

Notes on Judges

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I. The Failure of Israel – 1:1-3:4

Judges One

A. The Activities of Judah and Simeon – 1:1-3

¹ **Now after the death of Joshua it happened that the sons of Israel asked Yahweh, saying, ¹ Who shall be first to attack the Canaanites for us to fight against them?**

² **And Yahweh said, Judah shall attack. Behold, I have delivered the land into his hand.**

The Israelites' desire to fight the Canaanites was in harmony with Joshua's command for them to occupy their allotted tribal territories (Joshua 18:3; Joshua 23:5). Though the land was given by God, and conquered under and divided by Joshua, it was still necessary for each tribe to fight to displace the Canaanites yet remaining. The method whereby they asked and the Lord answered is not specified, but probably involved the ministry of the high priest at the tabernacle, whether by use of the Urim and Thummim (cf. Exodus 28:30; Numbers 27:21; 1 Samuel 14:37-43) or by a verbal form of divine guidance. God's selection of Judah (the names of the sons of Jacob throughout this chapter refer to tribal entities) for military preeminence corresponds with Judah's divine elevation in Jacob's patriarchal blessing (Genesis 49:8). On the location of the 12 tribes see the map "Land Allotted to Israel's Tribes" near Joshua 14:1-15.

³ **And Judah said to Simeon his brother, Come up with me to my allotment, and let's fight against the Canaanites; and I will also go with you to your allotment. So Simeon went with him.**

The tribal military alliance of Judah and Simeon was a logical one since the allotted inheritance of the Simeonites was within the southern boundaries of the tribe of Judah (Joshua 19:1-9). Also Judah and Simeon had a natural bond as offspring of Jacob and Leah (Genesis 29:33-35). Their common enemy was the Canaanites, probably used here as a generic term for all the inhabitants of Canaan in the area west of the Jordan River. In a more restricted sense, the term "Canaanites" sometimes refers to the inhabitants of the coastal plain and the valleys, whereas the inhabitants of the hill country are sometimes designated as Amorites (Numbers 13:29; cf. Judges 1:34-36; Judges 3:5).

B. The Partial Victory of Judah – 1:4-20

⁴ **And Judah attacked, and Yahweh delivered the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand; and they struck ten thousand men at Bezek.**

⁵ **And they found Adoni-Bezek in Bezek, and fought against him; and they struck the Canaanites and the Perizzites.**

⁶ **Then Adoni-Bezek fled, and they chased him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and big toes.**

⁷ **And Adoni-Bezek said, Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to gather scraps beneath my table. So God has repaid me as I have done. And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.**

The Lord gave victory to Judah as they fought the Canaanites and Perizzites. The latter group may have been an indigenous people distinct from the Canaanites. Or the term may be social rather than ethnic, referring to "villagers."

Judah defeated 10,000 men at Bezek, probably the same Bezek (modern Khirbet Ibziq) in Manasseh south of Mount Gilboa where Saul mustered his army to attack the Ammonites at Jabesh Gilead (1 Samuel 11:8-11). Adoni-Bezek is probably a title meaning "prince of Bezek." However, some scholars identify the name with Adoni-Zedek, a king of Jerusalem (Joshua 10:1, Joshua 10:3). The barbarous act by which the Israelites cut off his thumbs and big toes was neither commanded nor commended by God; yet it was recognized by Adoni-Bezek as an act of divine retribution since he had done the same thing to 70 kings

¹ Translation by the author.

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(apparently over a long period of time). Though barbarous by modern standards, this act was pragmatic since the loss of the thumbs made it difficult to hold a weapon, and the loss of the big toes hindered one's footing in combat. Since the major function of a king was to lead in battle (cf. 2 Samuel 11:1), this mutilation apparently disqualified him from further royal office. His own people took him to the important Canaanite city-state of Jerusalem to live out his days.

⁸ Now the sons of Judah fought against Jerusalem and captured it. They struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire.

Judah's initial success in destroying Jerusalem may refer only to the unfortified southwest hill (modern Mount Zion). In any case, Judah failed to displace the Jebusites permanently (cf. Joshua 15:63), and the Benjamites were not any more successful (Judges 1:21).

⁹ And afterward the sons of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who lived in the mountains, in the Negev, and in the lowland.

The region of Canaan south of Jerusalem, corresponding with the tribal allotment of Judah (including Simeon), is divided geographically into the hill country (the central mountain range straddling the ridge route from Jerusalem to Hebron), the Negev (the semiarid transitional region running east and west from Beersheba), and the western foothills (lit., "the Shephelah"), lying between the hill country and the coastal plain (which is not mentioned till Judges 1:18-19).

¹⁰ Then Judah went against the Canaanites who lived in Hebron (now the name of Hebron was previously Kirjath-arba.) And they struck Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai.

The former name of Hebron (meaning "confederacy") was Kiriath Arba (meaning "city of four," possibly suggesting an early confederacy of four cities), though some have identified it with Arba, the father of Anak, who may have founded the city (cf. Joshua 14:15; Joshua 15:13; Joshua 21:11; Judges 1:20). Hebron is located about 19 miles south by southwest of Jerusalem in a valley lying about 2,800 feet above sea level. Hebron was well known to Abraham (Genesis 13:18) and would later become the Judean capital for the first seven and one-half years of David's reign (2 Samuel 5:5). The populous clans of Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai, who were descended from Anak (cf. Judges 1:20; Joshua 15:14) and were indigenous to the south hill country (Numbers 13:22, Numbers 13:28; Joshua 11:21-22), were defeated by the men of Judah in or near Hebron. Either on this or a previous occasion, Caleb was the leader in defeating Hebron (Judges 1:20; cf. Joshua 15:14).

¹¹ From there they went against the inhabitants of Debir. (The name of Debir was previously Kirjath-sepher.)

¹² Then Caleb said, Whoever strikes Kirjath-sepher and captures it, I will give to him my daughter Achsah for a wife.

¹³ And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it, so he gave him his daughter Achsah for a wife.

¹⁴ Now it happened, when she came to him that she urged him to ask her father for a field. And she dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, What do you want?

¹⁵ And she said to him, Give me a blessing; since you have given me land of the Negev, give me also springs of water. And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.

The strategic royal Canaanite city of Debir (cf. Joshua 10:38; Joshua 12:13) was at one time identified by scholars with Tell Beit Mirsim, about 11 miles west by southwest of Hebron, but has been more recently identified as Khirbet Rabud, eight miles southwest of Hebron. It is not known why its former name was Kiriath Sepher (meaning "city of writing").

Caleb had been promised Hebron by Moses because he was one of the two faithful spies who came back from Canaan (Numbers 14:24; Joshua 14:6-15; Judges 1:20). Debir seems also to have been allotted to Caleb, but after conquering Hebron, he enlisted other leaders for the attack on Debir. He did this by offering his daughter Acsah in marriage to the man who would undertake the capture of Debir. Othniel, Caleb's younger brother (or "nephew" if "younger brother" refers to Kenaz), captured the city and hopefully the heart of Acsah.

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If Kenaz was the personal name of Othniel's father, he may have had the same mother as Caleb, whose father was "Jephunneh the Kenizzite" (Numbers 32:12). Or "son of Kenaz" may mean "Kenizzite" (an Edomite clan associated with the tribe of Judah; cf. Genesis 36:11). Caleb and Othniel would still have been natural Judahites if their mother was of the tribe of Judah.

Othniel's reward was the waiver of the customary gift to the bride's family. Acsah urged Othniel to seek a field from Caleb, and she herself requested springs of water as a bridal blessing (special favor) from her father. His abundant response was the gift of the upper and lower springs. It is noteworthy that the water supply system at Khirbet Rabud depended solely in the dry season on the upper and lower wells of 'Alaqa about two miles north of the site.

¹⁶ Now the sons of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up from the City of Palms with the sons of Judah into the wilderness of Judah, which lies South of Arad; and they went and lived with the people.

The Kenites were a nomadic people associated with the Amalekites (cf. 1 Samuel 15:6) and Midianites (cf. Exodus 18:1 with Judges 1:16). Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was a priest of Midian (Exodus 18:1). The City of Palms was the Jericho oasis (Deuteronomy 34:3; Judges 3:13). The people of the Desert of Judah may have been Amalekites. Arad (cf. Numbers 21:1-3) is Tell Arad, 16 miles south of Hebron though some scholars identify the ancient Canaanite Arad with Tel el-Milh., another eight miles to the southwest.

¹⁷ And Judah went with his brother Simeon, and they struck the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath, and completely destroyed it. So the name of the city was called Hormah.

The Judahites joined the Simeonites (cf. Judges 1:3) in attacking one of their allotted cities, Zephath (cf. Joshua 19:4), believed to be Tel Masos/Khirbet el-Meshash, about seven miles east of Beersheba. It had been taken earlier (Numbers 21:2-3) but now they totally destroyed the city. "Totally destroyed" translates the Hebrew *ḥāram*, indicating a holy war in which a city and its occupants were totally "devoted" to destruction (cf. comments on Joshua 6:21). This was reflected in the name given the city — Hormah (meaning "devotion or "destruction").

¹⁸ Also Judah captured Gaza with its territory, Ashkelon with its territory, and Ekron with its territory.

The cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron (later associated with Ashdod and Gath in the Philistine pentapolis) were located on the coastal plain. That Judah took these cities is contradicted by the Septuagint's "did not take," a translation perhaps influenced by the statement in Judges 1:19 that "they were unable to drive the people from the plains." But this does not negate Judah's initial victory over the cities; it only means that the men of Judah were unable to displace the inhabitants and occupy the cities.

¹⁹ And Yahweh was with Judah. And they possessed the hill country, but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain, because they had iron chariots.

As Judah took possession of the hill country, the Lord was with them (cf. Judges 1:22). The stated reason for their inability to drive the people from the plains was not the Lord's absence but the enemies' iron chariots, introduced by the Philistines about 1200 b.c. But the author later records God's rebuke (Judges 2:2-3) which linked nondisplacement of the land's peoples to Israel's disobeying the Mosaic Covenant.

²⁰ And they gave Hebron to Caleb, as Moses had said. Then he drove out from there the three sons of Anak.

This summary statement relates the defeat of Hebron (Judges 1:10) to the occupation of that city by Caleb, as promised by Moses (cf. Numbers 14:24; Deuteronomy 1:36; Joshua 14:9; Joshua 15:13). Caleb was apparently the leader of the men of Judah in the defeat of the three families of Anak (Judges 1:10, Judges 1:20).

C. The Partial Victory of Benjamin – 1:21

²¹ But the sons of Benjamin did not dislodge the Jebusites who remained Jerusalem, and the Jebusites live with the sons of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day.

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Jerusalem was located on the boundary between Judah and Benjamin. Following Judah's partial and/or temporary victory at Jerusalem (Judges 1:8), the Jebusites, who could not be dislodged by the Benjamites, continued to dwell on the fortified southeast hill until the time of David (2 Samuel 5:6-9). The Jebusites were the Canaanite inhabitants of the city also known as Jebus (Judges 19:10-11).

D. The Failure of Joseph – 1:22-29

²² **And the house of Joseph also attacked Bethel, and Yahweh was with them.**

²³ **So the house of Joseph spied out Bethel. (The name of the city was previously Luz.)**

²⁴ **And when the spies saw a man coming out of the city, they said to him, Please show us the entrance to the city, and we will show you kindness.**

²⁵ **So he showed them the entrance to the city, and they struck the city with the edge of the sword, but they let the man and all his family go.**

²⁶ **And the man went to the land of the Hittites, built a city, and called its name Luz, which is its name to this day.**

The key to the victory of the house of Joseph (i.e., Ephraim and Manasseh; cf. Genesis 48:1-22) over the city of Bethel was that the Lord was with them (cf. Judges 1:19). Their faith in Yahweh and obedience to His covenant stipulations for occupying Canaan brought victory from Him. Yet their failure to displace the Canaanites from other cities mentioned in Judges 1:27-29 demonstrated a growing condition of disobedience and a lack of faith (cf. Judges 2:1-5). Bethel ("house of God"), a city rich in Israelite history (e.g., Genesis 12:8; Genesis 28:10-22; Genesis 35:1-15), was situated on the border between Ephraim and Benjamin in the central highlands 10 or 12 miles north of Jerusalem. It was strategically located on the north-south trade route, and was a junction for traffic from the Mediterranean seacoast on the west and from the Jordan Valley via Jericho on the east. Bethel has commonly been identified with modern Beitin about 12 miles north of Jerusalem, though some evidence favors el-Bireh 2 miles farther south (cf. David Livingston, "Location of Biblical Bethel and Ai Reconsidered," *Westminster Theological Journal* 33. November 1970:20-44; and "Traditional Site of Bethel Questioned," *Westminster Theological Journal* 34. November 1971:39-50).

When the spies who were sent to reconnoiter Bethel were unable to discover any hidden entrance to the city, they promised safety to an occupant who revealed the needed access. After the defeat of the city, this man took his family to northern Syria (i.e., the land of the Hittites; cf. Joshua 1:4), perhaps his ancestral home, where he established a city called Luz, named after the ancient name of Bethel (Judges 1:23).

²⁷ **However, Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth Shean and its suburbs,² or Taanach and its suburbs, or the inhabitants of Dor and its suburbs, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its suburbs, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its suburbs; for the Canaanites were determined to live in that land.**

²⁸ **And it happened, when Israel was strong, that they caused the Canaanites to become forced laborers, but did not completely drive them out.**

The determination of the Canaanites to remain in key cities guarding the Jezreel Valley was stronger than the faith of the tribe of Manasseh to displace them. Israel's eventual compromise to put the Canaanites to forced labor (cf. Judges 1:30, Judges 1:33, Judges 1:35) demonstrated the incomplete obedience that was characteristic of several tribes, as stated in the remainder of Judges 1:1-36. The cities are not listed in exact geographical sequence, which would be (from east to west) Beth Shan, strategically located east of the Harod Valley; Ibleam Taanach, and Megiddo, guarding key entrances into the Jezreel Valley; and Dor, located on the coast south of Mount Carmel.

²⁹ **Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites who were living in Gezer; so the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them.**

Gezer was strategically located on Ephraim's southwest border at the entrance to the Aijalon Valley. It guarded the crossroads of the eastern branch of the coastal highway and the major west-to-east route

² Lit. "its daughters."

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through the Aijalon Valley to Jerusalem or Bethel. Like Manasseh farther north, Ephraim allowed the Canaanites to live there among them (cf. Judges 1:27-28).

E. The Failure of Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali – 1:30-33

³⁰ **Nor did Zebulun drive out the inhabitants of Kitron or the inhabitants of Nahalol; so the Canaanites lived among them, and became forced laborers.**

The incomplete obedience of Zebulun resembled that of Manasseh and Ephraim for they merely subjected the Canaanites of Kitron and Nahalol to forced labor. These unidentified cities may have been located on the northwestern edge of the Valley of Jezreel.

³¹ **Nor did Asher drive out the inhabitants of Acco or the inhabitants of Sidon, or of Ahlab, Achzib, Helbah, Aphik, or Rehob.**

³² **So the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not drive them out.**

The greater disobedience of Asher is evident in that the people of Asher lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land rather than merely putting to forced labor those whom they allowed to live among them, as Manasseh and Zebulun had done (cf. Judges 1:28, Judges 1:30). The Canaanite cities listed in Judges 1:31 were located in the area later known as Phoenicia.

³³ **Nor did Naphtali drive out the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh or the inhabitants of Beth Anath; but they lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, and the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh and Beth Anath became forced laborers for them.**

The tribe of Naphtali likewise lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land, though they did make forced laborers (cf. Judges 1:29-30, Judges 1:35) of those living in Beth Shemesh and Beth Anath. Sites in both Upper and Lower Galilee have been suggested for these cities.

F. The Defeat of Dan – 1:34-36

³⁴ **And the Amorites forced the children of Dan into the hill country, for they would not allow them to come down to the valley, ³⁵ and the Amorites wanted to live in Mount Heres, in Aijalon, and in Shaalbim. But when the hand of the house of Joseph grew heavier, they became forced laborers.**

³⁶ **Now the border of the Amorites was from the ascent of Akrabbim,³ from Sela, and upward.**

The Amorites (cf. comments on Judges 1:3) did not allow the Danites to come down into the plain even though the Danites eventually put them to forced labor in the cities of the Shephelah. That the Amorites basically confined the Danites to the hill country eventually led to the migration of the Danites to Laish north of the Sea of Galilee (cf. Judges 18:1-31), for the reduced territory of Dan extended little more than four miles from Aijalon on the west, at the entrance to the hill country, to Dan's border with Benjamin on the east.

