often depicted with wings.³

"Two things strike the student at once when he deals with the Canaanite deities. The first is the extraordinary fluidity of personality and function, a fluidity which makes it exceedingly hard to fix the domains of different gods or to determine their relation to one another. Physical relationship and even sex change with disconcerting ease. The second is the extent to which the gods receive etymologically transparent names and

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 269.

²Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, p. 80.

³*The Nelson ...*, p. 403. See also W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, pp. 74-75; and idem, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, pp. 189-92, 205.

appellations. ... Since this is not true of Greek or Roman divine names, nor of Accadian and Egyptian names of gods, it would appear that Canaanite religion was in this respect, at least, more primitive and nearer its fountain-head than the others."¹

"Essentially, the religion of Canaan was based on the assumption that the forces of nature are expressions of divine presence and activity and that the only way one could survive and prosper was to identify the gods responsible for each phenomenon and by proper ritual encourage them to bring to bear their respective powers. This is the mythological approach to reality. Ritual involves human enactments; particularly by cultic personnel such as priests, of the activity of the gods as described in the myths.

The worship of these idols did not involve or necessitate the abandonment of Yahweh. The Israelites evidently worshipped both the idols and the true God at the same time, or at least outwardly did so. This practice constituted forsaking Yahweh, because He demanded exclusive allegiance. So the Israelites became syncretistic, rather than exclusive, in their worship. It is easier to understand why the Israelites apostatized so quickly (v. 17) and so frequently, when we appreciate the syncretistic nature of Baal worship.

2:14-15 "Sin produces servitude. That is the fact of Judges."²

"Few books portray so complete a picture of human depravity as does Judges."³

2:16 The modified chiasmic structure of verses 11-23 points out the importance of verse 16:

¹Albright, *Archaeology and ...*, p. 71.

²Inrig, p. 40.

³Wolf, p. 379.

- A Apostasy (vv. 11-13)
- B Wrath (vv. 14-15)
- C Grace (v. 16)
- A' Apostasy (vv.17-19)
- B' Wrath (vv. 20-23)¹

"The narrator begins to speak of divine mercy without any hint of prior repentance. In this book Yahweh's actions will not typically be bound to any mechanical formula of blessing and or retribution, based upon what human beings earn by their actions. Rather he intervenes on Israel's behalf solely on the basis of his compassion; the scene of Israelite distress moves the divine patron to action."²

"The authority of the Judges was not inferior to that which was afterward exercised by *the Kings*; it extended to peace and war. They decided cases without appeal, but they had no power to enact new laws or to impose new burdens upon the people [nor did Moses or Joshua]. They were the protectors of the laws, defenders of religion, and avengers of crimes."³

The repeated cycle of deliverances in this book portray a God whose essential nature is to show mercy, forgive, and extend life, in spite of inveterate sinning.⁴

2:17-19 Each cycle of apostasy was worse than the former one (v. 19).

¹Dale Ralph Davis, *Such a Great Salvation*, p. 39.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 128.

³T. H. Horne, *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, 1818 ed., 2:42; quoted in Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 91.

⁴See McCann, p. 25; Howard, pp. 118-20; and Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Judges: Grace Abounding*, pp. 13-16.

"The Israelites were stiff-necked in the wilderness, but they were even more obstinate in the Promised Land. A new environment, alas, did not mean a new attitude."¹

"... God cannot help but be gracious to a people who apparently cannot help but be unfaithful. This, indeed, is the portrayal of God throughout the biblical canon, including the prophetic books, which both demand obedience and yet promise forgiveness, and including the New Testament, where the 'resolution' of God's dilemma takes the form of a cross, the ultimate act of God's grace toward an incurably sinful humankind."²

2:20-23 None of the Israelites' conflicts in the Book of Judges involved the conquest of new territory; in every entanglement, they were overburdened with throwing off the yoke of an oppressor, since the LORD allowed those nations to remain (v. 23). The writer explained the type of test that the continuation of the Canaanites among the Israelites constituted more fully in the next section.

"The choice of the impersonal word *nation* [in "this nation," v. 20] reflects the distance between God and His people."³

"... in a real sense the book of Judges actually involves multiple replays of the pattern found already in the Torah, especially the book of Exodus: God delivers the people, who then disobey, experiencing not only the destructive results of their disobedience (the guilty are by no means cleared, as Exod. 34:7 says) but also the steadfast love and faithfulness of a God who cannot finally let the people go ..."⁴

¹Wolf, p. 395. Cf. Gen. 6:12; Exod. 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9.

²McCann, p. 37.

³*The Nelson ...*, p. 402.

⁴McCann, p. 15. Cf. Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Exod. 34:6-10.

3. God's purposes with Israel 3:1-6

The purposes for which God allowed the Canaanites to live among the Israelites were four: First, He wanted to punish Israel for her apostasy (2:3), and secondly, He wanted to test the Israelites' faithfulness to and love for Himself (2:22; 3:4). Third, He also wanted to give the new generation of Israelites experience in warfare (3:2), namely, how to conduct war with God as their Commander-in-Chief (by depending on Yahweh)—not just how to fight human enemies. Furthermore, fourthly, God allowed some Canaanites to remain in the land so it would not become wild before the Israelites could subdue it completely (Deut. 7:20-24).

Even though the Israelites had defeated some of the Canaanites in various battles during Joshua's day, significant groups within the Canaanite tribes remained in the land (vv. 3, 5).¹ The Sidonians (v. 3) were the Phoenicians, Sidon being Phoenicia's chief port until about 1100 B.C., when Tyre began to eclipse it.² The Hivites (v. 3) "were probably a branch of the Horites, or Hurrians, who established the kingdom of Mitanni in upper Mesopotamia about 1500 B.C."³

The following enemies represented the whole of Canaan: the Philistines on the southwest, the Sidonians (Phoenicians) on the northwest, the Hittites and the Hivites on the northeast, and the Canaanites, Perizzites, Jebusites, and Amorites in the center and on the southeast. The Israelites then proceeded to intermarry with them and to worship with them (v. 6). From "the people served the LORD" (2:7), they had degenerated to the point that they "served other gods" (3:6).

"In these two verses [5-6] the narrator announces the theme of the book: the Canaanization of Israelite society."⁴

"The Israelites descended three steps in their cultural accommodation to paganism: (a) they lived among the Canaanites, (b) they intermarried with them, and (c) they

¹See Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, map 68, p. 50, for a map showing the limits of Israelite control.

²*The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Sidon," by D. J. Wiseman, pp. 1184-85; Wolf, p. 396.

³Pfeiffer, p. 239.

⁴Block, *Judges ...*, p. 141.

served their gods. Each step is a natural one leading on to the next."¹

"The book of Joshua introduces its hero by issuing a divine command that he be careful to obey the law of Moses (Josh 1:7-8). Judges begins not with a command that expects obedience but with a test that expects disobedience. Joshua begins with a nation expecting to drive out the peoples of the land. Judges begins with the people settled down among those same peoples, its tribes unable to drive them out of the land. Rather than enemies in holy war, we now find one big happy clan, all giving and receiving one another's children in marriage to cement the clan ties."²

"The book of Judges ends in chaos, and the monarchy led both kingdoms to destruction. The lesson? Self-assertion and idolatry produce deadly consequences. From this perspective, the book of Judges is, like all the books of the Former and Latter Prophets, a call to covenant loyalty—a call to repent of self-assertion and idolatry and a call to honor, worship, and serve God alone."³

II. THE RECORD OF ISRAEL'S APOSTASY 3:7—16:31

"The judges are twelve in number, reckoning either Deborah or Barak as a judge and omitting Abimelech, whose status in fact depended wholly on his descent from Gideon, and who was in effect not a 'deliverer', and a 'judge' only in the sense of a local ruler on his own account."⁴

¹Lindsey, p. 384.

²Butler, p. 60.

³McCann, p. 39.

⁴John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 189.

ISRAEL'S JUDGES						
Judge	Text	Oppressor		Length in Years		
		Nation(s)	King(s)	Misery	Rule	Peace
OTHNIEL	3:7-11	Mesopotamia	Cushan-rishathaim	8 (ca. 1358-1350 B.C.)		40 (ca. 1350-1310 B.C.)
EHUD	3:12-30	Moab (with Ammon & Amalek)	Eglon	18		80
SHAMGAR	3:31	Philistia				
DEBORAH	Chs. 4—5	Canaan	Jabin	20 (ca. 1250-1230 B.C.)		40 (ca. 1230-1190 B.C.)
GIDEON	Chs. 6—8	Midian (with Amalek & Arabia)	Zebah and Zalmunna	7		40 (ca. 1180-1140 B.C.)
TOLA	10:1-2				23 (ca. 1117-1094 B.C.)	
JAIR	10:3-5				22 (ca. 1115-1093 B.C.)	
JEPHTHAH	10:8—12:7	Ammon		18 (ca. 1123-1105 B.C.)	6	
IBZAN	12:8-10				7	
ELON	12:11-12				10	
ABDON	12:13-15				8	

SAMSON	Chs. 13— 16	Philistia		40 (ca. 1124- 1084 B.C.)	20 (ca. 1105- 1085 B.C.)	
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The total number of judges cited is 12. By selecting 12 judges, the writer may have been suggesting that all 12 tribes of Israel had apostatized. One writer argued that these 12 judges each did their work in a different month of the Hebrew calendar, thus adding another impression of completeness to the record.¹ This assertion cannot be proven, however. The biblical writer also recorded seven examples of oppression and deliverance (by Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson). This sevenfold scheme gives the impression of totality to Israel's degeneration. This selection suggests that the writer may have viewed these disasters as fulfillments of the curses in Leviticus 26, where the number seven occurs four times (Lev. 26:18, 21, 24, and 28; cf. Deut. 28:25).²

Certain expressions appear in 2:11-23, and then recur in the record of Israel's apostasy (3:7—16:31). However, as noted in the table below, they appear with less frequency as the narrative proceeds. Having established the pattern, the writer did not feel compelled to repeat these expressions as frequently, since the reader learns to anticipate them as the narrative unfolds. The breakdown of the occurrence of these expressions is a literary device that parallels and reflects, as a whole, the general moral and spiritual disintegration in Israel.³

Expression	Othniel	Ehud	Deborah	Gideon	Jephthah	Samson
The Israelites did evil (2:11-13).	3:7	3:12	4:1	6:1	10:6	13:1

¹J. G. Williams, "The Structure of Judges 2:6—16:31," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 49 (1991):77-85.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 145.

³R. H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, pp. 19-57; and J. Cheryl Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (July 1990):410-31.

Yahweh gave them over (2:14).	3:8	3:12	4:2	6:1	10:7	13:1
The Israelites cried out (2:15, 18).	3:9	3:15	4:3	6:7	10:10	
Yahweh raised up a deliverer (2:16, 18).	3:9	3:15				

A. THE FIRST APOSTASY 3:7-11

The first of six periods of oppression by Israel's enemies began while Othniel, Caleb's nephew, was still alive and strong (cf. Josh. 15:17; Judg. 1:13).

"Bible scholars don't agree as to the exact blood relationship Othniel had to Caleb. Was Othniel Caleb's nephew—that is, the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother—or was he simply Caleb's younger brother? As far as the text is concerned, either interpretation is possible.

"If he was Caleb's brother, then why was his father's name Kenaz instead of Jephunneh? (1 Chron. 4:13; Josh. 14:6) Perhaps Jephunneh had died, and Caleb's mother married Kenaz and gave birth to Othniel. Thus, Othniel would have been Caleb's half-brother. First Chronicles 4:13 indicates that Othniel was the son of Kenaz, but the word 'son' is used rather broadly in Jewish genealogies and doesn't always mean a direct father/son relationship.

"Fortunately, we don't have to untangle the branches in Othniel's family tree before we can benefit from the example of his life and ministry."¹

Almost all English translations have Othniel as Caleb's nephew.

The writer identified each of these six periods of oppression with the clause "the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).

In the Hebrew text, the clause, "the anger of the LORD was kindled" (v. 8), reads literally: the LORD's nose became hot. This is one of the most obvious examples of an anthropomorphism of God in the Old Testament. It pictures His anger most graphically in human terms.²

"Mesopotamia" (*Aram-naharaim*, v. 8) was, at this time: "... the fertile land east of the river Orontes covering the upper and middle Euphrates and the lands watered by the rivers Habur and Tigris, i.e., modern E Syria and N Iraq."³

The king of Mesopotamia's actual name proper was Cushan (v. 8). The last part of the hyphenated nickname Cushan-rishathaim means "doubly wicked." The Israelites, who experienced his harsh rule over them for eight years, probably added it to his given name.

Sin leads to slavery, and the Israelites' sin led them into slavery to Cushan-rishathaim (cf. Deut. 28:49-50; Rom. 6:16).

"Those who chose to serve (*'bd*) foreign gods (7d) are made to serve (*'bd*) a foreign tyrant (8e)."⁴

In response to His people's cries for deliverance (cf. Exod. 2:23), God moved and empowered ("raised up") Othniel to lead the Israelites in throwing off their foreign yoke. Throughout Judges, we read that God delivered the Israelites when (as soon as) they called out to Him for salvation from their desperate situations (cf. 3:9, 15; 7:2, 9; 10:12; 18:10). The LORD did not wait until they cleaned up their lives, a popular

¹Wiersbe, p. 103. Cf. Block, *Judges ...*, p. 93.

²Lewis, p. 31.

³*The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v., "Mesopotamia," by D. J. Wiseman, p. 811.

⁴Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, p. 128.

use of the word repentance. God provided deliverance as an act of grace, in response to their helpless cry, not as some kind of a reward they had earned for turning back to Him (cf. Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13).¹ Each deliverance was a sort of new Exodus for the Israelites (cf. Exod. 3:7-8).²

"... when 'Yahweh raised up a savior' for Israel he was not reacting to any repentance on Israel's part. If anything, he was responding to their misery rather than to their sorrow, to their pain rather than to their penitence."³

Othniel was already a prominent warrior in Israel, and had been living in Debir, in Judah, for many years (Josh. 15:15-17; Judg. 1:11-13). Note again the early primacy of the tribe of Judah (cf. 1:3-20; 20:18). Having proved faithful earlier, Othniel was selected by God for more important service on this occasion.

At just the right time God endowed Othniel with an increased measure of grace, by placing His Spirit on this man (v. 10; cf. Num. 24:2; Judg. 11:29; 1 Sam. 19:20, 23; 2 Chron. 20:14). The gift of the Spirit did not in itself guarantee success. There had to be cooperation with the Spirit for that to happen, and there was increasingly less—of both cooperation and success—as judge followed judge in Israel's history (cf. 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14).

"Three things should be noted about this coming of the Spirit upon the great leaders of the historical kingdom: first, it was not always related to high moral character; second, in certain cases its outstanding effects were seen chiefly in the realm of the purely physical; third, and most important of all, it had to do primarily with the regal functions of those who stood as mediators of the divine government of Israel."⁴

"In its peculiar operations the Spirit of Jehovah manifested itself as a spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord (Isa. xi. 2). The communication of this Spirit under the Old Testament was

¹See Greenspahn, pp. 391-95; and Lawhead, pp. 25-27.

²McCann, p. 42.

³D. R. Davis, p. 50.

⁴McClain, p. 93.

generally made in the form of extraordinary and supernatural influence upon the human spirit."¹

"Since Pentecost (Acts 2) a more general and permanent endowment of the Holy Spirit has been the privilege of every disciple."²

Evidently King Cushan controlled most, if not all, of Israel. This assumption rests on the fact that Mesopotamia (Heb. *Aram*) was situated northeast of Canaan, but Othniel lived in the southwest part of Canaan. In the cases of the other judges, God normally raised up persons who lived in the areas in Israel that were closest to Israel's oppressing enemies. Cushan was apparently the most powerful king that oppressed the Israelites during the Judges Period. By beginning with the record of his defeat, the writer announced that, since Yahweh could deliver Israel from this powerful king, He could surely rescue them from any foe.³

After the war with the northern Mesopotamians, whom Josephus called Assyrians,⁴ a period of 40 years of peace followed (v. 11). During this time, Othniel probably continued to judge Israel until he died. One writer suggested that verse 11 probably indicates that Ehud followed Othniel chronologically.⁵ Certainly the generally chronological arrangement of the material in Judges implies this.

Since the years of peace that followed four deliverances numbered 40 (3:11; 5:31; 8:28) and 80 (3:30), some scholars believe that these are rounded numbers indicating one and two generations.⁶ We also read of the Canaanites dominating Israel for 20 years (4:3), the Philistines doing so for 40 years (13:1), and Samson judging for 20 years (16:31). However, other lengths of oppressions and judgeships are not round numbers (3:8, 14; 6:1; 10:2, 3, 8; 12:11 [?], 14). Note, too, that the reports of Israel enjoying rest (from war) end with Gideon's judgeship; after that there was no more

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 293.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 74. Cf. John 14:17.

³Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 150, 152.

⁴Josephus, 5:3:3.

⁵See David L. Washburn, "The Chronology of Judges: Another Look," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:588 (October-December 1990):418.

⁶E.g., Pfeiffer, pp. 240, 256; Block, *Judges ...*, p. 155.

rest. In view of all this, it appears that some dates may be round numbers and others should be taken literally.

"... Othniel sets the standards by which all other judges must measure themselves."¹

"Othniel, who lives in Israel after the death of Joshua and the elders who outlived Joshua, models true judgeship for all who follow him in that position. There never is another Joshua, a survivor of a faithless generation, and there never is another Othniel, a survivor of a faithful generation."²

"Many have noted that the narrator writes nothing negative about this man [Othniel]. This is intentional. The prologue has prepared the reader to expect a progressive degeneration in the moral and spiritual fiber of the nation. As the embodiment of the people, the leaders whom Yahweh raises in the nation's defense exhibit the same pattern."³

Contrast the character of Samson, the last judge in the book. The most important factor in the story of Othniel, I believe, was the fact that God's Spirit empowered him (v. 10). This was probably true of all the judges, though the writer did not always mention it. No one can accomplish anything spiritually significant without the Holy Spirit's enablement (cf. Zech. 4:6; John 15:5). However, with His assistance, His people can be the agents of supernatural change and can carry out God's will.

The "minor judges" filled the same role in Israel as the "major judges" (Gideon, Samson, et al.).⁴ The commentators vary concerning whom they regard as major (primary) and minor (secondary) judges. Wood, for example, listed only Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon as minor judges.⁵

¹Butler, p. 66.

²Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, p. 112.

³Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 149-50. See also Chisholm, p. 171.

⁴See Theodore E. Mullen Jr., "The 'Minor Judges': Some Literary and Historical Considerations," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (April 1982):185-201; Kenneth C. Way, "The Meaning of the Minor Judges: Understanding the Bible's Shortest Stories," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61:2 (June 2018):275-85.

⁵Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, p. 7.

"The reason why the accounts of the judges vary in length is that their stories vary in their instructional value regarding this subjective aspect of redemptive significance. That is, the accounts which are longer present those stories which provide the most helpful guidelines for the Christian life."¹

This simple account of Othniel's judgeship makes crystal clear the most important points that the writer wanted to make in his record of Israel's judges.

B. THE SECOND APOSTASY 3:12-31

As time went by, Israel's departure from God progressed. The writer reflected this by showing that Israel next suffered under two oppressing powers at the same time: the Moabites and the Philistines.

1. Oppression under the Moabites and deliverance through Ehud 3:12-30

The Moabites and Ammonites were not only neighboring peoples who both lived to the southeast of Canaan, but they were also descendants of the same ancestor, Lot. The Amalekites lived on Israel's southern border and were descendants of Esau. The Moabites had allied with the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and had captured the site of Jericho ("the city of the palm trees," v. 13). They had evidently rebuilt it to some extent since Joshua's conquest.² The Moabites had taken over the surrounding area, and had forced Israel to serve them for 18 years (v. 14).

"The Moabites worshipped Chemosh and his consort Ashtar, as well as Baal."³

Jericho was in Benjamin's territory, so it was not unusual that God would raise up a judge from that tribe to lead Israel against the Moabites. We learn later that the Benjamites at this time were far from admirable on the whole (chs. 19—21). Yet God raised up a faithful man from this tribe to do His will. The English text's description of Ehud as left-handed (v. 15) is misleading. The Hebrew expression translated "a left-handed man"

¹Ibid., p. 41.

²See my comments on Joshua 6:26-27 in my notes on Joshua for further explanation.

³*The Nelson ...*, p. 404.

probably means "a man restricted as to his right hand."¹ This was an ironic condition for a Benjamite, since the name Benjamin means "son of the right hand." Many Benjamites were left-handed (20:16), and not a few were ambidextrous (right-and-left-handed; 1 Chron. 12:2). Ehud may not have been able to use his right hand nearly as well as his left. In spite of this abnormality, God used him to bring a great victory to Israel.

Most commentators regarded Ehud's methods as entirely legitimate.² Some, however, did not, as the following quotation illustrates:

"Ehud's conduct must be judged according to the spirit of those times, when it was thought allowable to adopt any means of destroying the enemy of one's nation. The treacherous assassination of a hostile king is not to be regarded as an act of the Spirit of God, and therefore is not set before us as an example to be imitated. Although Jehovah raised up Ehud as a deliverer to His people when oppressed by Eglon, it is not stated (and this ought particularly to be observed) that the Spirit of Jehovah came upon Ehud, and still less that Ehud assassinated the hostile king under the impulse of that Spirit. Ehud proved himself to have been raised up by the Lord as the deliverer of Israel, simply by the fact that he actually delivered his people from the bondage of the Moabites, and it by no means follows that the means which he selected were either commanded or approved by Jehovah."³

"The anomaly of a member of a right-handed tribe being a left-handed man seems to be hinting at the theological oddity of a deliverer raised up by Yahweh (3:15) resorting to underhanded tactics."⁴

The two facts, that Ehud did what he did as an act of war, and that God nowhere condemned him for it, have led most interpreters to believe that he was justified in assassinating King Eglon (lit. "Fat Ox"). God used other tricksters (e.g., Jacob, Samson) and other murderers (e.g., Moses, David,

¹J. A. Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, p. 50; et al.

²E.g., Cundall and Morris, p. 77; George Bush, *Notes on Judges*, pp. 37-38; Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, p. 174; Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Ehud: Assessing an Assassin," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168:671 (July-September 2011):274-82; et al.

³Keil and Delitzsch, p. 298.

⁴Kuruvilla, p. 73.

Paul). Note that Ehud (possibly meaning "Loner"¹) had no other Israelites with him when he confronted Eglon. He stood alone for God.

It seems that first Ehud delivered the Israelites' taxes ("tribute," v. 18)—Josephus called them "presents"²—to King Eglon, next, left Eglon, passed the idols (lit. "sculptured stones," or "quarries"³; Heb. *pesilim*) at Gilgal, and then finally returned to Eglon to assassinate him (v. 19). Ironically, this may have been a Gilgal on the border between Benjamin and Judah, west of Jericho, rather than the one northeast of Jericho (cf. Josh. 15:7).⁴

But Ehud had prepared to execute Eglon before going to Jericho (v. 16). So why did he not assassinate Eglon when he first met with him? Did he lose heart? Perhaps, or he may not have had the opportunity. Perhaps he received fresh motivation to kill the king when he passed the Canaanite objects of worship at Gilgal, and then returned to Jericho to finish the job.

The room in which Ehud met Eglon ("his cool roof chamber," Heb. *'aliya*, v. 20) was probably on an additional story raised above the flat roof of his house at one corner.⁵ Rooms built this way caught the prevailing currents of air, and therefore provided a cool place of retreat from the hot weather. Josephus wrote that Ehud claimed to have had a dream that God wanted him to give to King Eglon ("I have a message from God for you," v. 20).⁶ Perhaps, but maybe not.

Evidently Eglon was caught by surprise, because he did not expect Ehud to suddenly draw out a hidden sword with his left hand. He probably did not even know that he could do so. This was part of Ehud's strategy.

"It was *God's right hand* that gained Israel the victory (Ps. xlv. 3), not the right hand of the instruments he employed."⁷

The sword was a short cubit in length, about 16 inches (v. 16). The Hebrew word used to describe the cubit occurs only here in the Old Testament and describes a short cubit. The short cubit was as long as the distance

¹E. John Hamlin, *Judges*, p. 73.

²Josephus, 5:4:2.

³Pfeiffer, p. 240.

⁴Wolf, p. 400.

⁵Pfeiffer, p. 240.

⁶Josephus, 5:4:2.

⁷Henry, p. 245.

between the elbow and the knuckles of a fist. Ehud's sword apparently went all the way through the fat layers of Eglon's obese body. It apparently contained no crosspiece (hilt) between the handle and the blade. The handle lodged in the fat, and the point opened a hole in his lower back where his excrement oozed out.

"Thus by way of a humorous if vulgar twist, something unexpected 'comes out' of Eglon—his excrement. Such a grotesque occurrence would have been precisely the kind of detail that a story of this sort would have delighted in recounting and would be unlikely to omit. Although it no doubt strikes modern readers as vulgar and distasteful, in the context of the story it adds a note of extreme humiliation with respect to the Moabite king that would have delighted an Israelite audience, especially as it takes place at the very height of the drama: the national hero not only dispatched the enemy king with much cunning but in the process caused him to become besmirched with feces."¹

The writer may also have recorded this last disgusting detail in order to draw a parallel with the unclean Moabites' departure from the land following Ehud's victory. Notice the cool way Ehud behaved after he slew the king in his cool room (v. 23). Perhaps it was the odor of Eglon's excrement, in addition to the locked doors, that led the servants to conclude that the king was relieving himself (v. 24). Josephus believed that the servants thought that Eglon was asleep.²

"With effective employment of ambiguity, irony, satire, hyperbole, and caricature, he [the writer] sketches a literary cartoon that pokes fun at the Moabites and brings glory to God. ... Biblical historians seldom, if ever, wrote their pieces primarily so later readers could reconstruct historical events. Their agendas were generally theological and polemical, and few texts are as overt in the latter respect as ours."³

¹Michael L. Barré, "The Meaning of *prsdn* in Judges III 22," *Vetus Testamentum* 41:1 (1991):9-10. Cf. McCann, p. 23.

²Josephus, 5:4:2.

³Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 156-57. See also Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Yahweh versus the Canaanite Gods: Polemic in Judges and 1 Samuel 1—7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:654 (April-June 2007):165-80.

"The alleged inferior defeats an obvious superior; the one supposed to be unclean leaves the royal Eglon prostrate in his own dung; the apparently disabled person proves both mentally and physically more adept than his opponents."¹

Archaeologists have not yet identified the town of Seirah (v. 26), but it may have stood to the northwest of Gilgal in Ephraim's hill country (v. 27).

The Moabites, who at this time were living west of the Jordan River, would have fled back home eastward to their native country. For this reason the Israelites "took control of the fording places of the Jordan opposite Moab" (v. 28).

Verse 29 is difficult to interpret for two reasons. First, the word translated thousand can also mean military unit (cf. 20:10). Second, it is not clear whether the Israelites killed this many Moabites as they tried to cross the Jordan on this occasion. Perhaps this was the total Moabite force that the Israelites killed in their war with Moab. In either case, this was a great victory for Israel.

The writer's primary emphasis, in this story, seems to be that God used a man whom others would have regarded as unusual, because he was left-handed, to effect a great victory. Ehud did not excuse himself from doing God's will, just because he was different, as many Christians do. He stepped out in faith in spite of his physical peculiarity. Israel too had abnormalities, compared to the other nations, but when she stepped out in trust and obedience, God blessed her with success.

2. Oppression under the Philistines and deliverance through Shamgar 3:31

Several factors suggest that Shamgar's victory took place sometime during the 98 years described in the previous section (vv. 12-30): First, 4:1 refers to Ehud, not Shamgar. Second, there is no reference to Israel doing evil in Yahweh's sight in this verse. Third, the length of the Philistine oppression was long. Fourth, the writer did not mention, after Shamgar's victory, a number of years that the land enjoyed rest. Evidently during this 98-year period the Philistines also oppressed Israel.

¹McCann, p. 45.

David Washburn argued that the phrase "after him" may indicate the beginning of a new episode. If this is so, we should place Shamgar contemporary with Deborah rather than Ehud (cf. 5:6). He acknowledged, however, that it is impossible to determine exactly when Shamgar slew the 600 Philistines.¹

The Philistines had been in Canaan at least since Abraham's day (Gen. 21:32; et al.). However, during the Judges Period, perhaps about 1230 B.C., a major migration of the "Sea People" from the Aegean area brought many new inhabitants into Canaan. These people settled in the coastal areas of Canaan, especially in the South. They became the infamous Philistines, who opposed and fought the Israelites until David finally brought them under Israel's control.

"The name *Shamgar* is non-Israelite and may have been of Hittite or Hurrian origin. This does not automatically infer that he was a Canaanite, although this is possible; it may witness to the intermingling of the Israelites with the native population. In any case his actions benefited Israel."²

Peter Craigie believed that Shamgar may have been a Hurrian mercenary soldier, rather than a Hebrew. His name, "the son of Anath," suggests that he might have been a religious Canaanite, since Anath was a Canaanite goddess.³ It seems unlikely, however, that he was a religious Canaanite, because the writer identified him as a national hero through whom God delivered His people.

Another suggestion is that "son of Anath" indicated that Shamgar was like Anath, namely, of a warlike character.⁴ Shamgar could have been the son of a mixed marriage, or even of a foreigner. Perhaps he was a proselyte to Yahweh worship. Whatever his background, and whomever he may have served, his destruction of 600 Philistines accomplished God's will, specifically the destruction of the non-Israelite occupants of the land.

The writer did not record Shamgar's hometown, but some commentators connect Beth-Anath (lit. "house of Anath") in Naphtali, or Beth-Anoth in

¹Washburn, pp. 417-18, 421.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 80. See also Hamlin, p. 78.

³Peter Craigie, "A Reconsideration of Shamgar ben Anath (Judg 3:31 and 5:6)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91:2 (1972):239-30.

⁴Cyrus Gordon, *The Ancient Near East*, p. 151.

Judah (Josh. 15:59), with him. Most assume Anath was the name of Shamgar's father.

An oxgoad was a stout stick, 8 to 10 feet long, used to train and drive oxen.

"At the thin end they have a sharp point to drive the oxen, and at the other end a small hoe, to scrape off any dirt that may stick to the plough."¹

"It is no matter how weak the weapon is if God direct and strengthen the arm. An ox-goad, when God pleases, shall do more than Goliath's sword."²

Evidently Shamgar seized an opportunity to kill 600 Philistines with this unusual tool, which he used as a weapon (cf. 2 Sam. 23:11). The text does not say how quickly he did this, whether all at once, or one by one in guerrilla type warfare.

"Altogether, roughly a quarter of a million people perish in Judges!"³

Josephus wrote that Shamgar "... was elected for their governor, but died in the first year of his government."⁴ This statement rests on Jewish tradition.

Though the writer did not call Shamgar a judge in the text, he was one of Israel's heroic deliverers (cf. 5:4). Few students of the book exclude him from the list of judges, even though he may not have functioned like a typical judge in the nation.

Like Shamgar, Samson also fought the Philistines alone using an unlikely weapon. The writer devoted four chapters to Samson, but Samson did not accomplish in four chapters what Shamgar did in one verse. Samson did not deliver Israel. This comparison further demonstrates the pattern of progressive deterioration that characterizes the Book of Judges.⁵ It also

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 299.

²Henry, p. 245.

³Kuruvilla, p. 14.

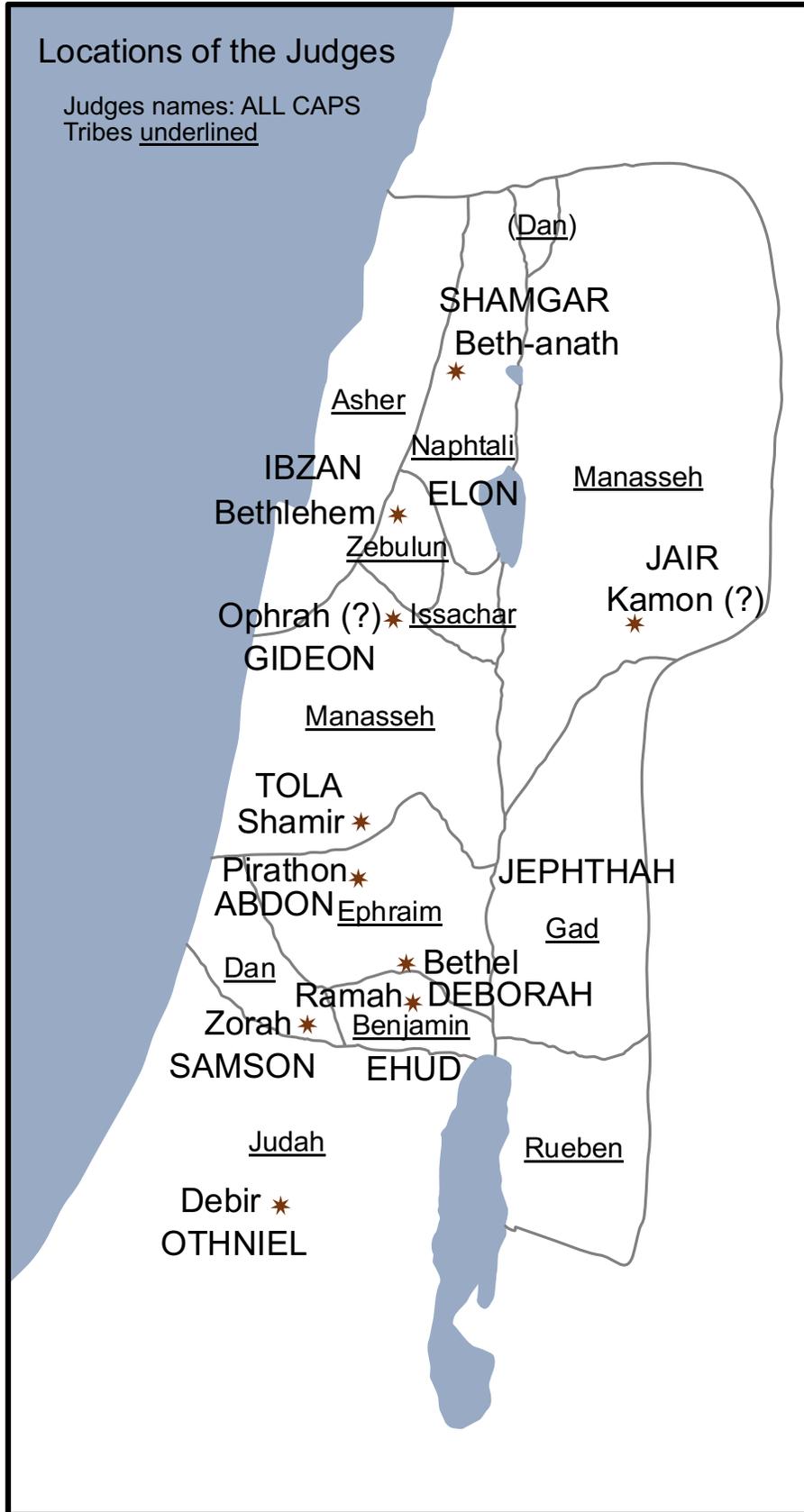
⁴Josephus, 5:4:3.

⁵McCann, p. 48.

suggests that the writer saw more instructive lessons for the reader in Samson's life than he did in Shamgar's.

A major lesson we should learn from Shamgar is that a shady personal background and/or a lack of proper equipment do not keep God from working through people who commit themselves to doing His will. Many Christians think that because they do not have a good background or the best tools, they cannot serve God. But if we commit ourselves to executing God's will, and use whatever background and equipment we have, God can accomplish a great deal through us.

In this third chapter we have seen that God raised up some very unusual people and empowered them to do great acts for His glory. Often very distinguished people rise from humble backgrounds, as these judges did. Jesus' disciples are similar illustrations of this fact. A single individual, committed to executing God's revealed will, is all He needs. He uses all types of people, but only those who are committed to His will, and who step out in faith. In the case of the judges, the will of God was the extermination of Israel's enemies.



C. THE THIRD APOSTASY CHS. 4—5

Chapters 4 and 5 are complementary versions of the victory God gave Israel over the Canaanites: chapter 4 in prose, and chapter 5 in poetry (cf. Exod. 14—15).¹ They are two witnesses to God's greatness and goodness.

1. The victory over Jabin and Sisera ch. 4

4:1-3 As long as Ehud lived, he kept Israel faithful to God (v. 1). However, after he died, God's people again did evil, and turned from the LORD. In discipline, God allowed the Canaanites in the North to gain strength and dominate the Israelites for 20 years. The earlier oppressions came from outside Canaan, but now a leader within Canaan led an uprising against the Israelites. Hazor, one of the largest cities in the Promised Land, again became the center of Canaanite power in this area. It had formerly organized a coalition of forces to fight against Joshua (cf. Josh. 11:1, 10).² It stood on the main road connecting Egypt and Mesopotamia.

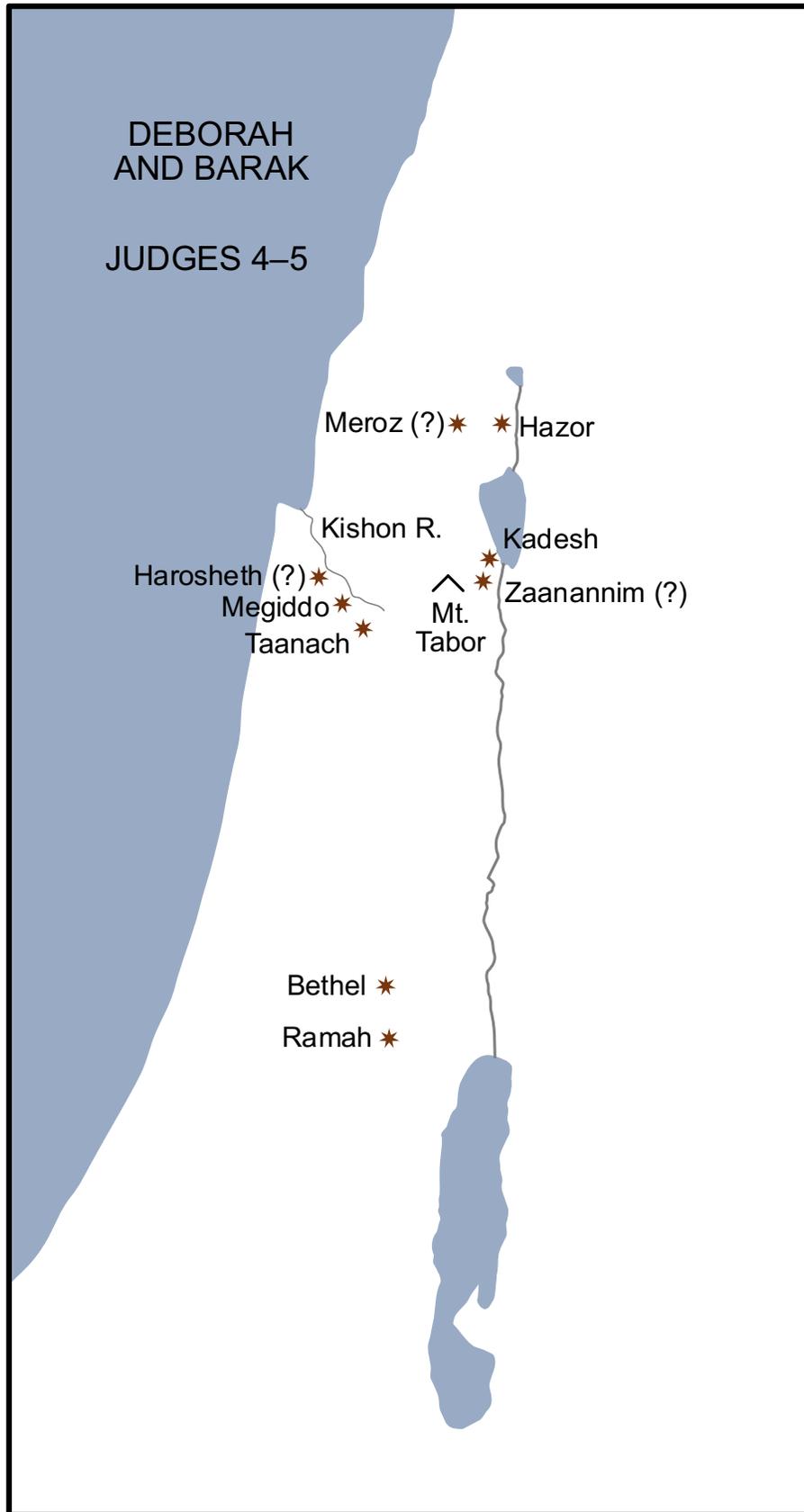
"The archaeological work there showed that it was in existence in the days of the judges, having attained its peak of prosperity even earlier, about 1800 B.C. ..."³

Evidently Hazor had been rebuilt since its complete destruction by Joshua early in the conquest of Canaan.

¹Block, *Judges ...*, p. 177.

²See Piotr Bienkowski, "The Role of Hazor in the Late Bronze Age," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 119:1 (January-June 1987):50-61.

³Free, p. 142.



Hazor's king was Jabin ("The Discerning," lit. "he will understand"). This was perhaps a title or dynastic name, rather than a proper name, since the king of Hazor that Joshua defeated was also called Jabin (Josh. 11:1).¹ Or perhaps, the Jabin in Judges could have received his name in honor of the Jabin in Joshua. This titulary (a name turned into a title) has an ironic ring, however, since Jabin would come to understand something important: that Yahweh opposes oppressors of His people.

Jabin's commander-in-chief, Sisera, lived several miles to the southwest of Hazor in Harosheth-hagoyim (lit. "The Woodlands of the Nations"). This may have been a term that described the entire northern Galilee region.² If so, this description implies that Canaanite influence was extensive throughout northern Israel at this time. Though the location and size of Harosheth-hagoyim are uncertain, it apparently was situated around the western end of the Jezreel Valley.³

The Canaanites' 900 iron chariots (v. 3) gave them complete control of some of the flatter and dryer portions of Canaan. The Israelites were forced to live in the hills to avoid them. These chariots were state-of-the-art weapons at this time. Compare Pharaoh's chariots in the Exodus account. Chapter 5 also recalls the Exodus. Josephus wrote that Jabin had at his command: 300,000 infantrymen, 10,000 cavalrymen, and no fewer than 3,000 chariots.⁴

4:4-11 Deborah was a prophetess, one of three prophetesses identified as such in the Old Testament (v. 4), along with Miriam (Exod. 15:20) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14).⁵ Anna (Luke 2:36) and Philip's four daughters (Acts 21:8-9) were also prophetesses. Deborah was also one of the judges (v. 4). Another translation of "wife of Lappidoth" is "woman of

¹Kenneth Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, p. 68.

²Lewis, p. 39.

³Dale W. Manor, "The Topography and Geography of the Jezreel Valley as they Contribute to the Battles of Deborah and Gideon," *Near Eastern Archaeology Society Bulletin* NS28 (Winter 1987):27; Wood, *A Survey ...*, p. 216, n. 39.

⁴Josephus, 5:5:1.

⁵See Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, pp. 143-46.

torches." This could be the meaning, since she motivated Barak and demonstrated conquering power, which "torches" symbolize (cf. 5:7; Isa. 62:1; Dan. 10:6; Zech. 12:6).¹ The account of her life and ministry shows that some of the judges served as civil leaders almost exclusively.² Samuel was a similar type of judge, whose military exploits were minor.