Judges Two

G. The Appearance of the Angel of Yahweh – 2:1-5

¹ **Then the Angel of Yahweh came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said: I led you up from Egypt and brought you to the land concerning which I swore to your fathers; and I said, I will never break My covenant with you.**

² **And you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land. You shall tear down their altars. But you have not obeyed My voice. Why have you done this?**

The Angel of the Lord (Hebrews., *Yahweh*) went up from Gilgal to Bokim. The Angel of the Lord was not merely “an angel”; He was a theophany — an appearance of the second Person of the Trinity in visible and bodily form before the Incarnation. Prominent during the time of Moses (Exodus 3:2-15; Numbers 22:22-35) and Joshua (Joshua 5:13-15), this divine manifestation also appeared during the period of the Judges to Gideon (Judges 6:11-24) and to the parents of Samson (Judges 13:3-21). The

³ Lit. “scorpions.”

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Angel of the Lord was Deity for He was called Yahweh (e.g., Joshua 5:13-15; Judges 6:11-24; Zechariah 3:1-10) and God (e.g., Genesis 32:24-32; Exodus 3:4), and had divine attributes and prerogatives (cf. Genesis 16:13; Genesis 18:25; Genesis 48:16). Yet this Messenger of the Lord was also distinct from Yahweh, thus indicating a plurality of Persons within the Godhead (cf. Numbers 20:16; Zechariah 1:12-13). New Testament allusions suggest that the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament was Jesus Christ (cf. John 12:41; 1 Corinthians 10:4; John 8:56; Hebrews 11:26).

“Gilgal” was where the Israelites first camped after they crossed the Jordan. There they were circumcised and dedicated to covenant faith and obedience (Joshua 5:2-12). Gilgal was near Jericho, and perhaps should be identified with Khirbet al-Mafjar about one and one-half miles northeast of Old Testament Jericho. The “oak of weeping” near Bethel (Genesis 35:8 3) has been suggested as a possible site for “Bokim” (“weepers”), but that location remains uncertain.

The Angel of the Lord obviously spoke as Yahweh Himself, for He used the covenantal formula to refer to His redemptive mercies in the Exodus and the gracious establishment of the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Exodus 19:4; Exodus 20:2; Joshua 24:2-13). He rehearsed the divine prohibition to the Israelites regarding Canaanite alliances (you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land) and idolatry (you shall break down their altars; cf. Exodus 23:32-33; Exodus 34:12-16; Numbers 33:55; Deuteronomy 7:2, Deuteronomy 7:5, Deuteronomy 7:16; Deuteronomy 12:3). Then the Angel, speaking as Yahweh, affirmed the fact of Israel’s disobedience (cf. the covenant with the Gibeonites, Joshua 9:1-27; and the continuance of the Canaanites in forced labor, Judges 1:28, Judges 1:30, Judges 1:33, Judges 1:35). God emphasized Israel’s disobedience with a question designed to stir their consciences: Why have you done this? (cf. NEB, “Look what you have done!”)

³ Therefore I also said, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall be thorns in your side, and their gods shall be a trap for you.

As a result of Israel’s disobedience, the divine aid by which Israel would have driven out the Canaanites was withheld (cf. 2:20-3:6). Intermarriage with the Canaanites led to tolerance of and even participation in their idolatry. The form of their disobedience which incurred divine wrath became in turn the form of the punishment placed on them. The snare of Canaanite idolatry anticipated the cycles in the days of the Judges.

⁴ And it happened, when the Angel of Yahweh spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, that the people lifted up their voice and wept.

⁵ And they called the name of that place Bochim, and they sacrificed there to Yahweh.

The weeping of the Israelites left little more than the place name (Bokim, “weeping”) for it apparently did not express true repentance since the people did not turn permanently from their disobedience. The sacrifices offered to the Lord at Bokim seem to have been only an external ritual rather than an expression of true faith.

H. The Death of Joshua – 2:6-9

⁶ And when Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel each went to his own inheritance to possess the land.

⁷ And the people served Yahweh all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of Yahweh which He had done for Israel.

This section further answers the question, Why were some Gentile nations left in the land? Whereas 1:1-2:5 forms a historical introduction to the book, this section is a literary introduction to the judges’ deeds, telling the repeating cycles of history that formed the pattern during the rules of the Judges.

Judges 2:6-9 corresponds with Joshua 24:29-31, thus linking together the close of the book of Conquest under Joshua and the book which records the deeds of the judges.

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Joshua's dismissing of Israel (cf. Joshua 24:28) apparently followed the covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem, described in Joshua 24:1-27. From Shechem each tribe was to return to its own inheritance to complete the occupation of the land, to eliminate the local inhabitants, and to destroy the pagan altars. In general this was accomplished as the people served the Lord for the period of time embracing the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him (cf. Joshua 24:31). This service was a faithful response to all the great things the Lord had done for Israel in the Exodus from Egypt, the wilderness wanderings, and the initial Conquest of the land.

⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of Yahweh, died when he was one hundred and ten years old.

⁹ And they buried him within the border of his inheritance at Timnath Heres, in the mountains of Ephraim, on the north side of Mount Ga'ash.

In contrast with Moses (cf. Joshua 1:1-9; Numbers 27:12-23), Joshua died without appointing a successor, thus setting the stage for the period of the Judges. Joshua's epitaph, identifying him as the servant of the Lord, linked him with other theocratic servant-rulers (Moses, Joshua 1:1; the kings, 2 Samuel 3:18; 2 Chronicles 32:16; and the promised Messiah, Isaiah 52:13; Isaiah 53:11). At the age of 110, Joshua died and was buried at Timnath Heres (also known as Timnath Serah, Joshua 19:50; Joshua 24:30), traditionally identified with Tibneh about 18 miles north by northwest of Jerusalem.

I. The Failure of Subsequent Generations – 2:10-13

¹⁰ And so all that generation were gathered to their fathers, and another generation arose after them who knew not Yahweh nor the work which He had done for Israel.

The new generation of Israelites that grew up after their faithful fathers died was distinguished by its faithlessness toward the Lord. That they knew neither the Lord nor what He had done for Israel could imply a failure of the older generation to communicate God's acts to them (cf. Deuteronomy 6:7). But the word "knew" probably has the sense of "acknowledge" (cf. Proverbs 3:6, where "know" is translated "acknowledge"), thus indicating unbelief rather than ignorance. They rejected both the Lord's grace toward them and their responsibilities toward Him. This led to the idolatrous practices cited in the verses that follow.

¹¹ And the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of Yahweh, and served the Ba'alim; ¹² and they forsook Yahweh God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they prostrated themselves to them; and they provoked Yahweh to wrath.

¹³ They forsook Yahweh and served Ba'al and the Ashtaroth.

A history of over three centuries is synthesized in these verses. The author directs attention to a recurring sequence of events in the period of the Judges (illustrated most clearly in the narrative about Othniel in Judges 3:7-11): (a) the *sin* or rebellion of Israel through idolatry or apostasy (Judges 2:11-13, Judges 2:17; Judges 3:7, Judges 3:12; Judges 4:1; Judges 6:1; Judges 10:6; Judges 13:1), (b) the *servitude* of Israel to foreign peoples due to retribution from the Lord (Judges 2:14-15; Judges 3:8), (c) the *supplication* or repentance of Israel (Judges 3:9; cf. Judges 2:18), (d) the *salvation* (military deliverance) and restoration to favor by the Lord through a Spirit-empowered deliverer (judge; Judges 2:16-18; Judges 3:9-10), and (e) a period of *silence* when the people and the land had rest, that is, cessation of war (Judges 3:11). Before long, however, the pattern was repeated. Yet this was more than just a cycle; it was also a descending spiral (cf. Judges 2:19).

Israel's sin is highlighted in terms of her forsaking the Lord who had brought them out of Egypt and serving or worshiping the various gods of the peoples around them (Judges 2:12), identified as the Ba'alim (Judges 2:11) or Ba'al and the Ashtaroth (Judges 2:13). The word "ba'al," which can mean "lord" or "husband," corresponds with the analogy of idolatry as spiritual adultery (cf. Judges 2:17). "Ba'al" was the Canaanite name for the Syrian god Hadad, god of storms and wars. The plural "Ba'alim" (*ba'alim*) suggests the many local varieties of the worship of Ba'al (cf. Ba'al Peor, Numbers 25:3; Ba'al Gad, Joshua 11:17; Ba'al-Berith, Judges 9:4; Ba'al-Zebub, 2 Kings 1:2). In Canaan the goddess Ashtoreth

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was the consort of Ba'al, known in Syria as 'Athtart and in Babylonia as Ishtar. (Cf. comments on a different goddess, Asherah, mentioned in Judges 3:7.) Ashtoreth was the goddess of fertility. Ba'al worship involved the most debasing immorality imaginable.

J. The Response of Yahweh – 2:14-23

¹⁴ And the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel, and He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them, and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies.

¹⁵ Wherever they went out, the hand of Yahweh was against them for evil, as Yahweh had said, and as Yahweh had sworn to them. And they were greatly distressed.

The Lord's (cf. Judges 2:12) anger was His righteous response to Israel's sin and spiritual adultery. The vivid imagery of a slave dealer (He sold them to their enemies) indicates the severity of the divine displeasure the Lord manifested in chastening His people. These enemies were located all around Israel, as illustrated by the various raiders who plundered them during the days of the Judges. Israel's defeat at the hands of her enemies (Judges 2:15; cf. Leviticus 26:17; Deuteronomy 28:25, Deuteronomy 28:48) was the result of the hand of the Lord and in response to the previous warning which He had sworn to them. Psalm 106:34-42 is a poetic paraphrase of Judges 2:11-15. Because of her defeats in battle, Israel was in great distress.

¹⁶ And Yahweh raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them.

This introductory summary of Israel's "pattern" in the days of the Judges does not specifically mention the supplication of Israel by which "they cried out to the Lord" but this is a recurring part of the pattern in Judges 3:9, Judges 3:15; Judges 4:3; Judges 6:6-7; Judges 10:10. The supplication may be implied in Judges 2:18 in that "they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them."

¹⁷ Yet they would not listen to their judges, but they played the prostitute with other gods, and prostrated themselves to them. They turned quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of Yahweh. They did not do so.

It is not clear whether Judges 2:17 refers to continued idolatry even during the period of rest in each judge's lifetime, or whether it views the period of the Judges as a whole, referring to the renewed spiral of disobedience after each judge's demise. In either case, Israel's sin is evident — they prostituted themselves to other gods and turned from the way of obedience to the Lord's commands. Since the practices of those who worshiped the Canaanite fertility gods involved sexual prostitution, the phrase "prostituted themselves" was literal as well as figurative.

¹⁸ And when Yahweh raised up judges for them, Yahweh was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge, for Yahweh was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and afflicted them.

¹⁹ And it happened, when the judge was dead, that they turned back and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and prostrate themselves to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way.

Once God had raised up a judge, the deliverance from the enemy was effective during the rest of that judge's lifetime because the Lord had compassion on His people. But when the judge died, Israel reactivated her downward spiral of progressive deterioration by following ways even more corrupt than the immediately preceding corrupt generation. (The "fathers" of Judges 2:17 seems to refer to the obedient generation of Joshua's day, while the fathers of Judges 2:19 refers to the preceding generation.)

²⁰ And the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel; and He said, Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and has not listened to My voice, ²¹ I also will not continue to drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, ²² so that by them I might test Israel, whether they will keep the ways of Yahweh, to walk in them as their fathers did, or not.

²³ And Yahweh let those nations remain, without driving them out quickly; nor did He deliver them into the hand of Joshua.

Notes on Judges

This paragraph, along with the next one (which identifies the remaining enemy nations still in the land, Judges 3:1-6), concludes the theological analysis of the period of the Judges. Whereas the pattern identified in Judges 2:11-19 related to surrounding nations that came in and plundered various tribes of Israel, 2:20-3:6 refers to Canaanite peoples already in the land which Israel failed to displace because of lack of faith and obedience.

The Lord allowed the Canaanite nations to remain in the land for four reasons: (1) He chose to punish Israel for her apostasy in turning to idolatry (Judges 2:2, Judges 2:20-21; cf. Joshua 23:1-13). In identifying themselves with the peoples of the land through marriage and subsequent idolatry (cf. Judges 3:6), the Israelites violated the covenant that the Lord gave their forefathers (cf. Joshua 23:16). Therefore, as God had promised (Joshua 23:4, Joshua 23:13), He would no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. (2) The Lord left the Canaanites in the land to test Israel's faithfulness to Himself (Judges 2:22; Judges 3:4). This provided each generation with an opportunity to keep the way of the Lord (cf. "the way of obedience," Joshua 2:17) or to continue in the rebellion of their immediate ancestors. (3) The Lord left the Canaanites in the land to give Israel experience in warfare (see comments on Joshua 3:2). (4) Another reason is stated in Deuteronomy 7:20-24 — to prevent the land from becoming a wilderness before Israel's population increased sufficiently to occupy the whole land.

K. The Influence of the Nations – 3:1-4

¹ And these are the nations which Yahweh left, to test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan, ² only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught to know war, at least those who had not previously known it),

The list of remaining nations is prefaced with two of the reasons the Lord allowed them to remain in the land — to test the Israelites (previously indicated in Judges 2:22; cf. Judges 3:4), and to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience, that is, experience in the kind of "holy warfare" conducted during Joshua's Conquest of the land. Thus "warfare" is probably not just "how to fight" but how to fight successfully, depending on the Lord to give the victory.

³ five lords of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites who lived in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Ba'al Hermon to the entrance of Hamath.

This list and the list in Judges 3:5 both mention the Canaanites and the Hivites. The Canaanites are those peoples mentioned in Judges 1:27-33. The Hivites are thought to be the Horites who were previously associated with the Upper Mesopotamian kingdom of Mittanni. The Horites who were best known in Joshua's time were the Gibeonites, the occupants of a confederacy of city-states including Gibeon (Joshua 9:7, Joshua 9:17). The Hivite people listed here lived in the Lebanon mountains from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamath (probably modern Lebweh in the Beqaa Valley 14 miles northeast of Baalbek). The Philistines, organized as a pentapolis (a confederacy of five cities), inhabited the southern coastal cities of Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza. Because of the prominence of the city of Sidon at this time, the Canaanite people known as the Phoenicians were also called the Sidonians.

⁴ And they were left, in order that He might test Israel by them, to know whether they would obey the commandments of Yahweh, which He had commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.

This is the third time the Lord's purpose, to test the Israelites, is mentioned (cf. Judges 2:22; Judges 3:1).

II. The Judgeships of Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar – 3:5-31

A. The Judgeship of Othniel – 3:5-11

⁵ Thus the sons of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

⁶ And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and served their gods.

Notes on Judges

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 served their gods. Each step is a natural one leading on to the next. The resulting departure from the Lord has already been described several times in connection with their oppression by foreign raiders (Judges 2:11-19). (On the Canaanites and Hivites, see comments on Judges 3:3; on the Hittites, see comments on Judges 1:26; on the Amorites, see comments on Judges 1:3; on the Perizzites, see comments on Judges 1:4; and on the Jebusites, see comments on Judges 1:21.)

⁷ So the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of Yahweh. They forgot Yahweh their God, and served the Ba'alim and Asherot.

This cameo description of Othniel's judgeship maximizes the literary structure and historical pattern of the heroic deeds of the judges while it minimizes the historical detail of this particular deliverance.

The episode begins with mention of Israel's idolatry. This was a deliberate act of putting Yahweh out of mind and choosing to serve the Baals (cf. Judges 2:11) and the Asherahs (wooden pillars or images used as objects of idolatrous worship; cf. Exodus 34:13; Deuteronomy 16:21; Judges 6:25). Asherah was the goddess of the sea in Ugaritic literature in Syria; she was the consort of El. Asherah should not be confused with Ashtoreth, the consort of Baal, in Judges 2:13.

⁸ Therefore the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-Rishathaim eight years.

Cushan-Rishathaim is a name meaning "Cushan of Double Wickedness." The word Mesopotamia is Aram Naharaim, literally "Syria of the Two Rivers," referring to Upper Mesopotamia. Since it seems strange for such a distant nation to plunder Israel, especially in the area of Judah where Othniel lived, some scholars have regarded "Aram" as an alteration of "Edom" (a slight difference in one Hebrew letter), which was located appropriately close to Judah in the south. However, it would not have been unusual for an ambitious king in Mesopotamia to invade Canaanite territory, especially at a time when Egypt to the southwest (which had nominal control over Canaan) was weak. In this case, Cushan subjected the Israelites for eight years.