"The very looseness of early Israelite social and political organization, along with the requirements of a subsistence economy, probably explains why women could play such a major role in Israelite life, as they clearly do in the book of Judges, especially in chapters 4—5 ..."³

Deborah lived in the hill country of Ephraim (v. 5). Her name means "Bee," and she did what often typifies a bee: She stung the enemy, and she brought sweet refreshment (as honey refreshes one's spirit and strength) to her people. However, her name also suggests her prophetic role as she spoke to Barak, since the consonants in her name are the same as those in the Hebrew word translated "speak" and "word." The writer may have referred to her palm tree ("the palm tree of Deborah"), another source of sweetness, to contrast it with the "oak of Zaananim," under which the compromising Heber worked (v. 11).

"The name Ramah [v. 5], in some of its forms, is applied to *any* place seated on a hill. There are scores of Rams, Ramahs, Ram-allahs, etc., all over the country ..."⁴

Deborah's Ramah, however, was located in the hill country of Ephraim (v. 5).

Barak apparently was a well-known military leader in Israel at this time. He lived in far north Israel, in Kedesh of Naphtali

¹McCann, pp. 51-52.

²See M. O'Connor, "The Women in the Book of Judges," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986):277-93.

³McCann, p. 56.

⁴W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 2:503.

("Kedesh-*naphtali*," v. 6), which was fairly close to Hazor. It stood at the southwest corner of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee),¹ though some scholars favor a location north of Lake Huleh, which was north of the Sea of Cinnereth.² Barak's name means "Lightning," which he resembled in his battle attack against the Canaanites.

As a prophetess, Deborah sent orders to Barak to assemble 10,000 soldiers, or possibly 10 units of soldiers, at Mount Tabor, southwest of the Sea of Chinnereth. Note that God's command to Barak was clear: He was to Go and march (Heb. *masak*, lit. "to draw along") with his recruits, and wait at the mountain. God said that He would draw out Sisera to advance against Barak. Barak was then to move west and engage Sisera's forces at the Kishon River, just north of the Carmel mountain range, which stood on the south side of the Jezreel Valley.

"The truth is, that the strictly permanent Kishon is one of the shortest rivers in the world. You will find the source in the vast fountains called Sa'adiyah, not more than three miles east of Haifa. They flow out from the very roots of Carmel, almost on a level with the sea, and the water is brackish."³

"RSV rightly renders **torrent** (Hebrew *nahal*), the **Kishon** in its upper course being indeed a seasonal wadi, which, however, rises quickly and strongly in its lower course, swollen by flash floods from the slopes of Carmel and the hills of Lower Galilee as they converge upon it near Harosheth."⁴

On this occasion, Israel's forces were very numerous. They had perhaps a 10 to one advantage over the Canaanites. Gideon's later battle with the Midianites would be the opposite, with

¹Yohanan Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, p. 204.

²Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 4:1:1, wrote of this lake as lake Semechonitis.

³Thomson, 2:141.

⁴Gray, p. 278. RSV refers to *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version*.

Israel's forces in the minority. God promised to give the Canaanites into Barak's hand (v. 7).

Barak's refusal to go on this mission without Deborah raises questions. He may have been afraid to go into battle without Deborah's comforting company. Probably he wanted to have this prophetess with him, so that he could obtain God's guidance through her if he needed to do so. A third explanation follows:

"... his mistrust of his own strength was such that he felt too weak to carry out the command of God. He wanted [lacked] divine enthusiasm for the conflict, and this the presence of the prophetess was to infuse into both Barak and the army that was to be gathered around him."¹

In most instances of dire need the leaders of God's people called on the LORD for help, but in this one Barak called on Deborah for help (v. 8). Also, instead of Yahweh providing assurance of success, as was often the case, in this one Deborah provided that assurance (v. 9).

Whatever his motivation may have been, Barak put a condition on obeying God. The will of God was clear. He even had God's promise of victory. Nevertheless he refused to obey unless Deborah accompanied him. Barak would defeat the Canaanites, but a woman would get the honor for defeating the commander, Sisera. This was Barak's punishment for putting a condition on his obedience to God (v. 9). Barak probably assumed that the prediction in verse 9 referred to Deborah, but, as things turned out, Jael the Kenite received the glory that might have been his (vv. 17-22). Even though Barak had faith (Heb. 11:32), his faith was not as strong as it should have been.

Apparently some of the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, had moved north to continue their semi-nomadic life in the northern part of western Manasseh. Hobab

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 303.

was evidently Moses' brother-in-law, as most English translations say, rather than his father-in-law (CEV; cf. Num 10:29).¹ The consonants of the Hebrew words translated "father-in-law" and "brother-in-law" are the same (i.e., *htn*). Only the vowels, which later scribes supplied, are different (*hoten* being "father-in-law" and *hatan* being "brother-in-law").

Most of the Kenites lived in southern Judah. Heber's family was able to maintain good relations with both the Canaanites and the Israelites (v. 17). Heber's name means "Ally," and it reflects his alliance with the Canaanites. Kenite means "smith," as in blacksmith.² Heber was apparently plying his trade under the oak of Zaananim. Was he one of the blacksmiths responsible for keeping the Canaanites' 900 iron chariots in good repair? Perhaps.

Oak trees were often the sites of pagan Canaanite worship. Had Heber set up shop at the cultic shrine of Baal in his area? If so, he contrasts sharply with Deborah, who carried out her work of revealing the words of God, and ruling His people, under a palm tree (v. 5). Here was a descendant of Moses' family, who appears to have been fraternizing with the very people Moses had commanded the Israelites to exterminate!

4:12-16 When word reached Sisera that Barak had mustered Israelite troops at Mt. Tabor, he moved east across the Jezreel Valley with his 900 iron chariots and warriors to engage Barak.

Structurally, verse 14 is the center of a chiasm. The chiastic structure of this chapter focuses the reader's attention on Yahweh as Israel's deliverer (cf. v. 15; Exod. 15:3; 1 Sam. 8:20; 2 Sam. 5:24). This is the writer's main point in the story. It is also one of the main emphases in the Song of Deborah in chapter 5.

A The sons of Israel are oppressed (vv. 1-3).

B Deborah, the prophetess, is featured (vv. 4-9).

¹CEV stands for *The Holy Bible: Contemporary English Version*.

²See Albright, *Archaeology and ...*, p. 98.

- C Barak and Sisera call out (vv. 10-13).
- D Yahweh is Israel's warrior (v. 14a).
- C' Barak and Sisera go down (vv. 14b-16).
- B' Jael, wife of Heber, is featured (vv. 17-22).
- A' Jabin, king of Canaan, is subdued (vv. 23-24).¹

With Deborah at his side, and her reassuring statement of God's promised victory (v. 14), Barak was now not afraid to engage the enemy. Commenting on verse 14, one expositor wrote the following:

"The most important characteristic of a Christian leader, in whatever area of life, is a dynamic, bold faith in God."²

Evidently God sent an unseasonable thunderstorm that mired Sisera's chariots in the softened valley soil (cf. 5:4-5, 20-21).³ The main battle apparently took place near Taanach, near the south central portion of the valley (5:19). The Israelites destroyed the whole Canaanite army that participated in this encounter (v. 16).

This loss was a double disappointment for the Canaanites. Not only did they lose control of the lowlands that their chariots had dominated, but their god had failed them. The Canaanites believed that Baal controlled storms and rode upon the clouds, but he allowed their army to be totally destroyed because of a storm!

"He is uniformly depicted as wielding a club in one hand and a stylized spear in the other, representing thunder and lightning respectively."⁴

¹D. R. Davis, p. 71.

²Inrig, p. 63.

³See Josephus' account in *Antiquities of ...*, 5:5:4.

⁴Cundall and Morris, p. 87.

Instead of Baal striking his enemies as lightning, Barak ("Lightning") had struck the enemies of Yahweh. Yet it was really the LORD (v. 15) who routed Sisera and his forces. Barak pursued the fleeing Canaanites west.

4:17-22 However Sisera, the Canaanite commander, fled east to Heber's home at Zaananim, to save his own skin. He sought refuge in the tent of Jael, his ally Heber's wife. Little did he realize, that even though Heber's sentiments apparently favored the Canaanites, his wife Jael was a loyal worshipper of Yahweh. She was no compromiser, as her husband seems to have been. That Heber had established very friendly relations with the Canaanites seems clear, since Sisera felt perfectly safe in Heber's wife's tent, as he hid from the pursuing Israelites.

It is interesting that Jael commanded the Canaanite commander to "Turn aside" (v. 18), as Deborah had commanded the Israelite commander to "God and march to Mt. Tabor" (v. 6). God was using two women to lead His people to victory on this occasion.

One writer suggested the following translation of the last part of verse 18 and verse 19. Instead of "she covered him. And he said to her ... then she covered him," this scholar divided the Hebrew words differently and came up with "she overwhelmed him with perfume. He grew faint and said to her ... then [she] closed it [the container of milk] again."¹ While this translation is provocative and possible, the problems with the traditional rendering are minimal and do not require this change.

Sisera had violated every part of the code governing the actions of host and guest."² Sisera should have gone directly to Heber, the head of the household, not to his wife's tent! This violation of hospitality customs would have alerted Jael that something was amiss. Furthermore, Sisera should not

¹Elizabeth Wilkinson, "The *Hapax Legomenon* of Judges IV 18," *Vetus Testamentum* 33:4 (October 1983):512-13.

²Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21 (Spring 1992):18.

have accepted Jael's offer of hospitality. But when he did, this doubtless indicated to Jael again that his intentions were not right.

Sisera proceeded to make two requests of his host: First, he requested something to drink, and secondly, that Jael would stand guard at the door of the tent—evidently to lie about his presence. This would have endangered her safety. Good guests did not make requests of their hosts in that culture, nor did they put them in danger. So Sisera was asking for trouble.

"Sisera is a famous military commander (4:2-3), and since conquering male heroes generally had their way with women (see 5:30), and since Sisera had violated hospitality customs by entering Jael's tent, Jael may very well have feared that she was going to be raped. Instead, in what some commentators describe as a reverse rape, it is Sisera who 'gets nailed' by Jael—literally, by Jael's use of the hammer and tent peg, and perhaps figuratively as well, a possibility captured by the sexual connotation of the contemporary idiom used above."¹

Jael probably gave Sisera milk [buttermilk? Heb. *hem'ah*]—Josephus called it "sour milk"²—instead of water (v. 19), because milk was a better drink, and would have assured Sisera of Jael's good will toward him. Furthermore, she may have intended that it would "knock him out": put him to sleep. Wine has the opposite effect, at least in moderation.

"It was probably a kind of yogurt or curdled milk (5:25)—a drink called *leben*, which is still commonly used by the Arabs."³

¹McCann, pp. 54-55.

²Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:5:4.

³Wolf, p. 407.

Jael's name means "Mountain Goat." Interestingly, she did two things we associate with mountain goats: she proved to be a tough creature, and she produced milk.

Note the vulnerability and dependence of Sisera, in verse 19, and his blind self-confidence in verse 20. He thought he was safe and in control, but he was in mortal danger, about to die, and he did not even suspect it. Such is often the case with proud people, especially the enemies of God's people (cf. Prov. 16:18).

Even though Jael was God's instrument of delivering Sisera into the Israelites' hands, some scholars have criticized her methods.¹ Compare Rahab's lie and Ehud's strategy. Oriental hospitality required Jael to protect her guest. Instead, she treacherously assassinated him. Yet in the light of Sisera's violation of hospitality customs, it seems that Jael's act was self-defense. Moreover, this was war, and holy war at that. What she did shows her commitment to do God's will, namely, destroying the inhabitants of the land (cf. Deut. 31:1-8; 32; Josh. 1:1-9).² I believe that is the reason Deborah honored her in the poem that follows in chapter 5.

"Jael's actions ... contain conscious misuse of this [hospitality] ritual to lure Sisera to his death. However, Sisera is more culpable than Jael in his systematic violation of every step in the customary [hospitality] ritual. He brought shame on himself and on the household of Heber by disregarding the proper roles of guest and host. It is the contention of this writer that a conscious effort has been made on the part of the writers/editors of this material to use the strictures of the hospitality code to further heighten the literary character of the story. Each violation provides further assurance to the

¹E.g., Keil and Delitzsch, p. 306.

²Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, pp. 198-99.

audience that violence, when it comes, as it surely must, is justified."¹

"Her dexterity with the *tent peg* (RSV) and *hammer*, or wooden mallet, is explained by the fact that the erection and taking down of tents was the work of a woman."²

"He [Sisera] that thought to destroy Israel with his many iron chariots is himself destroyed with one iron nail."³

To die by the hand of a woman was a disgrace in the ancient Near East (cf. 9:54). Jael reminds me of a charmed snake. Sisera thought he had her under his control, but at the crucial moment she struck him fatally. He died of a splitting headache! Actually Jael conquered both Sisera and Barak: the former by taking his life and the latter by taking his honor.⁴

Verse 22 is somewhat amusing and full of irony. Somehow Barak had gotten on Sisera's trail, and finally found his way to Heber's tent at the east end of the valley. As Deborah had commanded Barak to "Go" (v. 6), now Jael commanded him to "Come." But they used the same Hebrew word in addressing him on both occasions. The man who should have taken the initiative in attacking Israel's enemy years earlier, now got another order from a woman—a seemingly "ordinary housewife," who had conquered his, General Barak's, mighty enemy: General Sisera!

4:23-24 This victory broke the back of Canaanite domination at this period in Israel's history. The Israelites continued to put pressure on the Canaanites until they finally destroyed Jabin and his kingdom. This may have taken several years. The Canaanites never oppressed Israel again militarily, as far as

¹Matthews, "Hospitality and ...," p. 20. This article provides much help in understanding the hospitality customs of the ancient Near East, some of which continue to the present day.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 89.

³Henry, p. 247.

⁴Kuruvilla, p. 100.

Scripture records, but their religion continued to ensnare God's people (cf. the Moabites' and Midianites' two strategies in Numbers).¹

"If up to now the author of the book of Judges tended to tell of saviors that were raised up, from this war on it is clear that the human heroes are only a background for highlighting the divine salvation."²

What the author of the quotation above wrote is certainly the most important lesson this chapter teaches. However, this story also warns Christians about putting conditions on our obedience to God. If we do this, God may use someone else, and we will not achieve all we could for His glory. God honored Barak, but he has forever remained in Deborah's shadow. He defeated the Canaanites, but he failed to defeat their leader, Sisera.

God uses women in key roles in His work. There are at least 22 individuals or groups of women in Judges, and 10 of these have speaking parts. They are: Achsah (1:11-15); Deborah (chs. 4—5); Jael (4:17-23; 5:4-27); the mother of Sisera (5:28); the wise princesses of Sisera's mother (5:29-30); Gideon's concubine, the mother of Abimelech (8:31; 9:1-3); an unnamed woman who killed Abimelech (9:53); Jephthah's mother (11:1); Gilead's wife (11:2-3); Jephthah's daughter (11:34-40); the companions of Jephthah's daughter (11:37-38); the daughters of Israel (11:40); Samson's mother (13:2-25); Samson's "wife" from Timnah (14:1—15:8); the prostitute whom Samson visited in Gaza (16:1-3); Delilah (16:4-22); the women of the Philistines (16:27); Micah's mother (17:1-6); the Levite's concubine (19:1-30); the virgin daughter of the Levite's host at Gibeah (19:24); the 400 young virgins of Jabesh-gilead (21:12); and the young women of Shiloh (21:21).

Remember, also, in the New Testament, the women who ministered to Jesus, Priscilla, Phoebe, and Dorcas, and others.

¹For a very helpful exposition of this chapter with emphasis on its chiasmic literary structure, see John H. Stek, "The Bee and the Mountain Goat: A Literary Reading of Judges 4," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, pp. 53-86.

²Yairah Amit, "Judges 4: Its Contents and Form," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (October 1987):99.

Women could prophesy in the meetings of the early church (1 Cor. 11:5). Just because God has excluded women from the authoritative leadership of churches as elders (1 Tim. 2:12), does not mean they can do nothing in His service. This limitation has led some to conclude, that there are more divine restrictions on the ministry of women in the New Testament than there were in the Old. However, the opposite is true. Women could not be priests under the Mosaic Covenant, but they are priests under the New Covenant (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6).

God has excluded men from some ministries too, such as being mothers. Motherhood is one of the greatest and most influential ministries any human being can have: "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world."¹

Normally God chose to use men as prophets, both in Old Testament times and in the early church. However, in both periods He occasionally selected women for this ministry. And if it were not for the ministry of women, God's work throughout history would have suffered greatly. Think of Amy Carmichael, Fanny Crosby, Wetherill Johnson, Elisabeth Elliot, Isobel Kuhn, and countless others who have advanced and blessed the church.

This chapter also teaches us that God will use unusual people with unusual equipment—if they desire to do His will (cf. Ehud and Shamgar). Jael used what she had at hand to serve Him. Through a "Bee" and a "Mountain Goat," two women of faith and courage, God restored peace to the land of milk and honey.² God uses women (and men) of faith and courage to give His people victory over their enemies.

2. Deborah's song of victory ch. 5

One writer called this song "the finest masterpiece of Hebrew poetry" that "deserves a place among the best songs of victory ever written."³ It is the equivalent of a victory celebration when the troops come home from a war (cf. Exod. 15; Ps. 68). It is one of three sections of poems in Judges, along

¹William Ross Wallace, *John o' London's Treasure Trove*. Cited in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, p. 557.

²Stek, pp. 75, 78.

³Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 326.

with Jotham's fable of the trees (9:8-15) and Samson's riddles and proverbs (14:14, 16, 18).¹

"Observe that each of the three major sections [of Deborah's song] centers around a basic contrast: in verses 2-11c, the explosive God and humiliated people; in verses 11d-23, daring warriors and cautious brothers; in verses 24-30, gutsy woman and poor mommy."²

Introduction 5:1

The writer credited Deborah with composing this song (cf. v. 7), even though he wrote that both "Deborah and Barak ... sang" it (v. 1).³

"... Deborah was the poetic inspiration, Barak was the practical organizer."⁴

"It is important to notice that Deborah sang this song of praise on the same day God gave His people victory. ... We ought to learn, as we observe these people, the priority of praise in believers' lives."⁵

Call to praise 5:2

This opening verse gives the reason, as well as the call, to bless the LORD. The leaders of the Israelites led, and the people volunteered; they voluntarily followed their leadership. This was a major reason for the Israelites' success in this battle. When God's people carry out their assigned responsibilities and cooperate, God grants success. Unfortunately, many good works flounder because the saints refuse to work together and follow their leaders. Cooperation is one of the major themes in this song.

God's former salvation 5:3-5

Deborah called all people of consequence ("kings" and "dignitaries," v. 3) to pay attention ("Hear," "listen") to the record of God's sovereignty that

¹Sanford C. Yoder, *Poetry of the Old Testament*, pp. 58-61, 63-67.

²D. R. Davis, p. 82.

³For information helpful in understanding Hebrew poetry, see Cundall and Morris, pp. 91-93; and G. Buchanan Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry*.

⁴Morgan, *The Unfolding ...*, p. 114.

⁵Inrig, p. 72.

follows (cf. Exod. 15:18). "Kings" may refer to pagan kings, and "dignitaries" to Israel's leaders. The prophetess compared God's revelation at Sinai, when He gave the Israelites His covenant, to His intervention for His people in their most recent battle. She pictured God marching from Mt. Seir in Edom, to Mt. Sinai, where He appeared to the Israelites in great power, in a storm and earthquake (cf. Exod. 19:18; Deut. 33:2). Later in the song, she spoke of God's recent deliverance of His people in similar terms (vv. 20-21). She was comparing Yahweh's mighty self-revelation at Mt. Sinai with His similarly mighty self-revelation recently in the Esdraelon Valley ("This Sinai"). The description is poetic. We should not interpret it as literally as we would a prose narrative.

"... the song of victory says that the clouds dropped down rain, and it only rains on Esdraelon in the winter. The same thing is necessarily implied by the fact that 'the river of Kishon swept them away, that ancient river, the River Kishon,' [v. 21] and this it could not do except in winter."¹

Background of God's recent deliverance 5:6-8

During the days of Shamgar and Jael, the Canaanites were so strong that the people with the birthright to the land (the Israelites) feared to go out on the main highways. Instead, they traveled the back roads ("roundabout ways," v. 6) in order to avoid molestation. Peasant farmers could not raise or sell crops because of the Canaanite threat; they stopped working because of the Canaanite oppression. The Israelites chose "new gods," in the sense that they turned to idols—as a result of God not delivering them for 20 years. These conditions led to war in the gates of the cities, that is, civil war, internal strife in Israel. The 40,000 (or, less likely, 40 military units) were evidently Israel's soldiers who did not have normal weapons ("not a shield or spear was seen," v. 8).

When God raised up Deborah, Israel's fortunes changed dramatically. Deborah saw herself as merely a "mother in Israel" (v. 7) not a great warrior or even a prophetess, though she filled both of those roles. A mother is an unlikely leader of a successful revolutionary war. Yet God used Deborah to give new life to Israel, and to nurture the conditions that would sustain

¹Thomson, 2:145.

Israel's life. The title "mother in Israel" also reflects the honor and gratitude that the people extended to Deborah.

A renewed call to bless God 5:9-11

Verse 9 is very similar to verse 2 in that Deborah again voiced appreciation for the soldiers who went into battle. She then urged all the Israelites to bless the LORD for His recent victory. Those who rode on "white donkeys" (v. 10) were the upper classes, the rulers. Those who sat on "rich carpets" (v. 10) may refer to the wealthy, or perhaps those who stayed at home rather than participating in the fighting.¹ Those who "travel on the roads" (v. 10) were the middle classes. Deborah called on all these groups to sing praises to God for His deliverance. The writer pictured them as gathering at the wells ("watering places") and town "gates" in order to talk about and rejoice together in God's goodness for giving victory to His people ("recount the righteous deeds of the LORD," v. 11).

The faithful and unfaithful participants 5:12-18

God had to rouse Deborah to oppose the Canaanites; she did not initiate this action. God also roused her to sing His praise after the victory. After God stirred Deborah and Barak into action, many Israelite "survivors" (v. 13, the 40,000 volunteers) of the oppression followed their lead into the Valley of Jezreel. They came from the tribe of Ephraim in the region that the Amalekites had formerly occupied ("whose root is in Amalek," v. 14; cf. 12:15). They also came from Benjamin, western Manasseh ("Machir"), Naphtali, and Zebulun. Perhaps only the princes or leaders from Issachar came, or perhaps Deborah described the soldiers from Issachar as princes (cf. 6:34-35). Most of Issachar's territory lay in the valley where this battle took place. Perhaps many of the residents of Issachar were too fearful to participate.

Notable by their absence were the tribes of Reuben, the Gileadites (Gad and the part of Manasseh east of the Jordan), Dan, and Asher. G. Campbell Morgan captured the sarcasm of verses 15 and 16 by paraphrasing: "Those people of Reuben held conventions and passed resolutions and did nothing!"²

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 96, preferred the second view.

²Morgan, *The Unfolding ...*, p. 115.

The description of Dan staying on ships (v. 17) may mean the Danites were busy pursuing commercial activities off their Mediterranean coast.

"... they may have become too closely associated with their Phoenician and Canaanite neighbors to engage them in war ..."¹

Some scholars have suggested that a better translation of "on ships" may be "at ease." This reading rests on discoveries at Ugarit.²

"The [Hebrew] text of Judges is generally in good condition, ranking with the Pentateuch among the best preserved parts of the OT. The Song of Deborah in chapter 5, however, is an ancient poem with several textual problems stemming from the obscurity of its vocabulary."³

The more remote tribes stayed at home and did not participate in the war. Note the lack of tribal unity in Israel, which only increased as time passed.

"A voluntary lack of fellowship with other believers will inevitably produce a lack of enthusiasm for God's work."⁴

Deborah commended the people of Zebulun and Naphtali especially for their bravery ("who risked their lives," v. 18).

"The people of God today are not unlike the people of Israel when it comes to God's call for service: some immediately volunteer and follow the Lord; some risk their lives; some give the call serious consideration but say no; and others keep to themselves as though the call had never been given."⁵

God's defeat of the Canaanites 5:19-22

This great victory over the Canaanites was due to God's supernatural intervention for Israel. He increased the effectiveness of the Israelite soldiers. "The kings" in verse 19 are probably the Canaanite kings who

¹Lewis, p. 41.

²See Peter C. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old Testament*, pp. 84-86; J. Gray, pp. 287-88.

³Wolf, p. 380.

⁴Inrig, p. 80.

⁵Wiersbe, p. 112.

participated in this battle. "The waters of [near] Megiddo" is probably a reference to the Kishon River. Taanach may have been in ruins at this time.¹

The stars (v. 20) symbolize the forces of heaven (i.e., God's forces). On this occasion God used rain from heaven to assist the Israelites. This personification ("the stars fought") ridiculed the Canaanites' belief in astrology.² The overflowing and swiftly moving Kishon River that resulted from the rain made it impossible for the Canaanites to use their horses and chariots effectively (cf. Exod. 14:25).

"In all probability we have to think of a terrible storm, with thunder and lightning and hail, or the sudden bursting of a cloud, which is poetically described as though the stars of heaven had left their courses to fight for the Lord and His kingdom upon earth."³

"A raindrop is a very fragile thing; but if you put enough of them together, you can defeat an army!"⁴

Since Baal was the "storm god," who supposedly fought for the Canaanites, Deborah was clearly glorifying Yahweh over Baal in what she said here.

God's curse and blessing 5:23-27

Meroz (v. 23) may refer to Merom, an Israelite village in Naphtali, west of Hazor, which was at this time a Canaanite stronghold. Evidently, out of fear of reprisals, the Israelites who lived there did not join their brethren in fighting their foe. In contrast, Jael feared nothing, but instead, faced with the opportunity to kill Sisera, did so boldly. This made her "most blessed of women" (v. 24), the embodiment of God's will for justice and righteousness (cf. Luke 1:42, 51-53). Curds (v. 25) refers to the coagulated part of milk from which cheese comes, in contrast to the watery whey.

"By having Sisera fall and saying that he 'lay' at Jael's feet—more literally, '*between* her feet [or legs]'—the poet suggests the sexual dimension of the scene. The potential rapist is

¹W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, p. 117.

²Wolf, p. 414.

³Keil and Delitzsch, pp. 320-21.

⁴Wiersbe, p. 112.

subdued by the potential victim; that is, the poet contributes to what is also evident in the narrative version in 4:17-22—the 'womanization' of Sisera ..."1

A picture of frustrated hope 5:28-30

Deborah put herself in the shoes of Sisera's mother (cf. v. 7) and imagined what she must have been thinking as she anxiously anticipated her son's victorious return. However, deep in her heart, the mother of the commander wondered if he would return. Instead of wearing a beautiful garment, the "dyed cloth of double embroidery" she hoped for, she ended up wearing sackcloth and ashes.

"Three times in the Old Testament we read of women who looked through the window: Sisera's mother, Saul's daughter Michal (2 Sam. 6:16), and Jezebel (2 Kin. 9:30). All three opposed God's will and suffered accordingly."²

"The word for 'girl' [or concubine] (*raham*, v. 30) normally means 'womb,' brusquely suggesting the lustful treatment each one could expect."³

This touch ("two concubines for every warrior") is added confirmation that Jael was defending herself from a potential rapist when she killed Sisera. As noted earlier, this song is full of contrasts. The simplicity of Jael's tent (v. 24) also contrasts with the mother of Sisera's palace (v. 29).⁴

The final chorus 5:31

Deborah's song concludes with a prayerful wish that those who oppose Yahweh would perish and that those who love Him would prosper ("like the rising of the sun in its might"). This verse invites the reader to consider how we too, as New Testament believers, may join God in His work of crushing oppressors, His enemies, and so take our place among His friends.⁵

¹McCann, p. 57.

²*The Nelson ...*, p. 408.

³Wolf, p. 416.

⁴Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p. 45.

⁵McCann, p. 61. See Barnabas Lindars, "Deborah's Song: Women in the Old Testament," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 65:2 (Spring 1983):158-75.

Following this victory, and the subsequent battles with Jabin and the Canaanites that followed (4:24), the land saw no major wars for 40 years (v. 31). Evidently it took some time for the Israelites to defeat Jabin and his forces completely following the battle at the Kishon.

One writer pointed out several features of the ministry of Deborah that reveal Israel's inverted life during the era of the judges.¹ Perhaps the most obvious is the fact that a woman, rather than a man, led Israel at this particular time.

The emphases in this song are: God's people should honor Him for His salvation, the importance of cooperation in God's work, and the heroism of people such as Jael. The greatest argument for the propriety of Jael's action is that God honored her in this song (vv. 24-27). The whole Song of Deborah celebrates the establishment of God's justice and righteousness (cf. v. 11).

Women today can serve in church ministries, and in parachurch ministries, provided they do not usurp the authority of the male leadership (1 Tim. 2:12). If there is any question about the appropriateness of what Deborah and Jael did, chapter 5 should answer it. This chapter celebrates the fact that God gave His people a great victory through these women. I believe it was appropriate for women to serve as prophets and judges in biblical times, but it is not appropriate for them to serve now as elders of churches (i.e., in the highest position of responsibility in churches; 1 Tim. 2—3; Titus 2). Elders are consistently described as males in the New Testament, though I believe women can serve as deacons (official servants of the church; 1 Tim. 3).²

D. THE FOURTH APOSTASY 6:1—10:5

The writer of Judges structured this book so that the story of Gideon would be its focal center. Chisholm argued that the events described in 6:1—16:31 were chronologically parallel to those in 3:7—5:31, thus harmonizing the events in Judges with the chronological reference in 1 Kings 6:1.³

¹Freema Gottlieb, "Three Mothers," *Judaism* 30 (Spring 1981):194-203.

²See my notes on these New Testament passages for further discussion of these issues.

³Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "The Chronology of the Book of Judges," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52:2 (June 2009):247-55.

"Within the main body of the book, seven major narrative blocks can be noted. Moreover, there are certain parallel features between these narratives so that the entire book reflects a carefully worked symmetrical pattern. Furthermore this pattern has as its focal point the Gideon narrative in 6:1—8:32.

- "A Introduction, Part I (1:1—2:5)
 - B Introduction, Part II (2:6—3:6)
 - C Othniel Narrative (3:7-11)
 - D Ehud Narrative (3:12-31)
 - E Deborah-Barak Narrative (4:1—5:31)
 - F Gideon Narrative (6:1—8:32)
 - E' Abimelech Narrative (8:33—10:5)
 - D' Jephthah Narrative (10:6—12:15)
 - C' Samson Narrative (13:1—16:31)
 - B' Epilogue, Part I (17:1—18:31)
 - A' Epilogue, Part II (19:1—21:25)

"This arrangement suggests that the Gideon narrative has a unique contribution to make to the theological development of the book. As the nation went from one cycle of discipline to the next, there was a continual deterioration. Also there was a shift in the 'quality' of the judges themselves as the book advances. The Gideon narrative seems to mark a notable turning point."¹

"The Gideon-Abimelech complex (6:1—9:57) is a turning point in the Judges narrative; after this, Yahweh becomes

¹Tanner, p. 150. See also D. W. Gooding, "The Composition of the Book of Judges," *Eretz Israel* 16 (1982):70-79.

increasingly harsh in his response to his people (10:13), and there is a notable decrease in divine activity."¹

1. The story of Gideon 6:1—8:32

Paul Tanner pointed out that the Gideon narrative consists of five primary sections:

"The first section (6:1-10) provides the introduction and setting before Gideon's debut, the second section (6:11-32) gives the commissioning of Gideon as deliverer of Israel, the third section (6:33—7:18) presents the preparation for the battle, the fourth section (7:19—8:21) recounts the defeat of the Midianite army, and the fifth section (8:22-32) records the conclusion to Gideon's life after the victory over Midian. Yet thematic parallels exist between the first and fifth sections and between the second and fourth sections, thus giving the whole narrative a symmetrical pattern:

A 6:1-10

B 6:11-32

C 6:33—7:18

B' 7:19—8:21

A' 8:22-32"²

Other scholars divide the Gideon narrative into three parts: God's punishment and deliverance of Israel (6:1—8:3), Gideon's punishment and subjugation of Israel (8:4-28), and Gideon's legacy (8:29—9:57).³

"In this narrative—along with the subsequent tragedy of Abimelech that follows in ch. 9—we can see, in ways not evident previously, the continuing deterioration of Israel's spiritual state. First, God now rebuked Israel when it called upon Him (6:7-10). Second, the judge himself contributed to

¹Kuruvilla, pp. 126-27.

²Tanner, p. 151.

³Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 250-307. See also O'Connell, p. 139.

the spiritual decline (8:24-27). Third, Israel's tribes fought among themselves for the first time (8:16, 17; 9:23-54), prior to an even worse dissension later (12:1-6; 20:1-48)."¹

"The history of Gideon and his family is related very fully, because the working of the grace and righteousness of the faithful covenant God was so obviously displayed therein, that it contained a rich treasure of instruction and warning for the church of the Lord in all ages."²

"... more space is devoted to Gideon in the Book of Judges (100 verses) than to any other judge; and Gideon is the only judge whose personal struggles with his faith are recorded. Gideon is a great encouragement to people who have a hard time accepting themselves and believing that God can make anything out of them or do anything with them."³

Renewed apostasy and its punishment 6:1-10

The Midianites were nomads: people who have no permanent abode but travel from place to place to find fresh pasture for their livestock. They were the descendants of Abraham and Keturah (Gen. 25:1-2), and they occupied the plains that bordered the Arabian Desert to the east of Moab and Ammon. They were raiders of Israel for seven years, and would descend on the Israelites at harvest times, steal their crops and possessions, and then retreat to their own land (cf. Isa. 9:4; 10:26; 60:6). It was not their strategy to kill the Israelites and take over their land. They preferred to let the Israelites sow and harvest their crops, and then steal what God's people had labored so hard to produce. The Midianites conducted their raids riding on camels, which made them very hard to overtake in pursuit.

"This is the earliest instance of such a phenomenon of which we have record. The effective domestication of the camel had been accomplished somewhat earlier deep in Arabia and had now spread to tribal confederacies to the south and east of

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 408.

² Keil and Delitzsch, p. 326.

³ Wiersbe, p. 113.

Palestine, giving them a mobility such as they had never had before."¹

To conceal their harvested crops and other valuable possessions, the Israelites hid them in caves and other holes in the ground. Many of the mountainous areas of Israel's land abounded with natural caves and dens—and they still do.

The Amalekites, and other tribes that lived in the Arabian Desert east of Canaan ("people of the east," v. 3), joined the Midianites in their raids. Josephus called these desert-dwellers Arabians.² The raids extended all the way to Gaza on the Mediterranean coast (v. 4), far into Israel. These were the people whom God allowed to afflict His people for doing evil in His sight.

"Charles Spurgeon said, 'The Lord does not permit His children to sin successfully.'"³

After seven years of these locust-like, devastating raids (cf. Deut. 28:31, 38; Joel 1:4), the Israelites were at their wits' end, and cried out to Yahweh in their misery (v. 6). In response to their cries, God sent an unnamed prophet to the Israelites to explain the reason for their discipline (vv. 8-10).⁴ They had again disobeyed the LORD (v. 10). Yet this particular prophet did not deliver the people (cf. 4:4-7), but reminded them of their sin. Even at this point in Israel's history, when the people were getting farther from God, the Book of Judges portrays a God who cannot help but be gracious in spite of His people's waywardness.

Gideon's commissioning by Yahweh 6:11-32

"... the heroic women of the song [of Deborah, ch. 5] give way to an unheroic 'man of Israel' (7:14) who not only does all he can to evade the call of Yahweh but in the end abandons God. ... In the person of Gideon the narrator recognizes the schizophrenic nature of Israel's spiritual personality. On the one hand she treasures her call to be God's covenant people;

¹Bright, *A History ...*, p. 158.

²Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:6:1.

³Wiersbe, p. 113.

⁴See Wood, *The Prophets ...*, pp. 146-49.

on the other she cannot resist the allurements of the prevailing Canaanite culture."¹

The writer presented Gideon as a second Moses in his calling. Both men were very reluctant to lead God's people (cf. Exod. 3—4).

The appearance of the angel of the LORD 6:11-18

"As the reproof of the prophet was intended to turn the hearts of the people once more to the Lord their God and deliverer, so the manner in which God called Gideon to be their deliverer, and rescued Israel from its oppressors through his instrumentality, was intended to furnish the most evident proof that the help and salvation of Israel were not to be found in man, but solely in their God."²

Gideon's name means "Hewer" or "Hacker." God used him to cut down the altar of Baal—and then the Midianites!

In calling Gideon to deliver the Israelites, God revealed Himself twice. The first time, God appeared to Gideon, and spoke directly to him through the "angel of the LORD" (vv. 11-24; cf. Gen. 32:28), who "somewhat appeared to him in the shape of a young man ..." ³ The second time, God commanded Gideon to destroy the local Baal worship, and renew the worship of Yahweh (vv. 25-32; cf. 2:1-3; 1 Kings 18:30-40). In the first case, God acknowledged Gideon, and in the second, He called on Gideon to acknowledge Him as his God.

"God often manifests himself to his people when they are out of the noise and hurry of this world."⁴

"This messenger [the angel of the LORD, v. 11] paired together with the prophet of 6:8 ... serves as the first of several people and things paired together in the Gideon narrative. These include Gideon's two names (with Jerubbaal), two names for God (Yahweh and Elohim), Gideon's two fleece tests, two buildings of the altar in 6:24-32, two pairs of Midianite officers

¹Block, *Judges ...*, p. 250.

²Keil and Delitzsch, p. 330.

³Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:6:2.

⁴Henry, p. 249.

executed (7:25; 8:21), two tests of assurance of Yahweh's support (6:36-38, 39-40), and two tests God uses to reduce Gideon's army (7:2-3, 4-8)."¹

What is the significance of this pairing? I think it may be a device the writer used to highlight the doublemindedness that characterized Gideon and the Israelites.

Ophrah was a village over which Gideon's father, Joash, exercised a strong influence (v. 11; cf. v. 24). Its exact location is uncertain, but it appears to have been in the Jezreel Valley. Earlier, the writer described Deborah as sitting under a palm tree (4:5), but now we find Gideon sitting under an oak tree (v. 11). The former site was a place of fruitful blessing, but the latter was often a center of Canaanite worship. This contrast may be another indication of the decay that was spreading in Israel.²

Normally the Israelites would beat out their wheat in the open field, or on a raised piece of ground or platform. The prevailing wind would blow the lighter chaff away, while the heavier grain would fall to the ground. However, Gideon was beating out his grain in a wine press. The Israelites usually built winepresses in lower lying areas, so that the juice of the grapes would not run off. Gideon's use of a winepress for threshing grain shows that he felt the Midianite threat; it was so he could remain unnoticed that he beat out his grain in a less conspicuous place (v. 11).³

The angel, in His greeting ("valiant warrior," v. 12), was addressing Gideon as the man he would become, by God's enablement, not the man he was then. In the same way, God had called Abraham the father of a multitude before he had any children. He called Peter a rock before he behaved like one. He also calls Christians saints, even though we are not yet as saintly as God will make us. Alternatively, this may simply have been a complimentary address.⁴

¹Butler, pp. 200-1.

²Mark J. Boda, "Judges" in *Numbers-Ruth*, vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, revised ed., p. 1144.

³Cf. Jamieson, et al., p. 189.

⁴Block, *Judges ...*, p. 260.

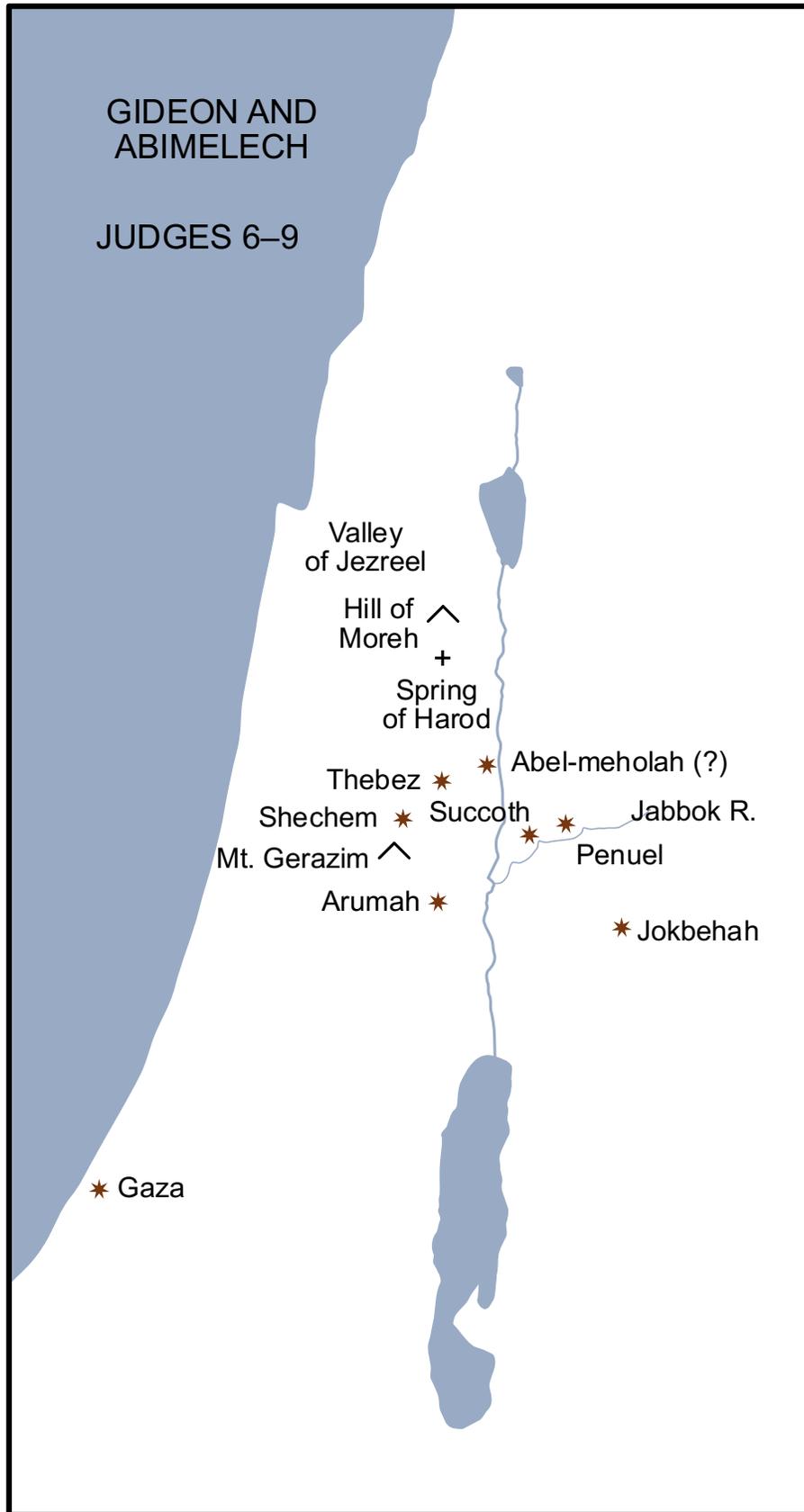
"One of the great truths of Scripture is that when God looks at us, He does not see us for what we are, but for what we can become, as He works in our lives."¹

Gideon could not understand why the Israelites were suffering as they were, if Yahweh was indeed with His people (v. 13; cf. Deut. 31:17). He failed to realize that their condition was the result of their abandoning God, not His abandoning them.