⁹ When the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh, Yahweh raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel, who delivered them: Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.

¹⁰ The Spirit of Yahweh came upon him, and he judged Israel. And he went out to war, and Yahweh delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-Rishathaim.

In response to Israel's supplication (they cried out to the Lord), Yahweh raised up Othniel as a deliverer who, when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him (cf. Judges 6:34; Judges 11:29; Judges 13:25; Judges 14:6, Judges 14:19; Judges 15:14), became Israel's judge and went to war. Othniel had already been introduced (Judges 1:11-15) as Caleb's younger brother (cf. Joshua 15:13-19). As the Lord sold the Israelites "into the hands of" the oppressing Arameans (Judges 3:8), so also He gave the enemy king into the hands of Othniel.

¹¹ So the land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

Thus peace was secured for 40 years, the remainder of the life of Othniel.

B. The Judgeship of Ehud – 3:12-30

¹² And the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yahweh. And Yahweh strengthened Eglon king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of Yahweh.

¹³ And he gathered to himself the people of Ammon and Amalek, went and struck Israel, and took possession of the City of Palms.

¹⁴ So the sons of Israel served Eglon king of Moab eighteen years.

The downward spiral began as once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord (cf. Judges 3:7). This evil was obviously their disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant, forsaking Yahweh to worship other gods (cf. Judges 2:17, Judges 2:19).

Notes on Judges

Once again the sovereign control of God over human affairs is noted in that He gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel. The Moabites were descendants of Lot by his older daughter's incestuous relationship with him (Genesis 19:30-38). They lived in the land east of the Dead Sea between the Arnon and Zered Rivers. They occupied the territory of Reuben to about 25 miles north of the Arnon, and then followed Joshua's route of entrance into the land and captured the Jericho oasis (the City of Palms). Israelites had apparently reoccupied Jericho but without refortifying it with city walls because of the curse on whoever did this (cf. Joshua 6:26).

The Moabites were aided in this conflict by the Ammonites and Amalekites. The Ammonites were the northeastern neighbors of the Moabites and were related to them as the descendants of Lot by his younger daughter (Genesis 19:38). The Amalekites were bitter enemies of Israel (cf. Exodus 17:8-13; Deuteronomy 25:17-19) who lived a nomadic life in the land south of Beersheba. The Israelites (i.e., the Benjamites and perhaps some Ephraimites) were subject to Eglon for 18 years.

¹⁵ But when the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh, Yahweh raised up a deliverer for them: Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man. By him the sons of Israel sent tribute to Eglon king of Moab.

¹⁶ And Ehud made himself a dagger (it was double-edged and a cubit in length) and tied it under his clothes on his right thigh.

¹⁷ And he brought the tribute to Eglon king of Moab—Eglon was a very fat man.

¹⁸ And it happened when he had finished presenting the tribute, *that* he sent away the people who had carried the tribute.

¹⁹ And he himself turned back from the stone idols that were at Gilgal, and said, I have a secret message for you, O king. He said, Keep silence! And all who attended him went out from him.

Following the Israelites' supplication, the Lord gave them a deliverer — Ehud, a left-handed man. The term "left-handed" is literally "one bound in the right hand." Left-handedness does not seem to have handicapped the Benjamites. In fact, they had 700 lefties who were excellent at slinging stones (cf. Judges 20:16). In Ehud's case, being left-handed would provide an opportunity for a daring deed.

Since the Israelites sent Ehud with the tribute (probably consisting of domestic animals as well as gold or silver and other precious commodities), he was probably a recognized leader in Benjamin. He had personally made a double-edged sword (probably a dagger without a hilt) which was short enough (about 18 inches long) to be strapped to his right thigh under his long outer garment. After presenting the tribute to Eglon who was a very fat man (cf. Judges 3:22), Ehud dismissed his attendants who carried the heavy tribute, but immediately turned back at Gilgal to seek further audience with King Eglon. The idols near Gilgal were a well-known landmark, whether "idols" means "sculptured stones" (RSV) or "graven images" (ASV marg.). Possibly the reference is to the memorial of 12 stones which Joshua's men had taken from the Jordan River (Joshua 4:1-7).

²⁰ And Ehud came to him—he was sitting upstairs in his cool private chamber. And Ehud said, I have a message from God for you. So he arose from his seat.

²¹ And Ehud reached out his left hand and took the dagger from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly.

²² And the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the dagger out of his belly; and his feces came out.

Ehud intrigued the king with the offer of a secret message, and so gained private access to Eglon in the upper room of his summer palace. Stating 'I have a message from God for you,' Ehud plunged his dagger into the king's belly so deeply that the fat closed in over it. The concealment of the dagger was accomplished by its unexpected location on Ehud's right thigh, from which he deftly grabbed it with his left hand.

²³ And Ehud went out through the porch and shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.

²⁴ When he had gone out, the servants came to see, and behold, the doors of the upper room were locked. And they said, He is only covering his feet in the cool chamber.

Notes on Judges

²⁵ **So they waited till they were ashamed, and behold, he had not opened the doors of the upper room. Therefore they took the key and opened them. And behold, there was their Lord, fallen to the floor dead.**

²⁶ **And Ehud escaped while they delayed, and passed beyond the stone idols and escaped to Seirah.**

Ehud's escape was well planned. To gain time he locked the doors of the king's upper room, and left undetected, or at least unhindered. His necessary time for escape was gained because the king's servants delayed outside his locked door, figuring that the king was relieving himself (lit., "covering his feet," a euphemism for body elimination; cf. 1 Samuel 24:3). When they realized they must be mistaken, they finally unlocked the doors and discovered their slain king. Meanwhile Ehud again passed the landmark (idols; cf. Judges 3:19) at Gilgal and escaped to Seirah (an unidentified place in Ephraim).

²⁷ **And it happened, when he arrived he blew the trumpet in the mountains of Ephraim, and the sons of Israel went down with him from the mountains and he before them.**

²⁸ **And he said to them, Chase after them for Yahweh has delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hand. And they went down after him, and took the fords of the Jordan leading to Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross over.**

²⁹ **And they struck at that time about ten thousand men of Moab, all stout men of valor; not a man escaped.**

By means of a trumpet blast, Ehud summoned Israelite men whom he led into battle against the disarrayed Moabites. He made no claims for himself but affirmed to the Israelites, The Lord has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands. His battle strategy was to seize the fords of the Jordan where the fleeing Moabites had to cross to return to their country. The Israelites struck down about 10,000 Moabites without allowing any to escape across the Jordan River.

³⁰ **So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.**

The defeat of the Moabites was so decisive that they became subject to Israel. As a result of the deliverance through Ehud, the land had peace for an unprecedented 80 years, the longest period of rest during the time of the Judges.

C. The Judgeship of Shamgar – 3:31

³¹ **After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck six hundred men of the Philistines with an ox goad; and he also delivered Israel.**

Shamgar's judgeship appears to have transpired after Ehud's deliverance but before his death (the historical notice in Judges 4:1 continues after Ehud's death rather than after Shamgar's). The name Shamgar is Hurrian, but this may infer no more than Hurrian influence on his parents, not that he was a non-Israelite. That he saved Israel marks him out as a judge though the only item recorded is that he struck down 600 Philistines with an oxgoad. Whether this tally was a lifetime total or the number in a single episode is not indicated. His weapon was a sharp metal-tipped stick about 8 or 10 feet long used to direct animals. The other end usually had a chisel-like blade for cleaning a plow

III. The Story of Deborah and Barak – 4:1-5:31

A. The Oppression by Jabin – 4:1-3

¹ **The sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yahweh after Ehud died.**

The focus of attention switches to the Northern tribes (cf. Judges 4:6; Judges 5:14-15, Judges 5:18) who were oppressed by a coalition of Canaanites united under Jabin of Hazor (Judges 4:2), apparently a descendant of King Hazor who was conquered by Joshua (Joshua 11:1-13). Unlike the preceding oppressions by foreign invaders, this one was instigated at the hands of the Canaanite population of the land, some of the same people that the Israelites had failed to drive out of northern Canaan (cf. Judges 1:30-33).

Notes on Judges

That the Israelites once again did evil indicated their continuing tailspin into the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites (cf. Judges 2:19; Judges 3:7, Judges 3:12). This defection seems to have reappeared only after Ehud died, indicating his positive influence in leading the people as judge. The dating of this chapter with the judgeship of Ehud suggests that Shamgar's deliverance of Israel (Judges 3:31) occurred during rather than after Ehud's period of leadership.

² And Yahweh sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. And the captain of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim.

³ And the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh; for Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and for twenty years he violently oppressed the sons of Israel.

About 200 years earlier the Lord had freed Israel from slavery in Egypt. Now, in contrast, He sold them into the hands of the Canaanites as punishment for their sins (cf. Judges 2:14; Judges 3:8; 1 Samuel 12:9). Jabin was probably a hereditary title (cf. a different Jabin in Joshua 11:1-13). Hazor (Tell el-Qedah.) was the most important northern Canaanite stronghold in northern Galilee about 8-1/2 miles north of the Sea of Kinnereth (Galilee). Neither Hazor nor its king Jabin play an active role in the narrative in Judges 4-5, for attention is centered on Sisera, the Canaanite commander from Harosheth Haggoyim (cf. Judges 4:13, Judges 4:16) sometimes identified with Tell el-'Amar (located by a narrow gorge where the Kishon River enters the Plain of Acre about 10 miles northwest of Megiddo). The Canaanite oppression was severe because of their superior military force, spearheaded by 900 iron chariots (cf. Judges 5:13). The oppression lasted for 20 years, so that the Israelites again cried to the Lord for help.

B. The Victory of Deborah and Barak – 4:4-24

⁴ And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time.

⁵ And she sat under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim, and the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment.

Deborah (whose name means "honeybee") was both a prophetess and a judge (she was leading Israel). She first functioned as a judge in deciding disputes at her court, located about 8 or 10 miles north of Jerusalem between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim. She was apparently an Ephraimite though some have linked her with the tribe of Issachar (cf. Judges 5:15). Nothing else is known about her husband Lapidoth (meaning "torch," not to be identified with Barak, meaning "lightning").

⁶ Then she sent and called for Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, Has not Yahweh God of Israel commanded, Go and draw toward Mount Tabor; take with you ten thousand men of the sons of Naphtali and of the sons of Zebulun; ⁷ and against you I will draw Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude at the River Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hand?

Deborah summoned Barak who was from the town of Kedesh in Naphtali, a city of refuge (Joshua 20:7), usually identified as Tel Qedesh, five miles west by northwest of Lake Huleh, close to the Canaanite oppressors in Galilee. An alternate site, Khirbet el-Kidish on the eastern edge of the Jabneel Valley, about a mile from the southwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, is more closely located to Mount Tabor where the army of Israel was mustered by Barak. Deborah, speaking as the Lord's prophetess, commanded Barak to muster 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them to Mount Tabor. Conical Mount Tabor rises to 1,300 feet and was strategically located at the juncture of the tribes of Naphtali, Zebulun, and Issachar in the northeast part of the Jezreel Valley. (Issachar, not mentioned in this chapter, is mentioned in Judges 5:15.) Mount Tabor was a place of relative safety from the Canaanite chariots and a launching ground from which to attack the enemy below. The message from God informed Barak that He would be in sovereign control of the battle (I will lure Sisera and give him into your hands).

⁸ And Barak said to her, If you go with me, I will go; but if you do not go with me, I will not go!

⁹ So she said, I will certainly go with you; nevertheless for you in the journey you are taking there will be no honor, for Yahweh will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.

Notes on Judges

Regardless of his motivation, Barak's conditional reply to Deborah (if you don't go with me, I won't go) was an unfitting response to a command from God. Perhaps Barak simply wanted to be assured of the divine presence in battle, represented by His prophetess-judge Deborah. It is noteworthy that Barak is listed among the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:32). Deborah agreed to go but said that Barak's conditional response to the divine command (the way you are going about this) was the basis for withholding the honor of victory over Sisera from Barak (the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman). Barak no doubt thought she meant herself, but the statement was prophetic, anticipating the role of Jael (Judges 4:21).

¹⁰ **And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; he went up with ten thousand men under his authority,⁴ and Deborah went up with him.**

¹¹ **Now Heber the Kenite, of the sons of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, divided himself from the Kenites and pitched his tent near the terebinth tree at Zaanaim, which is near Kedesh.**

¹² **And they told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor.**

¹³ **And Sisera gathered together all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth Hagoyim to the Waddy Kishon.**

Accompanied by Deborah, Barak led 10,000 men from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali to Mount Tabor. Parenthetically (in anticipation of Judges 4:17-22), an explanation is given that the nomad, Heber the Kenite, had left his clan in southern Judah (cf. Judges 1:16) and pitched his tent near Kedesh. On Hobab as Moses' brother-in-law (or father-in-law, NIV marg.), see comments on Numbers 10:29. When Sisera heard of Barak's action, he positioned his army with its 900 iron chariots (cf. Judges 4:3) near the Kishon River, probably in the vicinity of Megiddo or Taanach (cf. Judges 5:19) in the Jezreel Valley.

¹⁴ **Then Deborah said to Barak, Get up! For this is the day in which Yahweh has given Sisera into your hand. Has not Yahweh gone out before you? So Barak descended from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him.**

¹⁵ **And Yahweh routed Sisera and all the chariots and all the army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and ran away on foot.**

¹⁶ **And Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth Hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not one was left.**

At Deborah's command (Go!) and encouragement (the Lord has given Sisera into your hands), Barak led his men down Mount Tabor against the much stronger forces of Sisera. As promised by Deborah the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army. The means used by God were both human (by the sword) and divine (bringing an unseasonable and violent storm that mired the chariots in the floodwaters of the Kishon; cf. Judges 5:20-22). Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot, apparently in a northeastern direction past Mount Tabor, while Barak's forces pursued the grounded Canaanites till not a man was left.

¹⁷ **Now Sisera had run away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite.**

¹⁸ **And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; fear not. And he turned aside with her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug.**

¹⁹ **Then he said to her, Give me please a little water to drink, for I am thirsty. So she opened a skin bottle of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him.**

²⁰ **And he said to her, Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, and says, 'Is there any man here?' that you shall say, 'No.'**

²¹ **Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it penetrated into the ground; for he was fast asleep and tired. So he died.**

²² **And behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, Come, I will show you the man whom you seek. And when he went into her tent, behold, Sisera was lying, dead with the tent peg in his temple.**

Sisera fled on foot in the direction of Kedesh (a city of refuge) or perhaps Hazor, and ran toward the tents of Heber the Kenite who had friendly relations (*šālôm*, "peace") with Jabin king of Hazor. Jael, the wife of Heber, offered Sisera all the expected Near-Eastern hospitality, for she covered him either with a fly-

⁴ Lit. "under his feet."

Notes on Judges

net or with a rug for concealment, gave him a drink of milk, probably yogurt (cf. Judges 5:25), and stood at the tent door to divert intruders as he slept. However, Jael apparently did not share her husband's allegiance to King Jabin, for as soon as Sisera was fast asleep, she took a tent peg and with a hammer drove it through his temple into the ground (cf. Judges 5:26), an unusual breach of Near-Eastern hospitality! Since Bedouin women had the task of pitching the tents, she was an expert with the implements she used. Jael then attracted the attention of Barak who was going by in pursuit of Sisera, and showed him the corpse. Thus Deborah's prophecy (cf. Judges 4:9) was fulfilled, for two women received honor for the defeat of Sisera — Deborah who started it and Jael who finished it.

²³ **So God subdued on that day Jabin king of Canaan in the presence of the sons of Israel.**

²⁴ **And the hand of the sons of Israel moved harshly against Jabin king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.**

The defeat of Jabin's army initiated a period of constant decline in Galilee until Canaanite forces were no longer a threat to Israel.

C. The Song of Deborah – 5:1-31

1. Introduction to the Poem – 5:1

¹ **And Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying,**

This ancient poem, which may have been initially preserved in a collection such as “the Book of the Wars of the Lord” (Numbers 21:14) or “the Book of Jashar” (Joshua 10:13), is literally a victory hymn (well known in examples from the 15th to 12th centuries b.c. in Egypt and Assyria). This hymn was no doubt written by Deborah herself (cf. Judges 5:7-9) though Barak joined with her in voicing its theme (Judges 5:1). With profound simplicity the hymn ascribes to Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, victory over Sisera and the Canaanites. It also fills in a few incidental gaps in the narrative not given in Judges 4:1-24. It is noteworthy that the theme of blessing and cursing is prominent throughout.