"Sins, not afflictions, argue God's absence."²

¹Inrig, p. 84.

²Bishop Hall, quoted by Bush, p. 85. Cf. Josh. 7:10-13.



The strength of Gideon, to which the angel referred (v. 14), was what God's promised presence and commission guaranteed (vv. 14, 16). Gideon did not disbelieve the angel as much as he failed to understand how he could be God's instrument of deliverance. He was the youngest, and therefore the least esteemed in his father's household. Furthermore, his family was a comparatively insignificant one in Manasseh (v. 15). Gideon was looking to his own personality and background for natural signs of leadership, but God was promising supernatural enablement.

"Gideon's response to this divine word, however, is the first in a series of responses and actions that characterize him as lacking in faith, which thus shows further deterioration in the presentation of the Judges ..."¹

So to confirm that the angel really was a divine messenger, Gideon requested some supernatural confirmation that this calling was from God (v. 17). He then prepared to offer his guest a token of his hospitality (v. 18).

"... among unsophisticated Arabs [even today] the killing of a sheep, calf, or kid, in honor of a visitor, is strictly required by their laws of hospitality, and the neglect of it keenly resented."²

The Angel's sign 6:19-24

The food that Gideon offered his visitor was what a person would normally set before a guest whom one wished to honor in a special way, in that culture. The angel directed Gideon to place the food on a rock, and to pour out the broth on the ground, to resemble both a burnt sacrifice on an altar and a drink offering that was poured out. The angel's miracle, of utterly consuming the sacrifice with fire, convinced Gideon that this angel was God, and that He would fulfill His promises to be with Gideon and grant him victory.

Perhaps Gideon remembered how God similarly had consumed with fire sacrifices on the brazen altar, when the Israelites dedicated the tabernacle in the wilderness. If so, this memory might have encouraged him to believe

¹Boda, p. 1146.

²Thomson, 2:162.

that the same God who had delivered Israel then was still with His people now, and could deliver them again.

"The acceptance of the sacrifice was also a token of the acceptance of his person; it went to confirm the commission now given him, and to afford him every needed assurance of success."¹

This miracle strengthened Gideon's faith greatly. In building an altar to the LORD after the fire sacrifice, and naming it "The LORD is Peace" (v. 24), Gideon was acknowledging Him as his God (cf. Gen. 12:6-7).

"God had taught Gideon that it was not his inadequacy but God's adequacy that really counted."²

"... his [Gideon's] heroism was not a product of his natural make-up, but the outcome of a transforming spiritual experience."³

God presented Himself to Gideon as the same God who had appeared to the patriarchs, and who had fulfilled His promises to them (cf. Gen. 18).

Gideon's public confession 6:25-32

"Under normal circumstances the narrative should have proceeded directly from v. 24 to vv. 33-35, and then on to 7:1. But the normal sequence is interrupted twice to deal with a pair of abnormalities. The first is an objective issue, the presence of a pagan cult installation in Gideon's father's own backyard. The second is a subjective problem, Gideon's persistent resistance to the call of God."⁴

After the angel had vanished, the LORD appeared to Gideon again the same night. He commanded him to tear down his family's pagan altar and its accompanying Asherah pole, build an altar to Yahweh, and offer his father's bull as a burnt offering of worship. Gideon's name means "hewer" or

¹Bush, p. 88.

²Inrig, p. 95.

³Baxter, 2:21.

⁴Block, *Judges ...*, p. 265.

"hacker," so this event (tearing the altar and Asherah pole in pieces) may have been the source of it.

"The family has taught Gideon the traditions of the people of Yahweh (v 13), but they practice the rituals of Baal. Here is a clear indication of the syncretistic practices in Israel's religion at this period."¹

This act of tearing down the family's pagan altar constituted a public confession of Gideon's commitment to the LORD. It was necessary for him to take this stand personally, before the nation would follow him as its judge. Compare Moses' need to circumcise his son (Exod. 4:24-26). The real problem in Israel was not the Midianites' oppression, but Israel's spiritual apostasy due to idolatry. God's command to Gideon: "Take your father's bull and a second bull" (v. 25), can be translated: "Take your father's second (or second-best) bull" (CEV).

So probably Gideon used one and the same bull, both to pull apart the Canaanite altar, and to sacrifice as a burnt offering to Yahweh.² This sacrifice served a twofold purpose: First, burnt offerings of worship made atonement, and symbolized the offerer's total dedication to the LORD. Second, Gideon's sacrifice constituted a rejection of Baal worship, since the bull was a sacred animal in the Baal fertility cult.³

The fact that the bull was seven years old, strong and healthy, may have symbolized that the current seven-year oppression by Israel's enemies was about to end.⁴ On the other hand, or perhaps additionally, it may have indicated that the destruction of Baal worship to follow would be an act of God.

Another opinion is that Gideon offered two bulls: one for his own sins, and the other for the sins of the people whom he would deliver.⁵ Gideon's fear of being observed as he obeyed God (v. 27) was only natural, since veneration of Baal was strong in his family and town. His fear of man was greater than his fear of God at this point (cf. Barak, 4:8).

¹Butler, p. 205.

²See Block, *Judges ...*, p. 266.

³Cundall and Morris, p. 107.

⁴Boda, p. 1148.

⁵Henry, p. 251.

"How different from Deuteronomy 13:6-10, where Moses commanded that even close relatives must be stoned for idolatry! The heresy had become the main religion."¹

"The sentence that should have been imposed on idolators [*sic*] is pronounced upon the one who destroys the idol!"²

Ironically, Gideon's daring act of faith inspired his father, Joash, to take a stand for Yahweh (v. 31), even though Joash, until that very morning, had been a worshipper of Baal (v. 25)! The person whom Gideon probably feared most, his own father, had become his most outspoken defender!

"The probability, we think, is that Gideon, perceiving in the morning to what a pitch of exasperation the citizens were wrought, and how seriously they threatened his life, took occasion frankly to inform his father of the visit of the angel, and of all the circumstances of his call and commission, and that this, added to his feelings as a father, had served at once to convince him of his former error and to determine to stand by his son against the rage of the populace."³

"There are some profound spiritual implications in Gideon's assignment. 1. Baal must go before Midian can go. ... 2. God's altar cannot be built until Baal's altar is destroyed. ... 3. The place we must start is in our own backyard."⁴

"Obedience first, and then strength: this is God's order."⁵

Gideon's personal struggle to believe God's promise 6:33—7:18

"The primary matter in the Gideon narrative is not the deliverance itself, but rather something more personal, namely, Gideon's struggle to believe God's promise. ...

"Judges 6:33—7:18 is arranged in the following concentric pattern:

¹Wolf, p. 422.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 268.

³Bush, p. 92.

⁴Inrig, pp. 100-101.

⁵Darby, 1:413.

- "A The Spirit-endowed Gideon *mobilized* four tribes against the Midianites, though *lacking confidence* in God's promise (6:33-35).
- B Gideon sought a *sign* from God with the fleece *to confirm the promise* that the Lord would give Midian into his hand (6:36-40).
- C With the *fearful* Israelites having departed, God directed Gideon to *go down* to the water for the further reduction of his force (7:1-8).
- C' With *fear* still in Gideon himself, God directed Gideon to *go down* to the enemy camp to overhear the enemy (7:9-11).
- B' God provided a *sign* to Gideon with the dream of the Midianite *to confirm the promise* that the Lord would give Midian into his hand (7:12-14).
- A' The worshipping Gideon *mobilized* his force of 300 for a surprise attack against the Midianites, *fully confident* in God's promise (7:15-18).

"The reduction of Gideon's army is a familiar story often told from the perspective of emphasizing God's ability to deliver whether by many or by few. While this is true, such an explanation falls short of doing justice in this context. The context is dealing with a struggle within Gideon himself."¹

The mobilizing of four tribes in fear 6:33-35

Some time later, Israel's enemies from the East again crossed the Jordan, and amassed their forces in the Valley of Jezreel near Gideon's home (v. 33). They numbered 135 thousand, or 135 units, depending on the meaning of *eleph* here (8:10). Thousand seems preferable (cf. 7:12). This incursion into enemy territory appears to have been the Midianites' annual invasion.

¹Tanner, p. 157.

Gideon wished to reconfirm the LORD's promise to be with him and to lead him in victory against the enemy. Perhaps considerable time had elapsed between Gideon's call (vv. 11-32) and this new threat of attack. "The Spirit of the LORD covered Gideon like clothing," strengthening and defending him for his great task (v. 34; cf. Gen 28:20; Isa. 59:17). Gideon then sent out messengers calling for men from several of the other tribes to join him and his family to fight the Midianites (vv. 34-35).

"His enthusiastic corralling of troops across Israel in 6:35 was not the result of his clothing by the Spirit. Unsure of Yahweh's power, the man thinks deity needs a little help, and so he engages in an extensive military draft."¹

"When the 'spirit of the LORD' first appears in 3:10, it possesses Othniel, the first judge; and deliverance follows immediately. Here, however, when the spirit possesses Gideon, and despite the auspicious sign that several tribes fall into place when Gideon sounds the trumpet (6:34-35), Gideon hesitates (6:36-40). Apparently, the spirit is not effective apart from human participation ..."²

Gideon's desire for encouragement 6:36-40

The LORD graciously answered Gideon's request for additional signs that God was with him. Gideon should not have needed to request these signs, because God had already promised to help him (vv. 14, 16), and had already given him a sign (v. 21). In any event, Gideon's faith needed some added support, and God provided this without reproof (cf. James 1:5).

"The remarkable thing is that God responds to his tests. He is more anxious to deliver Israel than to quibble with this man's semipagan notions of deity."³

"Gideon's fleece is not a sign of faith. It is the opposite. It is not a search for God's will. It is a desperate grasp for security

¹Kuruvilla, p. 137.

²McCann, pp. 65-66. Cf. 11:29-40; 13:1-25.

³Block, *Judges ...*, p. 273. See also K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges, Ruth*, p. 188.

by one who knows clearly what that will be but who is reluctant to do it."¹

Perhaps Gideon used a woolen fleece for his sign simply because it was handy. He asked God to cause the dew to settle only on the fleece, that night, but to leave the surrounding ground dry. In the morning he discovered that is what God had done. Gideon may have concluded that he had asked the wrong thing, since wool attracts dew. In any case, the next night he asked God to let the dew fall on the ground, but not on the fleece. God did this too. Thus, this double demonstration, that God was indeed with him, and would grant him victory as He had promised, strengthened Gideon's faith.

Some students of this story have seen a deeper meaning in these signs than is immediately apparent:

"Dew in the Scriptures is a symbol of the beneficent power of God, which quickens, revives, and invigorates the objects of nature, when they have been parched by the burning heat of the sun's rays. The first sign was to be a pledge to him of the visible, tangible blessing of the Lord upon His people, the proof that He would grant them power over their mighty foes by whom Israel was then oppressed. The woollen [*sic*] fleece represented the nation of Israel in its condition at this time, when God had given power to the foe that was devastating its land, and had withdrawn His blessing from Israel. The moistening of the fleece with the dew of heaven whilst the land all round continued dry, was a sign that the Lord God would once more give strength to His people from on high, and withdraw it from the nations of the earth. Hence the second sign acquires the more general signification, 'that the Lord manifested himself even in the weakness and forsaken condition of His people, while the nations were flourishing all around' (*O. v. Gerl.*) . . ."²

Did God intend the dew, the fleece, and the ground to represent these things? Whether He did or not, it is clear that these two miraculous

¹Daniel I. Block, "Gideon: A Rough Vessel," *The Standard* 77:2 (February 1987):25. See idem, *Judges ...*, p. 307.

²Keil and Delitzsch, pp. 339-40.

demonstrations of God's presence and power strengthened Gideon's faith. That is the main point. Gideon was now ready to lead the Israelites against their foes.

"The manipulation of dew would be a powerful way for the real deity to stand up and be counted since both Baal and the Lord had claimed the right to provide this moisture so critical to survival in the land. [One of Baal's daughters was named Tallaya, or "Dew."¹] On a threshing floor before the soldiers of Israel God used the manipulation of dew to confirm His power and presence at the expense of Baal."²

Should Christians set out a "fleece" to determine God's will? The fact that Gideon set one out in the first place shows his weak faith. As Yairah Amit wrote: "he needed numerous signs like a person addicted to tranquilizers."³ Nevertheless, God accommodated his weak faith, and He often graciously accommodates our weak faith, when we ask Him for a sign. But a better approach is simply to trust God's promises and move forward in obedience.

"'Putting out the fleece' is not only an evidence of our unbelief, but it's also an evidence of our pride. God has to do what I tell Him to do before I'll do what He tells me to do!"⁴

But what about determining God's will when He has not revealed it in Scripture? In these cases, I believe that Christians should try to determine what action would be most pleasing to the Lord by praying and by consulting His Word and perhaps getting advice from godly friends. This is the way of wisdom that the Book of Proverbs advocates. The trouble with asking for a fleece is that we can never be absolutely sure that what happens is a sign from God or merely a coincidence.

Note four things that God used to prepare Gideon in this chapter: First, Gideon met the pre-incarnate Christ (the angel of the LORD). Second, he committed himself to following Yahweh. Third, he obeyed Yahweh by taking a public stand for Him, relying on His promises. Fourth, the Holy Spirit gave Gideon supernatural power. When the people God calls to Himself respond

¹John C. L. Gibson. *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, pp. 46, 48.

²John A. Beck, "Gideon, Dew, and the Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Judges 6:33-40," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165:657 (January-March 2008):28-38.

³Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges*, p. 238.

⁴Wiersbe, p. 118.

positively, by committing themselves to Him and standing up for Him, He strengthens their faith so He can use them in even greater ways. His ability can overcome the inability of His servants, if they rely on His promises, even though their faith may be weak (cf. 2 Cor. 12:10).

"All the judges except Abimelech countered a foreign threat, but only in the case of Gideon is there an extensive personal interaction between the judge and the Lord. This observation suggests that the narrative provides more than simply a victory account for future generations of Israel's defeat of Midian. While it is true that Samson offered up a few quick prayers, only in the case of Gideon is there a focus on the judge's faith and his coming to grips with the Lord's call on his life."¹

God's command to reduce the troops 7:1-8

Presumably, God willingly gave Gideon the signs of the fleece, because He knew that the command He would give him—to reduce his army—would stretch his faith to its limit. The Israelite soldiers numbered only 32,000 (or 32 units, v. 3), while the Midianites and their allies fielded about 135,000 warriors (or 135 units, 8:10).

"With Deborah and Barak, the problem was technological disadvantage (Judg 4:3); with Gideon, it is numerical disadvantage, a disadvantage made desperate by God's strategic test."²

God clearly revealed His purpose in reducing Israel's army: He wanted everyone to recognize that the victory was His work rather than Israel's (v. 2).

"Judges 7:2 is one of the most important verses in the Bible for understanding God's principles of spiritual warfare. God is not interested in simply giving His people victory. He is concerned with teaching us *trust*. In fact, if our victories make

¹Tanner, p. 156.

²Butler, p. 213.

us self-reliant, they are ultimately more disastrous than defeat."¹

In the Mosaic Law, God had commanded that the Israelites should not force the fearful to go into battle (Deut. 20:8). So God reminded Gideon to give any who were afraid the opportunity to go home, which he did (v. 3). However, the large number that deserted him—more than two out of three—must have shocked Gideon. Then God said that even the remaining 10,000 soldiers (or 10 units) were too many (v. 4).

The normal way for a human to drink from a stream was to get down on one's hands and knees and put one's mouth to the water. This is what most of the soldiers did. A much smaller number simply remained standing or kneeled, reached down, dipped one hand into the water, and brought the water to their lips. Now God again told Gideon that he should send the majority home, and that He would deliver Israel with only the 300 men who remained. That made the ratio of Midianite to Israelite soldiers about 450 to 1 (assuming *eleph* means thousand here).

It is not clear whether God's test and choice were arbitrary, having no other significance than that most people drink in one way and fewer in the other.² Possibly God designed the test to distinguish the more alert soldiers from the less alert.³ Because, obviously, getting down on all fours leaves one more vulnerable than if one remains upright while drinking. Another possibility is that God intended to identify the least likely to succeed: those who had so little self-confidence that they kept an eye out for the enemy while they drank.⁴

D. Daube opined: "I suggest that the lapping by the 300 like dogs symbolizes a lapping of the enemy's blood."⁵

The text does not enable us to understand God's motive with certainty. Simple obedience is what He required. Numbers are not determinative when it comes to spiritual warfare. Before Gideon let the larger group of soldiers

¹Inrig, p. 125.

²Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, p. 189; Chisholm, *A Commentary ...*, p. 282.

³Darby, 1:415; Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Annotated Bible*, 2:2:88; Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 105; McGee, 2:61-62; Leon Wood, *A Survey ...*, p. 220; Lewis, p. 49; E. M. Blaiklock, *Today's Handbook of Bible Characters*, p. 108..

⁴Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:6:3, preferred this option.

⁵D. Daube, "Gideon's Few," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 7 (1956):156.

go home (v. 8), he had received a promise that God would deliver Israel with the 300 remaining warriors (v. 7). This promise undoubtedly encouraged Gideon's faith. Even though Gideon's faith was at first very weak, when he finally trusted and obeyed God, he became a powerful tool in God's hand.

"Gideon is no fearless all-pro linebacker, no General Patton and John Wayne rolled into one huge ball of true grit. ...

"We sometimes dupe ourselves into thinking that a real servant of Christ is only someone who is dynamic, assured, confident, brash, fearless, witty, adventuresome, or glamorous—with one or two appearances on a Christian television network. Don't think you are unusable because you don't have that air about you. Christ takes uncertain and fearful folk, strengthens their hands in the oddest ways, and makes them able to stand for him in school or home or work."¹

"Gideon's request with the fleece reflected war in his heart: he was fearful and lacked faith. Interestingly the reduction of Gideon's army in the structure of the text falls precisely between his unfounded request for a fleece and God's exposure of his fear. Therefore the reduction of the army was not so much intended to glorify God (by demonstrating His ability to deliver with only 300) as it was to put Gideon in a position where his fear would be exposed. The very thing Gideon had hoped to achieve by the fleece demonstration—some kind of self-assurance that things would turn out well—was the very 'carpet' that God pulled out from beneath him. Gideon sought to gain some security by his self-conceived sign with the fleece, and though God acquiesced to that request, He immediately countered by putting Gideon in an even more vulnerable position. If Gideon struggled to trust God with 32,000 Israelites against a Midianite force of 135,000 (see 8:10), how would he react when he had only a force of 300? In this light the words of God in 7:10 take on great significance."²

¹D. R. Davis, pp. 106-7.

²Tanner, p. 159.

God's invitation to visit the Midianites' camp 7:9-11

God then commanded Gideon to prepare for battle that very night (v. 9). He offered the judge a further sign that he would be victorious, and Gideon immediately seized it. God did not rebuke Gideon's normal fear of going into battle against such overwhelming odds. Instead, God strengthened Gideon's faith by allowing him to hear a conversation between two Midianite soldiers.

God's provision of encouragement 7:12-14

Gideon and his servant Purah heard two enemy soldiers conversing on the outskirts of the Midianite camp. One soldier was relating a dream he had just had to his friend. The writer probably included the reference to the apparently innumerable Midianite enemy (v. 12), in order to emphasize the greatness of the victory God would give His people.

"Dreams were considered of great importance in ancient times, especially if the dreamer was a man of rank or authority, for the gods were conceived to make known their will or desires by this means. Every dream was believed to be capable of interpretation, though this was, of course, the point where difficulties arose."¹

Yahweh obviously sent this dream. The Midianite soldier derived his interpretation of his friend's dream from the symbolism in the dream. Barley bread was the food of the poor, and would have been the staple of the Israelites under the conditions they were having to endure during Midian's oppression. In his dream, the soldier identified the loaf of barley bread as a symbol of the Israelites. The tent in the dream symbolized, for this soldier, the collective armies of all the Midianite, Amalekite, and Arabian invaders. The two soldiers had obviously heard of Gideon and his plans to engage them in battle. They therefore concluded that the unlikely destruction of the tent, by a mere loaf of barley bread, signified Gideon's destruction of their forces.

"What Gideon sought to gain by the sign of the fleece was brought to nil. So he had to go back to the choice to believe God's promise simply because God had spoken. ... The irony is

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 111.

stunning: hearing the promise directly from the Lord did not convince Gideon, but hearing it from the Midianite soldier did."¹

The mobilizing of Gideon's band in faith 7:15-18

Upon hearing this interpretation of the dream, Gideon received courage to believe that God would indeed grant him victory (v. 15).

"No character in the book receives more divine assurance than Gideon and no one displays more doubt. Gideon is, significantly, the only judge to whom God speaks directly, though this privilege does not allay his faintheartedness."²

Gideon's strategy was so effective that the LORD must have revealed it to him, though the text does not state this. Almost equally amazing is the fact that Gideon's 300 followers obeyed his bizarre instructions. This too had to have been from the LORD. The three companies of Israelites may not have completely encircled the enemy. Nevertheless, the presence of three widely separated groups of soldiers gave the Midianites the impression that a very large number of Israelites was out there in the dark. The trumpets were rams horns that the Israelite soldiers tied around their necks. The empty pitchers concealed and protected the torches until the soldiers broke them. The light from the torches added to the shock effect of the combined noise from the 300 breaking pitchers, the blowing of 300 trumpets that made each soldier sound as loud as a company commander, and the shouting of the soldiers. All of these lights and very loud "surround-sound" effects led the sleepy Midianites to conclude that a vast host of Israelite warriors surrounded them.

"Interestingly, by holding these items in their two hands they would have had no ability to hold weapons ...—further proof that this victory is to be Yahweh's, not theirs (see 7:2)."³

"Gideon had moved from fear to faith, and that is precisely the point of the section 6:33—7:18. ...

"The textual patterning of the Gideon narrative is carefully composed to highlight not the deliverance from Midian but the

¹Tanner, p. 159.

²Exum, p. 416.

³Boda, p. 1157.

change that transpired in Gideon's heart, and it is precisely there that the greatest theological lesson in these chapters is found. The fear in Gideon's heart held him back from being able to trust the promise God had given about his delivering Israel from the Midianites. To overcome this deficiency in Gideon's life, God uniquely worked to expose the problem of fear in his life and to bring him to a point of worship and faith. Then and only then was Gideon ready to lead Israel in battle. ... Furthermore all the struggles in the book result from a lack of faith. This struggle is most fully spelled out in the Gideon narrative, which accords with this event (his religious struggle) being put in the very center of the book.

"... the narrator leaves the reader with a penetrating message: God must bring His servant to a moment when all human confidence is stripped away, he sits silently in humble adoration of his God as the One who is totally sufficient against all odds to accomplish His divine will. Then and only then is he ready to move forward to taste God's victory, though that victory is no more secure or certain than before."¹

"Even so, while it seems that Gideon has 'moved from fear to faith,' the situation may actually be more complicated. The two versions of Gideon's battle cry, 'For the LORD and for Gideon!' (v. 18) and 'A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!' (v. 20), suggest that Gideon may also be moving from fear to self-assertion. While from one perspective Gideon may simply be exercising strong military leadership, he also seems willing to take at least some of 'the credit' (7:2) for the victory. This is not a good sign."²

"Gideon had earlier felt that he was nothing (6:15) and the Lord was everything (7:15). But now in this shout Gideon claims a piece of the spotlight along with God."³

¹Tanner, p. 160.

²McCann, p. 67.

³Dennis T. Olson, "The Book of Judges," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 2:803.

The defeat of the Midianites 7:19—8:21

Gideon's defeat of the Midianites took some time, and involved some conflict with the other Israelites.

Gideon's initial victory 7:19-22

Gideon commenced his "attack" at the beginning of the middle watch, which was evidently midnight.¹ Many of the Midianites would have been sound asleep, and upon awakening would have experienced utter confusion by the sights and sounds of their enemies. In addition, the movements of their own soldiers, milling around the camp as a result of the recent watch change, would have disoriented them even further. Perhaps the camels stampeded, too, being frightened by the torch fires and general confusion, and giving the waking Midianites the impression that mounted soldiers had invaded their camp.

The Midianites felt so bewildered by this "surprise attack" that they slaughtered their fellow soldiers in the confusion and fled for home, running as fast as they could go (cf. 4:15-16).

"... a few of them were slain by their enemies, but the greatest part of [*sic* by] their own soldiers [i.e., the Midianites, the Amalekites, and the Arabians], on account of the diversity of their language; and when they were once put into disorder, they killed all that they met with, as thinking them to be enemies also."²

"Armed with God's symbol of deliverance, the trumpet, and the symbol of the Holy Spirit, the oil in the lamps, Gideon's army prevailed over the pagans. God had chosen to have Gideon attack with such a small force so that the glory would certainly go to Him. And likewise, we carry the Holy Spirit in the same sort of pottery jars used by Gideon's men ... (II Cor. 4:7)."³

The towns mentioned (v. 22) were at the southeast end of the Harod (lit. "trembling") Valley. The Harod Valley is an eastern extension of the Jezreel

¹Bush, p. 104; Keil and Delitzsch, p. 347. Lindsey, p. 394, wrote that it was 10:00 p.m.

²Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:6:5.

³Zola Levitt, *A Christian Love Story*, p. 24.

Valley, and it connects the Jezreel Valley with the Jordan Valley. These towns stood on either side of the Jordan River. Beth-shittah means "house of acacia." Zererah was about five miles southwest of Succoth and Penuel.¹ Abel-meholah means "field of dancing."

Pursuit of the enemy 7:23-25

The pursuit described in these verses may have taken several days. Gideon sent messengers to call for reinforcements throughout the whole northern part of Canaan. Many other Israelites responded and helped Gideon and his band round up and execute as many of the enemy as they could capture.

"... one wonders why Gideon would need extra troops after Yahweh had 'set the sword of one against another, even throughout the *whole* army,' and when that enemy army had fled far and wide (7:22). This was probably an attempt by Gideon to steal some of the glory of victory for himself, his showing off before fellow-Israelites."²

Israel furthermore gained control of the fording places of the Jordan and killed many Midianites as they fled homeward. The Israelites also captured and executed the two leaders of the Midianite army, Oreb (lit. "the Raven") and Zeeb ("the Wolf"), east of the Jordan. The Midianites had acted like scavengers and predators, so these names were ironically appropriate.

"Among ancient nations, generals and princes often took the names of birds and beasts."³

This record of God's great deliverance of His people illustrates what God can do through one person, who, though weak in faith, is willing to trust and obey Him.

"It is not our responsibility to understand how God is going to keep His word and accomplish His work. It is our responsibility to obey Him and to do what He commands."⁴

¹ *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, map 76, p. 54.

² Kuruvilla, p. 149.

³ Bush, pp. 105-106.

⁴ Inrig, p. 135.

The resentment of the Ephraimites 8:1-3

Gideon had not invited the men of Ephraim to join him initially when he recruited the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali (6:35). Presumably he had not invited them at the LORD's direction, since he did not need more soldiers. But the men of Ephraim took this omission as an insult and quarreled with him vehemently (v. 1) ...

"... less from any dissatisfied longing for booty, than from injured pride or jealousy, because Gideon [who was from the tribe of Manasseh] had made war upon the enemy and defeated them without the co-operation of this tribe, which was striving for the leadership [in Israel]."¹

"Ephraim was very jealous of Manasseh, lest that tribe should at any time eclipse the honour of theirs."²

"... nothing is more common than for those who will not attempt or venture anything in the cause of God, to be ready to censure those who show more zeal and enterprise than themselves."³

Gideon responded diplomatically and satisfied the Ephraimites with a clever compliment (v. 2). The "gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim" refers to the lives and spoils the Ephraimites took from the fleeing Midianites, and the "vintage of Abiezer" refers to the Midianites that Gideon and his 300 men had defeated and slain. The Ephraimites' victory was better, furthermore, in that they had killed two top Midianite commanders: Oreb and Zeeb.

It is significant, however, that Gideon based his appeal on psychology rather than theology. Why did he make no reference to God's direction of him or God's provision of victory (cf. ch. 5)? Having participated in a great deliverance, Gideon seems to have already begun to exclude the Victor from His own victory.

"When the plot resumes, something seems to have happened to the character of the hero. In chaps. 6—7 we have witnessed

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 351. See John H. Paterson, "The Touchy Tribe," *Toward the Mark* 16:6 (November-December 1987):110-13.

²Henry, p. 253.

³Bush, p. 107.

his transformation from a fearful private citizen to a fearless agent of God, willing to take on the enemy against all odds, not to mention a sensitive diplomat. But the portrait of the man the author paints in this chapter creates a radically different impression in the reader's mind. If 8:1-32 had been handed down without the literary context in which it is embedded, modern readers would reject Gideon as a tyrant, arbitrary in his treatment of the enemy and ruthless in his handling of his own countrymen. Instead of 'hacking' and 'contending' with the enemy, Gideon/Jerubbaal 'contends' and 'hacks' his own people."¹

"Although appropriately faithful to God and humble in the presence of others in 8:1-3, Gideon proves to be alarmingly self-assertive and prideful in 8:4-21."²

Gideon's capture of the two Midianite kings 8:4-12

"Gideon followed up the victory with a second military campaign, one which contrasts dramatically with the first. He pursued the two Midianite kings until he caught and killed them, and he punished the towns of Succoth and Penuel. In this account, there is no indication of God's involvement as there had been previously; rather, Gideon is merely settling a private score (vv. 18, 19)."³

Succoth and Penuel (a variant spelling of Peniel, cf. Gen. 32:30) were towns that stood on the east side of the Jordan, beside the Jabbok River. The residents of these villages lived closer to the Midianites than most of the Israelites did, and they may have made an alliance with them. It is understandable that they did not want to jeopardize their security by assisting Gideon, whom they thought of as much weaker than their Midianite neighbors.

"In these words [denying Gideon bread, v. 6] there is not only an expression of cowardice, or fear of the vengeance which the Midianites might take when they returned upon those who had supported Gideon and his host, but contempt of the small

¹Block, *Judges ...*, p. 287. Cf. Klein, p. 62.

²McCann, p. 68.

³*The Nelson ...*, pp. 413-14.

force which Gideon had, as if it were impossible for him to accomplish anything at all against the foe; and in this contempt they manifested their utter want of confidence in God."¹

A spirit of regionalism had grown in Israel since the days of Joshua. These Transjordanian Israelites showed no sense of brotherhood or national responsibility. Their lack of cooperation illustrates what both Moses and Joshua feared would happen to the Israelites living east of the Jordan River (Num. 32:6-15, 20-27; Josh. 22:13-20). The seeds of national disunity and disintegration had germinated.

Denied provisions by these two Israelite towns, Gideon continued to pursue the remaining 15,000 Midianite soldiers (or 15 units) southeast. When he caught up with them, he attacked them by surprise (v. 11). Perhaps the Midianites had not expected Gideon to pursue them so far: 20 miles east of the Jordan River, and at least 50 miles southeast of the Harod Springs. Karkor (v. 10) means "soft, even ground." The Israelites presumably had never pursued the Midianites before, when the Midianites had conducted their yearly raids. Gideon routed the remnant of the Midianite alliance, and captured the two kings of Midian: Zebah ("Victim") and Zalmunna ("Protection Refused"). Their names, like that of Cushan-rishathaim earlier (3:8, 10), may have been nicknames that the Israelites, and/or the writer, gave them.

"This was pure and unalloyed hubris. Gideon was seeking the highest honor and greatest glory in the battle. God got the 'vintage' (the bronze medal) [by defeating the Midianites]; the Ephraimites get the 'gleanings,' of greater value (the silver medal) [by killing the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb]; but Gideon was planning to skim off the *crème de la crème*, of greatest value (the gold medal) [by killing the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna]."²

"Here is the beginning of a trend of self-interest and revenge among the later judges ..."³

"The once timid Gideon has now become a violent tyrant and instigates, for the first time in Judges, military action against

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 352.

²Kuruvilla, p. 151.

³Boda, p. 1161.

fellow Israelites—a motif that will only grow worse as the book progresses (cf. 12:1-6; 20:1-48 ...)."¹

The punishment of Succoth and Penuel 8:13-17

The ascent of Heres (v. 13) appears to have been an inclined roadway or pass leading to that town, presumably in the Jabbok Valley near Penuel and Succoth. Gideon's severe punishment of the men of these towns was deserved and just. They had selfishly refused to assist God's appointed judge in his holy war for Yahweh's glory and his people's good. They had also shown contempt for and insulted the soldiers whom God had signally honored with supernatural victory.

It was, in fact, Gideon's duty as a judge in Israel to punish these compromising and selfish cities. The severity of his punishment doubtless impressed the other Israelites with the seriousness of their offense. However, one cannot miss the contrast between Gideon's impatience and ruthlessness with his fellow-Israelites, and Yahweh's longsuffering patience and grace with His people.

"Gideon's behavior could be justified if Penuel were a Canaanite city, but these were fellow Israelites! His character has been transformed again—he acted like a general out of control, no longer bound by rules of civility, let alone national loyalty."²

History has witnessed similar changes in modern times, when generals who have overthrown enemies have become tyrants themselves (e.g., Fidel Castro).

"This judge seems to have no compunction about torturing or killing those Israelites who have doubts in *him*, which is a sharp contrast to the treatment he received from Yahweh when Gideon was in doubt."³

"Burrows acknowledges that 'the fact that Gideon could find a young man who was able to write indicates a high degree of

¹Ibid., p. 1163.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 293. See also McCann, p. 69.

³Webb, p. 256.

literacy in the Early Iron Age population of Transjordan (Judges 8:14)' ..."¹

The execution of the Midianite kings 8:18-21

Gideon took his prisoners back to Ophrah, where the events of this passage evidently took place. The two Midianite kings, now in Gideon's custody, had apparently killed Gideon's brothers sometime before the recent battle, perhaps during one of the Midianites' previous raids. It seems that Gideon had been unable to avenge his brothers' deaths before now due, most likely, to the Midianites' superiority. Now Gideon had the upper hand.

Gideon was apparently a physically impressive person. The Midianite kings said Gideon's brothers resembled him, and that each one looked like a son of a king, perhaps appearing poised and aristocratic in their bearing. Another explanation is that the enemy kings hoped to gain Gideon's favor by flattery, but this seems unlikely, since Gideon recognized his brothers by the Midianites' description (v. 19). Gideon probably would not have applied the *lex talionis* ("eye for eye ... life for life" payback law), if his brothers had died in battle. The Midianite kings had evidently murdered them.

It was a great disgrace to die at the hand of a woman or a youth in the ancient Near East. This would imply that the person who was killed could not overcome his slayer. Therefore Gideon's intent was to punish the kings with humiliation, as well as death, for their treatment of his brothers, by having his boy Jether execute them (v. 20). However, Gideon's young son was not ready for this adult work, so Gideon killed them himself (v. 21).

"... the reluctant and fearful Jether resembles Gideon-as-he-*was*; the vengeful and self-seeking Abimelech [Jether's younger half-brother] resembles Gideon-as-he-*became*."²

The crescent-shaped ornaments that Gideon took from the kings' camels (v. 21) were presumably of gold and silver. The Arabians commonly wore these around their necks and also used them to decorate their camels. These particular ornaments would have been very valuable since they belonged to kings.

¹Free, p. 143. His quotation is from Millar Burrows, *What Mean These Stones?* p. 183.

²Kuruvilla, pp. 156-57.

"Such crescents are mentioned in the Bible only in this chapter and Isaiah 3:18, but crescent-moon-shaped ornaments have been found at many excavated sites in Palestine. They are widely used by Arab peoples up to the present day."¹

With the execution of Zebah and Zalmunna, and the destruction of their army, Midian's domination of Israel ended. Though the seven years of this oppression were not as long as some of Israel's other periods of discipline, these years evidently constituted an unusually oppressive subjugation.

Later events in Gideon's life 8:22-32

Even though the next events recorded (vv. 22-28) immediately followed the ones just reported (vv. 18-21), they had greater significance in later years than they did at that moment in history.

Gideon's compromise 8:22-28

The supernatural victory God had given His people elevated Gideon into national recognition. Some of the men of Israel even invited Gideon to be their king and to begin a dynasty of rulers (v. 22). Perhaps these "loyalists" were from the northern and western tribes, had participated in the battle, and were present at the execution of Zebah and Zalmunna.

Gideon wisely refused their flattering offer, but he failed to give credit to Yahweh for the victory, as Deborah had done (cf. ch. 5). God had made provision for an Israelite king in the Mosaic Law (Deut. 17:14-20). Evidently Gideon believed Israel was better off under the current arrangement of judgeships, whereby Yahweh, Israel's true king, would raise up deliverers like himself when He saw fit (v. 23). Or perhaps he thought he could not gain the support of the majority of Israelites and just gave his enthusiastic supporters a pious answer. In either case, Gideon made a wise decision, and it was in harmony with God's will.

"Here again it must be emphasized that throughout this period there was an established Kingdom of God on earth [v. 23; cf. 1 Sam. 12:12]."²

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 120.

²McClain, p. 94.

Yet Gideon's subsequent decision to make an ephod (vv. 24-27) belied his words: He led Israel back into idolatry—out of which he had previously led them (cf. 6:25-32). Rather than following Moses as his role model, who, though hesitant at first, had proved faithful—Gideon followed the example of Aaron, who requested the people's jewelry to make an idol (Exod. 32:1-6).

Gideon likely perceived, as a result of his popularity among the Israelites, an opportunity to do something that he may have believed would be a help to his people. Unfortunately, it became a spiritual snare to them (cf. 2:3). He decided to make an ephod (cf. 17:5; 18:14-20; Exod. 28:6-35).

"... there are three possible alternatives [concerning what this ephod was]: that it was a garment after the pattern of the high-priestly ephod but with an unusual degree of gold ornamentation; that it was a replica of the high-priestly garment made of pure gold; or that it was a free-standing image [cf. 1 Sam. 2:28; 14:3]."¹

Some interpreters have concluded that the ephod was not a priestly garment but that of a civil magistrate, which Gideon used when he served in that capacity (cf. 1 Chron. 15:27).²

"The narrator does not reveal the nature of the image, but it seems most likely that he [Gideon] has reconstructed the shrine to Baal he earlier had torn down at Yahweh's command (6:25-32). ... Instead of himself, an image of God, clothed with the Spirit of Yahweh (6:34), Gideon created his own image and clothed it with pagan materials."³

Gideon made this ephod from some of the jewelry that the Israelites had taken from the Midianites. The writer called them Ishmaelites (v. 24), a term that described loosely any trading nomadic group (cf. Gen. 37:25, 27, 28; 39:1).⁴

The grateful Israelites willingly donated a large quantity of gold jewelry: "... between 40 and 75 pounds' weight, depending on whether the light or

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 123.

²E.g., Jamieson, et al., p. 192.

³Block, *Judges ...*, p. 300.

⁴See Kitchen, p. 119.

heavy shekel was employed."¹ Gideon then took this gold and had it fashioned into an ephod, which he publicly displayed in his hometown of Ophrah (cf. 17:5). Even though Gideon had professed to reject kingship, he was behaving more and more like a king all the time (cf. Deut. 17:17).

Whatever this ephod was, it became an object of worship and a spiritual stumbling block to the Israelites (v. 27). Thus Gideon became the second official sponsor of idolatry in Israel, as far as we know—Aaron being the first. He was doing what was "right in his own eyes" (cf. 17:6; 21:25).

"... a good motive can never compensate for a bad action."²

"... the expression *and all Israel played the harlot after it there* (RSV) suggests that the form of worship inspired by his ephod was Canaanite in origin."³

"It is ... probable that Gideon put on the ephod and wore it as a priest, when he wished to inquire and learn the will of the Lord. ... The germs of Gideon's error, which became a snare to him and to his house, lie unquestionably ... in the fact that the high-priesthood had probably lost its worth in the eyes of the people on account of the worthlessness of its representatives [cf. 1 Sam. 1:3; 2:22], so that they no longer regarded the high priest as the sole or principal medium of divine revelation; and therefore Gideon, to whom the Lord had manifested himself directly, as He had not to any judge or leader of the people since the time of Joshua, might suppose that he was not acting in violation of the law, when he had an ephod made, and thus provided himself with a substratum or vehicle for inquiring the will of the Lord. His sin therefore consisted chiefly in his invading the prerogative of the Aaronic priesthood, drawing away the people from the one legitimate sanctuary, and thereby not only undermining the theocratic unity of Israel, but also giving an impetus to the relapse of the nation into the worship of Baal after his death. This sin became a snare to him and to his house."⁴

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 122.

²Wiersbe, p. 129.

³Cundall and Morris, p. 123.

⁴Keil and Delitzsch, pp. 358-59.

"Perhaps it is easier to honour God in some courageous action in the limelight of a time of national emergency than it is to honour Him consistently in the ordinary, everyday life, which requires a different kind of courage. Gideon, who came through the test of adversity with flying colours, was not the first nor the last to be less successful in the test of prosperity."¹

"I would even suggest we go ephod-making in the way we ignore God's provision of the Lord's covenant meal as the means of Christian renewal. We plan, organize, and concoct 'revivals,' seminars, retreats, or encounters, or we pressure congregations to come forward and rededicate their lives to Christ. All the while we neglect what God has provided: the Lord's Supper."²

"It's interesting and instructive to contrast Abraham and Gideon in the decisions they made after their respective victories (Gen. 14). Abraham took nothing for himself but made sure that others received their share of the spoils (Gen. 14:22-24). He especially refused to take anything from the heathen king of Sodom (Gen. 14:17, 21). Instead, Abraham fellowshiped with Melchizedek, King of Salem, a type of our Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 7—8); and in all that he said and did, Abraham gave glory to the Lord of heaven and earth."³

The final verse in this pericope (v. 28) draws the account of Gideon's defeat of the Midianites to a close. The land rested from oppression and war for 40 years following his victory (ca. 1180-1140 B.C.). This is the last period of peace that the writer of Judges mentioned.

Gideon's family 8:29-32

These verses wrap up the story of Gideon and introduce the story of Abimelech that follows (ch. 9).⁴

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 122.

²D. R. Davis, p. 115.

³Wiersbe, pp. 129-30.

⁴See Baruch Halpern, "The Rise of Abimelek Ben-Jerubbaal," *Hebrew Annual Review* 2 (1978):84-88.

Gideon enjoyed the fruits of his heroism for the rest of his life. He was wealthy enough to afford many wives, who bore him 70 sons! In this respect, Gideon lived like many ancient Near Eastern kings, who normally married many wives and fathered many offspring. But he was following pagan cultural customs and was violating God's will revealed in the Mosaic Law, because he not only accumulated much gold as a king (v. 26), but also collected many wives as a king (cf. Deut. 17:17; Gen. 2:24).

He also kept a concubine in Shechem, which the Canaanites controlled at this time (cf. 9:2, 28). His concubine appears, from references in chapter 9, to have been a Canaanite. According to Jewish tradition, her name was Drumah.¹ The Israelites were to eradicate the Canaanites, but now their leader decided to marry one (cf. Exod. 34:15-16; Deut. 7:3-4)!

The son whom this woman bore to Gideon was evidently a child of outstanding promise, since Gideon named him Abimelech (lit. "My Father is King"). This name may have been a nickname, rather than a proper name given to him at birth (cf. Gen. 20:2; 26:1; et al.). In giving it, Gideon may have been hoping that this son might one day become the father (or ancestor) of Israel's first king. Alternatively, it is possible that, even though Gideon had formally refused the office of king, the people may have referred to him popularly as their king.