2. Deborah Commands Blessing upon Yahweh – 5:2-11

² **In that leaders led in Israel, in that the people volunteered themselves, You shall bless Yahweh!³ Listen, kings! Hear, ruling ones! I, to Yahweh, I will sing; I will make music to Yahweh God of Israel.**

⁴ **Yahweh, when You went out from Seir, When You marched from the field of Edom, The earth quaked and the heavens dropped, The clouds also dropped water, ⁵ The mountains flowed before Yahweh, This Sinai, before Yahweh God of Israel.**

The opening call to bless the Lord is related to the rise of the volunteer spirit in Israel among both princes and people (Judges 5:2). A typical proclamation of praise (Judges 5:3) is followed by a historical recital of the Lord's previous saving deeds (Judges 5:4-5). Yahweh is identified as the One of Sinai (cf. Psalm 68:8) and associated with events prior to the crossing of the Jordan under Joshua. The mention of Seir, a mountain south of the Dead Sea, (cf. Deuteronomy 33:2) and Edom (cf. Habakkuk 3:3, which mentions Teman, an Edomite town) has led some scholars to locate Mount Sinai just east of the Arabah Valley (south of the Dead Sea), but this is unlikely.

⁶ **In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, In the days of Jael, The highways were deserted, And the travelers walked along crooked ways.**

⁷ **The rural population ceased, it ceased in Israel, Until I, Deborah, arose, Arose a mother in Israel.**

⁸ **It chose new gods; Then war was at the gates; Not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.**

Deborah next described the contemporary situation of distress that gripped the Northern tribes of Israel (cf. Judges 3:31; Judges 4:2-3) till she arose a mother in Israel. Outside the fortified (walled) cities, Israelite life in the villages and on the roadways came to a standstill because of the oppression by the Canaanites, which came right up to the city gates. This distress was rooted in Israel's idolatry — they chose new gods.

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⁹ **My heart is toward the scribes of Israel the volunteers for the people. You shall bless Yahweh!**

¹⁰ **Consider, you who ride on tawny female donkeys, Who sit on carpets, And who walk along the road.**

¹¹ **Away from the sound of the archers, between the watering places, There they shall recount the righteous acts of Yahweh, The righteous acts for His rural people in Israel; At that time the people of Yahweh shall go down to the gates.**

Deborah praised God because of faithful leaders and volunteers among the people who responded in the time of crisis. She called on rich (who ride on white donkeys) and poor (who walk along the road) alike to hear the song of victory. The righteous acts of the Lord were those by which He had intervened to bring salvation and victory to His people.

3. The Calling Together of the Tribes – 5:12-18

¹² **Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, sing a song! Arise, Barak, and hold captive your captives, son of Abinoam!**⁵

¹³ **At that time *the* survivor came down to the majestic ones; The people of Yahweh came down to me as strong ones.**

¹⁴ **Out of Ephraim came those whose root was in Amalek; following you was Benjamin with your people. Out of Machir came down governors, and out of Zebulun they who handle the staff of the ruler.**

¹⁵ **And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah; As was Issachar, so was Barak; into the valley they rushed at his heels; Among the divisions of Reuben were great resolves of heart.**

¹⁶ **Why did you sit among the sheepfolds, To hear the piping for the flocks? The divisions of Reuben have great searching of heart.**

¹⁷ **Gilead remained beyond the Jordan, And why did Dan remain on ships? Asher continued at the seashore, And stayed by his landing places.**

¹⁸ **Zebulun is a people who despised their lives unto death, Naphtali also, on the high places of the field.**

The song of victory itself begins with a call for Deborah and Barak to initiate the action. Blessing is pronounced on those tribes that responded freely to the muster for battle — Ephraim, Benjamin., Makir (a division of the tribe of Manasseh, usually the portion east of the Jordan but here perhaps the combined tribe or just the division west of the Jordan; cf. Numbers 26:29; Numbers 27:1), Zebulun, and Issachar (Judges 5:14-15).

The explanation about Ephraim's roots being in Amalek (Judges 5:14) apparently indicates that the Ephraimites lived in the central hill country previously occupied by the Amalekites. A series of taunts implying curses (cf. the curse on the Israelite city of Meroz in Judges 5:23 for failing to render aid during the battle) is directed against the tribes of Reuben. Gilead (apparently Gad and perhaps part of Manasseh), Dan, and Asher (Judges 5:15-17). The tribes of Zebulun (cf. Judges 5:14) and Naphtali, however, are praised for their parts in the battle (Judges 5:18; cf. Judges 4:6, Judges 4:10).

4. The defeat of the Canaanites – Judges 5:19-30

¹⁹ **The kings came and fought, Then the kings of Canaan fought In Taanach, beside the waters of Megiddo; They took no plunder of silver.**

²⁰ **The stars fought from the heavens; from their courses they fought against Sisera.**

²¹ **The wady of Kishon swept them away, The ancient wady, the wady of Kishon. My soul, march on in strength!**

²² **Then the horses' hoofs struck, The dashing, dashing of his valiant ones.**

The kings of Canaan were from the confederacy of Canaanite city-states under Jabin of Hazor whose army was commanded by Sisera. The battle zone included Taanach (located five miles southeast of Megiddo). The highly poetic language — from the heavens the stars fought against Sisera — does not imply a belief that the stars caused rain, but simply affirms divine intervention in the battle. As implied in

⁵ Barak's father's name means literally "my father is pleasant."

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Judges 5:21, God's intervention took the form of an unseasonable rain (the Canaanites would never have risked taking their chariots into marshy territory in the rainy season) which turned the dry riverbed of the Kishon into a raging torrent (cf. 1 Kings 18:40).

²³ Curse Meroz, said the angel of Yahweh, Curse its inhabitants completely, Because they did not come to the help of Yahweh, To the help of Yahweh against the mighty ones.

²⁴ Most blessed of women is Jael, The wife of Heber the Kenite; She is blessed among women in the tent.

²⁵ He asked for water, she gave milk; She brought out cheese in a majestic bowl.

²⁶ She stretched her hand for the tent peg, Her right hand for the workmen's mallet; She struck Sisera, she shattered his head, She split and went through his temple.

²⁷ Between her feet he bowed down, he fell, he lay down; At her feet he sank, he fell; Where he bowed down, there he fell dead.

A curse was pronounced on Meroz (perhaps located on the route of Sisera's flight) for failure to aid in the battle, but a blessing was pronounced on Jael for her act of slaying Sisera (cf. Judges 4:21-22), an act apparently regarded as expressing faithfulness to the covenant people of Israel with whom her clan had been identified through Moses. The vivid picture of Sisera's death (Judges 5:26-27) was not intended to narrate the steps of the physical action, but to describe metaphorically and in slow motion, so to speak, the fall of a leader.

²⁸ The mother of Sisera looked through the window, And cried out through the lattice, 'Why delays his chariot in coming? Why tarries the hoof beats of his chariots?'

²⁹ Her wisest ladies answered her, Yes, she repeats herself,

³⁰ Are they not finding and dividing the spoil: A maiden, two maidens for every warrior; For Sisera, plunder of dyed garments, Plunder of garments embroidered and dyed, Dyed work of double embroidery on the neck of the spoiler?

The pathos of the fallen general is amplified by an ironic description of Sisera's mother awaiting the unrealizable return of her son from battle. Her anxiety — Why is his chariot so long in coming? — and the hopeful excuses of his delay made by one of her maidens and herself contrast vividly with the real situation.

5. The Conclusion – 5:31

³¹ Thus let all Your enemies perish, Yahweh! But let those who love Him be like the rising sun in its might.

So the land had rest for forty years.

It is appropriate for a hymn describing Yahweh's victory over idolatrous enemies to conclude with a curse on evil enemies and a blessing on those who are faithful to Yahweh. To be like the sun when it rises means to have a life full of blessing.

The deliverance of Israel from Canaanite power under the judgeship of Deborah brought peace to the land for 40 years.

IV. The Judgeship of Gideon – 6:1-8:35

A. The Results of Israel's Evil – 6:1-6

¹ And the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of Yahweh. So Yahweh delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years, ² and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the sons of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains.

³ And it happened, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites came up; also Amalekites and the people of the East came up against them.

⁴ And they encamped against them and destroyed the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey.

⁵ And they came up with their livestock and their tents, they came as locusts in number; both they and their camels were without number; and they entered the land to destroy it.

⁶ And Israel was brought very low because of the Midianites, and the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh.

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The downward cycles (see the sketch near Judges 2:11-15) of apostasy (again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; cf. Judges 3:7, Judges 3:12; Judges 4:1) and deliverance continued in the case of Gideon whose judgeship receives the most extensive narration in the Book of Judges (100 verses comprising three chapters). The story of Samson is comparable, consisting of 96 verses in four chapters.

The seven years of oppression under the hands of Midianites was divine chastening for Israel's idolatry and evil practices. This relatively brief period of oppression was sandwiched in between two 40-year periods of peace (Judges 5:31; Judges 8:28). The Midianites were descendants of Abraham and Keturah (Genesis 25:1-2) and were defeated by Israel during the wilderness wanderings (Numbers 22:4; Numbers 25:16-18). They were a nomadic people who came from near the Gulf of Aqabah and ranged throughout the Arabah and Transjordan, apparently at this time subduing the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites as they crossed the Jordan into Canaan as far north as the Jezreel Valley (Judges 6:33), and as far south and east as Gaza (Judges 6:4), perhaps moving westward across the Jezreel Valley and southward along the coastal plain.

The strength of Midianite oppression forced the Israelites to hide themselves and their produce in mountain clefts, caves, and strongholds. However, this was not a continual occupation (like the preceding one of the Canaanites) but a seasonal invasion at harvest time, whenever the Israelites planted their crops. The Midianites' major goal was the appropriation of the crops for themselves and their animals. But the cumulative effect of these invasions on Israelite agriculture and food cycles was devastating. Midianite allies included the Amalekites (from south of Judah; cf. Judges 3:13) and other eastern peoples, a general term for the nomads of the Syrian desert, possibly including some Ammonites and Edomites. On these annual predatory invasions, in typical nomadic style, the oppressors camped on the land in such numbers and with such devastation that they were compared to swarms of locusts (cf. Judges 7:12). The Midianites and their allies traveled on innumerable camels (cf. Judges 7:12) whose range of distance and speed (as high as 100 miles per day) made them a formidable long-range military threat. This is the first reference to an organized raid using camels (cf. Genesis 24:10-11). The impoverishment that came to Israel drove her to cry out to the Lord for help. This cry does not seem to have been an indication of repentance for sin because they apparently were not aware of the moral cause behind the enemy's oppression until the Lord sent a prophet to point this out (cf. Judges 6:7-10).

B. The Proclamation of God's Prophet – 6:7-10

⁷ And it happened, when the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh because of the Midianites, ⁸ that Yahweh sent a prophet to the sons of Israel, who said to them, Thus says Yahweh God of Israel: I brought you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery; ⁹ 'and I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land.

¹⁰ And I said to you, I am Yahweh your God; do not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live. But you have not obeyed My voice.

The Lord sent an unnamed prophet (the only prophet mentioned in the book besides the Prophetess Deborah) to remind Israel of her covenant obligations to the Lord, who had delivered them from Egypt (cf. Exodus 34:10-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-26; Judges 3:5-6), not to worship the gods of the Amorites. The prophet rebuked them for their continued disobedience (But you have not listened to Me [God]). This message is similar to that from the Angel of the Lord at Bokim (cf. Judges 2:1-3).

C. The Appearance of the Angel of Yahweh – 6:11-16

¹¹ And the Angel of Yahweh came and sat under the terebinth tree which was in Ophrah, that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite. And his son Gideon threshed wheat at the winepress, in order to secure it from the Midianites.

¹² And the Angel of Yahweh appeared to him, and said to him, Yahweh is with you, you strong man of valor!

The story of Gideon is introduced not by an affirmation that "God raised up a deliverer named Gideon," but rather by a narration of *how* God raised him up. Gideon's call or commission resulted from a

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confrontation with the Angel of the Lord (who is “the Lord,” Judges 6:14; cf. comments on Judges 2:1), who appeared to him as a sojourning stranger and sat down under the oak in Ophrah. Since Gideon’s father Joash was an Abiezrite (a clan of Manasseh, Joshua 17:2), this Ophrah was not the place located in Benjamin but rather a northern site possibly near the border of Manasseh in the Jezreel Valley. Possible site identifications are el-Affula (six miles east of Megiddo) or et-Taiyiba (Hapharaim, eight miles northwest of Beth Shan). Gideon’s act of threshing wheat in a winepress reflected both his fear of discovery by the Midianites and the smallness of his harvest. Normally wheat was threshed (the grain separated from the wheat stalks) in an open area on a threshing floor (cf. 1 Chronicles 21:20-23) by oxen pulling threshing sledges over the stalks.

¹³ And Gideon said to Him, O my lord, if Yahweh is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, ‘Did not Yahweh bring us up from Egypt?’ But now Yahweh has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.

The Angel’s introductory remark affirmed the Lord’s presence with Gideon (you is sing.) and described Gideon as a mighty warrior (“mighty man of valor”; KJV; the words *gibbôr ḥāyil* are also applied to Jephthah, Judges 11:1; and to Boaz, Ruth 2:1). Though this description may have been spoken in satire (at this point Gideon was anything but a mighty warrior!), it probably reflected Gideon’s potentiality through divine enablement, as well as expressing his notable rank in the community.

Gideon’s initial response ignored the singular pronoun “you” (Judges 6:12), for he replied, If the Lord is with us (pl. pronoun). Gideon questioned the divine promise in view of his people’s present circumstances. He correctly concluded, however, that the Lord had put them into the hand of Midian.

¹⁴ Then Yahweh turned to him and said, Go in this strength of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?

“The Angel of the Lord” (Judges 6:11-12) now spoke as the Lord and commissioned Gideon to Go and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. The words the strength you have perhaps assumed the divine presence previously mentioned (Judges 6:12).

¹⁵ And he said to Him, O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my family is the poorest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.

But, Gideon objected, My clan is the weakest and I am the least. This objection might have stemmed from typical Near-Eastern humility, but perhaps it also reflected a good amount of reality.

¹⁶ And Yahweh said to him, I will certainly be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.

God’s reassurance reaffirmed His presence with Gideon (I will be with you) and the ease with which he would accomplish victory over the Midianites (as if they were but one man).

D. The Seeking for a Sign by Gideon – 6:17-21

¹⁷ And he said to Him, If now I have found grace in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who talk with me.

¹⁸ Do not depart from here, I beseech you, until I come to You and bring out my offering and set it before You. And He said, I will wait until you return.

¹⁹ So Gideon went in and prepared a young goat, and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot; and he brought them out to Him under the terebinth tree and presented them.

²⁰ The Angel of God said to him, Take the meat and the unleavened cakes and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth. And he did so.

²¹ Then the Angel of Yahweh put out the end of the staff that was in His hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and fire rose out of the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the Angel of Yahweh departed out of his sight.

Gideon requested a sign to confirm the Lord’s promise. This request was granted (cf. Judges 6:21). Meanwhile Gideon’s uncertainty regarding the exact identity of his supernatural Visitor prompted him to offer typical Near-Eastern hospitality. The word for offering or gift (*minḥâh*), which he proposed to set

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before the Visitor, could refer to a freewill offering in Israel's sacrificial system, or it could refer to tribute offered as a present to a king or other superior (cf. Judges 3:15). The large amount of food prepared by Gideon — goat's meat and broth, and unleavened cakes made from an ephah (one-half bushel) of flour — reflected both his wealth in a destitute time and the typical excessiveness of Near-Eastern hospitality. He no doubt planned to take the leftovers home for his family! But the Angel of the Lord touched the food offering with the tip of His staff and consumed it by fire, thus providing the sign Gideon had requested (Judges 6:17; cf. Leviticus 9:24; 1 Kings 18:38). Then the Angel disappeared.

D. The Reaction of Gideon – 6:22-24

²² And Gideon understood that He was the Angel of Yahweh. So Gideon said, Alas, O Lord GOD! For I have seen the Angel of Yahweh face to face.

²³ Then Yahweh said to him, Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die.

²⁴ So Gideon built an altar there to Yahweh, and called it Yahweh-Is-Peace.⁶ To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

Gideon's consternation probably reflected his fear of impending death because of seeing the divine presence (cf. Exodus 33:20). When the Lord assured Gideon he was not going to die, Gideon built an altar and named it the Lord is Peace.

E. The Building of Another Altar – 6:25-27

²⁵ And it happened the same night that Yahweh said to him, Take your father's young bull, the second bull of seven years old, and tear down the altar of Ba'al that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it; ²⁶ and build an altar to Yahweh your God on top of this stronghold in an orderly way, and take the second bull and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down.

The Lord gave Gideon a test of obedience. If Gideon was to deliver Israel from the Midianites, he must not only achieve military victory over the enemy but also must remove the cause of idolatry which initially led the Lord to give His people over to the Midianites (cf. Judges 6:1). Therefore God commanded Gideon to destroy his father's altar to Baal with its accompanying Asherah pole (a cult object probably representing Asherah, Ugaritic goddess of the sea; cf. comments on Judges 3:7). Gideon was then to construct a proper kind of altar to the Lord, kindle a fire with the wood of the Asherah pole, and offer one of his father's bulls (probably intended originally as a sacrificial animal for Baal) as a burnt offering to the Lord.

²⁷ And Gideon took ten men from among his servants and did as Yahweh had said to him. But because he feared his father's household and the men of the city too much to do it by day, he did it by night.

Gideon's obedience to God's command should not be minimized by his use of 10 servants (dismantling a Canaanite altar was a massive task), or by the fact that he did it at night (the Baal-worshippers would obviously have prevented it if he had tried to do this during the day).

F. The Retaliation of the Ba'al Worshipers – 6:28-30

²⁸ And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Ba'al was torn down; and the Asherah that was beside it was cut down, and the second bull was being offered on the altar which had been built.

²⁹ And they said to one another, Who has done this thing? And when they had inquired and asked, they said, Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing.

³⁰ Then the men of the city said to Joash, Bring out your son, that he may die, because he has torn down the altar of Ba'al, and because he has cut down the Asherah that was beside it.

⁶ Yahweh-shalom.

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G. The Faith of Joash – 6:31-32

³¹ **And Joash said to all who stood against him, Would you plead for Ba'al? Would you save him? Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning! If he is a god, let him plead for himself, because his altar has been torn down!**

³² **So on that day he called him Jerubba'al,⁷ saying, Let Ba'al plead against him, because he has torn down his altar.**

The resultant hostility of the community against Gideon was defused by his father's sage advice. Their investigation of the overnight vandalism quickly implicated Gideon, whose execution they demanded. But Joash, perhaps repentant and inspired by his son's remarkable actions, wisely proclaimed, If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself. Perhaps this implied that the people should not overstep Baal's prerogative of self-defense (cf. Elijah's irony about Baal, 1 Kings 18:27). This wise advice appealed to the people who then called Gideon by the name of Jerub-Baal, meaning Let Baal contend. Though they apparently applied the name derogatively, it might have later assumed an honorable signification as a witness against Baal's inability to defend himself (cf. Judges 7:1; Judges 8:29; and comments on Jerub-Baal in Judges 9:1).

H. The Gathering Against the Midianites and the Amalekites – 6:33-35

³³ **And all the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.**

³⁴ **And the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him.**

³⁵ **And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they also gathered behind him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.**

Gideon's commission by the Lord seems to have preceded the next (and final) annual invasion of the Midianites and their allies. They crossed the Jordan River not far south of the Sea of Kinnereth and camped in typical Bedouin fashion in the rich agricultural area of the Jezreel Valley. The Lord's deliverance of His people through Gideon began as the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon (cf. Judges 3:10; Judges 11:29; Judges 13:25; Judges 14:6, Judges 14:19; Judges 15:14), providing divine enablement through the Holy Spirit's personal presence. Gideon immediately began to muster men, summoning his Abiezrite clan (cf. Judges 6:11, Judges 6:24) with a trumpet and the rest of the tribe of Manasseh along with the tribes of Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali by means of messengers.

I. The Seeking of Further Signs by Gideon – 6:36-40

³⁶ **So Gideon said to God, If You will save Israel by my hand as You have spoken ³⁷ behold, I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have spoken.**

³⁸ **And it was so. When he rose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water.**

³⁹ **Then Gideon said to God, Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I entreat, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew.**

⁴⁰ **And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground.**

Gideon's apparent lack of faith in seeking a miraculous sign from God (cf. Matthew 12:38; 1 Corinthians 1:22-23) seems strange for a man who is listed among the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:32). In fact Gideon already had a sign from God at the time of his commission (Judges 6:17, Judges 6:21). It is noteworthy, however, that Gideon was not using the fleece to discover God's will, for he already knew from divine revelation what God wanted him to do (Judges 6:14). The sign related to a confirmation or assurance of God's presence or empowerment for the task at hand. God condescended to Gideon's weak faith and saturated the wool fleece with dew, so much so that Gideon wrung out a bowlful of water. Perhaps

⁷ Let Ba'al plead.

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Gideon had second thoughts about the uniqueness of this event since the surrounding threshing floor might naturally dry before the fleece. So he requested the opposite — This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew. God patiently did so, and Gideon was reassured to continue his assignment.

J. The Reduction of the Army by Yahweh – 7:1-8

¹ Then Jerubba'al, who is Gideon, and all the people who were with him rose early and camped beside the spring of Harod, and the camp of the Midian was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley.

² And Yahweh said to Gideon, The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, lest Israel glorify itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand saved me.'

Gideon camped at the spring of Harod (probably En Harod at the foot of Mount Gilboa, a spring that winds eastward to the Jordan River through the Harod Valley) with all his men, who numbered 32,000 (Judges 7:3). The Midianite force of 135,000 (cf. Judges 8:10) was camped three or four miles north of them at the foot of the hill of Moreh, the prominent hill rising like a sentinel to guard the eastern entrance to the Jezreel Valley. God, whose strength does not depend on numbers (cf. Psalm 33:16), purposed to deliver Midian to Israel through a few men so Israel would not boast that they had won the battle themselves. Gideon was no doubt perplexed by God's words, You have too many men.

³ Now therefore, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, 'Whoever is afraid and trembling, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead.' And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.

⁴ And Yahweh said to Gideon, The people are still too many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. Then it will be, that he of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' the same shall go with you; and whomever I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' the same shall not go.

⁵ So he brought the people down to the water. And Yahweh said to Gideon, Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, like a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself. Likewise, everyone who gets down on his knees to drink.

⁶ And the number of the ones who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the remainder of the people got down on their knees to drink water.

The means by which the size of Gideon's force was reduced was twofold: (a) 22,000 fearful recruits were summarily dismissed (in harmony with Deuteronomy 20:8) and allowed to return to their homes; and (b) 9,700 apparently less-watchful men who failed a simple test were also discharged (Judges 7:4-8; or at least were granted a leave of absence; cf. Judges 7:23).

The permission to leave Mount Gilead is puzzling since Gilead was across the Jordan River to the east. Some scholars view "Gilead" as an early copyist's error for "Gilboa," the mount near Gideon's army. Or another Mount Gilead may have been nearby, since some of Gilead's descendants lived on the western side of Jordan. Though the test given to the 9,700 seems simple enough, the words describing it are somewhat ambiguous. As the men drank from the spring, Gideon was to separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink. But how does one "lap like a dog" without "kneeling down" to place his face near the water? Some writers have suggested that a "non-kneeler" scooped the water up in one hand (holding his weapon in the other) from which he lapped the water with his tongue. Others have suggested that each used his hand to bring the water to his mouth much as a dog uses his tongue to bring water to his mouth. Whatever the explanation, the test probably identified those who were watchful, though some think it was strictly an arbitrary test for reducing the number of men. Historian Josephus even believed the 300 men who passed the test were less watchful, which resulted in a greater recognition of God's power.

⁷ Then Yahweh said to Gideon, By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver Midian into your hand. Let all the other people go, every man to his place.

⁸ So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent, and kept back those three hundred men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

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Now with just a few fighters, Gideon was again reassured by a divine promise: With the 300 men I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands (cf. Judges 6:14). Gideon's 300 men acquired the provisions and trumpets of those who returned to their tents.

K. The Dream of the Midianite – 7:9-14

⁹ It came to pass on the same night that Yahweh said to him, Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand.

¹⁰ But if you are afraid to go down, go down with Purah, your servant, to the camp, ¹¹ and you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands will be strengthened to go down against the camp. Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outer part of the armed men who were in the camp.

In spite of all the encouragement and assurance previously given Gideon, the Lord knew that he was afraid to attack, so God provided two further means of encouragement: (a) a direct divine word (go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands; cf. Judges 7:7, Judges 7:14-15), and (b) a providentially planned dream narrated by a Midianite and overheard by Gideon (Judges 7:13-14).

¹² Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley like a multitude of locusts; and their camels were without number, like the number of the sand by the seashore.

¹³ And when Gideon had come, behold, a man was telling a dream to his friend. He said, Behold, I had a dream: Behold, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to the tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent fell flat.

¹⁴ And his friend answered and said, This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! God has delivered into his hand Midian and all the camp.

Gideon and Purah his servant stalked the outskirts of the Midianite camp with its innumerable tents spread out in the valley like locusts (cf. Judges 6:5), tents which were outnumbered only by the myriads of camels (cf. Judges 6:5). A beautiful demonstration of God's providence was exhibited: Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream about a round loaf of barley bread which came tumbling into the Midianite camp and overturned a tent which it struck. The other Midianite responded, perhaps in jest, that this must refer to the sword of Gideon the Israelite into whose hands God has given us Midianites. However, the divinely intended symbolism is clear (barley bread aptly described the poverty-stricken Israelites, and the tent referred to the nomadic Midianites). Gideon correctly understood it as an encouragement from the Lord that Israel would be victorious over Midian.

L. The Victory of Israel – 7:15-25

¹⁵ And it was that when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he prostrated himself. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, Arise, for Yahweh has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand.

Gideon correctly understood it as an encouragement from the Lord that Israel would be victorious over Midian. Spontaneously worshiping God after this message, Gideon returned to the Israelite camp and proceeded immediately to marshal his forces, passing on to them the same assurance God had given him — The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands (cf. Judges 7:7, Judges 7:9, Judges 7:14).

¹⁶ And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers.

¹⁷ And he said to them, Look at me and do likewise; behold, and when I come to the outer part of the camp you shall do as I do.

¹⁸ When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the entire camp, and say, 'The sword of Yahweh and of Gideon!'

¹⁹ So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outer part of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands.

²⁰ Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers, they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing, and they cried, The sword of Yahweh and of Gideon!

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²¹ **And stood every man in his place all around the camp; and the entire army ran and cried out and fled.**

²² **When the three hundred blew the trumpets, Yahweh set every man's sword against his friend throughout the entire camp; and the army fled to Beth-shittah, toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah, by Tabbath.**

Gideon divided his small band into three companies of men, whose strategic but strange weapons were trumpets and empty jars with torches inside. They arrived at the edge of the Midianite camp at the providential time of the beginning of the middle watch (10:00 p.m.), just after they had changed the guard (when the retiring guards would still be milling about their tents). In Gideon's day the first watch was from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m.; the middle watch was from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.; and the morning watch started at 2 a.m. and went to 6 a.m.

At this critical moment the Israelites blew their trumpets and broke the jars (both making a terrible noise and revealing the glowing torches), and shouted loudly, A sword for the Lord and for Gideon! This battle cry indicated their confidence in the Lord to give them victory and also identified them to the Midianites and aroused fear in them. The word for trumpets is *šôpārôṭ*, "made from animal horns"; they gave a sharp, shrill sound. The jars were pitchers probably made of clay. The confusion in the Midianite camp was unbelievable as they imagined a much larger Israelite force attacking them and as they perhaps mistook their own retiring guards for Israelites. This divinely planned confusion caused the Midianites to turn on each other with their swords while the Israelites apparently watched in safety around the camp. The Midianite army fled to the southeast to Beth-shittah (an immediate field site) and Abel Meholah toward the Jordan River. Abel Meholah was perhaps Tell Abu Sus, about 24 miles south of the Sea of Kinnereth (Galilee). (Abel Meholah was where Elisha was living when Elijah called him to be his protégé, 1 Kings 19:16.) The army apparently fled in that direction in order to cross the Jordan to reach Zererah (possibly Zarethan or Tell es-Saidiya) and Tabbath (*Ras Abu Talbat*).

²³ **And the men of Israel were called together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and they pursued Midian.**

²⁴ **Then Gideon sent messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim, saying, Come down against Midian, and take the watering places before them as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan. Then all the men of Ephraim were gathered together and they took the watering places as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan.**

Gideon summoned reinforcements from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh to pursue the fleeing Midianites. Those who responded probably included the earlier contingents of Gideon's men who had been dismissed. Gideon also requested aid of the Ephraimites, who were well situated, to cut off the Midianites at strategic locations, preventing them from fording the Jordan River.

²⁵ **And they captured two officers of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. They had pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side of the Jordan.**

The men of Ephraim quickly secured the fords of the Jordan (the site of Beth Barah is currently unknown) and also captured two of the Midianite leaders, Oreb (meaning "raven") and Zeeb (meaning "wolf"), whose heads they brought to Gideon according to typical Near-Eastern military practice.

M. The Jealousy of the Ephraimites – 8:1-3

¹ **And the men of Ephraim said to him, Why have you done this to us by not calling us when you went to fight against Midian? And they argued with him forcefully.**

² **And he said to them, What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?**

³ **God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. And what was I able to do in comparison with you? Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that.**

However, the Ephraimites criticized Gideon sharply for not inviting them to participate in the initial conflict near the Hill of Moreh (Judges 7:1). The "gentle answer" of Gideon (cf. Proverbs 15:1)

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demonstrated his tactful diplomacy in the face of Ephraimite jealousy and averted intertribal warfare (cf. Judges 12:1-6 where Jephthah reacted adversely to Ephraimite jealousy). In Gideon's parable the full grape harvest of Abiezer seems to refer to the initial victory in the camp of Midian (Gideon was an Abiezrite, Judges 6:11) and the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes (affirmed as a greater victory) then refers to the "mopping up" operations which included slaying the two Midianite leaders.

N. The Total Victory by Gideon – 8:4-21

⁴ **And Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over, weary but still in pursuit.**

⁵ **And he said to the men of Succoth, Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are weary, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian.**

⁶ **And the leaders of Succoth said, Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?**

⁷ **And Gideon said, Because of this, when Yahweh has delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will thresh your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers!**

⁸ **And he went up from there to Peniel and spoke to them similarly, and the men of Peniel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered.**

⁹ **And he spoke also to the men of Peniel, saying, When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!**

Though the Israelite reinforcements destroyed many of the fleeing Midianites, a sizable group, including two Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, escaped beyond the Jordan in a southeasterly direction. They were rapidly pursued by Gideon and his 300 men who sought food from the men of Succoth (Judges 8:5) and the men of Peniel (Judges 8:8-9), two Israelite cities in the Transjordan territory of Gad (cf. Genesis 32:22, Genesis 32:30; Joshua 13:27). Both communities refused aid to Gideon, perhaps through fear of reprisal by the Midianites.

However, this was tantamount to allying themselves with the Midianites against the Lord and His chosen deliverer. Therefore similar to the earlier curse on the city of Meroz in Deborah's time (cf. Judges 5:23), Gideon threatened to punish them in retribution for their virtual hostility. To the people of Succoth he said, I will tear (lit., "thresh") your flesh with desert thorns and briers (cf. Judges 8:16). This may mean he would drag them over thorns like a threshing sledge over grain, or "thresh" them by drawing threshing sledges over them. Whatever the exact meaning, death seemed the inevitable result. To the people of Peniel he gave the threat, I will tear down this tower (cf. Judges 8:17). The tower was possibly a fortress where people went for safety, like the tower of Shechem (Judges 9:46-49) or the tower of Thebez (Judges 9:50-51).

¹⁰ **Now Zebah and Zalmunna were at Karkor, and their armies with them, about 15,000, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East; for there fell 120,000 men who drew the sword.**

¹¹ **And Gideon went up by the way of those who live in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah; and he struck the army while the camp was secure.**

¹² **And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued them; and he took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army.**

The two Midianite kings (Zebah and Zalmunna) arrived with a surviving force of only 15,000 men at Karkor, an unidentified site thought to be near the Wadi Sirhan well east of the Dead Sea. The 15,000 was a mere 11 percent of the total Midianite force of 135,000. Gideon followed a caravan route east of Nobah (perhaps Quanawat in eastern Bashan) and Jogbehah (modern el-Jubeihat 15 miles southeast of Peniel) and launched a surprise attack on the Midianites, captured the two kings, and routed their army.

¹³ **And Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle, from the Ascent of Heres.**

¹⁴ **And he caught a young man of the men of Succoth and questioned him; and he wrote down for him the rulers of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men.**

¹⁵ **And he came to the men of Succoth and said, Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you reproached me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your weary men?'**

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¹⁶ And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he punished the men of Succoth.