"The name of his son Abimelech ('my father is king') probably does not mean that Gideon regarded himself as monarch. In personal names 'my father' normally refers to God; so Gideon could have been reemphasizing the assertion of v. 23 ["the LORD shall rule over you"]."²

However, the fact that the adult Abimelech later regarded himself as the successor to Gideon suggests that he understood "the king" in view to be Gideon (cf. 9:2).

Abimelech unfortunately perpetuated, and even extended, Gideon's bad practices rather than his good theology. Gideon, who had become a bad example for his son, had said the right things, but done the wrong things. Gideon did not finish well. He refused kingship formally, in word, but in practice lived like a king, and set himself up as a priest.

¹Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:7:1.

²Wolf, p. 434.

"Some suffering occurs and continues because of a lack of consistent obedience on the part of leaders whom God has raised up."¹

The sons of concubines, in the ancient Near East, usually did not partake of their father's inheritances (cf. Gen. 16; 21:8-21). People considered them the heirs of, and members of, the family of their mother, but not their father. Abimelech, therefore, was of a different inheritance status than Gideon's other 70 sons. He would have been regarded by them as a "bastard" son.

Gideon eventually died, and his survivors buried him in his ancestral tomb in Ophrah (v. 32).

"In relation to the book as a whole, Gideon receives attention as the focal point because he represents a significant shift in the 'quality' of the judges that served Israel. A progressive deterioration begins with Othniel and continues through Samson. Othniel was almost an idealized judge, and Samson was a debauched self-centered individual. God used each judge, whether strong or weak, to accomplish His sovereign will and effect deliverance for the theocratic nation. Gideon, on the other hand, stands somewhere between these two extremes and represents the primary turning point from the 'better' judges to the 'weaker' ones."²

2. Israel's departure from Yahweh 8:33-35

After Gideon's death, the Israelites again wandered from the LORD (cf. 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). They even made a covenant with Baal ("made Baal-berith their god")—in disobedience to God's Law. Baal-berith (v. 33) means "Baal of the Covenant." Ironically Shechem, the town where the Israelites had twice renewed their covenant with Yahweh after they entered the land (Josh. 8; 24), would soon become a site and center of this Baal worship (9:46).

¹Stephen J. Bramer, "Suffering in the Historical Books," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*, p. 103.

²Tanner, pp. 152-53.

"In line with common practice, the covenant-making function of Yahweh was simply transferred to Baal so that he, not Yahweh, was viewed as the god who made Shechem a holy place."¹

Perhaps the site had once been sacred to the Canaanites, before the Israelites took it over and "converted" it. Now it was back in Canaanite hands.²

Over time the Israelites forgot Yahweh and His many deliverances of them, as well as the family of Gideon, their hero who had proved that Baal could not contend for himself (v. 35; cf. 6:31-32).

"Gideon personifies the typical Israelite in the period of the judges. He is more than half Canaanite in his outlook. He does not know how to relate to God. He does not want to get involved in the Lord's work. He is not beyond using his position for personal gain and influence.

"... recognizing the deficiencies in the man thrusts into sharper relief the contrasting patience and mercy of God ...

"Gideon is a man God used in spite of himself. He is a rough vessel if ever there was one. But God is determined to get His work done. In the absence of genuinely qualified leadership, He will use surprising vessels."³

Most of the major judges in the Book of Judges lacked character that we would call "above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2). God still uses vessels unto dishonor as well as vessels unto honor to accomplish His work (2 Tim. 2:20-21). This in no way justifies ungodliness. It simply magnifies the sovereignty and grace of God in using less than perfect material—if He chooses to do so for His own purposes.

¹Merrill, p. 169.

²Martin Noth, *The History of Israel*, pp. 98-99.

³Block, "Gideon ...," p. 27.

3. The story of Abimelech ch. 9

The story of Abimelech connects directly with the story of Gideon.¹ It is the sequel to, and indeed the climax of, the Gideon story, and it portrays the disastrous results of Gideon's legacy. Although Abimelech sought a place of leadership in Israel, God did not raise him up as a judge. His history is of interest primarily because of the light it throws on this period of Israel's national life and the continuing decline in Israel. Furthermore, we can see what had become of Shechem (cf. Josh. 8; 24).

"... in the use of names, Jerubbaal is used throughout for Gideon, and Yahweh is referred to only by the generic Elohim. These features reflect the author's unambiguous stance toward the nation and the characters: Israel has been totally Canaanized; Baal has contended for himself and prevailed."²

Likewise, the dominance of Baalism can be seen in the many uses of the Hebrew word *ba'al* in this story: 25 times in 57 verses. Among these are several references to the leaders (*ba'alim*) of Shechem.

Abimelech's murders and election as king 9:1-6

Though Gideon had rejected kingship officially (8:23), though not practically, Abimelech desired it for himself. He also hated his half-brothers, presumably because he was the "non-inheritance" son of a concubine, rather than a legitimate son of one of Gideon's wives (8:31).

"Among the early Arabians, a concubine or secondary 'wife' stayed with her own clan and was visited by her 'husband' from time to time. The children of the union belonged to the wife's clan. Abimelech, the son of a concubine, had close relations with the family of his mother. He sought their help in supporting his claims to the throne."³

Shechem, the home of Abimelech's concubine mother, was one of the older city-states in Canaan. Canaanites were its primary inhabitants, as is evident from this story. They seem to have been even more open to having a king

¹See Kuruvilla, p. 171, for a chart of the similarities between the Gideon and Abimelech stories.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 308.

³C. Pfeiffer, p. 250.

over them than the Israelites were (v. 6). Since he was a local boy, as well as the son of Gideon, the famous military leader, the Shechemites favored accepting Abimelech as their king.

"At least Gideon had *said* the right thing about God's sole sovereignty: 'the LORD will rule over you' (8:23). Abimelech, on the other hand, leaves the LORD out of the picture entirely."¹

Evidently Abimelech felt that Gideon's other sons were ambitious to be king too, though there is no indication in the text that any of them were. He was perhaps projecting his own feelings on them, as is often true of ambitious people. Sometimes they even become paranoid, as Abimelech did here (cf. King Saul).

Abimelech was able to secure some popular and financial support for himself by lobbying among his relatives (vv. 1-4). He then hired some assistants ("worthless and reckless men," v. 4) who promoted his cause, and who probably helped him gather, trap, and assassinate 69 of his 70 brothers—all except Jotham (v. 5). He executed this slaughter on one stone, suggesting a well-planned mass murder. They did not die in battle. Ironically, Abimelech died when a stone was thrown down on his head (v. 53). Compare and contrast the similar story of Jehu's slaughter of Ahab's sons in 2 Kings 10. Note how departure from God, idolatry, and self-assertion result in hatred and violence.²

"All the leaders of Shechem" must have learned about Abimelech's slaughter of his brothers before they made him king (v. 6). Perhaps Abimelech's violent behavior even enhanced his value in their eyes. Beth-millo was the citadel in Shechem, the most heavily fortified part of the town. The writer also called it the tower of Shechem (vv. 47, 49). It may have been a fortress-temple complex (vv. 4, 46).³

"The inhabitants of Shechem, the worshippers of Baal-berith, carried out the election of Abimelech as king in the very same place in which Joshua had held the last national assembly, and had renewed the covenant of Israel with Jehovah the true

¹McCann, p. 72.

²See *ibid.*, who traced the twin themes of idolatry and self-assertion, violations of the Ten Commandments that require submission to the sole sovereignty of Yahweh in one's person and works, through the Book of Judges.

³G. Ernest Wright, *Shechem, the Biography of a Biblical City*, pp. 123-28.

covenant God (Josh. xxiv. 1, 25, 26). It was there in all probability that the temple of Baal-berith was to be found, namely, according to ver. 46, near the tower of Shechem or the citadel of Millo."¹

This was also the place where Jacob had buried his idols (Gen. 35:4). Abimelech was the first person ever to be crowned king in Israel, as far as the text records.

Jotham's fable 9:7-21

Before Abimelech's sole surviving brother, Jotham, went into hiding, he uttered a parable against Abimelech, in which he predicted the destructive effects of Abimelech's rule. Jotham (lit. "Yahweh is Perfect" or "Yahweh is Honest") stood on the same mountain, where six of Israel's tribes had declared the blessings of abiding by the Law of Yahweh, and denounced the Shechemites for their foolish and wicked actions. The contrast between the Israelites' commitments in Joshua 8 and 24, and this passage, must be one reason the writer included Abimelech's story in Judges.

"Indeed, the people in these mountainous countries are able, from long practice, so to pitch their voices as to be heard distinctly at distances almost incredible. They talk with persons across enormous wadies, and give the most minute directions, which are perfectly understood; and in doing this they seem to speak very little louder than their usual tone of conversation. Jotham, therefore, might easily be heard by the greater part of the inhabitants of Shechem."²

Jotham's fable was a parable with a moral (cf. 2 Sam. 12:1-4; 2 Kings 14:9-10). It is generally recognized as the first parable in the Bible. The olive and fig trees, and the grape vine, represented productive human beings—oil, figs, and wine being among the most important products of Canaan. Brambles bore no fruit and offered no shelter or protection. They only injured those who got too close to them. Moreover, brambles sometimes spontaneously burst into flames in hot weather, and consequently caused much damage (v. 15). Obviously the bramble represented Abimelech, the

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 362.

²Thomson, 2:210.

trees and vine the more noble Shechemites, and the cedars of Lebanon the the upright leaders of Shechem.¹

"Even today when a good ruler comes into office, many folk say, 'God raised him up.' What about the wicked ruler? God permits him to come to the throne also [cf. Dan. 4:17]. Do you know why? Because the principle is 'like priest, like people.' That is, people get the ruler they deserve. The people of Israel wanted this boy Abimelech to rule over them; and they got the caliber of man they deserved. Friend, when we look around our world today, we find this principle is still true."²

" *'Elohim* [v. 13] may be rendered 'God' or *gods*. In this context Jotham appears to refer to religious libations offered to the gods, during which wine was poured beside the altar."³

Having finished his message, Jotham fled to Beer (lit. "Well," site uncertain) where he hid from his brother's wrath. However, this Beer may not have been the name of a town. Jotham may have just hidden in some empty well for a long time (cf. 2 Sam. 17:18-21).

Abimelech's reign 9:22-49

Abimelech's rule over Israel appears to have been not only very small in area and influence, but short in duration as well: three years (v. 22). He ruled only over Shechem and its surrounding territory. During this period, he evidently moved to Arumah, about five miles to the southeast of Shechem (v. 41).

"... Abimelech's government was not a monarchical reign, but simply a tyrannical despotism."⁴

The evil spirit that God sent between Abimelech and the men of Shechem (v. 24) was a spirit of discontent that proved to be disastrous. (King Saul also suffered from an "evil spirit" from God; 1 Sam. 16:14, 15, 16, 23; 18:10; 19:9.) Verse 25's "set up men in ambush against him" probably

¹For parallels to this fable in ancient Near Eastern literature, see W. C. van Wyk, "The Fable of Jotham in its Ancient Near Eastern Setting," in *Studies in Wisdom Literature*, pp. 89-95.

²McGee, 2:66.

³C. Pfeiffer, p. 251.

⁴Keil and Delitzsch, p. 365.

means that the men of Shechem conspired to rob Abimelech of the tolls that he received from the travelers and traders who passed through Shechem. They did this by ambushing them from Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal ("on the tops of the mountains"), the two mountains between which the road passed near Shechem.¹

Gaal was evidently a Canaanite who strongly disliked Abimelech, and cursed him when he was drunk, because Abimelech was the son of Jerubbaal (Gideon). He also hated him because Abimelech's father had not only destroyed the altar of Baal in Ophrah, but also reestablished the worship of Yahweh in Israel (6:27; 8:23). Gaal, whose name connects with a Hebrew word meaning "loathsome," and whose father's name means "servant," did not want Abimelech to continue ruling over that part of Canaan. He did not want Shechem to remain under Abimelech's control either (vv. 26-29).

"Strewing the ruined city with salt [v. 45], which only occurs here, was a symbolical act, signifying that the city was to be turned for ever into a barren salt desert. Salt ground is barren desert (Job xxxix. 6, [Psalms] cvii. 34)."²

Mt. Zalmon ("Black Mountain," v. 48) stood near Shechem, though its exact location is uncertain.³ It may have been the same mountain as Mt. Ebal or Mt. Gerizim. The Mt. Zalmon of Psalm 68:14 may have been in a different place.

"Archaeological confirmation of such a burning [as verse 49 describes] was found in 1926 in the excavations of the German archaeologist, Sellin."⁴

Abimelech's death 9:50-57

Abimelech suffered an ignominious death suitable to a man of his character. Thebez (v. 50) was probably another name for Tirzah, located about 7 miles northeast of Shechem.⁵ The modern town is called Tubas. The upper millstone that the woman threw down on Abimelech's head was probably

¹Cundall and Morris, pp. 130-31.

²Keil and Delitzsch, p. 370.

³*The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Zalmon," by D. F. Payne, p. 1353.

⁴Free, p. 143.

⁵Monson, p. 110.

about 18 inches in diameter.¹ Ironically, it was a stone that killed Abimelech, who had killed his 70 brothers on one stone (v. 5). And it was the skull that had concocted his rebellion that was crushed with the stone. Again, a woman proved to be the deliverer of her people, this time from an *Israelite* tyrant out of control (cf. 4:17-22; 5:24-27).

When Abimelech died, his army dissolved (v. 55). The writer of the Book of Judges ascribed his death and the fate of the Shechemites to God, who punished them for their wickedness (vv. 56-57; cf. v. 32). Jotham's fable proved prophetic (v. 57). This first attempt to set up a monarchy in Israel failed miserably.

"Abimelech's request to be finished off by his armor-bearer is similar to Saul's later request, so as to avoid dishonor (see 1 Sam. 31:4). Thus, the careers of Israel's first self-made king, Abimelech, and first divinely designated king, Saul, end in disgrace. Abimelech is an idolater from the beginning, and Saul is rejected by God for disobeying God's explicit command (1 Sam. 15)."²

That the men of Israel (v. 55) would follow such a man as Abimelech provides a sad commentary on the extremely low moral and spiritual level of God's people at this time. This was what incomplete obedience to God's Law, plus compromise with His enemies, produced.

From another perspective, though, God used Abimelech to punish the Canaanites in Shechem and its vicinity. In this sense, strange as it may seem, he was God's instrument. Perhaps this is at least part of the reason why the Spirit of God chose to record as much of Abimelech's life as we have here.³

"The rebellion of the Shechemites can be interpreted as a Canaanite rebellion against the Israelites. Although Abimelech had initially gained his rule on the basis of the support of the men of Shechem, his relationship to Gideon made him acceptable to many in Israel. The Shechemite support of Gaal

¹See *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Mill, Millstone," by A. R. Millard, p. 823.

²McCann, p. 75.

³See T. Crichton Mitchell, "Abimelech—the Bramble King," *Preacher's Magazine* 58:3 (March-May 1983):16-19, 61.

may be considered as a nationalistic movement with anti-Israelite overtones."¹

"In this book we observe the mercy of God at work in as sharp relief as anywhere else in Scripture. The greatest threats to Israel's existence do not come from outside enemies who may occasionally oppress them. Israel's most serious enemy is within. She is a nation that appears determined to destroy herself. Only the gracious intervention of God prevents this from happening."²

"... there seems to be a pattern that begins with the story of Gideon, which is a pivotal turning point in the book of Judges ... Each major judge's administration concludes with or is followed by Israelite-on-Israelite violence. The first two cycles are quite similar. Gideon (chaps. 6—8) is followed by Abimelech's violent rule (chap. 9), and then there is a respite (10:1-5). Jephthah's administration (10:6—12:7) ends in civil war (12:1-6), and then there is another respite (12:8-15). Samson's career (chaps. 13—16) is followed by more violence, including a bloody civil war (chaps. 17—21); but this time there is no relief. The book of Judges ends in chaos."³

4. The judgeships of Tola and Jair 10:1-5

No great military feats marked the judgeships of these two men. Their ministries appear to have consisted primarily in administering civil justice.

"The passages on the 'minor judges' do not conform to the editorial plan of the stories of the 'great judges', or to that of Jg. as a whole. Hence it would seem that they have been included, perhaps selectively, simply to supplement the number of the judges to the conventional number of twelve,

¹C. Pfeiffer, p. 252.

²Daniel I. Block, "Will the Real Gideon Please Stand Up? Narrative Style and Intention in Judges 6—9," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:3 (September 1997):365-66.

³McCann, p. 76.

thus possibly to make the judges as representative of all Israel."¹

Mark Boda suggested the following reason for the inclusion of the minor judges in the book:

"The five shorter accounts of judges in 10:1-5 and 12:8-15 provide pictures of idealistic leadership that points forward to a form of kingship shy of dynastic rule. These characters provide the stability, success, and continuity, which will allow them to enjoy life in the Promised Land. In this they foreshadow the kinds of qualities that will be fully realized in David."²

Tola's judgeship 10:1-2

Tola, whose name means "Worm" in Hebrew, arose to save Israel from the tribe of Issachar, some time after Abimelech died. One of the patriarch Issachar's sons was also named Tola (Gen. 46:13; Num. 26:23; 1 Chron. 7:1-2). The writer did not record how the judge Tola rose to power, or exactly when. Specifically, no mention of Yahweh raising him up appears, either, as was also true of Abimelech. Nevertheless, this brief notation of his contribution to Israel's national life pictures him as a worthy individual who enjoyed an orderly and stable tenure. He judged Israel for 23 years.

Jair's judgeship 10:3-5

The only unusual feature of Jair the Gileadite's life, other than that he came from Transjordan, was that he maintained a network of 30 cities, called Havvoth-jair (i.e., "The Towns of Jair"), over which his 30 sons ruled in Gilead. His name means "May [God] Enlighten." An ancestor of Jair the Gileadite, also named Jair, appears to have settled the same area shortly after the Israelites defeated Sihon and Og (Num. 32:41). The fact that all 30 of Jair's sons each rode on a donkey marked them as having distinguished rank in a time when the average Israelites had no horses or donkeys. Only the wealthy and prominent in Israel rode on donkeys at that time.³

¹J. Gray, p. 310.

²Boda, p. 1183.

³Keil and Delitzsch, p. 372.

"The ass was highly esteemed as a riding beast and many times carried with it special recognition (Judg. 1:14; [5:10;] 1 Sam. 25:20)."¹

The fact that Jair fathered 30 sons suggests that he practiced polygamy (cf. Gideon, 8:30). Jair judged Israel for 22 years. Kamon stood about 12 miles southeast of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee).

We see, in this brief record of Jair's life, continuing tendencies in Israel toward the lifestyle of the surrounding pagan nations, and away from fidelity to Yahweh and His Law.

"In Jair's story I can see three things: (1) prosperity without purpose; (2) affluence without influence; (3) prestige without power."²

The ministries of these two minor judges teach two lessons—one negative and the other positive: Negatively, they did not change any of the previous problems in Israel but only seem to have maintained the status quo.³ Positively, they illustrate God's gracious blessing of His apostate people in spite of themselves.

"Elsewhere in the Old Testament, children are gifts from God; they indicate God's blessing. So amid the increasing chaotic and violent stories that indicate the Israelites are abandoning God, the two lists of minor judges suggest that God is not abandoning the Israelites (see 2:1, where God says, 'I will never break my covenant with you.')."⁴

E. THE FIFTH APOSTASY 10:6—12:15

In view of Israel's continuing and worsening apostasy, God turned His people over to the discipline of two of Israel's enemy neighbors. He used five judges to lead the Israelites during this period.

¹J. J. Davis, pp. 119-20.

²McGee, 2:67.

³Tammi J. Schneiders, *Judges*, p. 158.

⁴McCann, p. 77.

1. Renewed oppression 10:6-7

The Israelites' return to apostasy, as time went by, brought discipline from two different directions at the same time. In the east, the Ammonites oppressed Israel, while in the west, God raised up the Philistines.

"The acuter [*sic*] pressure at this stage came from the Ammonites who were crueller [*sic*] in nature and more predatory in their methods than the Philistines (cf. 1 Sa. 11:1, 2)."¹

These verses actually introduce the judgeships of Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson (10:8—16:31). Since the introductory formula in these verses is not strictly a chronological sequence indicator, the judgeship of Jephthah may have overlapped Gideon's somewhat.

"... it is possible that Ammon took advantage of the terror brought on by the Midianite raids of Gideon's day to do some raiding of their own."²

The Baals and the Ashtaroth were Canaanite deities. Until now, these were the only idols that the writer mentioned that provided a recurring temptation for the Israelites (cf. 2:11, 13). But now he mentioned numerous other gods that the Israelites served, which indicates their increasing apostasy.

The LORD did not give us the names of the gods of Syria (Aram), that lay to the northeast of Israel, in the Old Testament. In Sidon, a town in Phoenicia to Israel's northwest, Ashtoreth, the consort (spouse) of Baal, was a chief deity (1 Kings 11:5). In Moab, to the east and south, Chemosh was the main god (1 Kings 11:33). The Ammonites worshipped Molech (1 Kings 11:7), also called Milcom (1 Kings 11:5, 33). Dagon, the fish-god, was the main idol in Philistia (16:23). These gods were believed to guard and favor their own particular territories.³ Verse 6 gives us the last and longest list of Israel's sins in Judges.

The only contiguous neighbor of Israel's, that did not have a negative influence on the chosen people during the time of the judges, as far as the

¹Cundall and Morris, pp. 138-39.

²Washburn, p. 422.

³Lewis, p. 62.

text reveals, was Edom. However, since about 300 years of history expired in the Judges Period, it is likely that the Edomites also opposed the Israelites.

"The spiritual trends observed in Israel at this time did not merely reflect syncretism, but in many cases involved the total abandonment of the worship of Jehovah in favor of other national deities."¹

Note the correspondence between seven groups of pagan gods (v. 6) and seven oppressing nations (v. 11), further suggesting completeness. The LORD delivered His people from as many nations as the number of gods they worshipped.

"The description of Yahweh's response to Israel's spiritual defection confirms our suggestion that in the narrator's mind the nation's Canaanization is coming to a climax. First, for the first time since 3:8 the text mentions God's anger as the emotion behind his selling the Israelites into the hands of the enemies. Second, for the first time the narrator notes that Yahweh had handed his people into the power of two different nations—the Philistines and the sons of Ammon."²

Notice how much more diversified Israel's idolatry had become. The Israelites were now worshipping *foreign* gods—in addition to the gods of Canaan. Furthermore, they abandoned the worship of Yahweh. This situation was a new low for them in Judges (v. 6).

The text reveals that the Philistines and the Ammonites began to oppress Israel simultaneously, from the west and the east respectively. The writer proceeded to narrate the Ammonite account first (10:8b—12:7), and then the Philistine oppression (13:1—16:31).

2. Oppression under the Ammonites 10:8-18

The Israelites felt the main influence of the Ammonites on the east side of the Jordan River—that bordered Ammon (v. 8). However, the Ammonites

¹J. J. Davis, p. 120.

²Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 344-45.

also attacked the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim—all west of the Jordan (v. 9).

The Ammonite oppression lasted 18 years (v. 8; evidently about 1123-1105 B.C.). But finally, the Israelites confessed their sin of apostasy and cried out to the LORD for deliverance (v. 10; cf. 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6). They had waited only seven years in the last oppression, before appealing for His help against the Midianites (6:6). This may indicate that their hearts had since then become even harder toward Yahweh.

For the first time in the book, here in 10:10, the Israelites confessed that they had sinned, but it seems as if their change of heart may have come too late. The LORD reminded them, presumably through a prophet, that their behavior had fallen into a pattern of apostasy, oppression, confession, and deliverance (vv. 11-12). God had previously delivered Israel from seven enemies. These were: the Egyptians (cf. Exod. 1-14), the Amorites (also known in Scripture as Midianites, cf. Num. 31:3), the Ammonites (3:12-30), the Philistines (3:31), the Sidonians (ch. 4?), the Amalekites (cf. Exod. 17:8-16), and the Maonites. The Maonites were probably Midianites (chs. 6—8), according to the Septuagint. All of these victories came in Israel's earlier history.

"This [group of seven nations] corresponds in number to the sets of gods Israel was serving (10:6) ... Even as the seven defeated enemies point to the completeness of Yahweh's deliverances, the seven worshiped groups of deities indicate the totality of the Israelites apostasy. They serve every god occupying every pantheon in every nation around them. The only deity they fail to serve is the true God, Yahweh [cf. Deut. 12:1-4, 29-31]."¹

We need to understand God's promise to deliver the Israelites "no longer" (v. 13) as conditional, because later He did deliver the nation (ch. 11; cf. Exod. 32:14). Often in Scripture we read that if the Israelites repented, after God promised to judge them, God relented and did not send judgment (e.g., Exod. 32:10, 14; Jer. 18:5-12; Jon. 3:4). Verses 13 and 14 reveal God's tough love for Israel (cf. 2:3; 6:8-10).

¹Kuruvilla, p. 190.

"... the emphatic declaration, 'I will deliver you no more,' is to be understood conditionally, in case their idols were kept among them; for the divine threatenings always imply a reserve of mercy to the truly repentant."¹

The genuine confession and repentance of the Israelites plus God's compassion for them, eventually combined to secure Israel's deliverance (v. 16). God's wayward son, Israel, had broken His heart. These verses illustrate the tension God felt: He both loved Israel, loyally, and yet found it necessary to discipline His "firstborn son."

"The greatness of Jehovah and His intense love for His people is nowhere more evident than in this particular situation [vv. 13-16]."²

The writer now introduced the battle in which God provided the next deliverance for His people (vv. 17-18). The Ammonites advanced into Gilead from the east, and the Israelites in that area congregated not far from them, at Mizpah, anticipating conflict (cf. Josh. 13:26). Even though the Israelites had confessed their sin of apostasy, and had genuinely repented, they approached this battle carnally, namely, without seeking and depending on God's help and guidance.

Rather than inquiring of God for strategy, the Israelites looked among themselves for a human leader, whom they could persuade to lead them by promising him kingship as a reward. Unfortunately, they were rejecting Yahweh's authority over them by doing this (cf. 1 Sam. 8:7). They would soon learn that the man they chose, Jephthah, had some glaring weaknesses (cf. King Saul).

3. Deliverance through Jephthah 11:1—12:7

To prepare for the recital of Israel's victory over the Ammonites, the writer provided the reader with some background information concerning the man whom God raised up to lead this deliverance. Like Gideon, Jephthah was an unlikely hero, who got off to a good start but ended poorly.

¹Bush, p. 140.

²J. J. Davis, p. 121.



The choice of Jephthah as Gilead's leader 11:1-11

Verses 1-3 provide information about Jephthah. His name means "He [an unspecified deity] Has Opened [the womb]" or "He Opens." The appropriateness of this name will become clear later. Jephthah lived on the east side of the Jordan River. Unlike Gideon, he was a courageous and valiant warrior. He was, however, the product of his father's sexual liaison with a prostitute, another clue to the moral level in Israel. Evidently Jephthah's grandparents named his father ("Gilead") in honor of an ancestor named Gilead, who was perhaps the man from whom the region of Gilead derived its name.

Today we would say that Jephthah was an abused child ("they [his half-brothers] drove Jephthah out [of the family]," v. 2). His half-brothers rejected him, in violation of the Mosaic Law that commanded the Israelites to love one another, their neighbors, and outcasts (Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:12-22). David may have suffered the same kind of hostility in his family (cf. Ps. 27:10). One also recalls Jesus' rejection (cf. Isa. 53:3), though we have no reason to believe that His parents abused Him.

Jephthah fled to Israel's frontier—on the edge of civilization. Tob (v. 3) stood between Ammon and Syria, northeast of Gilead (cf. 2 Sam. 10:6, 8). The Hebrew term translated "worthless men" in the NASB, NKJV, and ESV has been translated many other ways in various other English translations: "adventurers" (NIV), "scoundrels" (TNIV), "vain men" (AV), "idle men" (NEB), "lawless men" (NET2, HCSB), "outlaws" (NRSV), and "men who would do anything for money" (CEV).¹ These men were not necessarily evil, but they were definitely wild. Jephthah evidently lived a Robin Hood style of existence, similar to the life that David lived after he fled from Saul.² One writer even likened him to a guerrilla fighter or terrorist.³

Jephthah's personal background was quite similar to Abimelech's (8:31—9:4). His character, though, seems to have been considerably better in view

¹In addition to the translations previously identified in these notes, NKJV stands for *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*, ESV is *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, NIV is *The Holy Bible: New International Version*, 1984 ed., TNIV is *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*, AV is *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*, NEB is *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha*, NRT2 is *The NET (New English Translation) Bible*, 2019 ed., and HCSB is *The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Bible*.

²Jamieson, et al., p. 193.

³McCann, p. 80.

of what follows. Unlike Abimelech, he was more sensitive and submissive to Yahweh.

Jephthah was such a gifted warrior that, when the Ammonites threatened Gilead, the elders of that region overcame their personal dislike for Jephthah, humbled themselves, and begged him to defend them (vv. 4-6).

This story reminds me of a theme that is common in western movies, sometimes called oaters. The townsfolk drive the young misfit who has grown up among them away, because his love of guns and violence makes them uneasy. However, when a gang of outlaws threatens the town, they send for the gunslinger to save them.¹

Jephthah's complaint about having been appealed to as a last resort reminds us of God's similar words in 10:14. To persuade Jephthah to accept their invitation, the elders promised that he would be their chief, their leader—perhaps in a modern setting, their sheriff—and that they would follow his directions in the battle (v. 8). He acknowledged that, if he defeated the Ammonites, it would be because the LORD gave them over to him (v. 9). Interestingly, Jephthah used the name of Yahweh (the LORD) more frequently than any other person in Judges. He was a man of faith, even though he was a rough character.

The elders of Gilead made a formal public agreement with Jephthah, at Mizpah in northern Gilead, formalizing the conditions of his leading Israel in battle (vv. 10-11). They "pinned the sheriff's badge" on him. Evidently Jephthah told the LORD about this covenant in prayer (v. 11).

Notice how the writer of Judges wrote 11:1-11 parallel to 10:6-16. The elders of Gilead had treated Jephthah exactly as Israel had treated Yahweh.

| "Theme | Chapter 10 | Chapter 11 |
|------------|------------|------------|
| Rejection | v. 6 | vv. 1-3 |
| Distress | vv. 7-9 | v. 4 |
| Repentance | v. 10 | vv. 5-6 |

¹See also Charles R. Swindoll, *Come before Winter*, "A Message for Misfits," pp. 233-34.

| | | |
|--------------|------------|------------------------|
| Objection | vv. 11-14 | v. 7 |
| Appeal | vv. 15-16a | v. 8 |
| Acquiescence | v. 16b | vv. 9-11" ¹ |

"... where is God in this complex process of engaging Jephthah? Far from playing the decisive role, as he had in the provision of all the other judges, God is relegated to the role of silent witness to a purely human contract between a desperate people and an ambitious candidate."²

"The account reveals already Jephthah's penchant for negotiation and vow making, features that will reappear in his subsequent dealings with the Ammonites (11:12-28) and with Yahweh (11:29-40 ...). The careful negotiation of Jephthah represents further deterioration in the accounts of the judges in terms of self-interest, initiated by Gideon in 7:16-18 and reappearing in the dominance of personal vengeance in the account of Samson ... Such a negotiator is a perfect match for a generation whose negotiation with Yahweh is showcased in 10:10-16 ..."³

Jephthah's negotiations with the king of Ammon 11:12-28

Jephthah did not rush into battle but wisely tried to peaceably settle the Ammonites' grievance with Israel. His approach reveals his humility as well as his wisdom. Most men would have wanted to demonstrate their prowess in battle, in order to impress the ones who had expressed confidence in them, and to guarantee their future security with a victory. However, Jephthah restrained himself, and appealed to the king of Ammon very logically through messengers. He initiated peace talks, rather than launching a war.

Jephthah appealed to the king of Ammon with three arguments. His main point behind these arguments was that the Ammonites had no right to

¹D. R. Davis, p. 141.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 356.

³Boda, p. 1190.

Israel's territory east of the Jordan, which they were trying to obtain by force.

First, Jephthah traced the history whereby this territory had come into Israel's possession, showing that Ammon had no claim on Gilead (vv. 15-22). Israel had not taken away any territory held by the Ammonites or the Moabites when God's people approached the Promised Land in Moses' day. Israel, rather, had taken the land in dispute from the Amorites, who had previously wrested it from the Ammonites. If Israel's claims to ownership by conquest were invalid, so were those of the Ammonites!

Second, Jephthah emphasized the fact that Yahweh had given Israel this land. Thus it would have been wrong to allow the Ammonites to take it from them (vv. 23-25).

"Even the pagans recognized that when victory was given by a deity, the victors had full right to possess that territory."¹

"The Moabite Stone attributes the victories of Moab to the favor of Chemosh, and the victories of Israel over Moab to the anger of Chemosh."²

I cite the above quotation not to show that Israel had fought with Moab, which it had not, but to show that the ancients typically acknowledged military victories as gifts from their gods.

"Jephthah's theology contains at least one serious flaw: Chemosh was not the patron deity of the Ammonites but of Moab. The divine patron of Ammon was Milkom."³

"It is clear from Jephthah's speech that he considers this [Ammonite] king as representative of both Ammon and Moab (see Jdg 11:15, 25, 27), probably related to an earlier expansion of Ammon into Moab (see 3:13, 29 ...). What has been considered by previous scholars as an error by Jephthah or a conflation of traditions ... is actually one of Jephthah's

¹J. J. Davis, p. 123.

²C. Pfeiffer, p. 154.

³Block, *Judges ...*, p. 361.

key rhetorical points, for it justifies Israel's possession of the disputed territory by allusion to Ammon's expansion ..."¹

King Balak of Moab had never fought with Israel. That powerful king had realized that opposing Israel in battle would be futile in view of the power of Israel's God. He had therefore hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel (Num. 22—24).

Third, Jephthah appealed logically that Ammon had not tried to take the land it now claimed for 300 years. If the Ammonites had a legitimate claim on it, they should have tried to secure it long ago (v. 26).

Jephthah's reference to 300 years (v. 26) is an important benchmark in biblical chronology. It had been approximately 300 years since the Israelites had defeated Sihon and captured Heshbon (about 1406 B.C.). Shortly after Jephthah spoke these words, he defeated the Ammonites in battle (v. 33; about 1106 B.C.), and ended the 18-year Ammonite oppression (10:8).

The Philistine oppression of Israel began at the same time as the Ammonite oppression (10:7; in 1124 B.C.). The Philistines harassed Israel for 40 years (13:1; ca. 1124-1084 B.C.). The dates of the Philistine oppression are important, because they provide a framework for the ministries of Eli and Samuel, as well as for that of Samson.

This time reference, along with the one in 1 Kings 6:1, indicates that the Exodus took place about 1446 B.C., rather than about 1280 B.C. Advocates of the 1280 B.C. date of the Exodus usually take the 300 years as a rounded number, indicating several generations, as they also interpret 1 Kings 6:1, or as a total of overlapping periods.²

Finally, Jephthah called on Yahweh, the ultimate Judge, to judge who had the rightful title to the land (v. 27). But, in spite of Jephthah's arguments, the Ammonite king disregarded his message (v. 28). The king of the Ammonites obviously believed that he could take Gilead in battle.

¹Boda, p. 1193. See Lindsey, p. 401, for three other possible solutions to Jephthah's "mistake."

²For further discussion of the chronology of Judges, see Merrill, pp. 146-51.

Jephthah's vow and victory 11:29-33

God's Spirit then "came upon" Jephthah, giving the promise of divine enablement and victory in the approaching encounter with the Ammonite army (v. 29; cf. 3:10; 6:34; 14:6, 19; 1 Sam. 10:10).

"The spirit may be an effective power; but it seems that it is not automatically effective, at least not in terms of effecting deliverance. The spirit comes upon or possesses human beings; therefore, it must be embodied with cooperation and faithfulness if deliverance is to be effected ..."¹

Jephthah traveled through Gilead, in the tribal territories of Gad and eastern Manasseh, recruiting soldiers. He next led his troops back to Mizpah in Gilead (cf. v. 11), and then finally eastward into Ammon—to face the Ammonites in battle.

About this time, Jephthah made a vow before going into battle. Vowing to God was always voluntary in Israel; God never required a person to make a vow to Him. Jephthah did not need to make this vow. This was a mistake. Nevertheless, he promised that if the LORD would give him victory, he would give God "whatever" came out of the door of his house when he returned from the conflict (vv. 30-31). He would offer this person or animal—either as a sacrifice of dedication to the LORD, or as a burnt offering of worship (v. 31).

It is unclear whether Jephthah had a person or an animal in mind when he made his vow, and it is equally unclear whether he intended to dedicate the object to God or to offer it as a burnt offering to Him. In any case, it was an unnecessary and foolish thing for him to do, because he had no control over what might come out of his house to meet him if he returned from battle.

"The making of the vow is an act of unfaithfulness. Jephthah desires to bind God rather than embrace the gift of the spirit. What comes to him freely, he seeks to earn and manipulate. The meaning of his words is doubt, not faith; it is control, not courage. To such a vow the deity makes no reply."²

¹McCann, p. 82.

²Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p. 97.

Compare Gideon's similar response to the gift of God's Spirit (cf. 6:17-18). The masculine gender of the Hebrew word translated "whatever" can apply to a person or an animal, but Jephthah was probably thinking of an animal when he made the vow.

"His negotiations with the elders, his diplomacy with the Ammonites, and his vow, have all amply displayed Jephthah's facility with words. Jephthah, we know, is *good* at opening his mouth. (How ironical that his name means literally 'he opens!'). What has precipitated the crisis with his daughter is that he has opened his mouth to *Yahweh*, that is, he has tried to conduct his relationship with God in the same way that he has conducted his relationships with men. He has debased religion (a vow, an offering) into politics."¹

Webb pointed out, in the helpful article quoted above, that Israel had done the same thing Jephthah did. This tendency to negotiate with God marked and marred her relationship with Yahweh during this period of her history.

The LORD gave Jephthah great success in the battle, and he destroyed 20 cities in Ammon. He broke the Ammonites' strong power over the Israelites, so they ceased oppressing Israel (v. 33).

The writer wrote verses 29-32 using a chiasmic literary structure. This section begins and ends with the promise and fulfillment of God giving Jephthah victory. When the Spirit came upon him, there was no doubt that he would defeat the enemy. Unfortunately the center of this chiasm relates Jephthah bargaining with God to ensure victory. He did not need to make this vow. He had already testified that God had given His people victory in the past (vv. 21, 24). Apparently his faith was not as strong as it might have been, and this weakness led him to seek a guarantee of success by making the vow.

Jephthah's vow reveals that he had a rather unenlightened concept of Yahweh, even though he was a man of faith. His commitment to the LORD was strangely strong, but his understanding of God was not what it should have been. He either did not know what the Mosaic Law revealed about Yahweh, or else he had forgotten this.

¹Barry G. Webb, "The Theme of the Jephthah Story (Judge 10:6—12:7)," *Reformed Theological Review* 45:2 (May-August 1986):42.

His concept of God bears the marks of Canaanite influence. His belief that he needed to bargain with or bribe God, in order to get Him to bless His people, was unfortunate (cf. Jer. 29:11). He also believed that Yahweh took pleasure in what hurts people: that He is sadistic. This idea is also inaccurate and pagan. Furthermore, he believed that God might even abandon him before he finished his battle. But God had promised that He would not do this—as long as His people trusted and obeyed Him (Deut. 28:1, 7).

Jephthah made his tragic vow because he did not have a view of God that was informed by previous revelation.¹ He should have instead vowed to offer the inhabitants of the cities that he would conquer as sacrifices to God (Num. 21:2).

The secret to Jephthah's success was his essential trust in and obedience to Yahweh (cf. Heb. 11:32). This is always the key to spiritual success. His life teaches us that God can and does use people with tough backgrounds. God does not produce the people that He uses with a cookie cutter, nor mass produce them on an assembly line. Each one is different. He even uses people whom others reject because of their family situations or unorthodox lifestyles. God prepares His instruments throughout their lives, and uses everything in their backgrounds to equip them to conduct a unique ministry for Himself.

The fate of Jephthah's daughter 11:34-40

Verses 1-33 record Jephthah's success. The rest of his story (11:34—12:7) relates his failure. The writer likewise recorded Gideon's success first (6:1—8:23) and then his failure (8:24—9:57). We shall find a similar pattern when we come to Samson's story. As with Gideon and Samson, Jephthah's failure had a connection to his success. In all three of these major judges' cases, failure resulted from ignorance of God's Word or disregard of it.

God gave us little information about the personal lives of the first three major judges: Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah. He gave us much more personal information about the last three major judges: Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. This selection of material helps us appreciate the deterioration

¹See Inrig, p. 195.

that took place in Israel during the Judges Period, when God's people did "what was right in his own eyes" (21:25).

When Jephthah returned home from battle, his one and only child, a daughter, greeted him gleefully ("with tambourines and with dancing," v. 34). The writer's description of her recalls Miriam's joy and dancing after the LORD gave the Israelites victory over their Egyptian pursuers (Exod. 15:20). But her joy became Jephthah's sorrow ("Oh, my daughter! You have brought me disaster," v. 35). He falsely blamed her for his sorrow (cf. 1 Kings 18:17-18). But he himself was responsible for it, because of his vow to God (vv. 30-31). "Given my word" (v. 35) is wordplay with "given your word" (v. 36). Jephthah's name means "he opens," and "given my word" is literally "opened my mouth." Jephthah evidently believed that to go back on his vow to God would involve a denial of his integrity: his very name. He felt he would be denying everything he believed in and stood for if he failed to fulfill his vow.

Jephthah believed he could not get out of his vow (v. 35). Unfortunately he did not know, or had forgotten, that God had made provision for His people to redeem things they had vowed to give Him. Leviticus 27:1-8 instructed the Israelites that if they vowed someone or something to God, and then wanted it back, they could pay a stated ransom price and buy it back (cf. Exod. 13:2, 13; Num. 18:15).¹ Had Jephthah obeyed the Word of God, he could have avoided sacrificing his daughter. With his vow he sought to secure his present (a victory in battle), but through it he ended up sacrificing his future (his daughter, his only child). Contrast the outcome of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22). Abraham had secured a hope and a future (cf. Jeremiah in Jer. 29:11), whereas Jephthah lost both. This is yet another example in Judges of self-assertion leading to violence, in this case the senseless abuse of a young woman.

"Although the present story ends with the death of the young girl, her father is the tragic figure, presenting a pathetic picture of stupidity, brutality, ambition, and self-centeredness. Ironically, the one who appeared to have become master of his own fate has become a victim of his own rash word. ... The man who had tried to manipulate Yahweh to guarantee his

¹See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23—27*, pp. 2410-11.

'peace' (*shalom*) is doomed by the one whose life he was willing to sacrifice for his own well-being."¹

The submissiveness of Jephthah's daughter was as commendable as it was tragic. She did not know Leviticus 27 either, but she submitted as an obedient child (cf. Isaac in Gen. 22). She, along with her father, believed that the LORD had given her father the victory over the Ammonites (v. 36). Here is another woman in Judges who, although unnamed, provides a good example (cf. Achsah, Deborah, Jael). Yet she ended up weeping because of the folly of her idolatrous, self-assertive, ignorant father.