¹⁷ And he tore down the tower of Peniel and killed the men of the city.

Returning northwest to the Pass (“ascent”) of Heres (an unidentified site) Gideon forced a young man of Succoth to write down the names of the city’s 77 officials. Gideon then carried out his previous threat to punish the elders of the city (cf. Judges 8:7). He also fulfilled his threat to punish the city of Peniel (cf. Judges 8:9).

¹⁸ Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor? So they answered, As you are, so were they; each one was resembling the son of a king.

¹⁹ Then he said, They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As Yahweh lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you.

²⁰ And he said to Jether his firstborn, Arise, kill them! But the youth would not draw his sword, because he was afraid, for he was still a youth.

²¹ So Zebah and Zalmunna said, Arise yourself, and kill us; for as a man is, so is his strength. So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the moon-shaped ornaments which were on their camels’ necks.

With the two Midianite kings in hand, Gideon interrogated them regarding an otherwise unrecorded incident — the slaying of several brothers of his at Tabor, the conical small mountain just north of the Hill of Moreh. It is not stated whether this took place in the current invasion or on a previous Midianite invasion of the Jezreel Valley.

Since Gideon felt obligated by the duty of blood revenge (cf. Deuteronomy 19:6, Deuteronomy 19:12), probably his brothers were murdered in their homes or fields, not in battle. Gideon asked Jether his oldest son to kill them. This was an honor that the boy was not prepared to undertake, though it would have been a fitting insult to the kings to be slain by an untried opponent. They bravely invited Gideon to fulfill the revenge himself, considering it an honor to be slain by the courageous Gideon. Gideon obliged them and took the ornaments (probably moon-shaped) off their camels’ necks (cf. Judges 8:26) as the spoils of war.

O. The Failure of Gideon – 8:22-33

²² And the men of Israel said to Gideon, You rule over us, you and your son, and your son’s son also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.

²³ But Gideon said to them, I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you; Yahweh will rule over you.

Following this significant victory, the Israelites turned to Gideon with the request that he rule as king over them, that is, establish a ruling dynasty (you, your son, and your grandson). Gideon declined both the rule and the dynasty (but one of his sons, Abimelech, would later speak for himself; cf. Judges 9:1-6). Gideon realized the theocratic kingship of Yahweh — Yahweh will rule over you.

²⁴ Then Gideon said to them, I desire a petition from you, that each of you would give me the earrings from his spoil. (For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)

²⁵ So they answered, We will certainly give them. And they spread out a garment, and each man threw into it the earrings from his spoil.

²⁶ Now the weight of the gold earrings that he petitioned was 1,700 pieces of gold, besides the moon-shaped ornaments, pendants, and purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the bands that were around their camels’ necks.

Though he rejected kingship, Gideon did take occasion to indulge in a form of virtual taxation by requesting a share of the plunder in the form of gold earrings, the total weight coming to about 43 pounds. The term Ishmaelites originally referred to another nomadic tribe descended from Hagar (Genesis 16:15) but the term apparently took on a broader usage so that it is here applied to the Midianites.

²⁷ Then Gideon made it into an ephod and set it up in his city, Ophrah. And all Israel played the prostitute with it there and it became a snare to Gideon and to his household.

Gideon took the gold he received and made an ephod (probably some kind of girdle or vestment), which he placed in Ophrah, his hometown. Whatever Gideon’s intentions were in this act, the people worshiped

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this ephod, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family. The nature of this ephod is not clear. It may have been patterned after the short outer garment worn by the high priest (Exodus 28:6-30; Exodus 39:1-21; Leviticus 8:7-8). But rather than being worn as a garment, Gideon's golden ephod was apparently erected and became an idol. In some sense he may have usurped the function of the priest and/or established a rival worship center to the tabernacle. In the end Gideon seems to have returned to the syncretistic society out of which God had called him to deliver Israel.

²⁸ And Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, so that they lifted their heads no more. And the land was quiet for 40 years in the days of Gideon.

As a result of Gideon's rout of the Midianites the land enjoyed peace 40 years. This is the last period of peace recorded in the Book of Judges. The subsequent activities of Jephthah and Samson did not seem to produce an interim of peace or delay the nation's decline.

²⁹ Then Jerub-ba'al the son of Joash went and lived in his own house.

³⁰ Gideon had 70 sons who were begotten of his loins, for he had many wives.

³¹ And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech.

³² Now Gideon the son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the grave of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

³³ And it happened, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the prostitute with the Ba'alim, and made Ba'al-Berith their god.

Though Jerub-Baal (i.e., Gideon; cf. Judges 6:32; Judges 7:1) declined the kingship, he generally lived like a king (he had many wives who bore him 70 sons). He also had a concubine in Shechem (who characteristically lived with her parents' family) who bore him a son named Abimelech. This set the stage for the next downward spiral in Israel's history of apostasy, a spiral which began in earnest after the death of Gideon.

As though they had been waiting for it with expectancy, Gideon's death triggered Israel's immediate return to idolatry (cf. Judges 2:19). Instead of worshiping Yahweh with thanksgiving for all His deliverances, they set up Baal-Berith as their god, who had a central shrine at Shechem (Judges 9:3-4) where he was also worshiped as El-Berith (Judges 9:46).

P. The Ingratitude of Israel – 8:34-36

³⁴ And the sons of Israel did not remember Yahweh their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; ³⁵ nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerub-ba'al (Gideon) according to the good he had done for Israel.

Their failure to show gratitude to the family of Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon; cf. Judges 6:32; Judges 7:1; Judges 8:29) may have accounted for the apparent ease with which his sons were soon slain by Abimelech (Judges 9:5).

It may be significant that none of the judgeships recorded in the rest of the Book of Judges resulted in a designated period of peace (contrast Judges 3:11, Judges 3:30; Judges 5:31; Judges 8:28). This seems to fit the general pattern of progressive political and social decline and moral degeneration in the book. The event that launched the declining phase of the period of the Judges was the abortive kingship of Abimelech. Abimelech, a son of Gideon by a concubine, was not called a judge. In fact his rule included some elements of oppression which were eliminated only by his death and by the subsequent positive judgeship of Tola (who lived in the same general area of the central highlands).

V. The Story of Abimelech

The purpose of this story is to show that God sometimes uses evil men to providentially provide justice for wrong-doing, especially if the wrong-doing is an attempt to counter His plan. Abimelech was a murderer who, as the result of the evil of other men, finally met his end.

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A. The Murder of Gideon's Sons – 9:1-5

¹ And Abimelech the son of Jerub-ba'al went to Shechem, to his mother's brothers, and spoke with them and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, ² Speak in the hearing of all the men of Shechem: 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerub-ba'al reign over you, or that one reign over you?' Remember that I am your bone and your flesh.

Interestingly in Judges 9:1-57 Gideon is always called Jerub-Baal, and never Gideon. Cf. comments on "Jerub-Baal" in Judges 6:32. Abimelech was a son of Gideon by a concubine (Judges 8:31), a secondary wife who might live with her own family and be visited occasionally by her husband. In this social environment, Abimelech was no doubt shunned by his half-brothers (cf. his retaliation, Judges 9:5) but he was accepted by his mother's family who lived in Shechem.

The name Abimelech may have not been his given name, but one that was either given to him, or that he took himself. It means "a father of a king" and may have reflected the man's desire to found a dynasty of kings. The name had been previously used by kings of the Philistines.

The city of Shechem had been a significant religious center since the time of Abraham (Genesis 12:6-7). It was located in the narrow valley between the prominent hills of Gerizim and Ebal, the site of the recitation under Joshua of the blessings and cursings of the Law (Joshua 8:30-35) and of the further covenant renewal ceremony before Joshua's death (Joshua 24:1-28). Shechem was situated on a strategic crossroads of the latitudinal route ascending from the coastal highway in the west and descending to Adam, on the Jordan River, and the longitudinal route along the central ridge from Jerusalem in the south to the northern accesses to the Jezreel Valley.

³ And his mother's brothers spoke all these words concerning him in the hearing of all the men of Shechem; and their heart was inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, He is our brother.

⁴ And they gave him seventy pieces of silver from the temple of Ba'al-Berith, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless men; and they followed him.

⁵ And he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerub-ba'al, upon one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerub-ba'al was left, for he hid himself.

Abimelech appealed to his Shechemite heritage in offering himself to the citizens of Shechem in place of a corporate rule by Jerub-Baal's sons, who may have had neither the desire nor the following to be kings anyway. Some silver from the public temple of Baal-Berith was donated to Abimelech to hire reckless adventurers as his personal cadre. Their first assignment was to murder Abimelech's 70 brothers on one stone, implying a mass public execution. Significantly Jotham, Gideon's youngest son escaped.

Baal-berith בעל ברית, *ba'al b'rith*; Βααλβεριθ, *Baalberith*, "Covenant Baal," was worshipped at Shechem after the death of Gideon (Judges 8:33; Judges 9:4). In Judges 9:46 the name is replaced by El-berith, "Covenant-god." The covenant was that made by the god with his worshippers, less probably between the Israelites and the native Canaanites.

B. The Coronation of Abimelech – 9:6

⁶ And all the men of Shechem assembled together, all of Beth Millo, and they went and made Abimelech king beside the terebinth tree at the pillar which was in Shechem.

Following the successful removal of potential contenders for power (or was Abimelech's real motive personal vengeance?), Abimelech was crowned king by the ordinary citizens of Shechem (means "shoulder") and by the upper class who lived in the section of the city called Beth Millo ("house of the fortress"). The coronation took place beside the great tree (perhaps a well-known sacred tree; cf. Genesis 12:6; Genesis 35:4) at the pillar (cf. Joshua 24:26). It is doubtful that Abimelech's authority extended much beyond several cities in the vicinity of Shechem.

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C. The Opposition by Jotham – 9:7-21

⁷ And when they told Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and cried out. And he said to them: Listen to me, men of Shechem, That God may listen to you!

Gideon's youngest son Jotham, who had escaped the massacre by Abimelech (Judges 9:5), courageously climbed up on the top of Mount Gerizim *southwest of the city*, and shouted out to the citizens of Shechem. He probably spoke from a triangular rock ledge on the side of Gerizim which forms a natural pulpit from which one can be heard as far away as Mount Ebal across the valley. Jotham's speech is noteworthy for its form and content as the first of one of the Bible's few fables (a short story in which animals or inanimate objects, like trees, are personified). Its purpose was to call the Shechemites to account before God (Listen to me so that God may listen to you) for accepting as a leader the worthless murderer Abimelech.

⁸ The trees at one time went forth to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us!'

⁹ But the olive tree said to them, 'Should I leave my fatness, with which they honor God and men, and go to wave over trees?'

¹⁰ Then the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come, reign over us!'

¹¹ But the fig tree said to them, 'Should I cease my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to wave over trees?'

¹² Then the trees said to the vine, 'Come, reign over us!'

¹³ But the vine said to them, 'Should I leave my new wine, which cheers both God and men, and go to wave over trees?'

¹⁴ Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'Come, reign over us!'

¹⁵ And the bramble said to the trees, 'If in truth you anoint me as king over you, then come and take shelter in my shade; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon!'

The major point of Jotham's parable was that only worthless people seek to lord it over others, for worthy individuals are too busy in useful tasks to seek such places of authority. The features of the parable are clear. The trees were seeking a king, but were turned down, in turn, by (a) the olive tree (Judges 9:8), the most ancient of trees which is busy producing oil to be used to honor both gods and men (Judges 9:9); (b) the fig tree (Judges 9:10), the most common of trees in Israel whose fruit is a staple food (Judges 9:11); and (c) the vine (Judges 9:12), whose vintage produces wine which cheers both gods (i.e., in libations) and men (Judges 9:13). In desperation the trees invited the thornbush (the buckthorn or bramblebush was used to kindle cooking fires in the wilderness areas of Palestine) to be their king (Judges 9:14). The qualified acceptance by the thornbush was conditioned on the trees taking refuge in its shade (Judges 9:15). Jotham employed extreme irony in this statement, for the puny thornbush at the foot of other trees scarcely casts a shadow. The threat of fire coming out of the thornbush, however, was real for farmers feared the wildfires that could spread quickly through the dried tinder of thornbushes.

¹⁶ Now therefore, if you acted in truth and integrity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerub-ba'al and his house, and have done to him as he deserved –

¹⁷ for my father fought for you, risked his life, and delivered you from the hand of Midian;

¹⁸ and you have risen up against my father's house this day, and killed his seventy sons on one stone, and made Abimelech, the son of his female servant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your brother –

¹⁹ if then you have acted in truth and integrity with Jerub-ba'al and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you.

²⁰ And if not, let fire come from Abimelech and devour the men of Shechem and Beth Millo; and let fire come from the men of Shechem and from Beth Millo and devour Abimelech!

Jotham then applied the parable, which stressed the worthless "bramble king" Abimelech, to rebuke the Shechemites for accepting such a worthless leader. This rebuke actually took the form of a curse (Judges 9:20; cf. Judges 9:57). Jotham began the rebuke with three conditional clauses (Judges 9:16). After a parenthesis (Judges 9:17-18) describing the good deeds of Gideon and the bad deeds of Abimelech,

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Jotham restated the rebuke: If then you have acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal (i.e., Gideon), “then may you and Abimelech enjoy your relationship!” (Judges 9:19) But if the opposite was true (which was Jotham’s obvious assumption), let fire consume both Shechemites and Abimelech. This appropriate statement is specifically designated as a “curse” in Judges 9:57.

²¹ And Jotham ran away and fled; and he went to Beer and lived there, for fear of Abimelech his brother.

It is evident that the Shechemites responded negatively to Jotham’s rebuke for he fled to Beer (“well”), which is such a common place name in Israel that to try to identify it is only guesswork.

D. The Disaffection of the Men of Shechem – 9:22-25

²² And Abimelech reigned over Israel three years.

²³ And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, ²⁴ so that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerub-ba’al might come and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who had strengthened his hand in the killing of his brothers.

²⁵ And the men of Shechem set men waiting for him on the tops of the mountains, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way; and it was told Abimelech.

Three years of life under the leadership of Abimelech set the stage for a Shechemite revolt. An evil (demonic) spirit was sent by God to fulfill Jotham’s curse by arousing distrust or jealousy in the Shechemites, who set men on the hilltops to ambush and rob the caravans and other travelers on the strategic trade routes through Shechem. Such action would reduce travel and deprive Abimelech of tributes and tolls from travelers. That God would send an evil spirit, a demon, shows that He sovereignly rules over all the universe. Even Satan could not attack Job without God’s permission (Job 1:12; Job 2:6).

E. The Rabble Rousing of Ga’al – 9:26-29

²⁶ And Ga’al the son of Ebed came with his brothers and went over to Shechem; and the men of Shechem put their trust in him.

²⁷ And they went out into the fields, and gathered grapes from their vineyards and trod them, and had a festival. And they went into the house of their god, and ate and drank, and cursed Abimelech.

²⁸ And Ga’al the son of Ebed said, Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should serve him? Is he not the son of Jerub-ba’al, and is not Zebul his deputy? You men of Hamor serve the father of Shechem; but why should we serve him?

²⁹ Would that this people were under my authority! Then I would remove Abimelech. And he said to Abimelech, Increase your army and come out!

The undisciplined populace of Shechem found a new leader in Ga’al (“rejection,” or “loathing”; according to Wellhausen, “beetle,” *HPN*, 110) son of Ebed (servant), who moved into Shechem with his brothers (perhaps his personal army of brigands). At the time of grape harvest (June-July) the Shechemites held a pagan religious festival comparable to but earlier than the Israelite Feast of Ingathering or Tabernacles, which was in September-October (cf. Deuteronomy 16:13-15). At this time of festivity, they cursed Abimelech and put their confidence in Ga’al, who ridiculed both Abimelech and Zebul his deputy, who was Shechem’s governor (Judges 9:30). Ga’al exhorted them to serve the men of Hamor, the ancestor of their clan (Genesis 34:26) rather than the half-breed Abimelech. This suggests that a large portion of the Shechemite populace were native Canaanites. Ga’al boldly challenged the absent Abimelech, Call out your whole army!

There’s a difference of opinion on the meaning of the name Zebul. ISBE says it possibly means “exalted.” Others make it mean “habitation.”

Hamor (“donkey, ass”) was the father of Shechem from whom Jacob bought a piece of ground on his return from Paddan-aram for one hundred pieces of silver (Genesis 33:19), and the burial place of Joseph when his body was removed from Egypt to Canaan (Joshua 24:32). “The men of Hamor” were inhabitants of Shechem (ISBE).