Note the references to weeping at the beginning (2:4), middle (11:38), and end (20:23, 26; 21:2) of this book. Of all the characters in Judges, this daughter was more like Jesus than any other, in that she embodies His spirit of willing submission to His Father.² Notice also the parallel between the death of Jephthah's daughter and the death of six million Jews during World War II. Both were "holocausts," perpetrated in the name of God, that the Jews determined never to forget.³

There are primarily two possible interpretations of the fate of Jephthah's daughter.⁴

- 1. Jephthah offered her as a human sacrifice (a burnt offering) to Yahweh.⁵

¹Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 372-73.

²McCann, p. 88.

³Ibid., p. 89.

⁴One of the best discussions of this issue that I have found is by Robert D. Culver, "Did Jephthah Really Slay His Daughter and Offer Her Body as a Burnt Offering?" *The Evangelical Christian* 55:2 (February 1959):69-70. See also Hanna, pp. 123-25.

⁵Advocates of this view include Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:7:10; several early church fathers; D. R. Davis, p. 147; F. F. Bruce, "Judges," in *New Bible Commentary*, p. 250; Cundall and Morris, p. 148; Bright, *A History ...*, p. 159; J. J. Davis, p. 128; Henry, p. 260; Wolf, p. 456; Lewis, p. 68; J. Gray, p. 319; Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 367-68; McCann, p. 84; Howard, p. 117; Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "The Ethical Challenge of Jephthah's Fulfilled Vow," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167:668 (October-December 2010):404-22; idem, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 355, 357; C. Pfeiffer, p. 255; Jamieson, et al., p. 194; et al; Alexander Whyte, *Bible Characters*, 1:193; Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, p. 262; Butler, pp. 291-92; Kuruvilla, pp. 198-201; Boda, p. 1195-96; Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 206-7; Blaiklock, p. 112.

The more important arguments in favor of this interpretation are as follows:

- a. Jephthah's desolation when his daughter greeted him points to an ultimate sacrifice (v. 35).
- b. The fact that she received a two-month reprieve, before Jephthah carried out his vowed action, suggests that she was.
- c. The institution of a four-day annual feast in Israel, as a result of her fate, argues for her death (v. 40).
- d. Until the Middle Ages, this was the uniform interpretation of the commentators.
- e. The writer said the Israelites worshipped the gods of Ammon and Moab (10:10), and the leaders of these nations sacrificed children (2 Kings 3:27).

The rebuttals to these points are these:

- a. Jephthah naturally would have been very sorry that his daughter met him, rather than some animal. He had only one heir, and she could not now perpetuate his family in Israel.
- b. The two-month reprieve would have been just as appropriate, if she left her father's home from then on—for a life of perpetual service at the tabernacle. She mourned because she would have to live as a virgin, not die as a virgin.
- c. The Israelites established the feast because Jephthah's daughter so admirably submitted to the will of her father and God. Moreover, she was the daughter of a famous judge in Israel.
- d. The antiquity of an interpretation does not guarantee its accuracy.
- e. There is no indication that the Israelites practiced human sacrifice at this time, though their neighbors did.

- 2. Jephthah dedicated his daughter to the service of Yahweh, probably at the tabernacle, where she ministered from then on as a virgin.¹

Some of the stronger arguments in favor of this view are these:

- a. The text allows this possibility. The words and expressions used do not require a human sacrifice.
- b. God specifically forbade human sacrifice in the Mosaic Law, and called it an abominable act in His sight (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut. 12:31; 18:10). That a judge in Israel would have practiced it is unthinkable.
- c. There is no record yet that the Israelites made human sacrifices—not until the godless kings Ahab and Manasseh introduced them many years later.
- d. The writer did not otherwise picture Jephthah as a rash person who would have impetuously or desperately promised God such a sacrifice (cf. vv. 9-11, 12-27).
- e. The great respect that Jephthah showed for God would have prevented him from sacrificing an innocent person.
- f. The two facts, that Jephthah allowed his daughter to bewail her virginity, and that she had no relations with a man (v. 39), suggest that she sacrificed herself by remaining a virgin.
- g. Women did serve in Israel's worship centers (Exod. 38:8; 1 Sam. 2:22; Luke 2:36-37).

The responses to these arguments that critics of this view have made are as follows:

- a. Human sacrifice is the normal implication of the terms used in the passage.

¹Advocates of this view include Keil and Delitzsch, p. 338; Feinberg, p. 6; Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, p. 288-95; idem, *A Survey ...*, pp. 223-24; McGee, 2:71-72; Wiersbe, pp. 140-41.

- b. Jephthah might have violated the Mosaic Law, just as other judges of Israel did (e.g., Gideon's multiple marriages, Samson's violation of his Nazirite vow, etc.).
- c. This could be the first human sacrifice the Israelites offered that God recorded in Scripture. The king of Moab later offered his own crown prince as a human sacrifice, just to assure victory in battle—so this not-unheard-of ancient pagan practice may have influenced Jephthah (cf. 2 Kings 3:27).
- d. Jephthah's background suggests that he was, indeed, a rash person. He very well could have resorted to such an extreme measure in order to secure victory and acceptance by the Gileadites (cf. vv. 1-3).
- e. Having great respect for Yahweh and yet promising a human sacrifice were not necessarily inconsistent, especially in that period of Israel's history.
- f. The descriptions of Jephthah's daughter as a virgin describe her condition before her sacrifice, not after.
- g. The fact that some women served in Israel's central sanctuaries does not mean that Jephthah's daughter did.

I believe that Jephthah probably offered his daughter as a human sacrifice. What Jephthah did to his daughter may have been acceptable to Molech, but not to Yahweh. A few years later, King Saul made a similar foolish vow and almost slew his own son Jonathan (1 Sam. 14:39, 44-45). The only thing that prevented that tragedy was the intervention of the Israelites. Ignorance or disregard of God's Word is not only unfortunate, but it is also dangerous.

"Long neglect of the Mosaic law had left the Israelites with many mistaken notions about God's will."¹

Jephthah may have known God's will but simply have chosen to disregard it.

¹Wolf, p. 381.

"If God's mind can change for the sake of graciously allowing people to live, why cannot Jephthah change his mind [about slaying his daughter]? At other places in the Old Testament, God even breaks the Torah in order to allow the people to live—for instance, inviting an adulterous people to return instead of killing them (see Jer. 3:11-14), and allowing Israel, the disobedient child, to be spared rather than stoned (see Hos. 11:1-9). In Jephthah's case, Jephthah could actually have appealed to the Torah as support for not sacrificing his child. But he does not. Where are the imaginative diplomatic skills of 11:12-28, where Jephthah shows detailed awareness of Numbers 21, a Torah narrative?"¹

Why do the fortunes of women decline as the Book of Judges proceeds, beginning here? Following the execution of Jephthah's daughter, things got worse for women in Israel. A Levite's concubine was gang raped, killed, and dismembered (ch. 19), 400 young virgins from Jabesh-gilead were abducted (21:12), as were the young women of Shiloh (21:21). One of the primary indications of moral confusion and social chaos in any society is the abuse of women. In recording these instances of the abuse of women in Judges, the writer was revealing the state of confusion and chaos that existed in Israel.

Jephthah's battle with the Ephraimites 12:1-7

The writer's emphasis now shifts from Jephthah's foolishness to Ephraim's arrogance. Like Gideon, Jephthah had to deal with disgruntled Ephraimites, but in Jephthah's case the result was worse: a costly civil war.

The Ephraimites were the Gileadites' neighbors to the west. They resented the fact that Jephthah had not requested their assistance in the war with the Ammonites, probably for both economic (loss of plunder) and social (honor-shame) reasons.² We noted earlier that the Ephraimites considered themselves superior to their brethren in some respects (cf. 8:1). Now they foolishly threatened to punish Jephthah for his affront (v. 1).

"Why should the Ephraimites complain about a victory accomplished through God's intervention for the benefit of all

¹McCann, pp. 84-85.

²Boda, p. 1197.

the tribes? It was a strange jealousy that spurred on Ephraim."¹

"Some of the deepest animus [hostility, ill feeling] is reserved for fellow Israelites in the book of Judges."²

Jephthah opened his mouth *wisely* again, and replied that he had indeed requested their help, but they had not responded (v. 2). This did not satisfy the Ephraimites, however, who mobilized a large fighting force to teach the Gileadites a lesson. These proud Israelites wanted to dominate, to control, and to receive recognition among their brethren. They regarded the Gileadites as "survivors" (NASB) or "fugitives" (AV, NRSV, NKJV, ESV, HCSB) or "renegades" (NIV, TNIV) or "refugees" (NET2, CEV), because they had left the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh and had settled east of the Jordan River (v. 4).

"As is so often the case, internal disputes broke out after the common enemy was subdued. The main issue appears to be Jephthah's unilateral action in Transjordan. However, a much more serious issue is apparent, a developing independence among the tribes east of the Jordan. The conflict between the Ephraimites and the Gileadites is a sad commentary on the lack of Israelite unity in this period."³

When the Ephraimites had confronted Gideon, he responded with good psychology (8:1-3). Jephthah was a different kind of person from Gideon, however. He responded with a sword. Jephthah was a "nobody," and nobodies are often unimpressed with people who think they are "somebodies," as the Ephraimites considered themselves.

In the battle that followed, east of the Jordan, 42,000 Ephraimites (or 42 military units) suffered defeat—a high price for resentment. The Gileadites stopped the rebel Ephraimites who tried to flee back home at the fords of the Jordan. The Ephraimites' accent did not permit them to say *shibboleth* (meaning "ear of corn" or "flowing stream") normally (they pronounced it "sibboleth," with an 's' instead of 'sh' sound). Similarly, during World War II, the Nazis identified Russian Jews by the way they pronounced

¹Wolf, p. 458.

²Susan Niditch, *Judges*, p. 138.

³Monson, p. 187.

"kookoorooza," the Russian word for corn.¹ In this way, the Gileadite soldiers identified the fleeing Ephraimites, and killed so many of them.

"Here is graphic evidence that language distinctions had begun to mark the rapidly widening division of the nation."²

Unfortunately, Jephthah treated his fellow Israelites, the Ephraimites, as he had dealt with Israel's enemy, the Ammonites. He unleashed his zeal and took vengeance far out of proportion to what might have been legitimate.

"Jephthah's battle began with a foreign enemy; he has now become the internal enemy battling his own people."³

Jephthah served as a judge in Israel, but he probably judged only the Transjordanian tribes. He did so for only six years, after his appointment to judgeship by the elders of Gilead and after his victory over the Ammonites. He apparently failed to achieve any rest for the land. At least the writer mentioned none.

"Here God uses a leader not only with suspect origins who ascends to power under dubious circumstances through his negotiating skills, but also a leader who participates in a pagan practice (child sacrifice) and participates in the massacre of fellow northern tribesmen."⁴

"Gideon was a weak man who was transformed into a fearless warrior. Jephthah was a valiant warrior. Because of his tragic family life, he had to become strong to survive. The story of his life is of God taking a strong man, and, by His Spirit, turning him into a usable man. Whatever our strengths and weaknesses, the secret of our usefulness is our availability to our God."⁵

Earlier we saw that Gideon's failure had bad consequences for his nation (ch. 8) and for him personally (ch. 9). Likewise Jephthah's failure had bad

¹Wolf, p. 458.

²Merrill, pp. 172-73. Cf. C. Pfeiffer, p. 155; Daniel I. Block, "The Role of Language in Ancient Israelite Perceptions of National Identity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103:3 (September 1984):339, n. 75.

³Kuruvilla, p. 203.

⁴Boda, p. 1200.

⁵Inrig, p. 189.

consequences for him personally (ch. 11) and for his nation (ch. 12). We shall see that Samson's failure also had bad consequences for his nation and himself (ch. 16). The bad personal consequences Gideon experienced involved the premature death of his 70 sons. Jephthah's personal tragedy involved the premature death of his only daughter.¹ Samson himself died prematurely (cf. Rom. 6:23).

Gideon's failure was compromise with idolatry. The appeal of the world—Gideon's cultural environment—brought him down. Jephthah's failure was ignorance of, or inattention to, God's Word. In the record of Satan's temptations in Scripture, the devil sought to get people to doubt, deny, disobey, or disregard what God had said (cf. Gen. 3; Matt. 4). Jephthah fell before Satanic attack. Samson's failure was due to his indulging his fleshly appetites.

These three major judges all experienced success, but they also failed. One of each of the three major sources of temptation—the world, the flesh, and the devil—was responsible for the failure of each of these three judges.

All three judges failed to follow God fully. Each one turned aside to self-will. All three represent Israel in the period of the judges, and all three are typical of all believers. They experienced a measure of spiritual success, but they also failed for the same reasons we Christians fail.

4. The judgeships of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon 12:8-15

These three men, the first two from Zebulun and the third from Ephraim, were quite clearly successors of Jephthah (vv. 8, 11, 13). Probably Ibzan followed Jephthah (v. 8), and then Elon and Abdon succeeded Ibzan (vv. 11, 13). The writer noted no special deeds of these three, either because they performed none or because he chose not to feature them in his narrative.

"The people of God may never recognize the work you do for the Lord. You may be a Tola, an Ibzan, or an Elon. Don't be discouraged! God keeps the records and will one day reward you for your faithful service. It's not important that other

¹See Michael J. Smith, "The Failure of the Family in Judges, Part 1: Jephthah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:647 (July-September 2005):279-98.

people see what you do and compliment you on it. It is important that we serve the Lord and seek to please Him."¹

McGee believed that the short accounts of the minor judges Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon indicate that they did nothing significant, which he regarded as blameworthy.²

Ibzan's judgeship 12:8-10

Ibzan, whose name comes from a Hebrew root meaning "swift," was notable for his 30 sons and 30 daughters—a sign of prestige and wealth in the ancient Near East (cf. 8:30). He sharply contrasts with Jephthah, who had only one daughter. Whereas Jephthah slew his one daughter, Ibzan obtained husbands for his 30 daughters. Apparently Ibzan was a polygamist, since multiple wives would have normally been needed to produce 60 children, but Jephthah was not. Ibzan's "marriages probably cemented clan alliances and extended the scope of his political influence."³

"... the marriages represented good politics but bad religion just as in the later case of Solomon."⁴

Ibzan may have lived in Bethlehem of Zebulun. The writer identified the other Bethlehem (in Judah) as "Bethlehem of Judah" elsewhere in the text of Judges. However, it is possible that he lived in Bethlehem of Judah.⁵

"He did nothing in the seven years of his administration that was worth recording, or deserved a memorial."⁶

Elon's judgeship 12:11-12

Elon, meaning "little ram," or "oak," or "terebinth," also lived in Zebulun, though archaeologists have not yet discovered his town: Aijalon. Elon judged for 10 years.

¹Wiersbe, p. 169.

²McGee, 2:67-68, 73-74.

³Block, *Judges ...*, p. 389.

⁴Butler, p. 297.

⁵Boda, p. 1201.

⁶Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:7:13.

Abdon's judgeship 12:13-15

Abdon (lit. "Service" or "Servant" or "Little Servant") lived in the hill country of Ephraim. Pirathon, his hometown, was west and a little south of Shechem. Abdon, like Ibzan (v. 9) and Jair the Gileadite (10:3-4), had many sons and daughters, and his 70 sons and grandsons rode on 70 donkeys, reflecting this judge's prestige. This note may also suggest that peace and prosperity prevailed when he judged (cf. 10:4).

The fact that several of the judges fathered extremely large families points to their living like the eastern potentates of their day. This is further evidence that Canaanite culture was adversely influencing the Israelites. The judges' lives evidenced mixed success and failure. "Children are a gift from the LORD" (Ps. 127:3), so, even in spite of apostasy, God continued to bestow grace on His people (cf. 10:1-5).

"He [Abdon] is only recorded to have been happy in his children; for the public affairs were then so peaceable, and in such security, that neither did he perform any glorious action."¹

These final minor judges "do not compare favorably with the previous minor judges. No minor judge in this third group is said to 'deliver' Israel. Their rule brings benefit only to themselves and not to the nation of Israel as a whole. The details about these judges involve only their own families and their deaths and burials. The lengths of their reigns (seven years, ten years, eight years) are relatively short in comparison to the previous minor judges."²

F. THE SIXTH APOSTASY CHS. 13—16

"From chapters 13 to 18, the author concentrates on the tribe of Dan, which had been one of the largest and most prominent tribes during the wilderness march (Num 2:25-31). In the period of the judges, however, Dan seemed helpless against the Amorites (1:34) and moved northward to find new territory (chs. 17—18). Contrasted with these failures are the

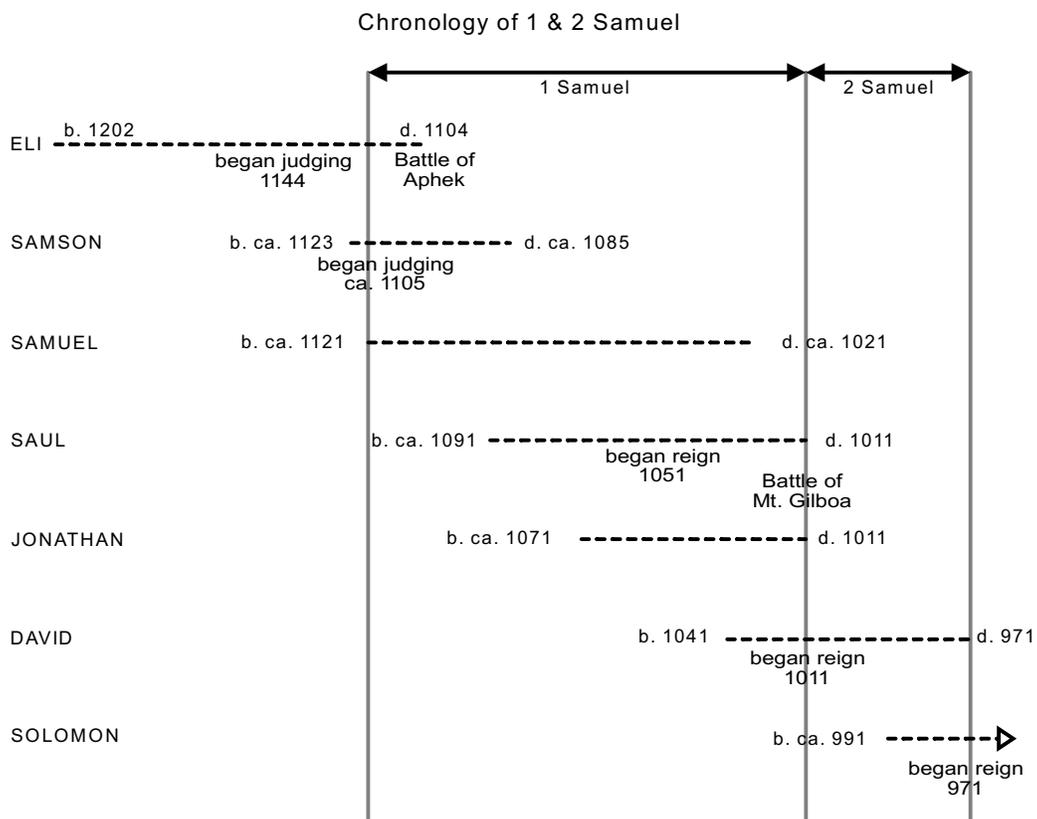
¹Ibid., 5:7:15.

²Olson, 2:839.

exploits of Samson, whose personal achievements are detailed in four chapters. Yet his own life was a strange mixture of the strength and weakness that epitomized the tragic conditions within the tribe itself."¹

"The story moves from his birth (conception and delivery by a barren woman) to his death (destruction and suicide by a disabled man)."²

The following diagram shows Samson's chronological relationship to the last judges and the first kings of Israel:



¹Wolf, p. 460.

²Kuruvilla, p. 208.

1. Samson's birth ch. 13

The purpose of this chapter is to show how the LORD provided the Israelites with a deliverer from their Philistine oppressors.¹ There is much archaeological evidence of the Philistines' presence in Canaan at this time.²

The Philistine oppression 13:1

The translation "again did" in verse 1 implies that the Philistine oppression followed the Ammonite oppression chronologically. However, the Hebrew idiom that these words translate does not necessarily mean a separate apostasy that followed. It can also mean, and in view of 10:6-7 must mean, that the Israelites continued to do evil. The Philistines and the Ammonites had begun oppressing Israel at approximately the same time (ca. 1124-1123 B.C.).³

"More than any previous agent of deliverance ... Samson demonstrates that the divinely chosen leaders were part of Israel's problem rather than a lasting solution."⁴

The 40-year oppression by the Philistines introduced here did not end until Samuel, also a judge (1 Sam. 7:6), defeated them at Ebenezer (1 Sam. 7; ca. 1084 B.C.). Samson only began to deliver Israel from the Philistines (v. 5). At the end of his life and story, conditions in Israel were even worse than at the beginning. The Philistines continued their oppression of the Israelites into King David's reign.

I have already referred to the antagonism of the Philistines on Israel's southwestern flank (3:31; 10:7). The Philistine nation continued to increase in power during the period of the judges, and became Israel's major enemy by the end of the Judges Period and the beginning of the monarchy.

The Philistines were, "... a powerful sea people that settled in the coastal strip in S.W. Palestine, extending along the Mediterranean from Joppa to S. of Gaza ... about 50 miles long and 15 miles wide. ...

¹See Brian N. Peterson, "Samson: Hero or Villain? The Samson Narrative in Light of David and Saul," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 174:693 (January-March 2017):22-44.

²See Free, pp. 143-44.

³See Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, p. 85.

⁴Block, *Judges ...*, p. 392.

"The Philistines are said to have come from Caphtor [Crete] (Amos 9:7; Jer. 47:4; cf. Deut. 2:23). ...

"The Philistines were a non-Semitic people. ... They appear as a tall, Hellenic-looking people. ...

"Their power and threat to Israel were due to a large extent to their political organization. It consisted of a league of five great cities [Gaza, Ekron, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gath]. ...

"Besides their warlike nature, effective political organization and economic power, as the result of the fertile farming section they inhabited, Philistine militarism, which was a continual threat to Israel, was explainable by their early control of the iron monopoly. Iron came into widespread use in Palestine around 1200 B.C. Philistines knew the secret of smelting it, which they evidently got from the Hittites. They were able to import, smelt, and forge iron and made use of various iron military weapons. By enforcing a rigid monopoly over Israel, the Philistines were able to make great strides in military encroachments upon Israelite territory [cf. 1 Sam. 13:19-22]. ...

"The Philistines were intensely religious. They celebrated their victories in the 'house of their idols' (1 Sam. 31:9) [cf. Judg. 16:23-27]. ... Dagon ... 'fish' was represented with the hands and face of a man and the tail of a fish. ... To ... him they offered thanksgiving when they had taken Samson (Judg. 16:23, 24)."¹

The Philistines (sometimes called Caphtorim) had evidently lived in Canaan in small numbers as early as the patriarchal period (Gen. 21:32; 26:1; cf. Deut. 2:23). However, their major migration into Canaan took place in the first quarter of the twelfth century B.C. (1200—1175 B.C.).² This would have made them more recent settlers in Canaan than the Israelites. Samson evidently began his judgeship about 1105 B.C.

¹ *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Philistines," by Merrill F. Unger, pp. 859-61.

² John Garstang, *The Foundations of Bible History: Joshua, Judges*, p. 287. See also Trude Dothan, "What We Know about the Philistines," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 8:4 (July-August 1982):20-44.

One writer argued that Samson was roughly contemporary with Jephthah and Gideon, which would place the beginning of his judgeship earlier than 1105 B.C.¹ He based his view on the fact that the writer recorded no rest period that preceded the beginning of Samson's judgeship (13:1). He saw a continuation of the conflict with the Philistines mentioned in 10:7. These arguments seem weak to me.

The Philistines continued to frustrate the Israelites until David subjugated them early in his reign (ca. 1004 B.C.; 2 Sam. 5:17-25). However, the Philistines continued to oppose the Israelites until the Babylonian Captivity removed both people groups from the land (cf. Isa. 14:29-32; Jer. 47; Ezek. 25:15-17; Amos 1:6-8). The "land of the Philistines" became known as "Philistia." The designation "Palestine" is a Greek word that derives from "Philistia." The Roman emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117-138) gave Canaan the name Palestine.

The writer recorded no Israelite cry for help from the Philistine oppressors. Later we shall see that the Israelites did not cooperate with Samson in opposing this enemy. The Philistines appear to have been attractive neighbors. Unfortunately, the Israelites readily cooperated with them, instead of opposing them and driving them from the Promised Land.

The announcement of Samson's birth 13:2-7

The angel of the LORD again appeared to an Israelite (v. 3; cf. 6:11). This time He announced to an infertile Danite woman, whose name is not mentioned, that she would give birth to a son (cf. Gen. 16:11; Luke 1:26-38).

"When God wants to do something really great in His world, He doesn't send an army but an angel."²

Josephus wrote the following about this woman and her husband, which he based on Jewish tradition:

"There was one Manoah, a person of such great virtue, that he had few men his equals, and without dispute the principal

¹Washburn, p. 424.

²Wiersbe, p. 144.

person of his country. He had a wife celebrated for her beauty, and excelling her contemporaries."¹

Samson's birth by a woman who could not naturally bear children indicated God's supernatural provision of him for a special purpose. The meaning of Samson's name may derive from *shemesh* ("sun") and the diminutive ending *on*, meaning "little sun" or "sunny boy." Samson's mother may have named him "little sun" in honor of a Canaanite god.² Another view is that Samson's name connects with Beth-Shemesh ("House of the Sun"), a nearby town.

"Just across the valley from Manoah's home was Beth-shemesh, the shrine town of the sun-god. Although Manoah was not an idolator [*sic*], he may have given his son a name that was common in the community."³

"Naming Samson after the sun, we have a dangerous dabbling in paganism. Not a good sign."⁴

Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Hannah, Michal, and Elizabeth were all barren too. Mary the mother of Jesus, like Samson's mother, also experienced a supernatural conception and birth. Each of these mothers produced a remarkable son as the result of God's direct intervention in their lives.

"What does he [God] do when he has a people who refuse to forsake Baal and have no desire to forsake Philistia? A people grown so used to bondage they don't even have sense to call out for relief? At least here the very God who judges them (v. 1b) begins to work their deliverance—anyway (vv. 2-5). That is grace—grace greater than all our sin, than all our stupidity, than all our density."⁵

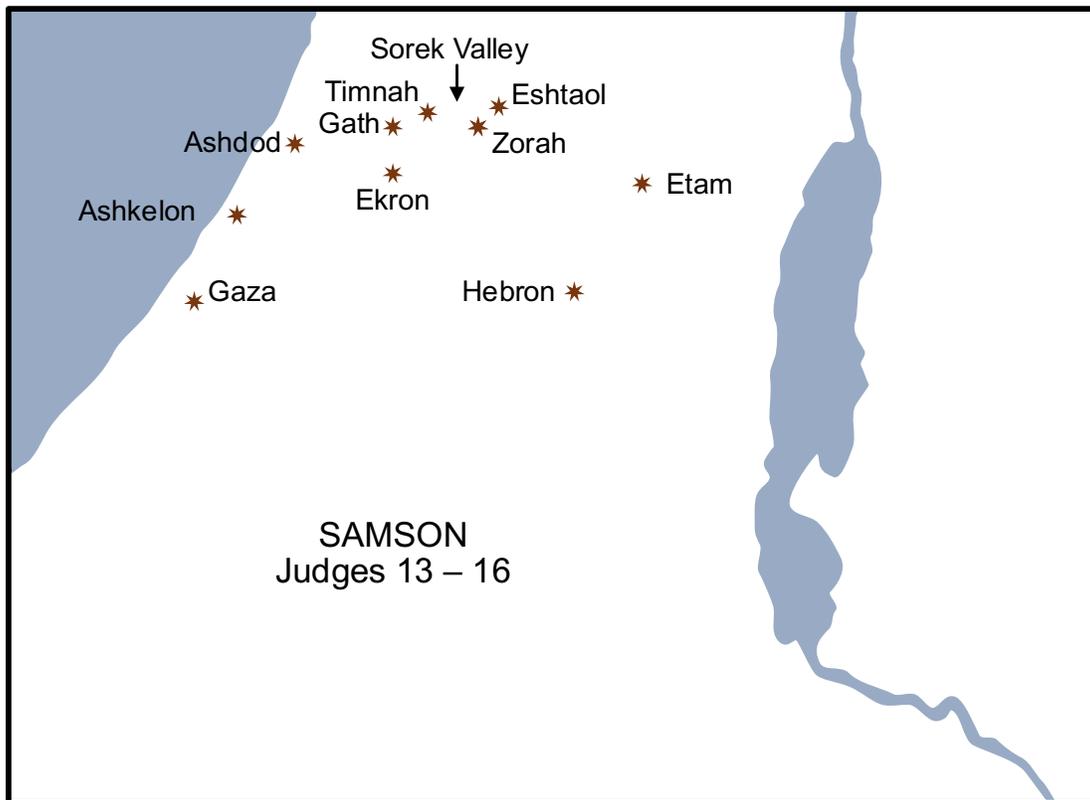
¹Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:8:2.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 419.

³C. Pfeiffer, p. 257. Cf. Lewis, p. 76.

⁴Kuruvilla, p. 217.

⁵D. R. Davis, p. 160.



The appearance of the angel of the LORD always marked a very significant event in Israel's history. The only other birth He had announced so far was Isaac's (Gen. 18:1, 10; cf. Zacharias, Luke 1). The fact that God announced Samson's birth this way indicates that Samson would have an unusual opportunity to serve God.

Samson's parents were to rear him as a Nazirite: a person set apart to a holy life because he was dedicated to God. Normally Israelites took the Nazirite vow voluntarily and only for a short period of time. But Samson was to be a lifelong Nazirite. Three laws governed the person under a typical temporary Nazirite vow, in addition to the other Mosaic laws: He was to eat nothing that the grapevine produced, he was to let his hair grow without cutting it, and he was to refrain from contact with a dead body (cf. Num. 6:1-21).

This vow placed the typical temporary Nazirite in a position of separation to God in a special sense (Num. 6:2). Abstinance from wine would have freed him from bondage to that drink, so he could operate under the control of God's Spirit consistently (cf. Eph. 5:18). Long hair was important

because it was a public testimony to the Nazirite's separation to God. Contact with a corpse precluded worship at Israel's central sanctuary temporarily, but no contact with dead bodies would enable the Nazirite to have unbroken fellowship with God.

Samson's mother was to observe certain precautions during her pregnancy to safeguard her special child. She was to abstain from wine and strong drink and any unclean thing (v. 4). Wine came from grapes, but strong drink (Heb. *shakar*) was the product of other fermented fruits and grains. We know that the physical condition of a pregnant woman can affect her unborn child. For example, heroin-addicted mothers give birth to babies that need that drug. God did not want Samson under any other influence except Himself, even from the time of his conception.

Samson was to live his whole life as a Nazirite, because God would "begin" to deliver Israel from the very powerful Philistines through him (v. 5). Samuel and David would later complete this task (1 Sam. 7:10-14; 2 Sam. 5:17-25).

Samson sadly proved unfaithful in his separation to God. John the Baptist, who was apparently another Nazirite from birth, was faithful. He showed us what Samson could have become, if he had valued his opportunity to serve God, and had preserved his dedication to God. Evidently Manoah's wife assumed at first that the angel was just a prophet: a man of God (v. 6).

Did the restrictions on a typical temporary Nazirite apply to Samson, or were his restrictions different, because he was to be a lifelong Nazirite? There seem to be three possible answers: (1) Samson was to follow all the restrictions that the Mosaic Law imposed on Nazirites, because he was to be a Nazirite. (2) Samson was to observe only the one restriction that the angel of the LORD specifically mentioned, namely, that he not cut his hair (v. 5). (3) Samson was not to cut his hair, but he was also to abstain from eating and drinking certain things, since his mother had been instructed to "not drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing" during her pregnancy (v. 7).¹

As Samson's story unfolds, it becomes clear that he certainly did not follow the angel's direction concerning leaving his hair uncut. It appears that he probably also violated the food and drink laws imposed on regular Nazirites,

¹Chisholm, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 395-96.

since he ate and drank with the Philistines, and he undoubtedly contacted dead bodies: a lion, a donkey, and many Philistines whom he slew. So while the exact limits on his activities as a lifelong Nazirite remain debatable, it is clear that, when he allowed his hair to be cut, he broke the vow—if he had not already done so earlier.

The revelations of the angel 13:8-23

God sent His angel to revisit Manoah and his wife because they asked God—in prayer—about how they should rear Samson (v. 8), his way of life (v. 12), and his vocation (v. 12). Their desire to bring their son up according to God's will was commendable. Samson's parents were similar to Samuel's parents in this respect (cf. 1 Sam. 1:27-28; 2:19).

Evidently Manoah also assumed that the angel of the LORD was a prophet, since he asked for his name (vv. 8, 17). The angel told Manoah that His name was "wonderful" (Heb. *pill'i*; v. 18, or "beyond understanding" NIV, TNIV, or "secret" AV, or "you cannot comprehend it" (NET2), or "you couldn't understand it" CEV).

"The word ... is not the proper name of the angel of the Lord, but expresses the character of the name; and as the name simply denotes the nature, it expresses the peculiarity of his nature also. It is to be understood in an absolute sense—'absolutely and supremely wonderful' (*Seb. Schmidt*) ..."¹

The same Hebrew word, translated "wonderful," appears in Isaiah 9:6 as a title of Messiah (cf. Gen. 32:29). The idea here is that the angel was telling Manoah and his wife that they could not fully comprehend the significance of who He was (cf. Exod. 3:13-14; Isa. 9:6; Ps. 139:6). Though we can apprehend God to some extent, we cannot fully comprehend Him. Sinful mortals cannot fully appreciate all there is to know about God, even with the aid of the revelation that He has given us.

As Gideon had done, Manoah prepared a sacrifice to God in appreciation for this special revelation (cf. 6:19-24). Block provided a table showing 11 comparisons between Gideon's sacrifice in 6:17-24 and Manoah's in 13:15-23.² The similarities suggest that the writer wanted the reader to interpret Manoah's sacrifice in the light of Gideon's. Manoah and his wife finally

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 407.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 411.

realized that they had been talking with the angel of the LORD—while He was rising heavenward in the flame from the blazing sacrifice on the altar (v. 20). The LORD had, after all, done something "wonderful" for them. They had been privileged to see a theophany: a visible manifestation of the pre-incarnate Christ. So they "fell on their faces" (bowed with their faces touching the ground) in worship, out of reverential fear of the LORD (v. 20).

"Manoah was the first to speak but the last to recover his composure, reflecting the widely-held belief that if a man saw God he would die (Ex. 33:20; Jdg. 6:22, 23)."¹

Interestingly, Manoah reacted hysterically ("We will certainly die, for we have seen God," v. 21), but his wife was more cool-headed and objective (v. 23). This is another indication in Judges of the weakness of the Israelite men and the strength of the Israelite women in these topsy-turvy times. Elkanah and Hannah, Samuel's parents, who were contemporaries of Samson's parents, also demonstrated these characteristics (1 Sam. 1—2). Several writers have noted that Manoah's wife, though unnamed, is the real hero of the Samson narrative, besides God. She is the one character who exemplifies faithfulness to God's word and His ways.²

"In sum, Manoah is as clueless about the things of God as his son will be. The father's blindness parallels the son's: like father, like son, though in the latter's case, it is carried to the extreme levels of negligence, foolhardiness, and danger (and ends in literal blindness, 16:21)."³

Samson's earliest years 13:24-25

Finally Samson, the predicted savior from oppression, was born. Samson's name also means "the strong (daring) one." The Old Testament records more instances of mothers naming their children, as here, than fathers doing so. The Spirit of the LORD began to stir Samson into action when he was living at home (v. 25).

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 160.

²E.g., Robert Alter, "Samson without Folklore," in *Text and Tradition*, p. 51; Adele Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55 (1992):29; McCann, pp. 94-97.

³Kuruvilla, p. 216.

"The Spirit will come upon Samson more than upon any of the other judges, but with the least effect (see 14:6, 19; 15:14)."¹

"Possession of the Spirit of the Lord seems to result only in the personal protection of Samson from a variety of threats, some of which are caused by his own antics. ... It again appears that divine power is constrained by the exercise of human freedom. ... Divine success appears contingent upon an appropriate human response. ... God will act to punish transgressions, but not to prevent them."²

"The Spirit does not show approval of Samson's spiritual condition, nor does it fill him with an inner spirituality. Again, as with Gideon and with Jephthah, the coming of the Spirit does not indicate a moral or devotional purity but a power to accomplish acts for God."³

Chapter 13 is the only birth narrative in Judges, and one of the few that appear in the Bible. It is significant because it shows the unique and gracious opportunity that God gave Samson to deliver his nation. God raised up the other judges in their adult years, but He nurtured and groomed Samson even before he was born.

Samson could have been a hero like Elijah, who began to turn the Israelites back to the LORD in another time of dark apostasy. But, as we shall see, Samson failed to appreciate his privilege and so lost his opportunity.

"Contrasted with Jephthah, Samson had every advantage as a boy. His birth was predicted by an angel; he had godly parents who loved him greatly; he was uniquely dedicated to God as a Nazirite; and he experienced the power of God's Spirit as a young man. Despite all these favorable factors, Samson's life as it unfolds in the next three chapters is marked by tragedy."⁴

¹McCann, p. 101.

²R. G. Bowman, "Narrative Criticism of Judges," in *Judges and Method*, pp. 38-39.

³Butler, p. 330.

⁴Wolf, p. 465.

In recording the stories of Jephthah and Samson, the writer made clear that initial home environment is not absolutely determinative. One's life unfolds from his or her personal choices more than because of family heritage.¹

"The pressures which Samson faced make him a contemporary figure. Twentieth-century Christians face the danger of assimilation, of being slowly and imperceptibly squeezed into the mold of the world around us. Therefore, what God did with and through Samson has a special meaning for our times."²

Samson's life and ministry constitute one of the strangest enigmas in Bible history.

"The life and acts of *Samson* ... are described ... with an elaborate fulness [*sic*] which seems quite out of proportion to the help and deliverance which he brought to his people. ... And whilst the small results that followed from the acts of this hero of God do not answer the expectations that might naturally be formed from the miraculous announcements of his birth, the nature of the acts which he performed appears still less to be such as we should expect from a hero impelled by the Spirit of God. His actions not only bear the stamp of adventure, foolhardiness, and willfulness, when looked at outwardly, but they are almost all associated with love affairs; so that it looks as if Samson had dishonored and fooled away the gift entrusted to him, by making it subservient to his sensual lusts, and thus had prepared the way for his own ruin, without bringing any essential help to his people. ... In the case of Samson this consecration of the life to God [which was undertaken with the Nazirite vow] was not an act of his own free will, or a vow voluntarily taken; but it was imposed upon him by divine command from his conception and birth. ... Samson was to exhibit to his age generally a picture on the one hand of the strength which the people of God might acquire to overcome their strongest foes through faithful submission to the Lord their God, and on the other hand of the

¹For an interesting study of the family in the Samson narrative, see Michael J. Smith, "The Failure of the Family in Judges, Part 2: Samson," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:648 (October-December 2005):424-36.

²Inrig, p. 207.

weakness into which they had sunk through unfaithfulness to the covenant and intercourse with the heathen. And it is in this typical character of Samson and his deeds that we find the head and flower of the institution of judge in Israel. ...

"But just as his strength depended upon the faithful observance of his vow, so his weakness became apparent in his natural character, particularly in his intrigues with the daughters of the Philistines; and in this weakness there was reflected the natural character of the nation generally, and of its constant disposition to fraternize with the heathen. ... The power of the Spirit of God, bestowed upon the judges for the deliverance of their people, was overpowered by the might of the flesh lusting against the spirit.

"This special call received from God will explain the peculiarities observable in the acts which he performed,—not only the smallness of the outward results of his heroic acts, but the character of adventurous boldness by which they were distinguished."¹

2. Samson's intended marriage to the Timnite ch. 14

Chapter 13 describes Samson's potential: his godly heritage, supernatural birth, calling in life, and divine enablement. The Israelites enjoyed each of these privileges, as does every Christian. Chapter 14 reveals Samson's problem and God's providence.

"Despite all these advantages and this special attention, Samson accomplishes less on behalf of his people than any of his predecessors. Perhaps herein lies his significance. ... Though Samson is impressive as an individual, he turns out to be anything but a military hero. He never leads Israel out in battle; he never engages the Philistines in martial combat; he never experiences a military victory. All his accomplishments are personal; all his victories, private."²

¹Keil and Delitzsch, pp. 399-402.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 420.

"The actual exploits of Samson fall into two parts (14:1—15:20 and 16:1-31), each climaxing with a mass destruction of the Philistines."¹

Samson's decision to marry a Philistine 14:1-4

Timnah was only about four miles southwest of Samson's hometown of Mahaneh-dan (lit. "the camp of Dan"), between Zorah and Eshtaol (13:25). The word woman in verse 2 is in the emphatic position in the Hebrew text, meaning "a woman I saw." He had been greatly impressed with this woman. Samson described her to his parents as the ideal woman from his viewpoint, and he wanted to marry her. Dating, as we know it in the West, was unknown in Samson's culture. Instead, the parents of young people would customarily contact each other, and arrange for their children to meet and eventually to marry. This practice is still followed in many parts of the world. Thomson related an incident that occurred during his travels in Palestine in the nineteenth century:

"A hardy little girl, about twelve years old, accompanied us on foot. She was the daughter of our guide, and he was bringing her to her husband, at this camp of Fareij, who had purchased her for a thousand piasters (*forty dollars*)."²

Samson's godly parents' response to his desire was undoubtedly a mixture of brokenhearted grief and anger. Instead of opposing the Philistines, he now wanted to ally with them in marriage. His intention reveals disregard for his divine calling in life (13:5). The reference to this woman as an "uncircumcised Philistine" (v. 3) stresses the fact that she was an unbeliever in Yahweh as well as an enemy of the Israelites. Circumcision was the rite that identified believers in God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 17). It was inappropriate for Israel's deliverer to marry someone who did not share a common faith and purpose with God's people (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14).

"Mixed marriages were uniformly disastrous early (Gen 26:34-35) and late (Neh 13:27) in Israel's history. Moreover, the Philistines were the one nation near Israel that did not practice circumcision of any kind. In Egypt, Moab, and elsewhere,

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 426.

² Thomson, 2:22.

circumcision was often associated with reaching puberty or with premarital rites; but at least it was circumcision."¹

Evidently the appeal of this woman was her external appearance only. Verses 2 and 3 paint Samson as an oversexed, very strong-willed young man.

"With Samson, the deterioration of the leadership of the judges in terms of their self-interest peaks ..."²

"It is true that the only marriages expressly prohibited in Ex. xxxiv. 16 and Deut. vii. 3, 4, are marriages with Canaanite women; but the reason assigned for this prohibition was equally applicable to marriages with daughters of the Philistines."³

Samson's parents viewed his plan to marry this woman as unwise, but it was "of the LORD" (v. 4). This means that God permitted it, though it was not a marriage that He approved of.⁴ It was a relationship that God would use to punish the Philistines (v. 4; cf. v. 19). This fact did not lessen Samson's guilt, but it shows how God providentially overrules human folly and brings His will to pass in spite of it (cf. Ps. 76:10; Rom. 8:28).

"Judges 14:4 is not only shocking, but it is also the key to chaps. 14—15. Accordingly, although Yahweh is largely absent from the narrative, in one way or another his agenda is being achieved in Samson's life. At the same time, while Yahweh's agenda is being achieved, the course of Samson's life is all downhill, a fact reflected by the fivefold repetition of the verb *yarad*, 'to go down' (14:1, 5, 7, 19; 15:8)."⁵

Samson's disregard of God's grace 14:5-9

The first recorded indication of Samson's superhuman strength is his ability to tear apart a young lion with his bare hands (v. 6). The lion came roaring

¹Wolf, p. 466.

²Boda, p. 1213.

³Wolf, p. 409.

⁴See Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, p. 166; and Gary Yates and Jillian L. Ross, "Does Yahweh Approve of Samson's Marriage in Judges 14? An analysis of 'From Yahweh'," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 66:1 (March 2023):33-52.

⁵Block, *Judges ...*, p. 422.

toward Samson (v. 5), but also the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him with supernatural dynamic power (v. 6). (This, by the way, is one of 39 references to "the Spirit of the LORD," or an equivalent phrase, in the Old Testament.)

With this incident God showed Samson that He could empower him to dismember the Philistines. However, Samson did not abandon his plan to marry the Timnite. He proceeded to her home to continue his relationship with her. The phrase translated "she looked pleasing to Samson" (v. 7) literally reads "she was right in the eyes of Samson." Likewise the phrase "she is right for me" (v. 3) is literally "is right in my own eyes." Thus Samson was typical of the ordinary Israelite, who also did what was right in his own eyes (17:6; 21:25).

Even though God strengthened him, Samson used that strength for his own purposes, not to fulfill God's will. Note David's very different reaction to God's enabling him to kill a lion and a bear (1 Sam. 17:34-37).

"Like bees in a carcass, Israel was to inhabit a country of idolaters, a country that became habitable for God's community only through the death of God's enemies."¹

Samson's discovery of a dead lion with honey in its carcass provided a temptation and a test of his character (vv. 8-9). Bees normally do not inhabit cadavers; flies and maggots do. So the presence of bees and honey in a dead lion's carcass was an attention-getting phenomenon. When Samson scraped the honey out of the lion's carcass with his hand, he may have violated part of his Nazirite condition. God had revealed that touching a carcass defiled any Israelite temporarily (Lev. 11:24-25, 39). Samson thought so little of God's will that he did not mind defiling himself to satisfy his appetite (cf. Esau). Again, pursuing what looked good to Samson, in this case honey, led him into trouble.

Probably Samson did not tell his parents about the honey (v. 9) because he knew that what he had done would have disappointed them. But by giving them some of the unclean honey to eat, without telling them that it was unclean, Samson callously led them into defilement. His parents had

¹Martin Emmrich, "The Symbolism of the Lion and the Bees: Another Ironic Twist in the Samson Cycle," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:1 (March 2001):70.

previously dedicated him when they consecrated him as a Nazirite from the womb (13:7), but now he desecrated them.

Samson's further willful behavior 14:10-14

It was customary among the Philistines for a seven-day feast to precede the actual wedding ceremony (v. 10). In Samson's case, the groom provided this feast, and it took place at the bride's home. It is most probable that during this seven-day feast Samson drank wine, though the text does not say so explicitly. Drinking was a standard activity at this type of celebration, including among the pagans. Furthermore, the Hebrew word for feast is related to the word that means drink, and it refers to a drinking banquet.¹ Since Samson had previously defiled himself by touching a dead body, it is likely that he also disregarded the law concerning temporary Nazirites by drinking wine (Num. 6:4). If this is true, Samson indulged his desire for drink (wine) as well as for food (honey), even though these actions adversely affected his relationship with God.

The bride's family invited 30 guests to the wedding feast (v. 11). They were evidently proud of their prospective son-in-law. Samson fit into Philistine society quite comfortably.

It was also common in ancient times for people to propound riddles as entertainment (v. 12).² A riddle is a question or statement intentionally phrased so as to require ingenuity in ascertaining its answer or meaning, typically presented as a game.³ The same Hebrew word, *hidot*, occurs in 1 Kings 10:1, where we read that the Queen of Sheba tested Solomon with riddles. Eleven of the 21 occurrences of the Hebrew word for riddle appear in Judges 14.

The linen wraps (v. 12) were "large rectangular pieces of fine linen that were worn next to the body by day or by night"⁴ (as undergarments⁵). The Hebrew word for wraps is rare (cf. Prov. 31:24; Isa. 3:23). The Hebrew word translated clothes means "festal garments," namely, garments for very special occasions, which were quite expensive and very beautiful (cf.

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 425.

² Keil and Delitzsch, p. 411.

³ See Harry Torcszyner, "The Riddle in the Bible," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 1 (1924):125-49.

⁴ Cundall and Morris, p. 166.

⁵ Boda, p. 1218.

Gen. 45:22; 2 Kings 5:22). We now discover that Samson not only lusted after women and food and drink, but clothing as well. Fancy clothes were items that connoted wealth and status in the ancient world (cf. Gen. 45:22; 2 Kings 5:22). If Samson was to own 30 fine changes of clothing, by winning his riddle bet, he would have become wealthy indeed.¹

Samson's losses 14:15-20

The writer called the Timnite Samson's "wife," even though the engaged couple had not yet consummated their marriage (it was only the fourth day of the feast, v. 15). In Hebrew society, a couple was regarded as already married when they became "engaged."

"The usual length of a [wedding] celebration was seven days and the marriage was not consummated until the end of that period."²

Samson's loyalty to his parents above his "wife" is understandable, since he had not yet consummated his marriage to her (v. 16). Samson's "wife" was afraid that her guests would kill her and her family because of Samson's riddle. Ironically, Samson could have defended her and her family easily with his great strength. Evidently the Philistines thought that she had some part in making up the riddle, and that she either knew the answer to it or could find out what the answer was.

Samson "could not withstand the corrosive influence of three or four days of weeping."³

He finally told her the answer on the seventh day (v. 17), and she then passed it on to the Philistines—in a misguided attempt to protect herself and her father's household.

"In calling her a 'heifer' [v. 18] he was ridiculing her for her untamed and stubborn spirit (cf. Jer. 50:11; Hosea 4:16)."⁴

¹For an evaluation of various interpretations of Samson's riddle, see Philip Nel, "The Riddle of Samson (Judg 14,14.18)," *Biblica* 66:4 (1985):534-45.

²Cundall and Morris, pp. 165-65.

³Ibid., p. 166.

⁴Lindsey, p. 405.

"Samson's defeat comes because his wife performed the task of an animal. Later, Samson will himself carry out the work of oxen."¹

"First the Philistine woman enticed him (Judg. 14:1), then she controlled him (v. 17), and then she betrayed him (v. 17), which is the way the world always treats the compromising believer."²

Perhaps to avoid recognition, or to preclude having vengeance taken on him by the Philistines in Timnah, Samson trekked down to Ashkelon, which was 23 miles southwest of Timnah. There he killed 30 Philistine men, and took what they were wearing. He gave these used garments to the wedding guests who answered his riddle, and went back home in disgust—without claiming his bride, who had cruelly tricked and deceived him.

The writer said God's Spirit "rushed upon" Samson to slaughter the 30 Philistines in Ashkelon (v. 19). Samson was not just taking personal revenge for what his Timnite guests had done to him. He was, perhaps unwittingly, fulfilling his role as a judge in Israel by slaying the enemies of God's people.

This was an act of holy war, even though Samson appears to have carried it out with carnal vengeance. He did God's will, but for the wrong reason. God wanted Samson to kill the Philistines because they were the enemies of His people, but Samson wanted to kill them because they had offended him. God had chosen Samson as His instrument to begin defeating the Philistines, and He would continue to use him for that purpose—even though Samson was a rebellious and reluctant servant. Thus we see God's providence overcoming the problem that Samson posed.

It was after Samson had paid his debt of 30 garments that the text says he became angry. The object of his wrath here was his "wife," not the Philistines. Even so, Samson did not intend to abandon his plan to marry the Timnite (15:1-2). He went back home to let his anger cool. Josephus wrote that Samson divorced his wife.³ The Jews regarded breaking a marital engagement as equivalent to getting a divorce, since they considered a couple as good as married when they became engaged.

¹James L. Crenshaw, *Samson*, p. 119.

²Wiersbe, p. 148.

³Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:8:6.

"... instead of looking at the wrong by which Samson felt himself aggrieved, and trying to mitigate his wrath, the parents of the woman made the breach irreparable by giving their daughter as a wife to his companion."¹

Samson's self-will ironically yielded no satisfaction for him. By disregarding his God-given privileges, he lost: his bet with the Philistines, his wardrobe, his wife, and his honor.

Samson's basic problem was that he did not submit to God's authority over his life. This authority problem manifested itself first in his refusal to submit to his parents' authority (v. 3; cf. 17:6; 21:25). Samson also did not exercise self-discipline. He let his passions control him (cf. 1 Cor. 9:27). Self-discipline is essentially a matter of submission to God's authority, not a matter of self-denial. Dedication is essentially separation unto God, not just separation from things.

3. Samson's vengeance on the Philistines ch. 15

Samson's weaknesses dominate chapter 14, but his strengths shine forth in chapter 15.

Samson's revenge on the Timnites 15:1-8

Wheat harvest took place in late May or early June in this part of Canaan.² Samson's anger had cooled, and he decided to return to Timnah and arrange for the completion (consummation) of his marriage. Instead of flowers or candy, he brought a young goat as a gift for his fiancée. The woman's father, however, claimed that he was sure that Samson so thoroughly hated his daughter, because of her betrayal of Samson, that he would never want to marry her. Whether this was the real reason the Timnite gave his daughter in marriage to another man, Samson's companion—the Israelite version of a "best man" in Western culture—is not clear. He may have simply wanted to avoid losing face. In any case, Samson believed treachery had motivated his father-in-law's act. But he must have realized that his own treatment of the 30 Philistines in Ashkelon

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 413.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 168.

(14:19) was blameworthy, since he announced that what he was about to do would be blameless (v. 3). Samson was about to embark on holy war.

"Samson regarded the treatment he had received from his father-in-law as but one effect of the disposition of the Philistines generally toward the Israelites, and therefore resolved to revenge the wrong which he had received from one member of the Philistines upon the whole nation, or at all events upon the whole of the city of Timnah."¹

"His words indicate that he felt completely justified in such vindictive action."²

The word translated foxes (v. 4, AV) probably refers to jackals (NASB). Foxes are solitary and elusive animals, but jackals run in packs and are relatively easy to capture.³

"The burning of *standing corn* was a common method of retaliation or revenge in the ancient world and its effect in an agricultural community was very serious."⁴

"And when we remember that so great is the dread of fire in harvest-time that the Arabs punish with death any one who sets fire to a wheat-field, even though done by accident, we will not greatly wonder that the Philistines should have thus dealt with the family whose injurious conduct had excited their dreaded enemy to this ruinous exploit."⁵

"Samson is a man with a higher calling than any other deliverer in the book, but he spends his whole life 'doing his own thing.'"⁶

The fate that Samson's "wife" sought to avoid by betraying him—being burned to death—overtook her after all (v. 6; cf. 14:15). The Philistines presumably burned the house down with the woman and her parents inside.

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 413.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 168.

³See Thomson, 2:340-41, for an explanation of how Samson could capture so many foxes.

⁴Cundall and Morris, p. 169. Cf. 2 Sam. 14:29-32.

⁵Thomson, 2:342.

⁶Block, *Judges ...*, p. 441.

The Philistines' act of revenge on Samson's "wife" simply added more fuel to the desire for revenge that was already burning within Samson (v. 7). Evidently he really loved the Timnite woman. Samson proceeded to avenge her death by ruthlessly slaughtering many more of the Philistines (v. 8). Then he took refuge in a cave nearby (v. 8).

Samson's treatment by the Judahites 15:9-13

The Philistines pursued Samson into the territory of Judah, which they controlled (v. 9; cf. 14:4). The exact location of Lehi is still uncertain.

We gain a glimpse into the spiritual condition in Judah at this time from how the 3,000 Judahites (more probable than 3 units of people) responded to their Philistine oppressors. The men of Judah were no threat to the Philistines, but Samson *was*. The men of Judah did not respond to Samson as the judge whom God had raised up to deliver them from the Philistines. Instead of supporting him, they meekly bowed before their oppressors, and took the Philistines' side against Samson (v. 11-13). Instead of affirming that Yahweh ruled over them, they acknowledged that the Philistines ruled over them (v. 11).

"The Israelites are now no different from the peoples surrounding them: Canaanization is complete! And Judah, once the leader of the nation in 1:1-2, has now degenerated into being a lackey of the enemy."¹

The men of Judah rebuked Samson for jeopardizing their safety by attacking the Philistines (v. 11). They were satisfied to live under the Philistines' heel. They regarded Samson's action as something he was doing against them, rather than as an act of aggression against the enemies of God's people. The Judahites were compromisers who preferred slavery to freedom. Their attitude toward Samson may have been hostile in part because he was from their neighboring tribe of Dan, and was not one of them.

"It is a sad fact of Christian experience that if you are a Christian committed to growing and maturing in Jesus Christ, you will often be hindered the most by other Christians who

¹Kuruvilla, p. 233.

have become accustomed and accommodated to an anemic, wishy-washy spiritual life."¹

During his whole ministry, Samson never had an army, or even several Israelites, behind him. Neither did he ever ask for the help of any other Israelites. He fought the LORD's battles alone. The Judahites were voluntarily doing their enemies' work for them, by coming to bind Samson and hand him over to them (v. 12). They swore not to kill their judge themselves, but they bound him and handed him over to the Philistines so they could kill him (v. 13; cf. Jesus' similar treatment by His fellow Jews, who turned Him over to their enemies: the Romans).

"The tribe that had formerly waded into battle after battle (1:1-20) has become a collection of spineless wimps (15:13)."²

Samson's patience and grace with his fellow Israelites are astounding. He must have realized what they were doing, but he also apparently believed that, when delivered over to the enemy, he could overcome them. If his courage—as his fellow Israelites brought him bound before hordes of Philistines and handed him over to them—arose from trust in God, then his faith was remarkable after all. This would have been one of the high points of Samson's spiritual career.

Alternatively, Samson's confidence may have rested in himself, particularly in his own strength. If that was so, this incident was a low point for him spiritually. I prefer the second explanation, since it seems more consistent with Samson's character.

Samson's victory at Ramath-lehi 15:14-20

Note again that it was the Spirit of the LORD who gave Samson his supernatural strength (v. 14). He slew 1,000 of the Philistines (or one unit) on this occasion (v. 15). The unlikely instrument Samson used, a recently deceased donkey's dentures, proved more than adequate for this slaughter (cf. 3:31).

¹Inrig, p. 237.

²D. R. Davis, p. 182.

"But again the deed is done through contact with a dead animal, emphatically described as recently deceased, and thus a renewed violation of the Nazirite oath."¹

The Hebrew words translated "donkey" and "heaps" (v. 16) constitute a wordplay. Samson loved riddles and rhymes. Moffatt's translation rendered the first part of Samson's poem: "With the jawbone of an ass, I have piled them in a mass."² Samson named the place where he defeated these Philistines Ramath-lehi, or in English, "Jawbone Hill." This "hill" may have been the mound that Samson had built with the corpses of the Philistines.

Samson's prayer, his first in the story, reveals that he knew he was participating in holy war as God's deliverer (v. 18). He gave God the credit for his victory: The word translated "You" is in the emphatic first position in the Hebrew text. Then Samson cried out to the LORD for water after his strenuous fight. God amazingly and graciously provided water for His rebellious servant, in a very unusual way, and Samson's strength returned and he revived (v. 19; cf. Exod. 17:6; Num. 20:11). So Samson named that place "En-hakkore," or in English, "Suppliant's Spring." However, this name focused on Samson, not Yahweh.

The summary statement that concludes the record of Samson's victories thus far (v. 20) separates his story into two parts. First, the writer recorded Samson's acts against the Philistines, that gradually increased in severity and significance, in chapters 14 and 15. In the second part of his "successful" years, Samson continued to serve as Israel's judge for 20 years. Following Samson's better years, the writer next gave us the chain of events that followed, in which Samson brought his own destruction on himself (ch. 16).

Chapter 15 contrasts Samson's radical commitment to destroying the Philistines with Judah's wretched compromise. Samson's actions and motives were not always the best, but at least he carried out God's will. He treated the compromisers among whom he lived graciously, since they were God's people. However, he alone did what God had called him to do—when he defeated the Philistines. Today, many Christians compromise with the

¹Butler, p. 343.

²James A. Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible*, p. 291.

world like the Judahites did. Samson's example encourages us to radical obedience—even if we have to stand for God alone.

"The Samson cycle in Judges parallels the life of Moses, the archetypal national deliverer, demonstrating Samson's deficiencies as a deliverer for Israel. The parallels are most clearly seen in the water incident at Lehi (Judg 15:9-19), which serves as the trigger for the larger typology. Ironically, Samson is more similar to the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness than to Moses."¹

4. Samson's final fatal victory ch. 16

To this point in his history, Samson had demonstrated some faith in God, even though "the exploits of Samson read like the actions of an uncontrollable juvenile delinquent."² However, his unwillingness to remain dedicated to God eventually resulted in his loss of strength, his enslavement, and his death.

Samson's weakness and strength at Gaza 16:1-3

Gaza lay on the sunny Mediterranean coast, in the heart of Philistine territory. It was probably a popular vacation site for compromising Israelites, as well as for the pagan Philistines. Perhaps Samson went there to enjoy the amusements that flourish in such places, and to show off his physique on the "muscle beach" of his day. As the judge assigned to destroy the Philistines, his presence there for recreational purposes was inappropriate, to say the least. Going to Gaza also reveals Samson's great self-confidence, since after 20 years of judging Israel, he was undoubtedly the "most wanted" enemy in Philistia.

In contrast, Samuel, who was only a few years younger than Samson, was at this time ministering as a faithful circuit-riding judge in Israel's heartland (1 Sam. 7:15-17). Samson's birth was probably close to 1123 B.C., and Samuel's was about 1121 B.C.³

¹Gary E. Yates and Jillian L. Ross, "Samson: An Anti-Moses Deliverer," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 178:712 (October-December 2021):415.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 155.

³See my notes on 1 Samuel.

Samson's weakness for women stands out in the record of his evening spent with the Gaza prostitute (v. 1). The Hebrew word for a common prostitute (*zah-nah*) describes this woman; she was not the type of prostitute who performed sexual acts in the service of pagan gods (*k'deh-shah*; cf. 1 Kings 14:24; Hos. 4:14). Going to a Philistine prostitute was unquestionably the most inappropriate, not to mention sinful, behavior for a Nazirite—especially one whom God had called to deliver Israel from the very enemy he was romancing.¹ Any reference to the leading of the LORD is notably absent here (cf. 14:4). Samson's weakness contrasts with his strength throughout this chapter. Here we see his moral and spiritual weakness.

"Samson's liaison with the prostitute signifies Israel's lusting after other gods for the sake of personal gratification and self-centered desires. The Jericho spies were doing the opposite. They risked their lives and well-being for the sake of the larger community."²

Why did God continue to use Samson, seeing he was so morally impure? Part of the answer has to be that God had chosen to use him, and that He was patient with him. God's patience was providing Samson the opportunity to repent, and to experience God's blessing, instead of His judgment (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Cor. 11:31). Unfortunately, Samson responded to God's patience by taxing it to its limit. While the heavenly Father is patient, He is not permissive. That is, He does not allow unacceptable behavior to continue indefinitely without discipline.

Evidently the men of Gaza decided that they would capture Samson as he left the city early the next morning. Consequently, they slept at the gate of the city that night (v. 2). Samson left much earlier than they expected, however: around midnight. Presumably God miraculously caused Samson's enemies to sleep right through his raucous exit. Pulling the city gateposts out of the ground, and carrying off the whole gate with its bar and frame, must have caused considerable noise.

"As the gates of ancient cities were often nail-studded and covered with metal to prevent them from being burnt during

¹Cf. Butler, p. 346.

²Olson, 2:855.

an attack, the weight may have been greater than that of the timber itself."¹

It is not clear how far Samson carried the gates. The mountain opposite Hebron (v. 3) is the site in question. Some writers believed that Samson carried the gates 40 miles to a hill opposite Hebron.² Hebron stood about 38 miles east of Gaza and at a higher elevation. It occupied the highest hill in southern Canaan. Other commentators believed that the writer had in mind a hill overlooking Gaza, in the direction toward Hebron.³ The latter view is the traditional interpretation.

While Samson may have been fully capable of carrying the gates all the way to Hebron, his purpose in transporting them—whatever the distance—seems to have been to mock the men of Gaza. He would probably have impressed them significantly enough by planting the gates at the top of the nearby hill that was clearly visible from Gaza. The traditional interpretation appeals to me for this reason. Here the emphasis is on Samson's superhuman physical strength.

Samson and Delilah 16:4-21

The first three verses of this chapter presented Samson sowing his "wild oats." Verses 4-21 picture him reaping a bitter harvest (cf. Gal. 6:7).

Samson now allowed a third woman to seduce him. Josephus called her a harlot.⁴ She lived in the Sorek Valley, between Samson's hometown of Mahaneh-dan (13:25) and the Philistine town of Timnah. The valley itself was a geographical "compromise" between Israelite and Philistine territory.

The woman's name, Delilah, is evidently Jewish, and probably means "devotee" or "worshipper."⁵ However, she seems to have been a Philistine convert from Judaism, and was possibly even a temple prostitute.⁶ Her devotion and loyalty to the Philistines is obvious in the story, and her devotion to their gods may well have motivated her actions in this

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 174. For a diagram of a typical city gate complex, and a discussion of the difficulty of removing the gates undetected, see Block, *Judges ...*, p. 450.

²E.g., C. Pfeiffer, p. 259; McGee, 2:79; Block, *Judges ...*, p. 451; *The Nelson ...*, p. 430; Butler, p. 346; Chisholm, *A Commentary ...*, p. 416.

³E.g., Thomson, 2:339; Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, p. 326; Lindsey, p. 407.

⁴Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:8:11.

⁵Ibid, pp. 453-54, offered three other possible interpretations of her name.

⁶Lindsey, p. 407.

sequence of events. Evidently she and her family had chosen to live among the attractive and advanced enemies of God's people.

"It is strange that Samson's three loves should have been numbered amongst his inveterate enemies, the Philistines."¹

Samson, now in enemy territory, posed a great threat to the Philistines. The governors of the Philistines initiated the plan to capture him, and they offered an enormous reward to Delilah, that would have made her extremely rich (v. 5). Eleven-hundred pieces of silver was a fortune. A person could live comfortably on 10 pieces of silver a year (cf. 17:10).

"... taking \$25 thousand as the average annual wage, the governors' total offer to Delilah would approach \$15 million. This lets us see how valuable the capture of public enemy number one was for the Philistine governors and what an incentive Delilah had to betray her lover."²

"Ironically, while a woman, Jael, once lured a foreign warrior chieftain, Sisera, to his death, now it is a foreign woman, Delilah, who is luring Israel's foremost warrior-judge, Samson, to his."³

Samson probably did not have an abnormally muscular physique, since the Philistines did not know where he got his great strength.⁴

"The Philistine princes thought that Samson's supernatural strength arose from something external, which he wore or carried about with him as an amulet."⁵

Moral compromise always makes one vulnerable to temptation. We see this both in Samson's case and in Delilah's, in these verses. Temptation usually comes in attractive packages. The wrong companions can lead us into temptation (cf. 1 Cor. 15:33). Temptation is persistent (cf. Matt. 4). Yielding to temptation starts us on a toboggan slide. We find ourselves

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 175.

²Butler, p. 350.

³Kuruvilla, p. 238.

⁴Cf. Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, p. 317.

⁵Keil and Delitzsch, p. 419. Cf. Leon Wood, *A Survey ...*, p. 226.

going faster and faster downhill, and soon we can only get off with great personal pain.

The seven fresh animal tendons (v. 7) were probably common catgut cords that the Philistines used for bowstrings and the strings of their harps. Josephus called them green vine tendrils.¹ If they were animal tendons, they were unclean for Samson—since they were dead animal parts. Perhaps Samson specified seven of these, since the Israelites regarded seven as a complete or perfect number. New ropes (v. 11) had not been able to restrain him previously (cf. 15:13-14), but perhaps the governors of the Philistines were unaware of this.

It is difficult to understand exactly what Samson meant when he instructed Delilah to weave the seven locks of his hair with a web, and then fasten it with a pin (vv. 13-14). The commentators all struggle with what the writer wrote and what Delilah did. Apparently Delilah wove Samson's long hair with some kind of loom and used a pin or rod to secure it to the loom.

"The loom that held Samson's hair [v. 13] was likely an upright one, supported by two posts that were firmly anchored in the ground."²

"... The words in question are to be understood as referring to something that was done to fasten Samson still more securely."³

"Ironically, the words 'tightened it with [= 'drove'] the pin' (*titqa' bayyated*, v. 14) are the same ones used of Jael, who drove the tent peg into Sisera's head (4:21). Though Delilah did not kill Samson in the same way, she was to become as important a heroine among the Philistines as Jael had been in Israel."⁴

What had been the fate of Israel's enemy, in the case of Sisera, now became the fate of Israel's judge, Samson, showing again Israel's reversal of fortunes as Israel's apostasy progressed.

¹Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:8:11.

²*The Nelson ...*, p. 430.

³Keil and Delitzsch, p. 421.

⁴Wolf, p. 476.

The fact that Samson told Delilah to do something to his hair (v. 13) suggests that he was giving her a clue to his strength. She did not pick up on this, and thus kept hounding him for his secret. Finally he gave in and revealed the source of his strength (v. 17; cf. 14:17).

"A razor [v. 17] in Samson's day would have been like a bronze knife with a handle of wood or bone."¹

Why did Samson continue to give Delilah reasons for his strength—even when she threatened him with violence by the Philistines? He may have done so because they were playing some kind of game together, and teasing each other. Samson liked riddles (14:12). He seems to have uprooted Gaza's gates in sport—just for the fun of it—too. Samson thought he was playing "Here come the Philistines!"—but really he was playing "Russian roulette"!

It is incredible, or at least hard to imagine, that Samson would have told Delilah the secret of his strength—if he was thinking that she really intended to betray him. Evidently Samson had so much self-confidence in his super-human, God-given physical strength, that he thought he could control this situation. He even appears to have felt that he was stronger than, or perhaps as strong as, God. He expected God to behave on his terms, by giving him strength, rather than submitting himself to God's terms, namely, his Nazirite vow.

"Satan ruins men by rocking them asleep, flattering them into a good opinion of their own safety, and so bringing them to mind nothing and fear nothing, and then he robs them of their strength and honour and leads them captive at his will."²

Sin, if persisted in, makes a person irrational and vulnerable. Such is its deceitfulness (cf. 1 Cor 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:22). Samson thought that he was still strong, but really he had become weak. Contrast the Apostle Paul's attitude in 2 Corinthians 12:10: "when I am weak, then I am strong."

"This man is indeed all brawn and no brain."³

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 430.

² Henry, p. 267.

³ Block, *Judges ...*, p. 463.

"The hypocrisy of Delilah, pretending to love but all the time plotting the death of her lover, can be left without comment."¹

It is for this deceitful betrayal, this disloyal and diabolical behavior, that Delilah has become an infamous figure in history. Like Judas Iscariot, Delilah betrayed a friend for money.

"He [Samson] wanted to be like *every* man [v. 20]! This was a renunciation of his calling, a repudiation of his dedication, a resignation from his Naziriteship. This was defection. He had thrust God out. He had slapped God's face. We was washing his hands of this whole God-business. He just wanted to be like *every* man: enjoying his women, doing whatever was 'right in his eyes' (14:3, 7), throwing family, tribe, nation, and God to the winds!"²

The reason Samson lost his strength was only secondarily that he allowed his hair to be cut. The real reason was that "the LORD had departed from him" (v. 20). When God's Spirit departed from someone under the Old Covenant, the results were disastrous (cf. 1 Sam. 16:14; Ps. 51:11).

"Forty years, Samson had kept one part of his vow. He had broken all the other parts, but he had kept his hair unshaven, as a sign of his commitment to God. He had not made a very strong commitment or felt a deep faith, but he had trusted God at least in this. There was no magic in his hair. It was only a symbol of his separation to God. But if his hair was shaved, Samson's feeble dedication would crumble completely."³

As mentioned previously, there is some question about whether Samson, who was to be a lifelong Nazirite, was subject to all the normal restrictions on temporary Nazirites, and whether or not he broke all three of the typical Nazirite restrictions. We know he broke at least two, the one involving his hair and the one forbidding contact with the dead, but we do not know whether he abstained from all grape products. He probably did not abstain.⁴

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 177.

²Kuruvilla, p. 239.

³Inrig, p. 252.

⁴For further discussion see Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Identity Crisis: Assessing Samson's Birth and Career," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:662 (April-June 2009):155-62.

"The fact that God worked through Samson need not denote approval of his lifestyle. In God's sovereignty the Holy Spirit came on men for particular tasks, and this enduing was not necessarily proportionate to one's spirituality. The Spirit's power enabled men to inspire Israel (6:34; 11:29) and to perform great feats of strength (14:6, 19; 15:14). But it was a temporary enduement, and Samson and later Saul tragically discovered that the Lord had left them. The NT experience of the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit was not known in OT times."¹

Samson was fatally unwise in sharing his secret with Delilah. His willingness to do so seems traceable to his lack of appreciation of two things: One, he failed to appreciate his personal calling by God, and two, the fact that his strength lay solely in God's power working through him as a holy instrument. These are the same failures that Israel manifested, and which resulted in her experiencing a fate similar to Samson's, during the period of the judges. They have caused many other servants of God to fall since Samson's day, too.

"Alas! the sad story, how it has been repeated in the individual experiences of many believers. Flirting with the unholy principles of this present evil age is a dangerous thing. Loving the world will end, if unchecked, in disaster for the child of God. And the remedy is the close walk in heart dependence and heart devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ."²

Samson's spiritual blindness resulted in his becoming physically blind (v. 21).

"His eyes were the inlets of his sin: he saw the harlot at Gaza, and went in unto her (v. 1), and now his punishment began there."³

¹Wolf, p. 381.

²Gaebelein, 2:2:105.

³Henry, p. 267.

"Samson became a grinder, forced to grind grain, most likely with a hand mill. Larger, animal-driven mills were not used until several centuries later."¹

The Philistines seized Samson (v. 21) and brought him to Gaza, just as he had seized ("took hold of") the Philistines' gate there (v. 3). The same Hebrew verb occurs in both verses, highlighting the comparison. Since Samson chose to be the slave of his physical passions, rather than of his God, God disciplined him with physical slavery (cf. Rom. 6:16; Gal. 6:7).

"Grinding a hand mill was the hardest and lowest kind of slave labour (compare Ex. xi. 5 with xii. 29); and both Greeks and Romans [later] sentenced their slaves to this as a punishment ..."²

"This occupation was not only menial, it was humiliating, since it was invariably women's work ..."³

"Someone has said that Judges 16:21 reminds us of the *blinding*, *binding*, and *grinding* results of sin."⁴

Poor blind Samson found himself chained in the prison in Gaza, in the very town where he had performed his greatest feat of strength. Previously, he had demonstrated great physical strength there, but now he was very weak.

"Samson is one of three men in Scripture who are especially identified with the darkness. The other two are King Saul, who went out in the darkness to get last-minute help from a witch (1 Sam. 28), and Judas, who 'went immediately out: and it was night' (John 13:30). Saul lived for the world, Samson yielded to the flesh, and Judas gave himself to the devil (John 13:2, 27); and all three ended up taking their own lives."⁵

"When the Philistines captured Samson with Delilah's help, Israel's story had come full circle from the earlier account of

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 431.

² Keil and Delitzsch, pp. 423-24.

³ Cundall and Morris, p. 179.

⁴ Wiersbe, p. 154.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Jael and Sisera. On that earlier occasion Israel's ally Jael lured a *foreign* general to his death; now the Philistines' ally Delilah has lured the greatest of *Israel's* warriors to his demise. Samson is in the role of Sisera, and Delilah in the role of Jael."¹

Samson's triumph in death 16:22-31

A spark of hope flickered in the darkness of Samson's prison cell. The hair of his head began to grow again (v. 22). In grace, God permitted Samson's hair to return, suggesting the possibility of his renewed commitment to Yahweh. However, God did not restore Samson's eyesight. God always gives opportunity for divine service after failure, but one may not be able to serve Him as one could in the past.

We might suppose that the Philistines would have been careful to keep their captive's hair cropped. Whether it was because they considered their blind slave incapable of escaping, or because they failed to recognize the importance of his hair, they let his hair grow back. They were, in their own way, as blind as Samson. Along with his hair, Samson's dedication to Yahweh, which his hair symbolized, began to return (cf. v. 28). This was the real reason that his strength returned.

As mentioned previously, the Philistines were very religious. They thanked Dagon, their chief god, for Samson's capture (v. 23).

"Dagon was the principal Philistine god. He is known as Dagan in Syrian and Mesopotamian inscriptions. Temples dedicated to him have been unearthed at Ugarit in northern Syria, dating to the centuries just before Samson, and at Mari on the Euphrates River in Syria, dating to the eighteenth century B.C. A Philistine temple for Dagon was at Beth Shan, in northern Israel, in the days of Saul (1 Sam. 31:9, 10; 1 Chr. 10:10), and it was in another such temple that the Philistines stored the ark of the covenant for a time (1 Sam. 5:1-7). Dagon was once commonly thought to be a fish god, but modern excavations have shown that he was a god of grain. In fact, one of the Hebrew words for grain is *dagan*."²

¹Chisholm, *A Commentary ...*, p. 426.

²*The Nelson ...*, p. 431.

"At Ugarit he [Dagon] was seen as the father of Baal."¹

The Philistines were even singing songs and praising Dagon with a hymn of praise. The Israelites, on the other hand, should have been singing because of Yahweh's deliverance of them, but they were not, because they had not trusted and obeyed Him. Samson had given the enemies of Yahweh an opportunity to blaspheme Him (cf. 2 Sam. 12:14). Perhaps the writer recorded so much of their praise here because very soon it turned out to be totally without basis (in this case "gallows humor").

"It is not difficult to infer from the ubiquity of these wine craters and beer jugs that the Philistines were mighty carousers [cf. v. 25]. In this respect again, archaeology is in full agreement with biblical tradition, as we see from the story of Samson, where drinking bouts are mentioned several times in connexion [*sic*] with the Philistines, though it is said emphatically of Samson that he drank neither wine nor beer."²

Samson—who, as we have seen, was fond of riddles, tricks, and entertainment—became the object of sport or entertainment for those he had previously taunted (v. 25). He became the tragic or sad-faced "clown," but in the end he finally "brought the house down"—literally!

"A number of sites of ancient heathen temples have been recently discovered, and since they show certain common characteristics it is likely that the temple of Gaza was of a similar pattern. In all probability the officials and dignitaries were in a covered portion looking out upon a courtyard where Samson was made a spectacle, but separated from it by a series of wooden pillars set on stone bases, supporting the roof, on which the crowd gathered. It may be conjectured that the spectators on the roof, pressing forward to gain a good vantage-point, had made the whole structure unstable. Samson must have been aware of the form of construction and of the possibilities in such a situation. The performance over, or temporarily halted, Samson was brought *between the pillars*

¹Butler, p. 352.

²Albright, *The Archaeology ...*, p. 115.

(25b), just under the shelter of the roof, so that the dignitaries within the portico could have a closer look at him."¹

Samson's humiliation was even greater on this day, because a young boy now led the former "Philistine terror" around—holding his hand—as easily as leading a goat (v. 26). Samson's weakness appears the greatest at this point in the story. Sensing his opportunity, Samson prayed to God for strength (cf. 15:18).

"This is the only time we ever read of Samson praying before he used his strength. Now his strength was disciplined by faith, but it took failure to teach him this response."²

"The theological message toward which each of the cycles [chs. 14—15 and ch. 16] moves centers on prayer and divine response, and the position of answered prayer at the end of each cycle is emphatic. In xv 18-19 Samson asks for life. ... In xvi 28-30 he prays first for vindication, then for death. In both cases he is dependent wholly upon Yhwh, who alone holds the power to grant life and death and who acts in response to human supplication."³

The fact that Samson addressed God as Lord Yahweh (v. 28; i.e., Master, Covenant-Keeping God of Israel) is significant. It definitely suggests that, during the many lonely hours of darkness in his cell, Samson had repented. He had apparently confessed his lack of appreciation for God's grace, calling, and power in his life—and had rededicated himself to the LORD. He begged God, from whom He had departed, to remember him, and to strengthen him supernaturally—"just this" one last "time."

Samson desired to return to his calling as God's deliverer of His people, and be avenged of his enemies for robbing him of his eyes. God graciously heard and answered His servant's prayer. Samson's prayer was for the glory of

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 180. See also Amihai Mazar, "A Philistine Temple at Tell Qasile," *Biblical Archaeologist* 36 (1973):43-48; and *ibid.*, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000-586 B.C.E.*, pp. 319-23.

²Inrig, p. 263.

³J. Cheryl Exum, "The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga," *Vetus Testamentum* 33:1 (1983):34.

God, and in harmony with God's will. Nevertheless, personal vengeance still motivated Samson too.

"Even Samson's turn back to God is marked more by his desire for personal revenge against the Philistines than for deliverance for his people. In essence, Samson remains, to the very end, selfish, just as he remained until nearly the very end, clueless (see 16:20). That both Samson and the Israelites demonstrate such persistent unfaithfulness and self-assertion, thus thwarting God's purpose to deliver them from Philistine oppression, means that Judges 13—16 functions as a call to repentance, as does all the prophetic literature."¹

"The fact that Samson took hold (AV, RV; lit. *grasped*, RSV) of the two central pillars indicates that, exerting his strength, he pushed forward either directly towards or directly away from the open courtyard. Had he pushed sideways he would not have 'grasped' the pillars. Aided by the weight of the crowd above, who would be pressing forward since Samson was now out of their sight, the main supporting pillars were now displaced, causing them to slide off their stone bases. When the roof collapsed many would be killed instantly; others would be crushed in the ensuing panic."²

We should perhaps not regard Samson's death as suicide, but as martyrdom (cf. Heb. 11:32). He died in battle. Nevertheless, he brought death on himself.

"Samson's deed ... was not suicide, but the act of a hero, who sees that it is necessary for him to plunge into the midst of his enemies with the inevitable certainty of death, in order to effect the deliverance of his people and decide the victory which he has still to achieve."³

In his death, Samson vindicated Yahweh over Dagon. He also killed more of Israel's enemies than he had slain during his lifetime (v. 30).

¹McCann, p. 109.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 181. RV stands for *The English Revised Version Holy Bible*.

³Otto von Gerlach, quoted by Keil and Delitzsch, p. 425.

While this is a complimentary note, it also reminds us of the tragedy of Samson's failure as a judge. He could have routed destroyed many more Philistines if he had walked with God. The brothers who buried him (v. 31) could have been members of his tribe or extended family; they were not necessarily members of his immediate family.

"The Philistines' hatred of Samson must have been mitigated by respect for his achievements and they made no apparent effort to abuse his corpse or to refuse him burial in his family tomb (cf. the dishonoring of Saul's body, I Sa. 31:9, 10). The treatment of a body after death was a matter of importance in the ancient world ..."¹

Some writers have commented on what they call the "Samson syndrome":

"One of the greatest values I see in the story of Samson is its demonstration of the Samson Syndrome. This is the tendency among some church leaders to operate from a personal power model and not understand its consequences. And for others it is a tendency to ignore our physical, emotional and spiritual limits—to not realize that when 'our hair has been shorn' we cannot go out and beat up on Philistines, even though we want to."²

"The essence of the Samson syndrome lies right here: the presumption that one can indulge the flesh and at the same time know the Spirit's *fulness* [*sic*]."³

The story of Samson's life is one of the greatest tragedies in history and literature, and it should be a warning to every believer. Samson had many advantages:

- God chose him even before his birth (13:7; cf. Eph. 1:14).
- He received excellent training from godly parents, who encouraged him to maintain his dedication to Yahweh (13:8, 12; 14:3).

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 181.

²G. Lloyd Rediger, "The Samson Syndrome," *Church Management—The Clergy Journal* 60:7 (May-June 1984):78.

³Ted S. Rendall, "The Samson Syndrome," *The Prairie Overcomer* 27:7 (July-August 1984):19. Italics added.

- He enjoyed God's blessings (13:24).
- Most significantly for him, the Holy Spirit empowered him with supernatural might (13:25; 14:6, 19).

Nevertheless, Samson chose to yield to his physical passions, rather than maintaining his dedication to the LORD (cf. Esau). The text hardly supports Josephus' assessment of Samson as: "... in all other respects [excepting his being ensnared by a woman], he was one [person] of extraordinary virtue."¹

"The man who carried the gates of Gaza up to the top of the mountain was the slave of a woman, to whom he frivolously betrayed the strength of his Nazirite locks."²

"Samson, when strong and brave, strangled a lion; but he could not strangle his own love. He burst the fetters of his foes, but not the cords of his own lusts. He burned up the crops of others, and lost the fruit of his own virtue when burning with the flame enkindled by a single woman."³

"His life which promised so much, was blighted and ultimately destroyed by his sensual passions and lack of true separation to the Lord."⁴

"He wasted his life in riotous living, the Prodigal Son of the Old Testament, undisciplined, capricious, carnal, violent for violence'[s] sake. But Samson was the prodigal who came home dead."⁵

"It is possible for a leader to be empowered by the Spirit, even exercising in faith (cf. Heb 11:32), and yet operate in a fleshly way."⁶

There are several similarities between the lives of Samson and Jesus: (1) Both had births foretold by God. (2) Both were separated to God from the

¹Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:8:12.

²Ziegler, quoted by Keil and Delitzsch, p. 400.

³Ambrose, quoted by Keil and Delitzsch, pp. 417-18.

⁴Cundall and Morris, p. 181.

⁵Blaiklock, p. 115.

⁶Boda, p. 1236.

womb. (3) Both moved in the power of the Holy Spirit. (4) Both were rejected by their own people. (5) Both destroyed (or will destroy) their enemies.

But the differences are as equally striking: (1) Sin marked Samson's life, but sinlessness characterized Jesus' life. (2) Samson's dying prayer was to be avenged for the evil done to him, but Jesus' dying prayer was for the forgiveness of His enemies. (3) In death Samson stretched out his hands in wrath to destroy his enemies, but Jesus stretched out His hands in love to save His enemies. (4) Samson died, but Jesus lives.¹

Samson's unwillingness to discipline himself physically was a symptom of his unwillingness to discipline himself spiritually. This lack of discipline in serving the LORD as He required resulted in Samson's enslavement, and finally in his premature death.

Still, Samson's life should at the same time be an encouragement to all believers. The record of Samson's experiences teaches us that God will use people who are far from perfect. God is patient with His sinning servants, even though His patience eventually has an end. There is still hope in this lifetime, that God may yet again use His servants—whom He may have had to set aside because of their sins. It all depends on whether they truly repent and rededicate themselves to Him.²

"The prophetic books—including the book of Judges (and especially the book of Judges at its lowest point with Samson and the aftermath in chaps. 17—21)—are powerful statements of hope; not hope in 'culture heroes' like Samson, but rather hope in a God whose grace is greater than our ability to comprehend and whose commitment to justice, righteousness, and peace surpasses our understanding."³

¹McGee, 2:81-82.

²See Robert U. Ferguson Jr., "The Danger of Playing Games with God," *Pulpit Digest* 64:468 (July-August 1984):31-34; and Samuel Cassel, "Strong Man: A Scripture Study of the Weaknesses in Strength," *Foundations* 2 (1959):264-68.