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F. The Message from Zebul – 9:30-33

³⁰ And Zebul, the ruler of the city, heard the words of Ga'al the son of Ebed, and his anger was kindled.

³¹ And he sent messengers to Abimelech craftily, saying, Behold, Ga'al the son of Ebed and his brothers have come to Shechem; and behold, they are fortifying the city against you.

³² And now therefore, arise by night, you and the people who are with you, and lie in wait in the field.

³³ And it will be, in the morning as soon as the sun is up, that you will rise early and rush upon the city; and behold, when he and the people who are with him come out against you, you may then do to them as you find an occasion.

Zebul (cf. Judges 9:28), the governor of the city, was angered by the rebel Ga'al. So Zebul warned Abimelech, who lived in nearby Arumah (Judges 9:41), perhaps Khirbet el-Urma between Shechem and Shiloh, to bring his troops during the night and advance against the city at sunrise to kill Ga'al.

G. The Defeat of Ga'al and Destruction of Shechem – 9:34-45

³⁴ And Abimelech and all the people who were with him rose by night, and lay in wait against Shechem in four companies.

³⁵ And Ga'al the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance to the city gate, and Abimelech and the people who were with him rose from lying in wait.

³⁶ And when Ga'al saw the people, he said to Zebul, Behold, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains! But Zebul said to him, You see the shadows of the mountains as though they were men.

³⁷ So Ga'al spoke again and said, Behold, people are coming down from the center of the land, and another company is coming from the Soothsayer's Terebinth Tree.

³⁸ Then Zebul said to him, Where indeed is your mouth now, with which you said, 'Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?' Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out and fight with them now.

³⁹ And Ga'al went out, leading the men of Shechem, and fought with Abimelech.

⁴⁰ And Abimelech chased him, and he fled from him; and many fell wounded up to the entrance of the gate.

⁴¹ And Abimelech stayed at Arumah, and Zebul drove out Ga'al and his brothers, so that they could not live in Shechem.

Abimelech went to Shechem, concealed his troops in four companies, and began to move on the city at sunrise. When Ga'al mentioned their early morning movement, Zebul claimed they were only shadows of the mountains. But Ga'al persisted in recognizing them as people coming down from the center of the land (lit., "the navel of the land," apparently a reference to Gerizim located centrally in the central highlands). The soothsayers' tree may have been the oak of Moreh (Genesis 12:6). When he could deceive Ga'al no longer, Zebul goaded him into leading his forces outside the protective walls of the city to fight against Abimelech's troops. After all his bragging, Ga'al had no other choice but to engage in the encounter, and his Shechemite followers were soundly defeated by Abimelech. Then Abimelech returned to Arumah while those Shechemites faithful to Zebul drove Ga'al and his brothers out of Shechem.

⁴² And it came about on the next day that the people went out into the field, and it was told to Abimelech.

⁴³ And he took his people, divided them into three companies, and lay in wait in the field. And behold, the people were coming out of the city; and he rose against them and struck them.

⁴⁴ And Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city; and the other two companies rushed upon all who were in the fields and struck them.

⁴⁵ And Abimelech fought against the city all that day; he took the city and killed the people who were in it; and he razed the city and sowed it with salt.

However, Abimelech's anger had not receded and his fear of further Shechemite revolt led him to ambush the people while they worked in the fields. Two companies carried out the slaughter while Abimelech secured the city gate with a third company. By evening he had captured the city and destroyed it, having

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killed its inhabitants. He then scattered salt over it, symbolic of a sentence of infertility so it might remain barren forever (cf. Deuteronomy 29:23; Jeremiah 17:6). Archeology has confirmed this 12th-century destruction of Shechem, which remained a ruin till rebuilt by Jeroboam I as his capital (1 Kings 12:25).

H. The Burning of the Tower of Shechem – 9:46-49

⁴⁶ And when all the men of the tower of Shechem heard that, they entered the stronghold of the temple of El Berith.

⁴⁷ And it was told Abimelech that all the men of the tower of Shechem were gathered together.

⁴⁸ So Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the people who were with him. And Abimelech took an ax in his hand and cut down a bough from the trees, and took it and laid it on his shoulder. Then he said to the people who were with him, What you have seen me do, hurry and do as I have done.

⁴⁹ And all the people likewise cut down his own bough and followed Abimelech, put them against the stronghold, and set the stronghold on fire above them, so that all the people of the tower of Shechem died, about a thousand men and women.

These verses probably explain an incident within the city, included in the destruction previously recorded in Judges 9:45, rather than a subsequent event outside the destroyed city. On hearing of either the slaughter in the fields (Judges 9:43-44) or the capture of the city gate (Judges 9:44), the Shechemites who had retreated into the tower of Shechem (probably the same as the Beth Millo of Judges 9:6), secured themselves in the stronghold of the temple of El-Berith (an alternate title for Baal-Berith, Judges 9:4), probably a part of the tower of Shechem. Abimelech and his troops cut branches from Mount Zalmon (perhaps either Mount Gerizim or Mount Ebal) and set them on fire over the stronghold, so that about 1,000 men and women died.

I. The End of Abimelech – 9:50-57

⁵⁰ And Abimelech went to Thebez, and he camped against Thebez and took it.

⁵¹ But there was a strong tower in the city, and all the men and women and all the people of the city fled there and shut themselves in; then they went up to the top of the tower.

⁵² And Abimelech came as far as the tower and fought against it; and he came near the door of the tower to burn it with fire, ⁵³ and one woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull.

⁵⁴ Then he called quickly to the young man, his armor bearer, and said to him, Draw your sword and kill me, that men not say of me, 'A woman killed him.' So his young man thrust him through, and he died.

⁵⁵ And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed every man to his place.

Abimelech next besieged and captured Thebez (brightness), probably to be identified with modern Tubas about 10 miles northeast of Shechem on the road to Beth Shan. This city apparently was a dependency of Shechem which, under Abimelech's control, had joined in the revolt. Attempting a repeat performance of Shechem, Abimelech sought to set fire to the tower (within the city) where the people had fled. However, a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull. The "upper millstone" was either a cylinder-shaped stone from a handmill (about 8 or 10 inches in length and several inches thick) or the large upper stone of a regular mill (about 12 to 18 inches in diameter with a hole in the middle and several inches thick). As he was dying Abimelech (like Saul, 1 Samuel 31:4) commanded his armor-bearer to kill him. Abimelech did not want it said that a woman had killed him. The followers of Abimelech (here identified as Israelites) went home when they saw that he was dead.

⁵⁶ Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did to his father by killing his seventy brothers.

⁵⁷ And all the wickedness of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads, and came upon them the curse of Jotham the son of Jerub-ba'al.

The sacred historian recorded the divine providence behind the destruction of Shechem and the death of Abimelech: God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to Gideon and his family; God also

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made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. Thus the curse of Jotham, Gideon's son, was fulfilled (cf. Judges 9:20).

VI. The Judgeships of Tola and Jair – 10:1-5

A. The Judgeship of Tola – 10:1-2

¹ After Abimelech there arose to rescue Israel Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, a man of Issachar. And he lived in Shamir in the mountains of Ephraim.

² He judged Israel twenty-three years; and he died and was buried in Shamir.

Tola and Jair were among the so-called “minor judges” but they were no less significant in delivering Israel during the period before the monarchy. The judgeship of Tola in particular was a temporary counteraction to the decay under Abimelech. The judgeship of Jair in Gilead anticipated the judgeship of the next major judge, Jephthah, in the same geographical area.

B. The Judgeship of Jair – 10:3-4

³ After him arose Jair, a Gileadite; and he judged Israel twenty-two years.

⁴ Now he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys; they also had thirty towns, which are called Havoth Jair to this day, which are in the land of Gilead.

⁵ And Jair died and was buried in Camon.

After Tola's judgeship, Jair led Israel 22 years in Gilead, in the Transjordanian area of Manasseh. His noble status is evidenced by his large progeny of 30 sons, who each had a donkey as his status symbol (cf. Judges 12:14). The “tent villages of Jair” (Havvoth Jair) were a group of towns in Bashan named by an earlier Jair (Numbers 32:39-42; Deuteronomy 3:14) which were relatively permanent since they were still there in the days of the author of the Book of Judges. Jair's burial place, Kamon, may be modern Qamm in Gilead.

VII. The Judgeship of Jephthah – 10:6-12:7

A. The Harassment by the Philistines – 10:6-8

⁶ And the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yahweh, and served the Ba'alim and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they deserted Yahweh and did not serve Him.

Judges 10:6-16 seems to be an expanded theological introduction to the judgeships of both Jephthah (10:17-12:7) and Samson (chaps. 13-16) since the oppressors introduced in Judges 10:7 are simultaneously the Ammonites (in the east) and the Philistines (in the west).

⁷ So the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel; and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the sons of Ammon.

⁸ From that year they harassed and oppressed the sons of Israel for eighteen years, all the sons of Israel who were on the other side of the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, in Gilead.

The Lord again chastened His straying people by foreign oppressors — the Philistines in the west (anticipating the narrative of Samson, chaps. 13-16) and the Ammonites in the east, who oppressed Israel for 18 years. Ammon was a Transjordanian kingdom northeast of Moab which was allied with Eglon of Moab in the time of Ehud (Judges 3:13). The Ammonites oppressed Gilead, the Transjordanian area occupied in the south by the tribe of Gad and in the north by the half-tribe of Manasseh.

B. The Invasion of Ammon – 10:9-10

⁹ Moreover the sons of Ammon crossed over the Jordan to fight against Judah also, against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.

The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan, probably on periodic raids against Judah, Benjamin, and the house of Ephraim (the area of the central highlands).

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¹⁰ And the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh, saying, We have sinned against You, because we have both forsaken our God and served the Ba'alim!

C. The Rebuttal by Yahweh – 10:11-14

¹¹ And Yahweh said to the sons of Israel, Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites and from the sons of Ammon and from the Philistines?

¹² The Sidonians and Amalekites and Maonites also oppressed you; and you cried out to Me, and I delivered you from their hand.

¹³ Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods. Therefore I will deliver you no more.

¹⁴ Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress.

In previous times of distress Israel's calling on **the Lord** was not an evidence of repentance for her sin (cf. Judges 3:9, Judges 3:15; Judges 4:3). At the time of the Midianite invasions, the Lord sent a prophet to point out her need for repentance (Judges 6:7-10).

D. The Return to Yahweh – 10:15-18

¹⁵ And the sons of Israel said to Yahweh, We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems best to You; only deliver us this day, we pray.

¹⁶ So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served Yahweh. And His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.

However, on this occasion the Israelites demonstrated genuine repentance, first confessing their sins (We have sinned against You) and then, after the Lord rebuked them (let the gods you have chosen. save you), they remained steadfast in their confession of sin and took action to get rid of the foreign gods and serve the Lord. His mercy toward Israel's misery led Him to raise up Jephthah as a deliverer. The Maonites (Judges 10:11) may refer to the Midianites (cf. Judges 10:12, LXX) or to a clan descended from someone with the Canaanite name of Maon.

¹⁷ Then the sons of Ammon gathered together and encamped in Gilead. And the sons of Israel assembled together and encamped in Mizpah.

¹⁸ And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said to one another, Who is the man who will begin the fight against the sons of Ammon? He will be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

10:17-11:6. In response to the Ammonite invasion of Gilead, the Israelites assembled and camped at Mizpah, probably about 14 miles northeast of Rabbath-ammon, i.e., modern Amman, or Ramoth Gilead, about 40 miles north of Rabbath Ammon. The first task of Israel was to search for a military commander. Their search led them to seek Jephthah (Judges 11:4-6), a notorious leader of men whose earlier family history is summarized in Judges 11:1-3. Like Abimelech (cf. Judges 9:1-57), Jephthah was probably a half-Canaanite (his mother was a prostitute). He was driven from home by his half brothers (Judges 11:2). In the land of Tob (probably north of Ammon and east of Manasseh) he gathered around himself a group of adventurers (Judges 11:3, probably meaning "a band of brigands").

E. The Background of Jephthah The Gileadite – 11:1-3

¹ Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he was the son of a prostitute; and Gilead begot Jephthah.

² Gilead's wife bore sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out, and said to him, You will have no inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.

³ Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him.

Like Abimelech (cf. Judges 9:1-57), Jephthah was probably a half-Canaanite (his mother was a prostitute). He was driven from home by his half brothers (Judges 11:2). In the land of Tob (probably north of Ammon and east of Manasseh) he gathered around himself a group of worthless men, probably meaning "a band of brigands".

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F. The Invitation to Jephthah – 11:4-10

⁴ It happened after a time that the sons of Ammon made war against Israel.

⁵ And so it was, when the sons of Ammon made war against Israel, that the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob.

⁶ And they said to Jephthah, Come and be our commander, that we may fight against the sons of Ammon.

In response to the Ammonite invasion of Gilead, the Israelites assembled and camped at Mizpah (probably Ramath Mizpeh [Khirbet Jalad, about 14 miles northeast of Rabbath-ammon, i.e., modern Amman] or Ramoth Gilead [Tel Ramith, about 40 miles north of Rabbath Ammon]). The first task of Israel was to search for a military commander. Their search led them to seek Jephthah (Judges 11:4-6), a notorious leader of men whose earlier family history is summarized in Judges 11:1-3.

⁷ And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, Did you not hate me, and drove me from my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?

⁸ And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, That is why we have turned again to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the sons of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

⁹ And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, If you take me back home to fight against the sons of Ammon, and Yahweh delivers them to me, will I be your head?

¹⁰ And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, Yahweh will be a witness between us, if we do not do according to your words.

The elders of Gilead persisted in the face of Jephthah's rebuke (Judges 11:8). They cemented their promise that Jephthah would be their civil leader over Gilead after he won a military victory by making a formal and solemn oath with the Lord as witness (Judges 11:10).

G. The Complaint of Ammon – 11:11-13

¹¹ And Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before Yahweh in Mizpah.

The oath (vs. 10) was followed by a formal swearing-in ceremony at Mizpah. In contrast with the judgeship of Gideon, who was initially called by the Lord, Jephthah was initially called by other men. However, the Lord was called to witness their selection (Judges 11:10-11) and He placed His Spirit on Jephthah to achieve victory (Judges 11:29).

¹² And Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, saying, What do you have against me, that you have come to fight against me in my land?

¹³ And the king of the sons of Ammon answered the messengers of Jephthah, Because Israel took away my land when they came up out of Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and to the Jordan. Now therefore, restore those lands peaceably.

Surprisingly Jephthah's first step as commander of Gilead was to seek a nonmilitary settlement to the conflict. Through messengers he asked the Ammonite king why he had attacked Gilead. The king's reply came in the form of an accusation — When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land — which Jephthah proceeded to demonstrate was untrue (Judges 11:14-27). Yet the Ammonite king offered peace to Jephthah for the return of the land. The Arnon and the Jabbok are rivers that formed the southern and northern boundaries of Ammon. South of the Arnon was Moab. The Arnon flows into the Dead Sea and the Jabbok into the Jordan River.

H. The Explanation by Jephthah – 11:14-27

¹⁴ And Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, ¹⁵ and said to him, Thus says Jephthah: 'Israel did not take away the land of Moab, nor the land of the sons of Ammon; ¹⁶ 'for when Israel came up from Egypt, they walked through the wilderness as far as the Red Sea and came to Kadesh.

¹⁷ And Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, Please let me pass through your land. But the king of Edom would not heed. And in like manner they sent to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained in Kadesh.

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¹⁸ And they went along through the wilderness and bypassed the land of Edom and the land of Moab, came to the east side of the land of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. But they did not enter the border of Moab, for the Arnon was the border of Moab.

¹⁹ And Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, Please let us pass through your land into our place.

²⁰ And Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. So Sihon gathered all his people together, camped in Jahaz, and fought against Israel.

²¹ And Yahweh, God of Israel, delivered Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they struck them. Thus Israel gained possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country.

²² They took possession of all the borders of the Amorites, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan.

Jephthah applied his knowledge of Israel's history (learned either from written or oral sources) to refute the Ammonite king's claim. In passing, Jephthah indicated that Israel had acquiesced to the refusal of Edom (cf. Numbers 20:14-21) and Moab to permit passage through their lands (Judges 11:17-18). However, when Israel circled the borders of Edom and Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon (the more usual northern border of Moab), Sihon king of the Amorites also refused Israel passage northwest to the Jordan River, and fought against Israel. The Lord gave Israel the victory and Israel took over all the land of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok — the land now under dispute between the Ammonites and the Gileadites (cf. Judges 11:13). This area was really southern Gilead (the rest of Gilead was north of the Jabbok River), and its southern portion (from the Arnon to a line extending eastward from the north end of the Dead Sea) was periodically in Moabite hands.