³McCann, p. 94.

III. THE RESULTS OF ISRAEL'S APOSTASY CHS. 17—21

The following two extended incidents (ch. 17—21) differ from the records of the judges just completed (chs. 3—16). They are not accounts of the activities of any of Israel's judges. They are the record of events that took place during the Judges Period that throw light on conditions in Israel during this era. The purpose behind their inclusion seems to have been to illustrate even more clearly: "... the low moral standards, ... the debased religious conceptions and ... the disordered social structure" in Israel.¹

"As was the case in the earlier chapters of the Book of Judges [1:1—3:6], these chapters deal with the subject of spiritual apostasy and its effects upon the nation of Israel."²

"The book's epilogue fingers the tribe of Levi as the source of Israel's failures to keep covenant with *YHWH* during the dark age when warlords ruled."³

These chapters also resume the emphasis on tribal activity that is prominent in 1:1—3:6.⁴

Philip Satterthwaite concluded, from studying the allusions to former similar events in Israel's history, that all these allusions "have a similar effect, that is, they suggest the theme of 'something going wrong in Israel.'"⁵ The stories in this epilogue (chs. 17—21) illustrate conditions in Israel at this time. The first story, of Micah and the Danites (chs. 17—18), shows how far the Israelites departed from God in the religious and spiritual aspects of their life—the dominant characteristic being idolatry. The second story, of the Levite and his concubine (chs. 19—21), shows the effects of religious apostasy on Israel's civil and domestic life—the dominant characteristic being violence.

In Deuteronomy, Moses expounded the importance of the Ten Commandments, and then the implications of those commandments, on

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 182.

²J. J. Davis, p. 143. Cf. McGee, 2:82.

³Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 613. See also David R. Klingler, "Validation and Function of the Literary Allusions in Judges 19—21," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 177:708 (October-December 2020):422-41.

⁴Boda, p. 1236.

⁵Philip Satterthwaite, "'No King in Israel': Narrative Criticism and Judges 17—21," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993):85.

Israel's religious, civil, and domestic life—in his second major address (Deut. 5—26). The epilogue of Judges does the same thing. It also illuminates the importance of Jesus' teaching about the two greatest commandments (Matt. 22:34-40).

"Nearly all of the Ten Commandments are broken in Jud 17:1—21:25 (Epilogues I and II): other gods and idols are worshiped (17:3-5); Yahweh's name is taken in vain (17:13); parents are dishonored (17:1-2); innocent victims are slain (18:27; 19:26-29; 21:10); adultery and rape are committed (19:22-25); others' property is stolen (17:2; 18:21-27); false witness is borne (20:1-7); and what belongs to a neighbor is coveted (18:27-31; 21:8-24)."¹

Whereas Judges chapters 3—16 record Israel's struggles with her external enemies, chapters 17—21 document the internal conditions of the nation that made her so weak. In chapters 17—18 we see Israel abandoning God, and in chapters 19—21 we see her destroying herself.

The town of Bethlehem features in each of three stories: two in Judges and one in Ruth. These stories are Micah and the Danites (chs. 17—18), the Levite and the Benjamites (chs. 19—21), and the story of Ruth and the Judahites in the Book of Ruth. Therefore some scholars refer to this section of Scripture as the "Bethlehem trilogy." These stories also share other themes and motifs.

"They concern individuals in more or less private settings whose identities and activities are nevertheless inseparable from and crucial to a full understanding of the Davidic monarchy which followed them. Accounts of actual events that transpired in the days of the judges, they are included in the sacred record for the purpose of tracing the roots of the Davidic dynasty and justifying its existence in opposition to Saul."²

If the writer intended these chapters as a setup for the Davidic line, or the monarchy in general, we cannot help but remember that the monarchy ended in chaos as well. The kings also did what was right in their own eyes.

¹Kuruville, p. 250. See also Olson, 2:864-65.

²Merrill, pp. 178-79.

In spite of the form of government and the rulers under which the Israelites lived, they consistently fell short of God's standard for them.

The first incident in the Judges epilogue (chs. 17—18) describes the fate of the Danites, and the second (chs. 19—21), the fate of the Benjamites. Both tribes received land in Israel's heartland, between Judah and Ephraim. These were the tribes that would, after the monarchy divided, lead the Southern and Northern Kingdoms respectively. By selecting incidents from these tribes, the narrator showed that the degenerating tendency in Israel was not just a problem in the fringe territories. Canaanite influence had infected the heart of the nation.

Both of the tribes of Dan and Benjamin found themselves in dire straits, but for different reasons. The Danites could not settle into their allotted inheritance because of Canaanite influence, and the Benjamites could not remain in theirs because of their hostile Israelite brethren. In both instances, a nameless Levite with Bethlehem (17:7-8; 19:1-2) and the hill country of Ephraim (17:1; 19:1) connections, precipitated the crisis. Both accounts include priestly characters inquiring of God concerning the outcome of a proposed course of action (18:5-6; 20:27-28), and both conclude with a reference to Shiloh (18:31; 21:19-24). In both accounts, military contingents of 800 men play a crucial role (18:11, 16, 25; 20:47; 21:7, 12, 14, 16-17, 23), and both contain references to the absence of a king in Israel (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). These parallel references have the effect of making the reader conclude that the "Canaanization" of Israel had become complete.¹ Both accounts evidently took place during the first period of oppression that the Book of Judges records (3:8-11), which occurred during the generation that followed the death of Joshua and the elders who outlived him.²

A. THE IDOLATRY OF MICAH AND THE DANITES CHS. 17—18

God undoubtedly included the story of Micah and the Danites in the sacred record, because it recounts the establishment of image worship in Israel. This was a new and catastrophic departure from Yahweh for the Israelites. Image worship continued, grew, and became an increasing snare to the Israelites—from this time on in their history until the Babylonian Captivity.

¹Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 474-76.

²See Leon Wood, *A Survey ...*, p. 212.

Consequently, this incident exposes the extent of the spiritual apostasy of Israel.

The events recorded in these two chapters evidently took place while the Philistines were putting pressure on the tribes of Dan, Judah, and Benjamin (cf. Josh. 19:47). Perhaps the writer included them here because of their connection with the geographical setting of Samson's activities that he had just related (chs. 13—16). Another connection is the mention of 1,100 pieces of silver (16:5; 17:2). Shekels of silver are evidently in view. Eleven hundred shekels weighed about 28 pounds.

"... and in both [stories] there is a betrayal (one of a lover by his paramour, the other of a mother by her son. What an ostensibly foreign woman, Delilah, did is surpassed by an Israelite."¹

Just as money played a significant role in Samson's downfall, so it played a major part in Micah's defection. As mentioned previously, the writers of the Old Testament frequently connected events and laws that were similar or had a logical relationship to one another, rather than following a strict chronological sequence. However, this chapter also records another downward step, lower than Samson's, that the Israelites took in their departure from the LORD. Probably the writer placed this incident before chapters 19—21, because it indicates a basic problem, namely, spiritual apostasy, and then chapters 19—21 record the resultant political and social conditions.

The notation "until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them [the Danites] as a possession among the tribes of Israel" (18:1) seems to fix the date of this incident early in the period of the judges (cf. 18:30; Josh. 19:47). We already read that the Amorites forced the sons of Dan into the hill country (1:34), but exactly when this occurred is difficult to pin down. The incident in chapters 17 and 18 took place when the tabernacle still stood at Shiloh (18:31), and before the Philistines destroyed Shiloh, probably around 1050 B.C. (cf. Ps. 78:60; Jer. 7:12, 14; 26:6). Joshua evidently died about 1366 B.C.² So it appears that this event occurred sometime early, between these two dates, during the earliest

¹Kuruville, p. 252.

²Merrill, p. 147.

judgeships, while the land was still being divided up among the tribes (cf. Josh. 19:41-47).

1. The idolatry of Micah ch. 17

The story of Micah (ch. 17) introduces the account of the setting up of image worship in the North of the Promised Land (ch. 18).

"There is humour in Judges 17 from the very beginning. The storyteller mocks Micah at almost every opportunity."¹

Micah's unlawful worship 17:1-6

The writer told us nothing about Micah's background, except that he originally lived in the hill country of Ephraim with or near his mother (vv. 1-2). Micah's name means "Who is like Yahweh." As is true of so many details in this story, Micah's name is ironic. He was anything but "like Yahweh."

"It seems that absolutely *no one* in chapters 17—18 knows what God is like!"²

The story's beginning reads like a Shakespearean comedy: Micah confesses to his mother that he was the one who had stolen her silver. Not wanting to receive the full impact of the curse she had pronounced on the thief, he admitted: "the silver is with me; I took it" (v. 2).

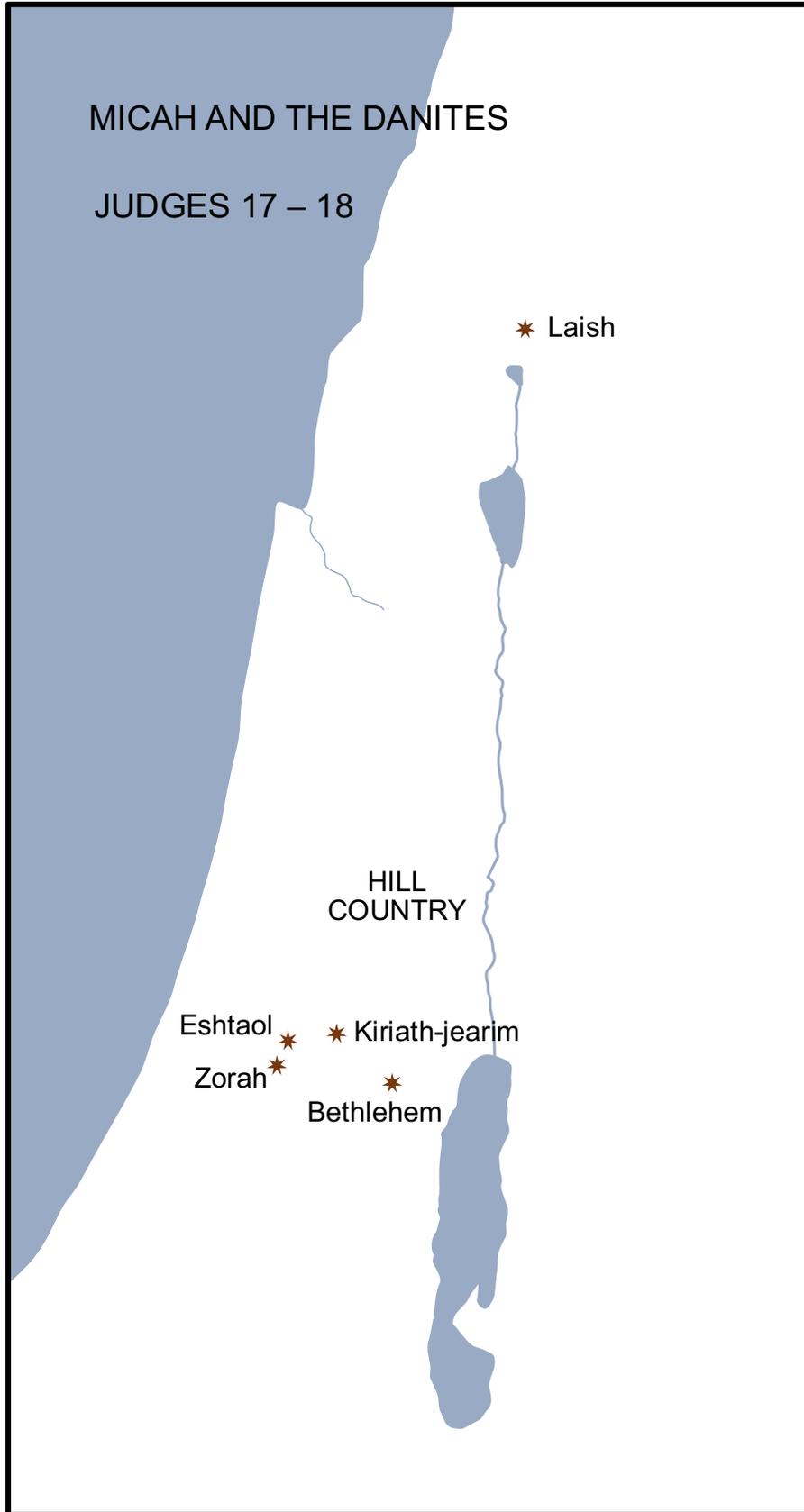
"Outward losses drive good people to their prayers, but bad people to their curses."³

The fact that Micah's mother, upon hearing his confession, now blessed Micah in the name of the LORD, creates a positive impression. But other features of the story demonstrate that her veneer of orthodox Yahwism was extremely thin.

¹A. G. Auld, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 224.

²McCann, p. 121.

³Henry, p. 268.



Micah was a thief who stole a fortune from his own mother. The quantity of silver that he stole (1,100 pieces) could have sustained one person for a lifetime in Israel (cf. v. 10). The Lydians first produced coined money in the sixth century B.C. Therefore these were not 1,100 silver coins, but 1,100 pieces of silver. The writer did not identify how much silver was in each piece, but this was a fortune by any estimate.¹

Apparently Micah confessed his theft because he feared his mother's curse (v. 2). Instead of cursing him though, she blessed him, a very unusual reaction in view of the amount of money involved. Perhaps she believed that her blessing would undo her previous curse.²

Micah's mother then claimed to dedicate all of the silver to the LORD. However, she gave 200 pieces of it to a silversmith to make an image. She now stole from God, just as her son had stolen from her. Micah had evidently learned dishonesty at home.

The carved image (Heb. *peseh*) and the cast metal image" (*massekah*) were evidently two idols, though some have interpreted that the carved image was an idol and the cast metal image was its base. Others believed that there was actually only one image consisting of carved wood overlaid with silver.³ Both of these Hebrew words occur at the head of the list of curses (Deut. 27:15), to describe what the law forbade Israelites from making for idolatrous purposes (cf. Exod. 20:4). The Hebrew word that describes the carved image occurs almost exclusively in relation to the golden calves that Aaron (Exod. 32:4) and King Jeroboam made (1 Kings 12:28-30). Micah's mother evidently intended these images to represent Yahweh and/or an animal on which pagan people visualized their gods standing.⁴

¹See *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Money," by A. F. Walls, 836-41.

²Wolf, p. 481.

³E.g., C. Pfeiffer, p. 261.

⁴See Amihai Mazar, "Bronze Bull Found in Israelite 'High Place' From the Time of the Judges," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 9:5 (September-October 1983):34-40; Hershel Shanks, "Two Early Israelite Cult Sites Now Questioned," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 14:1 (January-February 1988):48-52; and Amihai Mazar, "On Cult Places and Early Israelites: A Response to Michael Coogan," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 15:4 (July-August 1988):45.

"The gods were often depicted as standing, or more rarely sitting, on the back of a bull, which by its strength and power of fertility well represented the essence of the nature cults."¹

Obviously Micah and his mother were either ignorant of—or perhaps more probably chose to disregard—God's law against making carved and cast metal images (Exod. 20:4, 23; Deut. 4:16). They also seem to have been unaware of, or unconcerned about, Israel's tragic experience with the golden calf at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 32:19-35).

"Micah and his mother are sharply distinguished from Samson and his mother [and even more from Samuel and his mother] by their materialism and idolatry. Here there is no evidence of the presence or call of the Spirit in their lives."²

God commanded the Israelites to destroy all the places and objects of worship that they found in Canaan and to worship Him only at the place that He would designate as His sanctuary (Deut. 12:1-14). But Micah built a place of worship in or near his house (v. 5). He did not need to do this, because he lived close to Shiloh, where the tabernacle stood (cf. v. 1; 18:31). In his convenient, homemade shrine, Micah kept an ephod that he had made, probably for divination purposes (cf. Gideon's ephod, 8:27). This was evidently an imitation of the high priest's ephod (cf. 8:27). In this shrine Micah also kept household idols, which probably had some connection with ancestor veneration and divination (cf. Gen. 31:19).³ He also disregarded the Aaronic priesthood by consecrating one of his sons as a priest (v. 5; cf. Exod. 28:1; 40:12-15; Num. 16:39-40; 17:8).

"The by-passing of the Levitical priesthood by Micah may be due either to a breakdown in the distribution of the Levites amongst the community or to an overlooking, wilful [*sic*] or ignorant, of the provisions of the law."⁴

The writer explained editorially that there was no king in Israel at this time, and everyone did just as he pleased (v. 6). That was the reason why Micah could get away with such flagrantly disobedient behavior. Even though there was not yet a human king, Yahweh reigned as Israel's Monarch from

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 184.

²Lewis, p. 88.

³J. J. Davis, p. 144.

⁴Cundall and Morris, p. 185.

heaven. Since His people paid no attention to His authority, by disregarding His Law, Israel was, practically speaking, without a king. Kings enforce standards, but in Israel, the people were setting their own standards.

It was during the tenure of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (ca. 1930), that America switched, from following the Bible as the standard of what is right and what is wrong, to popular opinion of what is right and what is wrong.

Micah's Levite 17:7-13

Verses 1-6 stress the sin of self-styled worship. Verses 7-13 emphasize the folly of self-determined service.

The writer did not call the young Levite who came to live with Micah a priest. So he was evidently not a descendant of Aaron, though he was from the tribe of Levi. The Levites were, of course, living throughout Israel, having received no tribal allotment of land, but only cities within the territories of the other tribes. This young man had been living in Bethlehem of Judah, which was not a Levitical city (v. 7). His disregard for God's will is obvious, in his choice to live somewhere other than where God had instructed the Levites to live (cf. v. 6).

"Unlike Abraham, who also set out for an unknown destination but who went with a keen sense of the calling of God, this person is shiftless. He has no passion for God, no sense of divine calling, no burden of responsibility. He is a 'laid back' professional minister following the path of least resistance and waiting for an opportunity to open up."¹

So this young Levite decided to move elsewhere, and, during his travels met Micah, who, desiring to upgrade his priesthood, invited him to live with him, and to become a "father" (spiritual leader, adviser) and a priest to his family.

"To be called a father was a title of honor (see the reference to Deborah as a 'mother in Israel' in 5:7)."²

¹Block, *Judges ...*, p. 487.

²*The Nelson ...*, p. 433.

Micah had been content to have his son function as his family priest, but a genuine Levite would be even better, Micah thought. Family priests had passed out of existence in Israel, ever since God had appointed the tribe of Levi for priestly service (Exod. 32:28-29; cf. Num. 3:12-13).

Since Micah promised to support him financially, the Levite agreed to the arrangement that Micah proposed.

"The ministry is the best calling but the worst trade in the world."¹

In other words, don't enter the ministry expecting to get rich. Micah proceeded to consecrate (formally appoint) the young man to his service (v. 12) and superstitiously concluded that Yahweh would prosper him since, after all, he had a Levite as his priest (v. 13). However, Yahweh did not prosper Micah, as the following chapter shows.

"The apostasy of the Judges period, according to this chapter, was characterized by three observable trends. 1. Religious syncretism (17:1-5). ... 2. Moral relativism (17:6). ... 3. Extreme materialism (17:7-13)."²

2. The apostasy of the Danites ch. 18

"If we had seen a wayward Israelite or two (or three) in Judges 17, now we are shown a whole wayward *tribe* in Judges 18."³

The messengers from Dan 18:1-6

This chapter begins with another reference to the fact that there was no king in Israel at this time (cf. 17:6). The writer reminded us again that the Israelites were living unrestrained lives, everyone doing as they pleased. Abundant evidence of this follows in chapter 18.

"The nation needs no king to lead them in battle or into apostasy. They will do both on their own."⁴

¹Henry, p. 269.

²J. J. Davis, pp. 143-45.

³Kuruvilla, p. 256.

⁴Block, *Judges ...*, p. 491.

In verse 1, some English translations imply that the following incident happened before the Danites had received their tribal inheritance (Josh. 19:40-48). If true, this statement would date the incident that follows during the days of Joshua. Other English versions, on the other hand, imply that the Danites had not yet subdued, and/or fully occupied, their allotted tribal territory. In this case, the incident probably happened shortly after Joshua's death. The Hebrew text reads literally, "there had not fallen to them [the Danites] by that day in the midst of the tribes of Israel an inheritance."

Many of the commentators prefer the second view.¹ In either case, the incident shows the Danites' dissatisfaction with their condition. They either did not wait for God to give them what He had promised (cf. Josh. 13:1-7), or they were unwilling to fight the Amorites so they could inhabit it (cf. 1:34). They felt that they did not have an adequate inheritance. They then sent a group of five men to investigate the possibilities of other land that might be available to them, in other parts of Canaan.

"They clearly felt that the boundary lines had not fallen for them 'in pleasant places' (Ps 16:6). Their desire to move revealed a lack of faith in the Lord who had allotted to them their original territory."²

The center of Danite activity was then between Zorah and Eshtaol, the area where Samson grew up (13:25). However, this incident seems to have antedated Samson's judgeship. Previously Moses, and later Joshua, had sent spies before them (Num. 13; Josh. 2). There are many parallels between chapter 18 and Numbers 12:16—14:45 and Deuteronomy 1:19-46³ There is no reference to God's leading the Danites to send spies, however. In view of what follows, this decision seems to have lacked divine initiative or permission.

When the five representatives happened to come to Micah's house, they recognized the distinctive voice of his Levite (v. 3). After learning what he was doing there, the Danites explained their mission and asked the Levite to inquire from Yahweh whether their journey would be successful (v. 5).

¹E.g., Bush, p. 223; Cundall and Morris, p. 187; Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, p. 148; Keil and Delitzsch, p. 434; McGee, 2:83; Inrig, pp. 277-78; Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 493-94.

²Wolf, p. 483.

³See A. Malamat, "The Danite Migration and the Pan-Israelite Exodus-Conquest: A Biblical Narrative Pattern," *Biblica* 51 (1970):1-16; and O'Connell, pp. 235-38.

Since the tabernacle, God's required place for inquiring into His will, was just a few miles from Micah's house, the Danites should have gone there if they really wanted to know God's will.

"They seem to have had a greater opinion of Micah's teraphim than of God's urim ...¹

The Levite, perhaps using Micah's ephod, announced God's approval of their mission (v. 6). In view of his own relationship to God, it is doubtful that he really received an answer from Yahweh. Moreover, in view of what the soldiers proceeded to do, their plan was definitely not in harmony with God's will.

The report of the spies 18:7-10

The five Danites continued northward about 100 miles, and finally came upon an area they felt would be ideal for their needs. There they discovered the isolated town of Laish (also called Leshem, Josh. 19:47), which they believed they could capture fairly easily.² It occupied a beautiful location on the southwestern foothills of Mt. Hermon.

"Unlike most Canaanite cities of the time, Laish was not defended by stone walls but by huge ramparts consisting of alternating layers of soil from the surrounding region and debris from previous settlements."³

"The Bible refers to the country as Phoenicia only in the New Testament (Mark 7:26; Acts 11:19; 15:3; 21:2). The Old Testament regularly uses merely the name of either or both of its principal two cities, Tyre and Sidon. These two cities, both prominent in merchandising activity, continue to the present day and are only twenty miles apart. They never seem to have enjoyed any real political cohesion, however, which means that the country never did either. In fact, the boundaries of the country, at any given time, are difficult to fix because this was true. The people often are called simply 'Sidonians' in the Old

¹Henry, p. 269.

²See John C. H. Laughlin, "Dan," *Biblical Illustrator* 9:4 (Summer 1983):40-46; and "Avraham Biram—Twenty Years of Digging at Tell Dan," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13:4 (July-August 1987):12-25.

³Block, *Judges ...*, p. 501.

Testament (Deut. 3:9; Josh. 13:4, 6; Judg. 3:3; 18:7; 1 Kings 5:6; etc.). This is because Sidon was more important than Tyre in early history."¹

Encouraged by the Levite's blessing, these spies persuaded their fellow Danites to believe that God would give them this new "promised land." Its advantages were three (v. 7): First, it was a quiet and secure site (cf. v. 27). Second, there was no dominating ruler under whom the Danites would have to submit; they could continue to do as they pleased. Third, it enjoyed an isolated location, suggesting that there would be no interference from people who might object to the Danites' practices.

"... Ezek 38:10-11 has Yahweh explicitly condemning an attack on innocent people living 'quietly' and 'in security'; he calls it an 'evil plan.' This was a clear violation of Deuteronomic war policies. In fact, Deut 20:10-15 stipulated that for non-Israelite cities at 'a great distance' from Israelite settlements, an offer of peace had to be made first."²

Obviously the Danites wanted to continue to live as they chose, rather than submitting to God's will for them. The name Dan is similar to the Hebrew word that means "justice." How ironic it was, that the tribe that was to judge Israel (Gen. 49:16), would instigate such a miscarriage of justice!

One writer suggested the following translation of verse 7, on the basis of the Arabic cognate of the Hebrew word translated "humiliating" in the NASB: "there was no one speaking with authority in the land, no one in possession of control."³ This translation is possible, but probably not as accurate as the NASB rendering that suggests that there was no oppressive ruler in that area.

The spies' use of the phrase "to take possession of the land" (v. 9) appears to have been a pious ploy to convince their brethren that this self-seeking plan was God's will. Moses and Joshua had repeatedly urged the Israelites to take possession of the land, but only the land that was God's will for them to possess. The Danite spies were trying to provide security for their tribe contrary to God's previous directions. Likewise the phrase "for God

¹Wood, *Distressing Days ...*, p. 79.

²Kuruvilla, p. 260.

³A. A. Macintosh, "The Meaning of MKLYM in Judges XVIII 7," *Vetus Testamentum* 35:1 (1985):76.

has handed it over to you" (v. 10) had previously been Joshua's battle cry (cf. Josh. 6:16; et al.).

"Although the use of spies recalls Numbers 13, the report of the spies in Judges 18 differs significantly. Whereas the spies in Numbers 13 had encountered intimidating giants, the spies in Judges 18 suggest that the inhabitants of Laish are a pushover. The effect of the report in Numbers 13 is to affirm the people's need for God's help against a superior opponent. There is no such need in Judges 18; and this difference is in keeping with the Danites' orientation throughout the story."¹

"There are a number of elements common to the two accounts: the sending of spies; the mustering of fighting men; the named places where the Danites camped along the way; the capture and renaming of a non-Israelite city at the end. But everything about this exodus and conquest is wrong: the Danites are unscrupulous plunderers, their cult is corrupt, and they destroy an innocent people."²

The Danites were unable, or unwilling, to claim their God-appointed territory in which no city was larger than Laish. But they were eager to march many miles north, and battle other opponents, for a town that suited them better. The fact that Laish lay within the Promised Land, that is, within the full extent of the land that God had said He would give the Israelites, does not justify the Danites' action. It was God's will for His people to first settle in their appointed tribal allotments. Then He promised give them the rest of the land later.

The theft of Micah's images and his Levite priest 18:11-20

An army of 600 Danite men proceeded from Zorah and Eshtaol eastward up the Kesalon Valley to Kiriath-jearim ("City of Forests"), and then northward into the Hill Country of Ephraim. They stopped at Micah's house, noticed his images and ephod, and pondered what they should do (v. 14). What they should have done was execute Micah and the Levite, since they were idolaters (Deut. 13:6-11), but the Danites themselves had also departed from God.

¹McCann, p. 123.

²Satterthwaite, p. 84.

So, instead of killing Micah, they stole his images and his priest. They easily convinced his Levite that it would be better for him to serve a tribe, as the Danites' "father" and "priest," than just one family. They made him such a good offer that this upwardly mobile apostate could not refuse them. Here was an opportunity for a larger ministry. It did not matter to him that it involved violating God's restrictions concerning ordinary Levites serving as priests.

"The question the Danites posed to him is asked every day by pastoral search committees: 'Which is better, to be the pastor of a small family or to be the pastor of a megachurch?' The contemporary problem of ambition and opportunism in the ministry has at least a three-thousand-year history."¹

"His [the Levite's] fickle and mercenary attitude reflects the state of the priesthood during this period. Equally deplorable is the fact that one tribe would steal from another with apparent impunity. The treacherous behavior of the tribe of Dan in dealing with Micah and the city of Laish illustrates the 'serpent' nature predicted by Jacob in Genesis 49:17."²

The Danites' theft and intimidation were actions contrary to God's will (Exod. 20:15). Apparently the writer wanted to highlight the theft, since he referred to it five times in this chapter (vv. 17, 18, 20, 24, and 27; cf. 17:2, 4). The bullying tactics of the soldiers further betrayed their selfishness (cf. v. 25).

Micah's attempt to recover his losses 18:21-26

Micah gathered some of his neighbors and pursued the Danites, hoping to force them to return what they had taken from him: his carved image, his ephod, his household idols, his cast metal image, and his priest (v. 18). However, the Danites proved much stronger than he anticipated, and he had to withdraw without a fight (cf. Gen. 14). Here is another example of the Israelites opposing one another, rather than uniting to combat their common foe.

It is comical to read Micah's sniveling complaint that the Danite soldiers had taken the gods that he had made (v. 24). Obviously these gods had no

¹Block, *Judges ...*, p. 515.

²Wolf, p. 486.

power to protect him from his enemies. The fact that he had created them himself should have made this clear to him. Since he was superior to the gods that he had made, they had to be weaker and more helpless than he was. His pathetic question, "What more do I have?" (v. 24) reflects the emptiness of idolatry.

"His failure is in marked contrast to the stunning victory gained by Abraham and his small army when they overtook the coalition of kings who had captured Lot and the wealth of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 14:10-16). The God of Abraham proved stronger than the idol deities fashioned by Micah. Like the gods of Babylon, Micah's gods were taken captive, unable to effect their own escape (cf. 6:31; Isa 46:1-2)."¹

Likewise Micah's priest, whom he had treated as a son, turned against him. None of the characters in this story show any integrity.

The establishment of idolatry at Dan 18:27-31

The Danites' destruction of the inhabitants and houses of Laish appears cruel and unjustified (cf. 9:45-49), even though Laish was a Canaanite village. This town, which, to the Danites spies seemed so desirable, was very vulnerable and isolated, and its people relatively peace-loving and decent. But its advantages turned out to be weaknesses. Since God had provided adequate territory for the Danites in southern Canaan, this whole expedition was displeasing to God—in spite of the Levite's blessing (v. 6). Some of the Danites remained in their original southern tribal allotment, and did not move north. The new Danite territory, in the North, was actually within a section of the Promised Land that Joshua had previously apportioned to the tribe of Manasseh, or possibly Naphtali (Josh. 13:29-31; 19:32-33).

Note, in verse 27, that the Danites took three things: the gods that Micah had made (cf. v. 14), a priest whom they could buy, and a city that its inhabitants could not defend. On these three unpromising and flimsy foundations, the Danites built their future in the North.

Definitely contrary to God's will was the setting up of Micah's carved image in Dan, their newly named town. Unnamed up to this point in the story, the Levite whom the writer had referred to is finally revealed as: Jonathan. Only

¹Ibid., p. 487.

now did the writer identify him by name, probably as a final forceful shock for us, the readers. He was, of all people, a direct descendant of Moses! The English translations call him the son of Gershom the son of Manasseh (18:30). However, some ancient versions say that Jonathan was the son of Gershom the son of Moses. If Jonathan was in fact the grandson of Moses, he still could have been a fairly young man (17:7; et al.) at this time.

"It is universally agreed that the reference [to Manasseh] was originally to Moses. The reason for the amendment may have been to safeguard the reputation of this great leader by excluding him from the pedigree of this time-serving and idolatrous Levite."¹

The revelation of the identity of this apostate Levite as Moses' descendant, at the end of this already shocking story, brings it to an almost unbelievable climax: A direct descendant of the man most responsible for securing Israel's unswerving commitment to Yahweh played a major role in leading the Israelites away from God!

"The problem of religious syncretism is so deeply rooted it has infected the most sacred institutions and the most revered household. ... If *ben* means 'son' rather than 'grandson' or 'descendant,' then these events must have happened within a hundred years of the arrival of the Israelites."²

The day of the captivity of the land referred to (v. 30) may be the one by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:11, 22) or the Arameans (2 Chron. 28:5).³ Some scholars believe that it was the Assyrian Captivity of Israel, that began in 734 B.C. (2 Kings 15:29).⁴ But if so, this statement was a later editorial insertion in the text. The idolatry that was centered in Dan plagued Israel for over 600 years, and the Danites were initially responsible for it.

"In the book of 1 Chronicles, when the list of the tribes and families of Israel is given, Dan is the only tribe which is totally ignored. Zebulun's genealogy is also not chronicled, but it is mentioned elsewhere (1 Chron. 6:63, 77; 12:33, 40). Dan

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 191.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 512.

³Lewis, p. 93.

⁴Block, *Judges ...*, p. 513; Bush, p. 232.

appears only as a geographical name, not as a tribe. They had vanished into obscurity, probably because of intermarriage with the Philistines. (E.g., 2 Chron. 2:14.) Dan did not take what God had given to them, and they took what God had not given them. In the process, they lost all that they had."¹

The last verse of the story makes the most important point (v. 31): The writer contrasted Micah's graven image that he had made, in Dan, with the house of God that He had ordained, at Shiloh.

"I suggest the writer places these two sanctuaries [Micah's house of gods, translated "shrine" in 17:5, and the tabernacle], the false and the true, over against one another. There is the true house of God at Shiloh and then there is Micah's collection of cultic Tinkertoys."²

"The narrator's point is that throughout the period of the judges the cult site at Dan functioned as an apostate challenge to the true worship of Yahweh."³

The Danites were the first tribe to establish public idolatry in Israel. Perhaps this was the reason why their tribe's name does not appear in the list of 12 tribes that will each produce 12,000 godly Israelite witnesses during the Tribulation Period (Rev. 7:5-8).

"... the tribe of Dan was one of the first to go into idolatry, was small in number, and probably was thereafter classified with the tribe of Naphtali ..."⁴

This whole story of Micah and the Danites illustrates the terrible spiritual apostasy that corrupted Israel during the age of the judges. Even a grandson (or descendant) of Moses took leadership in it. It was no wonder that Israel had trouble with her external enemies (chs. 3—16) since she was so spiritually corrupt internally (chs. 17—18).

¹Inrig, p. 279.

²D. R. Davis, p. 201.

³Block, *Judges ...*, p. 514.

⁴John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 141. See also Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 166.

"The general theme pervading the whole narrative is its concern over false religion ..."¹

"Indeed, things are so wrong in Judges 18, and the Danites' behavior is so repulsive, that it is hard not to conclude that Judges 18 is an intentional polemic against Dan, probably because Dan and Bethel became the two northern cultic sites that rivaled Jerusalem."²

There may be a polemic against Bethel in the reference to Ephraim in 17:1.³

Chapters 17 and 18 teach Christians important lessons:

- We should obey God's Word, not disregard it, as Micah did.
- We should serve God faithfully as He directs, not advance ourselves at the cost of disobedience, as Jonathan did.
- We should also wait for God and engage our spiritual enemy, not rush ahead or run away to establish our own security, as the Danites did.

Micah's error was self-styled worship, Jonathan's was self-determined service, and the Danites' was self-seeking security.

"In this portrayal of the events the narrator provides another challenge to the traditional scholarly understanding of Deuteronomism, which insists that sin brings on the curse, but blessing follows obedience. Here sin succeeds! Ironically, and perhaps tragically, the agendas people set for themselves are sometimes achieved—which sends a solemn warning to the church at the close of the twentieth century. Success is not necessarily a sign of righteousness or an indication that we must be doing something right. It may in fact be the opposite. God does not stifle every corrupt thought and scheme of the human heart."⁴

¹Dale Ralph Davis, "Comic Literature—Tragic Theology: A Study of Judges 17—18," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (Spring 1984):162.

²McCann, pp. 124-25.

³See Yairah Amit, "Hidden Polemic in the Conquest of Dan: Judges XVII—XVIII," *Vetus Testamentum* 40 (1990):4-20.

⁴Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 514-15.

B. THE IMMORALITY OF GIBEAH AND THE BENJAMITES CHS. 19—21

Chapter 19 records an event that provoked civil war in Israel. The account of that war follows in chapter 20. Then the consequences of the war unfold in chapter 21. This section of the book is the climactic and supreme demonstration of the "Canaanization" of Israel during the pre-monarchic period of her history.

"The historicity of these events which culminated in the burning of Gibeah has often been doubted. Confirmation of the burning of Gibeah, however, was found in the excavation of that site by Albright."¹

Chapters 19—21 teach us how to survive in a society without spiritual and moral standards. Chapter 19 is a story of love and hate. It is so contemporary that, with a few minor changes, we might learn about it from our news source. Scenes of brutal, violent rape frame this three-chapter section.

The first verse clearly introduces a new story. The events of chapters 19—21 are not a continuation of those in chapters 17—18. "Those days" were the days of the Judges Period. The reference to Phinehas (20:28) suggests that they took place in the years fairly soon after Joshua's death. The writer of Chronicles recorded only two descendants of Aaron named Phinehas: the godly son of Eleazar (1 Chron. 6:1-15), and the ungodly son of Eli (1 Sam. 4:4). This series of events (chs. 19—21) evidently transpired during the lifetime of Aaron's grandson (Phinehas), and the previous events (chs. 17—18) may have occurred during the lifetime of Moses' grandson (Jonathan, 18:30).

Josephus narrated the story in chapters 19—21 immediately after his account of the Israelites' failure to subdue all their enemies (1:19—3:6), and before the story of the Danites in chapters 17—18.² He placed the story of the Danites in chapters 17—18 after this one (chs. 19—21), and before the events of Othniel's judgeship (3:7-11).³ This arrangement indicates his understanding of the chronology of these events.

¹Free, p. 145.

²Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:2:8-12.

³*Ibid.*, 5:3:1-2.

The reference to Israel's lack of a king (v. 1) points to the Israelites' practical denial of Yahweh's sovereignty over them, as well as the absence of an Israelite monarch. This refrain, "there was no king in Israel," occurs four times in chapters 17—21 (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). It brackets the story in chapters 19—21, and also provides the key to its interpretation. This incident shows what happens when God's people fail to acknowledge Yahweh's sovereign authority over their lives. In chapters 17—18, the result was religious apostasy (idolatry), and in chapters 19—21, it was moral degeneracy (immorality), political disintegration (anarchy), and social chaos (injustice).

The almost complete anonymity of the characters in the following chapters, especially in a book that often names even minor characters, reflects the disintegration and dehumanization of society at this time.¹

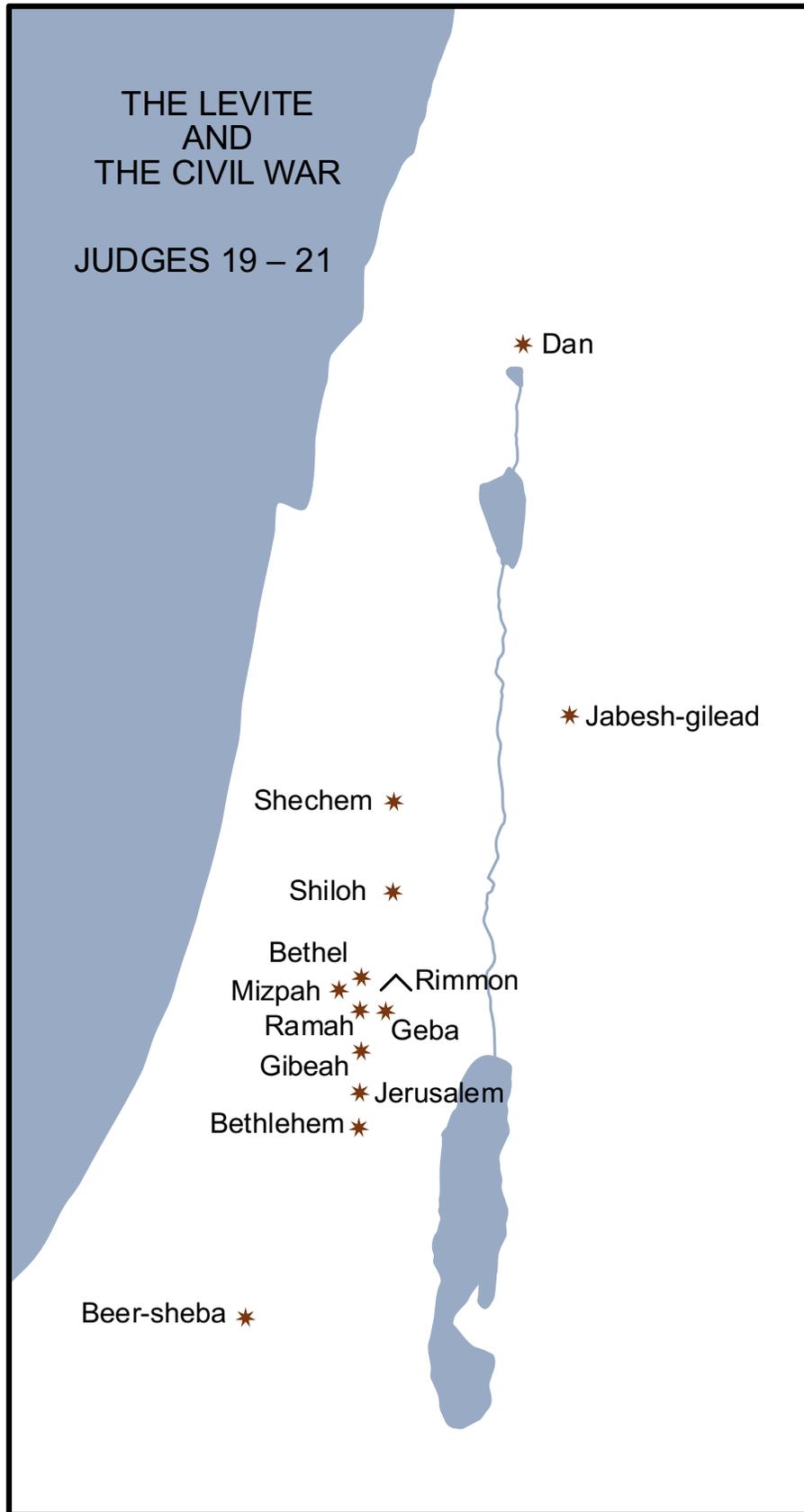
1. The atrocity in Gibeah ch. 19

This incident and chapter closely relate to those that follow.

The background of the incident 19:1-15

We meet another Levite in verse 1, like the one in the last story, who was paying no attention to God's directions concerning where the Levites should live (cf. 17:7). Since monogamy was God's standard for marriage, the Levite should not have married a concubine (Gen. 2:24). A concubine was a female servant who was regarded as part of the family, with whom the master sometimes produced descendants (cf. Gen. 16; 30:4-13). Marrying a concubine was doubly wrong in the case of a Levite, because the Levites were to remain as holy as possible in view of their special ministry in Israel. Not only was this Levite disregarding the Mosaic Law, but he was also not treating his concubine in a loving way. This comes out clearly later in the story, but here we simply read that his concubine found him "repugnant" (v. 2). So she left him and returning to her father's home.

¹Kuruvilla, pp. 268, 287.



"The reason for her return given in many ancient versions, 'because she was angry with him' (followed by RSV), is more plausible than that supplied in the AV and RV that she *played the whore against him*. The penalty against the adulteress was death (Lv. 20:10), but a heated argument would allow the Levite to seek a reconciliation when the passions of temper had subsided."¹

Arthur Cundall's preference, expressed in the quotation above, rested on the Septuagint translators' rendering of verse 2, that is the equivalent of: "his concubine was angry with him." However, the Hebrew text has "his concubine was unfaithful to him," and this is the preferable reading. If she was unfaithful, she may have fled to her father's house because she feared that her husband would kill her (cf. Gen. 38:24; Lev. 20:10; 21:9). Perhaps after four months with her parents (v. 2), her husband realized that she was not pregnant and so sought reconciliation.²

As we have noted, the Israelites paid less attention to the Law in the period of the judges than they did while Joshua was alive. It is probable that the concubine actually had been unfaithful, and that the Israelites simply did not execute the penalty for that offense that the Law prescribed. The fact that the Levite waited four months before trying to get his concubine back suggests that he was not eager to do so.

Josephus' commentary is interesting and reflects his interpretation:

"Now he [the Levite] was very fond of his wife [concubine], and overcome with her beauty; but he was unhappy in this, that he did not meet with the like return of affection from her, for she was averse to him, which did more inflame his passion for her, so that they quarreled one with another perpetually; and at last the woman was so disgusted at these quarrels, that she left her husband, and went to her parents in the fourth month."³

The writer referred to the Levite as the concubine's "husband" because that is what he was in the Israelites' eyes (v. 3). The Levite's gentle words were insincere, as his later dealings with her prove. Apparently he wanted

¹Cundall and Morris, p. 193. Cf. Butler, p. 418.

²Boda, p. 1257.

³Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:2:8.

her back for selfish reasons. The two donkeys that the Levite took with him to Bethlehem were for his "wife" and him to ride when they returned home. The concubine's father was glad to see the Levite, probably because it was disgraceful in that culture for a woman to leave her husband, and his daughter's disgrace was an embarrassment to him. The Levite wanted to patch up his relationship with his concubine, and that would have pleased his father-in-law.

The writer's mention of the hospitality of the Levite's father-in-law (vv. 4-9) points out the contrast with the Gibeahites' lack of hospitality later in the story (vv. 15, 22-26). Hospitality was a sacred duty in the ancient Near East when there were few public facilities for travelers (cf. 4:17-23; Gen. 18:5; 24:55). Also, this culture valued people over tasks.

Perhaps it is significant that the father-in-law, who practiced hospitality (lit. "love of strangers") lived in Bethlehem, which was later David's hometown. Saul came from Gibeah, where the residents hated strangers, as the story will show. The fact that Israel's first king came from Gibeah has led some scholars to conclude that, by including this incident, the writer may have intended to discredit Saul.¹

Jebus (Jerusalem) was and is about six miles north of Bethlehem (v. 10). The Levite and his concubine would have reached Jebus in about two hours as they traveled north from Bethlehem. Gibeah (v. 12) was three miles farther north, and Ramah (v. 13) was two miles beyond Gibeah. Jebus was, at that time, and until David finally captured it (2 Sam. 5:6-9), a stronghold of the Jebusites, who were one of the native Canaanite tribes.

The Levite expected to find hate in Jebus, and love in Gibeah. But he would have been wiser to stop for the night in Jebus, since he found no hospitality in Gibeah, but instead, as it turned out, he encountered hostility and hatred. All the overnight accommodations in Gibeah were full, or at least not open to the Levite and his party. Of all their population, the Israelites were to give special consideration to their Levites (Deut. 16:14; 26:12).

"The last clause in v. 15 would have been shocking anywhere in the ancient Near East. But it is especially shocking in Israel. The social disintegration has infected the very heart of the community. People refuse to open their doors to strangers

¹See Jeremiah Unterman, "The Literary Influence of 'The Binding of Isaac' (Genesis 22) on 'The Outrage at Gibeah' (Judges 19)," *Hebrew Annual Review* 4 (1980):161-66.

passing through. It makes no difference that these travelers are their own countrymen."¹

The hospitality of the stranger 19:16-21

The old man who took the Levite and his traveling companions in for the night had evidently moved to Gibeah temporarily, perhaps as a farm laborer (v. 16; cf. v. 23; Gen. 19:9). The contrast between this stranger's hospitality and the Gibeahites' lack of it stands out in the text.

The writer of Judges used a tragicomic literary style to emphasize the terrible moral and spiritual climate in Israel at this time.² One wonders if the men of Gibeah, who demonstrated great lack of hospitality, even knew that the Levite was a Levite. Was their refusal to grant him shelter, even though he was a servant of Yahweh, a deliberate act of disrespect for the LORD? Verse 19 tells us that, since the Levite had plenty of food for his traveling group, including his donkeys, there was no apparent reason for the Gibeahites to refuse them a place to sleep for the night.

Beginning with verse 21, this story begins to sound like a replay of what happened to Lot in Sodom (cf. Gen. 19:1-3).³ Gibeah proved to be the "New Sodom."⁴

The immorality of the Gibeahites 19:22-26

Only a group of "worthless men" surrounded the old man's house (v. 22). However, the men of Gibeah, as a whole, tolerated the actions of this group. Furthermore, the whole tribe of Benjamin later refused to punish them (20:13-14). This points to the Benjamites' sympathy for the perpetrators of this atrocity. The "worthless men" repeated the request of the Sodomites in Lot's day (Gen. 19:4-5; cf. 1 Sam. 2:12). What had previously characterized the Canaanites now marked the Israelites (cf. Rom. 1:26-27).⁵

¹Block, *Judges ...*, p. 530.

²Stuart Lasine, "Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot's Hospitality in an Inverted World," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (1984):37-59.

³See Kuruvilla, p. 276, for a chart comparing the two stories.

⁴D. R. Davis, *Such a ...*, pp. 211-27.

⁵See Susan Niditch, "The 'Sodomite' Theme in Judges 19—20: Family, Community, and Social Disintegration," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44:3 (July 1982):365-378.

Josephus wrote that it was the Levite's concubine that the men of Gibeah wanted to have sex with, "having seen the woman in the market-place, and admiring her beauty, ... they desired him [the old man] to yield them up the strange woman [the concubine] ..." ¹ But this clearly is not what the text says; it reflects Jewish tradition.

The Levite, and his aged host to a lesser degree, shared the callousness to sexual perversion that marked this gang from Gibeah. Note that the older man told the men of Gibeah, "Please let me bring them [the Levite's concubine and his own daughter] out, then rape them and do to them whatever you wish [i.e., what is right in your own eyes]" (v. 24).

"In his concern for the accepted conventions of hospitality the old man was willing to shatter a code which, to the modern reader, appears of infinitely more importance, namely, the care and protection of the weak and helpless. Womanhood was but lightly esteemed in the ancient world; indeed it is largely due to the precepts of the Jewish faith, and particularly the enlightenment which has come through the Christian faith, that women enjoy their present position. ... The Levite himself, with a callous disregard for the one he professed to love, or, perhaps more pertinently, with a greater concern for his own skin, took his concubine by force and thrust her out to the men [cf. Gen. 19:6-9]." ²

Evidently "the man" in verse 25 was the Levite. He was even more guilty than the old stranger, because he actually sacrificed his own concubine to these homosexual (v. 22) terrorists. Recall Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter, which was another instance of brutality against a woman, even a woman who was a relative (11:39). The Levite threw his concubine out of the house as one tosses a scrap of meat to dogs. There is no mention that the old stranger did so with his own daughter, even though at first he offered to give her up (v. 24).

Imagine the fight the concubine must have put up as her husband tried to wrestle her out of the door in order to save his own cowardly skin! Clearly he did not really love this woman, or he would have defended her, and even offered himself in her place. His actions speak volumes about his views of

¹Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:2:8.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 197. Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:2:8; 12:4:6.

women, himself, and God's will. Now we can understand why this woman left him in the first place (v. 2).

The writer, in verse 26, now called the Levite the "master" of the concubine, rather than her husband. Perhaps he did so because the Levite treated her as his property, rather than as a person.

"The entire book presents a nation rotting at the core. Nothing is normal, least of all the Canaanite version of patriarchy. Normative biblical patricentrism perceives male headship not as a position of power but one of responsibility, in which the leader sacrifices himself for the well-being of the led. In the Book of Judges this pattern is reversed. Repeatedly women and children are sacrificed for males."¹

The Levite's reaction to the atrocity 19:27-30

"It is not only the action of the men of Gibeah which reveals the abysmally low moral standards of the age; the indifference of the Levite who prepared to depart in the morning without any apparent concern to ascertain the fate of his concubine, and his curt, unfeeling command when he saw her lying on the threshold (27, 28), these show that, in spite of his religion, he was devoid of the finer emotions. The sense of outrage does not appear to have influenced him until he realized that she was dead, when he lifted her body on to one of the asses and continued his journey."²

"That the woman is put on a donkey recalls Judges 1:14, where the woman Achsah is also riding on a donkey. The two scenes form a tragic envelope-structure for the book of Judges. Whereas Achsah is an active subject, stating her desire for 'a present' or 'a blessing' from her father, and getting it, the Levite's concubine remains nameless and without a voice. Whereas Achsah prospers, the Levite's concubine is tragically victimized. This envelope-structure is part of the larger pattern in the book of Judges. The progressive deterioration that starts with Gideon and reaches

¹Block, *Judges ...*, p. 584.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 198.

its nadir in Judges 17—21 is signaled in part by the increasing violence against women ... It is the case, then and now, that the disease of a society manifests itself in the abuse of women."¹

As soon as he arrived home, the Levite callously cut his concubine into 12 pieces, as one would slaughter an animal (Exod. 29:17; Lev. 1:6, 12; 8:20). It is even possible that he murdered her here, since the text does not clearly state that she had died in Gibeah. Even though the Levite later described what happened as though she was already dead when he cut her up (20:5-6), we wonder if we can believe him, in view of how the writer painted his character. He could have committed murder in a fit of rage, over the indignity to his honor that the men of Gibeah's treatment of his concubine caused. This would show, even more, how much disrespect he had for his concubine wife. This theory, however, is based on supposition alone.

Earlier, we read that the Levite had gone to Bethlehem to speak gently to his concubine (v. 3). But now his treatment of her is anything but gentle. One wonders if their five days in Bethlehem had changed his attitude; perhaps they were full of contention and animosity. Perhaps the concubine's father insisted on the Levite staying so unusually long because he was hoping for a reconciliation that never came. Evidently relations between the Levite and his concubine had improved to the extent that he was willing to take her back home, but they seem to have worsened on the journey, since he callously threw her to the Gibeonite "wolves."

In that culture, the treatment that people gave a corpse reflected their respect, or lack of respect, for the dead person. The Levite should have given her a proper burial. Instead, he sent one piece of her body to each of the Israelite tribes, explaining what had happened, and calling on them to take action. King Saul later summoned the tribes for war with a similar act involving an animal (1 Sam. 11:7).

"Sending the dissected pieces of the corpse to the tribes was a symbolic act, by which the crime committed upon the murdered woman was placed before the eyes of the whole nation, to summon it to punish the crime ..."²

¹McCann, p. 131. See also Olson, 2:877.

²Keil and Delitzsch, p. 446.

The Israelites perceived this incident as the greatest act of moral corruption in their nation's history (v. 30; cf. Hos. 9:9; 10:9). The last sentence in the last verse of this chapter is perhaps the most significant: "Consider it, make a plan, and speak up!"

What would Israel do? Would she deal with this situation as God had specified in the Mosaic Law, or would she disregard His will, as almost everyone in this story had done? The nation had faced a similar crisis in dealing with Micah (cf. 18:14). The next chapter shows what Israel did.

"... it is truly remarkable that this nameless Levite from an obscure place in Ephraim was able to accomplish what none of the divinely called and empowered deliverers had been able to do. Not even Deborah and Barak had been able to galvanize support and mobilize the military resources of the nation to this extent."¹

Chapter 19 is a story about love and hate. The major evidence of love is hospitality. The major manifestation of hate is immorality (lit. "what is contrary to manners"). Webster's dictionary defines "immoral" as: "contrary to the moral code of the community."² The erroneous notion that man sets his own standards of morality goes all the way back to the Fall (Gen. 3). Actually God sets these standards. He does so based on His love and His desire for the welfare of humanity, and He reveals these standards in His Word. When people abandon God's standards, life breaks down, unravels, and disintegrates.

Notice how the characters in this chapter behaved when they chose to disregard divine sovereign authority:

- The most admirable person was the Levite's father-in-law. He showed love to both the Levite and his own daughter by extending hospitality (vv. 4-9).
- The concubine loved the Levite enough to live with him temporarily, but she did not love him enough to remain with him.
- The Levite loved his concubine enough to go after her and try to reconcile with her, but he actually hated her as a person. He handed her over to the Gibeonites, like the coward he was, spoke callously

¹Block, *Judges ...*, p. 550.

²*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, s.v. "immoral."

- to her, and treated her body contemptuously. He failed to protect her (v. 25), to assist her (v. 27), and to respect her (v. 29).
- The old stranger loved the Levite, but he hated the women: his daughter and the Levite's concubine.
 - The men of Gibeah are the most despicable characters. They hated all the men and the women in the house. Their profession of love (intercourse with the Levite, v. 22) was a pretext for hate (attempted homosexual rape, actual heterosexual rape, and probably murder).

This is how horribly people, even God's chosen people, can behave when they reject God's rule over their lives (v. 1).

"By describing as clearly and graphically as possible the horrible, terror-filled, violent consequences of human self-assertion and idolatry—that is, everybody doing what is right in their own eyes—Judges 19, the book of Judges, and the prophetic canon invite repentance and conformity of self and society to the just, righteous, and peaceful purposes of God."¹

2. The civil war in Israel ch. 20

This chapter continues the story begun in chapter 19. The emphasis in chapter 19 was on moral degeneracy, and that of chapter 20 is on Israel's political disorganization. The sin of a few men in chapter 19 resulted in over 65,000 deaths in chapter 20 (cf. Josh. 7).

Preparations to besiege Gibeah 20:1-11

The phrase "from Dan to Beersheba" (v. 1) became a common expression describing the whole of Israel's occupied territory during Israel's united monarchy. The Mizpah referred to here (v. 1) was the one in Benjamin's tribal territory just five miles north of Gibeah (cf. 1 Sam. 7:5; Jer. 40:5-12), not Mizpah of Gilead east of the Jordan River (cf. 2 Kings 10:33; Jer. 50:10; Zech. 10:10). Three times in this pericope the writer used the phrase "as one person" or "as one man" (vv. 1, 8, 11). This, of all times, was one of the rare instances of Israelite solidarity during the Judges Period. Here the tribal leaders unanimously chose a plan that lacked divine

¹McCann, p. 132.

initiative. At other times they did not cooperate in order to fulfill the revealed will of God (cf. 5:15-17; 8:1-3; 12:1-6; 15:11).

"For once in the book of Judges, all Israel joins together to plot strategy, but it is strategy to punish one of their own, not to occupy the land and displace the native inhabitants who tempt them with foreign gods."¹

"Ironically, the Levite has sacrificed his concubine to save himself and now is willing to sacrifice the 'sons of Israel' to get his personal revenge on these Gibeahite 'sons of Belial' [vv. 4-7]."²

By casting lots to see how they should proceed against Benjamin (v. 9), the tribes were dealing with Benjamin on the same basis that they had dealt with the Canaanite towns they had attacked. God did not tell them to deal with their fellow Israelites using this method (cf. Deut. 13:12-18). They were now battling their own Israelite brethren, just as they had engaged their enemies (v. 18; cf. Lev. 19:18).

"Some comment must be made regarding the large numbers in this chapter. The discussion centers around the translation of the Hebrew word *eleph*. This word often is translated *thousand* but can also mean a *family, clan, or military unit of fighting men* (such as a squad of ten to twenty soldiers). The *twenty-six, twenty-two, eighteen, ten*, should not be thought of as so many *thousand* men but as so many *units* of men, each unit consisting of somewhere in the neighborhood of ten to twenty fighting men each. (A unit of ten is mentioned specifically in verse 10.) This interpretation does not detract from the authority of the Scriptures in any way. It simply attempts to understand what the Bible actually says. Certainly it places the other numbers in the chapter in a reasonable context."³

¹Butler, p. 440.

²Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, p. 371.

³Monson, p. 119. See also *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Number," by R. A. H. Gunner, pp. 895-98.

I see no reason to reject the traditional translation of *eleph* as "thousand" in this context (cf. Num. 26:41).¹

Attempt at a peaceful settlement 20:12-19

The 11 other tribes wisely tried to settle this problem with the Benjamites peacefully (v. 12; cf. Josh. 22:13-20). Unfortunately, the Benjamites decided to support the wicked men of Gibeah who were their kinsmen. They should have sided with their brothers (vv. 13, 23, 28) who were the other Israelites. The Benjamites decided to support their kinsmen because they were their relatives, rather than standing with God for what was right. In this case, as is often true, loyalty to family trumped loyalty to God.

The other tribes gathered to remove the wickedness from the Israelites (v. 13), but, ironically, their gathering resulted in removing the Israelites from the wickedness—by killing them! Their plan resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent Israelites.

"Though the sin of the guilty impairs the whole community, here of Benjamin, the assembly would have been content with the capital punishment of only the guilty individuals. It was only after identifying themselves with the guilty persons by their refusal to give them up that Benjamin came collectively under the ban. This is a case of corporate responsibility rather than 'corporate personality'."²

"The extent to which people will stand up to defend evil and evildoers is a measure of how deeply rooted is the Canaanizing rot in a culture."³

The Benjamites were outstanding warriors in Israel. Ehud and Saul, as well as other champions, came from the tribe of Benjamin (cf. Gen. 49:27; 1 Chron. 8:40; 12:2). The 700 choice left-handed soldiers (v. 16) were evidently an elite fighting force, all of whom were expert in the use of the sling. Comparing the number of Israelites able to fight in Numbers 26 (601,730) with the number able to fight in this war (26,700 from Benjamin plus 400,000 from the rest of Israel [v. 2] equals 426,700) shows that

¹So also Wolf, p. 494; et al.

²J. Gray, p. 355.

³Block, *Judges ...*, p. 568.

the population had declined by about 30 percent. This is another indication of Israel's deterioration.¹

"Alone a left-handed person was considered handicapped [e.g., Ehud] and in a contingent of right-handed troops an actual liability, but if enough left-handed men could be assembled to make up an entire contingent, a disadvantage could be transformed into a distinct advantage, physically and psychologically."²

The name Benjamin means "Son of the Right Hand," but, ironically, this tribe was stocked full of left-handed men. Is this another literary indication of the inverted condition of Israel at this time? Perhaps.

"The *sling*, which was employed with a left-handed motion, must not be confused with the modern schoolboy's catapult [slingshot]; it was a formidable weapon of war used in the Assyrian, Egyptian, and Babylonian armies as well as in Israel. David's encounter with the Philistine, Goliath, is a telling example of the power and accuracy of this weapon (I Sa. 17:49). It has been estimated that stones weighing up to one pound could be projected with uncanny accuracy at speeds up to 90 m.p.h!"³

The Israelites went to Bethel to inquire for God's strategy in their battle (v. 18). In 1:1, they had inquired of Yahweh, but here they inquired of Elohim, the generic name for God. In 1:1, the LORD had directed Judah to attack the Canaanites, but here He tells Judah to attack the Benjamites. These details are still more evidence of Israel's departure from the LORD.

"They [the Israelites] began in the Spirit and ended in the flesh. First, they fought the common foe, then they fought each other."⁴

"The book begins and ends with Judah in this prominent position (1:1, 2). This is no accident, since the end of the book

¹Webb, p. 481.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 557.

³Cundall and Morris, p. 201.

⁴Gaebelein, 1:2:66.

points toward the monarchy, whose true expression would come out of Judah."¹

Bethel (lit. "House of God") was only about four miles north of Mizpah. The ark of the covenant was at Bethel at this time (v. 27). This is the only mention of the ark in Judges. The people were not seeking the LORD much at this time. Contrast the more numerous references to the ark in Joshua, where the Israelites were more victorious. They may have moved the ark and the tabernacle from Shiloh (cf. Josh. 21:2; 22:9, 12; Judg. 18:31; 21:12, 19, 21; 1 Sam. 1:3).

Another possibility is that only the ark was at Bethel, but the tabernacle was still at Shiloh. This seems probable, since we read later (1 Sam. 1:3) that the tabernacle was at Shiloh. The Israelites viewed the ark as a good luck charm (cf. 1 Sam. 4:3-4). They had a very low view of God's holiness, which explains their disregard for Him as their Commander-in-Chief in this chapter.

The Israelites' initial defeats 20:20-28

The LORD granted the Benjamites success at first, in order to discipline the other Israelites for their independence, not because He approved of the Benjamites' actions. The Benjamites became God's temporary instrument to discipline the other tribes, as God also used Israel's foreign foes (the Canaanites, Midianites, Philistines, et al., and later the Assyrians and Babylonians).

"The congregation now discovered, from this repeated defeat, that the Lord had withdrawn His grace, and was punishing them. Their sin, however, did not consist in the fact that they had begun the war itself—for the law in Deut. xxii 22, to which they themselves had referred in ver. 13, really required this,—but rather in the state of mind with which they had entered upon the war, their strong self-consciousness, and great confidence in their own might and power. They had indeed inquired of God (*Elohim*) who should open the conflict; but they had neglected to humble themselves before Jehovah the covenant God, in the consciousness not only of their own

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 437.

weakness and sinfulness, but also of grief at the moral corruption of their brother tribe."¹

The text says that 22,000 Israelite soldiers fell on the first day of battle (v. 21), but Josephus wrote that 2,000 fell.²

The reference to the Israelites weeping (v. 23) is significant. This book opened with a reference to the people weeping because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant, manifested in idolatry (2:4-5). In the middle chapter of the book, there is another reference to weeping—by Jephthah's daughter and her friends—as a result of Jephthah's foolish vow (11:37-38). So weeping frames the whole book and lies at its heart, showing the unhappy outcome of idolatry and self-assertiveness.³ One writer even referred to Judges as "a book of weeping."⁴

With each successive defeat, the Israelites became more concerned about getting God's guidance. They had previously simply asked Him to bless their plans with success.

"... by reducing the size of the army, God was showing them that numbers alone did not guarantee victory. They needed to trust God to accomplish the impossible, as he did for Gideon's three hundred (cf. 7:7)."⁵

"Just as the worship of Baal had brought about a near catastrophe in the plains of Moab (Num 25:1-9), so the Baal cult was probably responsible for subverting the Benjamites. This must have been comparatively soon after the earlier incident, for the same priest Phinehas intervened on both occasions (Num 25:7-8; Judg 20:28)."⁶

Block claimed that the name Phinehas is Egyptian in origin, and derives from a word meaning "the dark-skinned, the Negro."⁷

¹Keil and Delitzsch, p. 452.

²Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 5:2:10.

³McCann, p. 118.

⁴Tate, p. 34.

⁵Wolf, p. 498.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 493.

⁷Block, *Judges ...*, p. 561.

The Israelites' final victory 20:29-48

Verses 29-36a give an overview of the battle, and 36b-48 provide a more detailed explanation. Israel's strategy was similar to what God had specified against Ai (Josh. 8:1-29), and what Abimelech used against Shechem (9:33-44).

The location of Baal-tamar is unknown (v. 33), but Maareh-geba was evidently Geba, which stood a few miles northeast of Gibeah. Rimmon (lit. "Pomegranate," v. 45) was farther to the north and east of Bethel. The site of Gidom (v. 45) is still unknown. The writer carefully recorded that it was the LORD who struck Benjamin (v. 35). The 25,100 total Benjamites who "drew the sword" and were killed (v. 35), is likely the same group that is later rounded to 25,000 (v. 46).

"Verse 15 indicates that the Benjamite army numbered twenty-six thousand troops and an additional seven hundred slingers. They lost twenty-five thousand, one hundred men in battle (cf. v. 35 with vv. 44-46) and an additional six hundred men escaped. What happened to the extra thousand men? The most reasonable explanation is that they were killed during the fighting on the first two days."¹

"The word for 'whole' (*kalil*, v. 40) is often used of 'whole burnt offerings' (Deut 33:10) and is in fact used of burning a town whose people have become involved in idolatry (Deut 13:16). The entire town [of Gibeah] literally became a burnt offering!"²

The Israelites did to the Benjamites just as they had done to the Canaanites who were "under the ban" (devoted to destruction), killing everyone and burning everything (v. 48). This was excessively severe treatment, and contrary to God's will (Exod. 21:24; Lev. 19:18).

"God said the most you could do was an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The Levites sought to destroy a tribe for the crimes of a few town ruffians. This was not justice. This was not divine. This was human rage. This was human revenge

¹Chisholm, *A Commentary ...*, p. 505.

²Block, *Judges ...*, p. 500.

conceived totally apart from divine law, divine word, divine oracle, or divine presence."¹

This chapter illustrates the far-reaching consequences of a single sexual sin (19:1). It also reveals the inverted values of people who did not acknowledge God as their King. Unwarranted protection of a neighbor—the Benjamites' protection of the Gibeahites—replaced loyalty to God. Vengeance and overkill—the other Israelites' treatment of the Benjamites—replaced adherence to God's gracious will. Furthermore, we see here that God's guidance may involve discipline for the independent (the 11 Israelite tribes), as well as punishment for the rebellious (the Benjamites). However, we should not conclude that one person's problems (here the Benjamites' problems) always have their roots in his or her personal sins. There are other reasons why people and groups of people have problems, suffering, and tragedies other than that they have sinned (cf. Job; John 9:2-3).

3. The preservation of Benjamin ch. 21

In chapter 20, Israel tried desperately to destroy the tribe of Benjamin. In Genesis 42:36, Jacob feared that Joseph's brothers would do something that would result in Benjamin's death. What Jacob feared then almost happened now to the entire Benjamite tribe.

In chapter 21, Israel tried just as hard to deliver this tribe from the extinction that the 11 other tribes' excessive vengeance, in the previous chapter, threatened to accomplish. The anarchy of God's people complicated the problems that her apostasy had initiated. The moral degeneracy of chapter 19 proceeded from political disorganization in chapter 20 to social disintegration in chapter 21.

"Interpreting biblical narrative can be like trying to figure out someone who has a dry sense of humor. The person may give no visible indication that he intends humor, so that you have to divine it as best you can. Judges 21 is noncommittal like that. The writer reports but hardly critiques, so that we are left asking how we are to take the story."²

¹Butler, p. 450.

²D. R. Davis, *Such a ...*, pp. 224-25.

The way to determine the rightness or wrongness of Israel's actions, when the writer did not point this out, is to compare them with God's revealed will in the Mosaic Law. This is especially important when reading Old Testament narratives, because storytellers often do not take time out to comment on the rightness or wrongness of actions. They leave this up to the reader, assuming that he or she will make moral judgments on the basis of their preunderstanding. Similarly, Christians should read narrative sections in the Gospels and Acts while being informed by other divine revelation regarding God's will.

The plight of the Benjamites 21:1-4

The plan to attack the Benjamites that the Israelites had made at Mizpah (20:8-11) may have had some connection with God's commands concerning Israel's treatment of the Canaanites (Deut. 7:1-3). Israel was to destroy these enemies utterly, and was not to intermarry with them. However, that was how Israel was to deal with Canaanites, not her own brethren. Obviously the remaining Benjamites needed wives and children to perpetuate the tribe.

"That they justify their attempt at compassion with reference to solemn oaths (see 21:1, 5) is not much of a defense, given the poor history of oaths in the book of Judges (see 11:29-40)."¹

The civil war involving the 11 tribes against Benjamin had left only 600 Benjamite warriors alive (20:47). The population of this endangered tribe was now so small that it could easily have become extinct. Returning to Bethel and the ark, the victorious Israelites reflected on the situation they had created and wept profusely (v. 2). As they realized the consequences of their actions, "the thrill of victory" that they had briefly felt now turned into "the agony of defeat." The dilemma that their wife oath (v. 1) and their sorrow (v. 2) posed is the subject of this chapter. How could they resolve these two things?

The Israelites' initial reaction was to ask God to explain the situation (v. 3). The reason for it was their failure to seek and follow God's will earlier (cf. 20:8-11). Here we see no mourning for sin, no self-humbling because of

¹McCann, p. 136.

national transgression, and no return to the LORD. The LORD did not respond to them because they were acting in self-will (cf. v. 10).

Then the Israelites sought the LORD more seriously (v. 4). It seems strange that they built an altar at Bethel, since they had recently offered sacrifices on the one that was there (20:26). Perhaps they rebuilt or enlarged the altar at Bethel, or maybe they built a second altar.

Israel's first, insufficient solution: a previous oath 21:5-15

Verses 5-7 stress the sorrow and the dilemma the Israelites felt because of the Benjamites' situation. The solemn oath that the Israelites had taken (v. 5) was that any Israelite town that did not respond to the call to assemble at Mizpah and participate in the nation's battle against Benjamin would suffer punishment (cf. Num. 32:20-33).

Verses 8-12 record the Israelites' preferred solution to their dilemma, after having asked themselves (not the LORD), "What are we to do?" (v. 7; cf. v. 16). They should have confessed their mistake in making their "wife vow" (v. 1) and asked for God's solution. They discovered that the men of Jabesh-gilead had not been present in the battle against Benjamin. Jabesh-gilead (meaning "Well-Drained Soil of Gilead") was about 48 miles northeast of Shiloh, on the east side of the Jordan River.

Next, the Israelites commanded 12,000 valiant soldiers to attack and completely destroy the uncooperative Israelite town (vv. 10-11). The only people to be spared were virgin females. This was another sinful plan born out of self-will and vengeance. Note that it was the decision of the whole congregation of Israelites.

"Never was anything done with such catholicity [whole-hearted cooperation] in Judges!"¹

"The action [against Jabesh-gilead] appears cruel in the extreme to the modern reader, but the virtual sacredness of the bond linking the several tribes into the amphictyony must be appreciated, and the sin of Jabesh-gilead seen in its light."²

¹Kuruvilla, p. 298.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 210.

This barbaric action provided only 400 young virgins for the 600 remaining Benjamites, which was an insufficient number (vv. 12-14). The failure of the plan confirms that it was not God's will, although He permitted it.

This section closes with the people's response to their continuing problem due to the failure of their plan: "the people were sorry for Benjamin" (v. 15). "The LORD had created a gap in the tribes of Israel" in the sense that He permitted it to happen. However, He did not permit the annihilation of Benjamin, in view of His promises concerning the future of Israel.

"Note, (1) There may be over-doing in well-doing. ... (2) Even necessary justice is to be done with compassion. ... (3) Strong passions make work for repentance. What we say and do in a heat our calmer thoughts commonly wish undone again."¹

Israel's second, sufficient solution: a technical loophole 21:16-24

The writer constructed this section parallel to the previous one (vv. 5-15) in order to highlight the dilemma Israel continued to face.² About 200 Benjamites still needed wives. Verses 16-18 repeat the dilemma that the Israelites' "wife oath" had created (v. 1).

The elders of Israel proposed a second plan (v. 19; cf. vv. 8-9). It would give the Benjamites wives without causing the Israelites to break the letter of their vow, though it violated a more basic law. The problem with this plan was that it required the forcible kidnapping and marriage of 200 women from Shiloh. Undoubtedly, if the elders had sought the LORD's counsel, He would have given them a better plan. There is no evidence in the text that they did so.

"Preoccupation with legalistic and technical obedience to certain rules or laws without an accompanying sense of the principles of faithfulness and love that undergird such laws and temper their rigid application is a recipe for disaster."³

"The rape of one has become the rape of six hundred."⁴

¹Henry, p. 274.

²D. R. Davis, *Such a ...*, p. 224.

³Olson, 2:887.

⁴Trible, p. 83.

The annual feast of Yahweh (v. 19) was probably the Passover "... as the dances of the daughters of Shiloh was apparently an imitation of the dances of the Israelitish women at the Red Sea under the superintendence of Miriam (Ex. xv. 20)."¹ Another possibility is that this was the Feast of Tabernacles "... in the time of the vintage-harvest (cf. vv. 20-21)."² A third option is that it was a festival of the Israelites' own making.³

Verses 20-22 record the Israelites' command to the Benjamite assailants (cf. vv. 10-11). The fathers and brothers of the women would complain because of the treatment their daughters and sisters would receive, and because these fathers and brothers would not receive dowries from their sons-in-law, as was customary. The Israelites also vainly expected these fathers and brothers to find some consolation in the fact that they had not technically broken the oath.

This second provision of wives proved to be sufficient for the Benjamites (v. 23; cf. vv. 12-14), even though the plan involved the violation of basic human rights. With this resolution of the problem, the Israelites returned to their homes (v. 24; cf. v. 15).

"Ironically the brutalization of Israelite women anticipated by Sisera's mother (cf. 5:30) becomes a reality, not through a ruthless foreign conqueror and his soldiers, but through Israelite men."⁴

"There is a certain rightness and a certain wrongness about what Israel does. They justifiably requite Jabesh-gilead with unjustifiable severity (vv. 5, 10). They stand consistently upon their wife-oath (vv. 7, 16-18) but trample happily upon the rights of the Shiloh girls and their families (vv. 19-22). It is a mix of consistency and confusion. ...

"The ambivalence pervading chapter 21 simply fits the pattern of incongruities throughout the story from the beginning of chapter 19."⁵

¹Keil and Delitzsch, pp. 461-62.

²Cundall and Morris, p. 212; *The Nelson ...*, p. 439.

³Block, *Judges ...*, p. 580.

⁴Chisholm, *A Commentary ...*, p. 510.

⁵D. R. Davis, *Such a ...*, p. 226.

"... all of this carnage and destruction happened because one Levite didn't have the courage to stand up for what was right and treat his concubine honorably."¹

"Through Moses Yahweh had warned that if the Israelites stoop to behaving like Canaanites, then they can expect the same fate (Deut 8:19-20). The narrator never declares so outrightly, but the present account, coming as it does at the end of the book affirms the total Canaanization of the tribe of Benjamin and the Israelites' falsely based sympathy for their brothers."²

"The Hebrew words here [translated: "each ... to his inheritance," v. 24] are the same as those found at the end of the Book of Joshua (24:28). However, the book's final comment (v. 25) indicates that times were far worse than they had been in Joshua's day."³

"By the end of the book Israel's moral decline is complete. Women, who at the beginning of the book inspired Israelite men to great deeds and then played the role of national deliverers, were then raped, slaughtered (21:16), and kidnapped by their countrymen. Ironically the brutalization of Israelite women anticipated by Sisera's mother (5:28-30) is realized,, not through a ruthless foreign conqueror, but through Israelite men."⁴

The concluding key 21:25

Verse 25 concludes the story of the atrocity of the men of Gibeah and the Benjamites (chs. 19—21). This second vignette from the period of the judges begins and ends with the same statement ("there was no king in Israel," cf. 19:1). It reflects the failure of Israel in this event in its history to acknowledge the sovereignty of Yahweh in a practical way.

"The motivation for including this second narrative of the Bethlehem trilogy is evident. It reflects badly on Benjamin and

¹Wiersbe, p. 166.

²Block, *Judges ...*, pp. 582-83.

³*The Nelson ...*, p. 440.

⁴Chisholm, *A Commentary ...*, p. 77.

by implication on the Saulide ancestry and dynasty. The pro-David sentiment is crystal clear."¹

However, the verse also summarizes the whole period of the judges surveyed in this book. It forms a fitting concluding statement that explains why life in Israel was as it was during that era. For this reason, many Bible students regard this verse as the key verse in the book.²

"Judges 19—21 gives us the ugliest story in the Bible. The key to it is that, at every stage, men were acting on the basis of what was right in their own eyes. As far as the men of Gibeah were concerned, rape was all right. To the farmer and the Levite in the house, homosexual rape was unthinkable, but other rape was acceptable. The men of Benjamin thought it was right to overlook sin and to defend evil men. To Israel, revenge and retaliation would be justified, and to solve their problems about marriage for the Benjamites, the massacre of innocent people and kidnapping could be condoned.

"The interesting thing is that none of this [in chapters 19—21] had anything to do with idolatry or Baal worship. It began with individuals ignoring the law of God, doing what was right in their own eyes, and it led a whole nation into moral collapse."³

The Israelites needed no judge or king to lead them into apostasy or battle. They did both on their own.

"In a sense Judges is the antithesis to Joshua. In Joshua the Israelites attempt to Hebraize Canaan; in Judges they Canaanize themselves."⁴

¹Merrill, pp. 181-82.

²See Frederick E. Greenspahn, "An Egyptian Parallel to Judg. 17:6 and 21:25," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101:1 (1982):129-35.

³Inrig, p. 289.

⁴Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, p. 383. See also Butler, p. 468, and Table 1.1: Comparison of Joshua and Judges, pp. 479-81.

Conclusion

The Book of Joshua recorded Israel's victory over her enemies through trust in, and obedience to, God. The Book of Judges shows the defeat of the nation by her enemies, from without and within, due to her refusal to trust and obey God.

"No book in the Old Testament offers the modern church as telling a mirror as this book. From the jealousies of the Ephraimites to the religious pragmatism of the Danites, from the paganism of Gideon to the self-centeredness of Samson, and from the unmanliness of Barak to the violence against women by the men of Gibeah, all of the marks of Canaanite degeneracy are evident in the church and its leaders today. This book is a wake-up call for a church moribund in its own selfish pursuits. Instead of heeding the call of truly godly leaders and letting Jesus Christ be Lord of the church, everywhere congregations and their leaders do what is right in their own eyes."¹

"The principle theme of the Book of Judges is 'Failure through Compromise' which is in contrast to the main theme in the Book of Joshua which is 'Victory through Faith.'"²

"The Book of Judges illustrates both God's justice and His grace—justice in punishing sin and grace in forgiving sin."³

The course of Israel's decline progressed in a descending series of cycles. She went from blessing, to apostasy, to discipline, to repentance, to deliverance, to rededication, to blessing, etc. Her deterioration grew out of spiritual apostasy, and manifested itself in moral degeneracy, political disorganization, and social disintegration.

"So the Book of Judges ends with a miracle. How after chapters 19—21, indeed, after chapters 1—21, can you account for the fact that there is still an Israel? It can only be because Yahweh wished to dwell in the midst of his people in

¹Block, *Judges ...*, p. 586.

²J. J. Davis, p. 94.

³Lindsey, p. 414.

spite of its sin. It can only be because Yahweh's grace is far more tenacious than his people's depravity and insists on still holding them fast even in their sinfulness and their stupidity. Nor is he finished raising up saviors for them (Acts 13:23)!"¹

Joshua and Judges, therefore, give proof positively and negatively, respectively, of how the basic principles, affecting the relationship that God intends people to enjoy, work out in national and personal life. The Pentateuch revealed these principles:

In Genesis, Moses moved from the general to the specific (cf. chs. 1 and 2, et al.). God's primary concern is for people. His purpose to bless man stands out. Faith in God is shown to be the main principle for a successful life.

In Exodus, we observe God's methods. He created a pattern in Israel. He revealed a person: Himself. And He provided an opportunity for people by giving them personal choices. The outstanding theological emphases in Exodus are God's sovereignty and man's salvation. God's sovereignty should result in worship. Man's salvation should lead to obedience. We also see in this book God providing redemption.

In Leviticus, we have a revelation of human sin and divine holiness. God is essentially holy, and man is essentially sinful. Leviticus also teaches us how sinful redeemed people can have intimate fellowship with a holy God. The basis for fellowship with God is sacrifice. Leviticus anticipates the sacrifice of Christ.

Numbers reveals that everything depends on our attitude toward God. Kadesh-Barnea was the great testing point for Israel that teaches this lesson most clearly. Obedience must follow faith. We must continue to walk *by faith*, just as we began to follow God by faith, or we will suffer discipline and setbacks.

Deuteronomy is all about motivation. Here we learn that the basis of God's government is His love. Likewise, our obedience should be based on our love for God because of what He has done for us. We need to remind ourselves of God's past provisions and faithfulness, in order to help us to continue to love Him.

¹D. R. Davis, *Such a ...*, p. 227. See also McCann, p. 138.

Appendix

Biblical Chronology of the Middle Israelite Period¹

"N" below refers to Nisan-year, a lunar-solar year that began on Nisan 1 (in late March or early April of the modern calendar) and ended the day before the next Nisan 1. "T" refers to Tishri-year, a lunar-solar year that began on Tishri 1 (in late September or early October of the modern calendar) and ended the day before the next Tishri 1.

| THE EXODUS, WANDERING AND THE CONQUEST (1446-1399 B.C.) | | | |
|--|---------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Name of Time Period | Length | Ancient Calendar | Modern Calendar |
| Exodus and Wandering | 40 years | 1446N-1407N | 1446-1406 B.C. |
| War of Conquest | 7 years | 1406N-1400N | 1406-1399 B.C. |
| THE EARLY JUDGES (1399-1186 B.C.) | | | |
| Name of Time Period | Length | Ancient Calendar | Modern Calendar |
| Cushan Oppression | 8 years | 1399N-1392N | 1399-1391 B.C. |
| Peace years of Othniel | 40 years | 1391N-1352N | 1391-1351 B.C. |
| Eglon Oppression | 18 years | 1351N-1334N | 1351-1333 B.C. |
| Peace Years of Ehud | 80 years | 1333N-1254N | 1333-1253 B.C. |
| Jabin Oppression | 20 years | 1253N-1234N | 1253-1233 B.C. |

¹Yuan, p. 56.

| | | | |
|---|---------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Peace Years of Deborah | 40 years | 1233N-1194N | 1233-1213 (<i>sic</i> 1193) B.C. |
| Midianite Oppression | 7 years | 1193N-1187N | 1193-1186 B.C. |
| THE ILLEGAL DYNASTY (1186-1143 B.C.) | | | |
| Name of Time Period | Length | Ancient Calendar | Modern Calendar |
| Peace Years of Gideon | 40 years | 1186N-1147N | 1186-1146 B.C. |
| Kingship of Abimelech | 3 years | 1146N-1144N | 1146-1143 B.C. |
| THE NORTHERN JUDGES (1143-1049 B.C.) | | | |
| Name of Time Period | Length | Ancient Calendar | Modern Calendar |
| Judgeship of Tola | 23 years | 1143N-1121N | 1143-1120 B.C. |
| Judgeship of Jair | 22 years | 1120N-1099N | 1120-1098 B.C. |
| Ammonite Oppression | 18 years | 1098N-1081N | 1098-1080 B.C. |
| Judgeship of Jephthah | 6 years | 1080N-1075N | 1080-1074 B.C. |
| Judgeship of Ibzan | 7 years | 1074N-1068N | 1074-1067 B.C. |
| Judgeship of Elon | 10 years | 1067N-1058N | 1067-1057 B.C. |
| Judgeship of Abdon | 8 years | 1057N-1050N | 1057-1050 B.C. |
| | | | |

| THE SOUTHERN JUDGES (1143-1049 B.C.) | | | |
|---|---------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Name of Time Period | Length | Ancient Calendar | Modern Calendar |
| Judgeship of Eli | 40 years | 1143N-1104N | 1143-1103 B.C. |
| Judgeship of Samson | 20 years | 1103N-1084N | 1103-1083 B.C. |
| Judgeship of Samuel | 34 years | 1083N-1050N | 1083-1049 B.C. |
| THE UNITED MONARCHY (1049-930 B.C.) | | | |
| Name of Time Period | Length | Ancient Calendar | Modern Calendar |
| Kingship of Saul | 40 years | 1049N-1010N | 1049-1010 B.C. |
| David, king of Judah | 40 years | 1010T-971T | 1010-970 B.C. |
| David, king of Israel | 33 years | 1002N-970N | 1002-970 B.C. |
| Kingship of Solomon | 40 years | 970T-931T | 970-930 B.C. |

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