²³ And now Yahweh God of Israel has dispossessed the Amorites from before His people Israel; should you then possess it?

²⁴ Will you not possess whatever Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever Yahweh our God takes possession of before us, we will possess.

Jephthah thus argued that the Lord had given this land to Israel. He concluded this point of his argument by indicating that Ammon should be satisfied with the land that their god Chemosh had given them and should not contest the land Yahweh had given Israel. Historically Chemosh was the god of the Moabites, and Milcam (or Molech) was god of the Ammonites. However, Jephthah seemed to be referring to the god of that portion of the land which had previously belonged to the Moabites before Sihon had pushed Moab south of the Arnon. Another explanation is that the Moabites were in alliance with the Ammonites in this attack on Gilead, so that Jephthah was really addressing the Moabites at this point in his argument. A third possibility is that the Ammonites had adopted the worship of Chemosh by this time.

²⁵ And now, are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive against Israel? Did he ever fight against them?

²⁶ While Israel lived in Heshbon and its suburbs, in Aroer and its suburbs, and in all the cities along the banks of the Arnon, for three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time?

²⁷ Therefore I have not sinned against you, but you wronged me by fighting against me. May Yahweh, the Judge, render judgment this day between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon.

Jephthah also argued that Balak, king of Moab, to whom part of the area in question used to belong, had consented to Israel's right to this area. In fact, Jephthah claimed, the land at the time of the Ammonite invasion had been Israel's for 300 years without any surrounding nations contesting it. Thus Jephthah denied any wrongdoing on Israel's part against Ammon. Ammon was in the wrong by warring against Israel.

I. The Foolish Vow of Jephthah – 11:28-33

²⁸ However, the king of the sons of Ammon did not heed the words which Jephthah sent him.

Jephthah's attempt at diplomacy failed since the king of Ammon paid no attention to his message.

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²⁹ And the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the sons of Ammon.

The purpose of the Spirit of the Lord coming on Jephthah was to provide divine enablement in his military leadership against the pagan oppressors whom the Lord had been using to chasten His people (cf. Judges 3:10; Judges 6:34; Judges 13:25; Judges 15:14). The presence of the Holy Spirit with Old Testament leaders was primarily for the purpose of accomplishing services for God, not specifically for holy living. Thus the presence of the Spirit with Jephthah was not necessarily related to his vow or its fulfillment, recorded in the following verses. Jephthah's trip through Gilead and Manasseh was apparently to recruit his army.

³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to Yahweh, and said, If You will indeed deliver the sons of Ammon into my hands, ³¹ then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, will surely be Yahweh's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.

That Jephthah made a vow to the Lord was not unusual in the Mosaic dispensation. Jephthah may have made the vow in anticipation of thanksgiving for divinely provided victory over the Ammonites. While the vow showed Jephthah's zeal and earnestness, many have thought it was also characterized by rashness. Some scholars have sought to protect Jephthah from this charge by translating Judges 11:31, "it will be the Lord's *or* I will offer it up as a burnt offering." However, the NIV more likely reflects Jephthah's intention — I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.

³² So Jephthah advanced toward the sons of Ammon to fight against them, and Yahweh delivered them into his hands.

³³ And he struck them from Aroer as far as Minnith (twenty cities) and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the sons of Ammon were subdued before the sons of Israel.

God fulfilled Jephthah's request and gave the Ammonites into his hands. Jephthah devastated 20 Ammonite-occupied towns in Gilead, and so subdued Ammon. Aroer was located about 14 miles east of the Dead Sea near the intersection of the Arnon River or the southern boundary of Reuben and the "King's Highway," on the main north-south trade route.

J. The Consequences of the Vow – 11:34-40

³⁴ When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter.

³⁵ And it happened, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to Yahweh, and I cannot go back on it.

³⁶ And she said to him, My father, if you have given your word to Yahweh, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because Yahweh has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon.

³⁷ And she said to her father, Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I.

³⁸ And he said, Go. And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains.

³⁹ And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel ⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Victorious Jephthah was met at the door of his house by his rejoicing daughter, who was jubilantly celebrating her father's victory over Ammon. Emphasis is placed on the fact that she was an only child. Anticipating the fulfillment of his vow, Jephthah expressed his great chagrin and sorrow in typical Near-Eastern fashion by tearing his clothes (cf., e.g., Genesis 37:29, Genesis 37:34; Genesis 44:13; Joshua 7:6; Esther 4:1; Job 1:20; Job 2:12).

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His statement, I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break, may reflect his ignorance of the legal option to redeem (with silver) persons who were thus dedicated (cf. Leviticus 27:1-8). Also the Mosaic Law expressly prohibited human sacrifices (cf. Leviticus 18:21; Leviticus 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:31; Deuteronomy 18:10). Therefore many scholars conclude that when Jephthah did to her as he had vowed (Judges 11:39), he commuted his daughter's fate from being a burnt sacrifice to being a lifelong virgin in service at Israel's central sanctuary. Other scholars believe Jephthah's semi-pagan culture led him to sacrifice her as a burnt offering. Strong arguments have been advanced for both views (cf. Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, pp. 288-95; Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, 2 vols. Chicago: Moody Press, 1981, 1:331).

K. The Punishment of Ephraim – 12:1-7

¹ **And the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you with fire!**

² **And Jephthah said to them, My people and I were in a great struggle with the sons of Ammon; and when I called you, you did not deliver me out of their hands.**

³ **And when I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the sons of Ammon; and Yahweh delivered them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?**

⁴ **And Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, because they said, You Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites and among the Manassites.**

⁵ **The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites arrived. And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, Let me cross over, the men of Gilead would say to him, Are you an Ephraimite? If he said, No, ⁶ then they would say to him, Then say, 'Shibboleth'! And he would say, Sibboleth, for he could not pronounce it right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan. There fell at that time forty-two thousand Ephraimites.**

The Ephraimites had been attacked by the Ammonites (cf. Judges 10:9) but the former's land had apparently not been occupied by the Ammonites as was true of Jephthah's Gileadites. Nevertheless the Ephraimites reacted against Jephthah because he had not invited their aid in defeating Ammon. In contrast with Gideon's tactful handling of a similar situation (cf. Judges 8:1-3), Jephthah asserted that they had not responded to his call (though the record is silent concerning such an invitation), so he gained victory over Ammon without their help. Insults by the Ephraimites then led to their destruction by the Gileadites. The Gileadites even killed straggling survivors who tried to ford the Jordan River to return to Ephraim. The Ephraimites were easily identified by their colloquial pronunciation of the Hebrew sound *sh* which they pronounced as an *s*. This civil conflict in Israel cost the Ephraimites 42,000 lives, a high price for jealousy!

⁷ **And Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in among the cities of Gilead.**

Following the victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah led (i.e., judged) Israel six years until his death.

VIII. The Judgeships of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon – 12:8-15

A. The Judgeship of Ibzan – 12:8-10

⁸ **After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel.**

⁹ **He had thirty sons. And he gave away thirty daughters in marriage, and brought in thirty daughters from elsewhere for his sons. He judged Israel seven years.**

¹⁰ **Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem.**

Three minor judges followed Jephthah, in various areas of Israel.

Ibzan led Israel as judge, apparently from his hometown of Bethlehem. It is not indicated whether this was Bethlehem in Judah or Bethlehem in Zebulun (cf. Joshua 19:10, Joshua 19:15). Ibzan's community status is evidenced by his large family of 30 sons and 30 daughters, and his political alliances are

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suggested by his seeking marriages both for his sons and daughters outside his clan. He judged Israel seven years before he died.

B. The Judgeship of Elon – 12:11-12

¹¹ **After him, Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel. He judged Israel ten years.**

¹² **And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the country of Zebulun.**

Elon the Zebulunite led Israel 10 years. Nothing is recorded about him except his place of burial — Aijalon (an unidentified city) in the land of Zebulun.

C. The Judgeship of Abdon – 12:13-15

¹³ **After him, Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel.**

¹⁴ **He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy young donkeys. He judged Israel eight years.**

¹⁵ **Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the mountains of the Amalekites.**

Abdon, who was from Pirathon in Ephraim (located seven miles west by southwest of Shechem), had 40 sons and 30 grandsons, each with his own donkey, the status symbol of nobility (cf. the judge Jair, whose 30 sons each rode a donkey; Judges 10:4). Abdon's eight-year judgeship may have involved some conflict with the Amalekites.

IX. The Judgeship of Samson – 13:1-16:31

A. The First Appearance of Angel of Yahweh – 13:1-7

¹ **Again the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of Yahweh, and Yahweh delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.**

Israel's monotonous downward spiral climaxed with the seventh recorded apostasy in the Book of Judges (cf. Judges 3:5-7, Judges 3:12-14; Judges 4:1-3; Judges 6:1-2; Judges 8:33-35; Judges 10:6-9). This apostasy appears to have been a phase of the idolatrous worship previously described in Judges 10:6 (which included "the gods of the Philistines"), because a resulting oppression by the Philistines (in the west) is mentioned in Judges 10:7 to complement that by the Ammonites (in the east).

The depths of Israelite apostasy and the greatness of Philistine strength were causes for the unprecedented length of oppression — 40 years — though the Philistines continued as a threat until the early years of David's reign (cf. 2 Samuel 5:17-25). Though earlier Philistine settlements had been present in Palestine (cf. Genesis 21:32-34; Genesis 26:1-18; Judges 1:18-19), the Philistines arrived in large numbers during the invasion of the Sea Peoples about 1200 b.c. They organized a pentapolis or confederation of five cities — Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ashdod on the strategic coastal highway, and Gath and Ekron on the edge of the Shephelah or Judean foothills (cf. Joshua 13:3).

When the Philistine aggression moved eastward into the land of Benjamin and Judah, the Israelites accepted that domination without resistance (cf. Judges 14:4; Judges 15:11) till the time of Samuel (cf. 1 Samuel 7:10-14).

How was it that Samson's parents, who were Danites, were still living in the Sorek Valley when much earlier the tribe of Dan had migrated north? (Judges 18:1-31) Apparently a few of the Danite clans stayed behind and did not move northward.

² **Now there was a certain man from Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren and had no children.**

³ **And the Angel of Yahweh appeared to the woman and said to her, Behold now you are barren and have borne no children, but you will become pregnant and bear a son.**

⁴ **Now therefore, please be careful not to drink wine or similar drink, and not to eat anything unclean.**

⁵ **For behold, you will become pregnant and bear a son. And no razor will come upon his head, for the child will be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he will begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.**

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Unless the repentance mentioned in Judges 10:10-16 includes the western Israelites who were being oppressed by the Philistines (cf. Judges 10:7) — which is unlikely in view of their apparent acceptance of the Philistine domination (cf. Judges 15:11) — there is no mention of Israel's cry to God before He raised up Samson as a deliverer (contrast Judges 3:9, Judges 3:15; Judges 4:3; Judges 6:7; Judges 10:10). Since Samson judged Israel 20 years (Judges 15:20; Judges 16:31), beginning apparently at about age 20, his entire life span must have approximated the 40-year Philistine oppression which began before his birth (cf. Judges 13:5). He was thus a contemporary of Samuel who with God's help subdued the Philistines after Samson's death (cf. 1 Samuel 7:10-14).

Samson's parents were from the clan of the Danites, perhaps implying that the bulk of the tribe of Dan had already made the move northward to the Huleh Valley (cf. Judges 18:1-31), so that only a clan or two remained in their original tribal inheritance. The childless wife of Manoah of Zorah was visited by the Angel of the Lord. Zorah, the highest point in the Shephelah, was on a high ridge north of the Sorek Valley and about 14 miles west of Jerusalem. Originally Zorah was a city of Judah (Joshua 15:20, Joshua 15:33), but later it was allotted to the tribe of Dan (Joshua 19:40-41). In this theophany (cf. comments on Judges 2:1-2) the Lord foretold the birth of her son, Samson, and said that he was to be a Nazirite. A Nazirite (meaning "devoted" or "consecrated") was a person whose vow of separation to God included abstaining from fermented drink, refraining from cutting his hair, and avoiding contact with dead bodies (Numbers 6:2-6). Nazirite vows were normally for a limited period of time but Samson was to be a Nazirite of God all his life (Judges 13:7). His mother was to share for a time in part of the Nazirite vow (Judges 13:4, Judges 13:7, Judges 13:14). Besides being set apart as a Nazirite, Samson was chosen by God to begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines. The completion of this task would be left to Samuel (1 Samuel 7:10-14) and David (2 Samuel 5:17-25).

⁶ So the woman came and told her husband, saying, A man of God came to me, and His appearance was like the appearance of the Angel of God, very awesome; but I did not ask Him where He was from, and He did not tell me His name.

⁷ And He said to me, Behold, you will become pregnant and bear a son. Now drink no wine or similar drink, nor eat anything unclean, for the child will be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.

Manoah's wife reported directly to her husband. She calls the Angel of Yahweh "A man of God" because He had taken the appearance of a man. But it's clear that she recognized that this was more than a man. She emphasizes that by describing his appearance as "the Angel of God, very awesome." Furthermore, she understood the significance of the fact, and did not ask from where the "man of God" came. She also states that He did not tell her His name, and the woman did not press the issue.

B. The Second Appearance of the Angel of Yahweh – 13:8-21

⁸ Then Manoah prayed to Yahweh, and said, O my Lord, please let the man of God whom You sent come to us again and teach us what we will do for the child who will be born.

When Manoah's wife reported to him her encounter with this One whom she described as a Man of God, who looked like an Angel Manoah prayed for His reappearance to teach them how to bring up the boy.

⁹ And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the Angel of God came to the woman again as she was sitting in the field; but Manoah her husband was not with her.

¹⁰ And the woman ran in haste and told her husband, and said to him, Behold, the Man has just now appeared to me who came to me the other day!

¹¹ And Manoah arose and followed his wife. When he came to the Man, he said to Him, Are You the Man who spoke to this woman? And He said, I am.

¹² And Manoah said, Now let Your words come to pass! What will be the boy's rule of life, and his work?

¹³ And the Angel of Yahweh said to Manoah, Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful.

¹⁴ She may not eat anything that comes from the vine, nor may she drink wine or similar drink, nor eat anything unclean. All that I commanded her let her observe.

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¹⁵ **And Manoah said to the Angel of Yahweh, Please let us detain You, and we will prepare a young goat for You.**

¹⁶ **And the Angel of Yahweh said to Manoah, Though you detain Me, I will not eat your food. But if you offer a burnt offering, you must offer it to Yahweh. (For Manoah did not know He was the Angel of Yahweh.)**

¹⁷ **And Manoah said to the Angel of Yahweh, What is Your name, that when Your words come to pass we may honor You?**

¹⁸ **And the Angel of Yahweh said to him, Why do you ask My name, seeing it is wonderful?**

In response to Manoah's prayer the Angel of God (another title for the Angel of the Lord) reappeared, first to his wife and then to Manoah, but He merely repeated His previous instructions. Not fully realizing the divine character of his Guest (Judges 13:16), Manoah invited the Messenger to stay for a meal. The Angel indicated that any provisions should be offered to the Lord as a burnt offering. On asking the Angel's name, Manoah was informed, It is beyond understanding.

¹⁹ **So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it upon the rock to Yahweh. And He did a wondrous thing while Manoah and his wife looked on, ²⁰ it happened as the flame went up toward heaven from the altar the Angel of Yahweh ascended in the flame of the altar! And Manoah and his wife saw this, and they fell on their faces to the ground.**

²¹ **And the Angel of Yahweh appeared no more to Manoah and his wife, so Manoah knew that He was the Angel of Yahweh.**

C. The Logic of a Wise Woman – 13:22-23

²² **And Manoah said to his wife, We will surely die, because we have seen God!**

²³ **But his wife said to him, If Yahweh had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands, nor would He have shown us all these things, nor would He have told us such things as these at this time.**

Then Manoah sacrificed a young goat (cf. Judges 13:15) with a grain offering (cf. Leviticus 2:1-16) on a rock to the Lord. He and his wife were amazed as the Angel of the Lord ascended in the flame that blazed up from the altar. Realizing the identity of the divine Messenger, Manoah expressed fear of impending death because of their having seen God (cf. Gideon's similar response, Judges 6:22-23). Manoah's wife more practically pointed out that God's acceptance of the sacrifice and the promise of a son indicated that immediate death was not God's plan for them.

D. The Birth of Samson – 13:24-25

²⁴ **And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson; and the child grew, and Yahweh blessed him.**

In fulfillment of the words of the divine Messenger, Manoah's wife gave birth to Samson (a name related to the word for "sun"), who grew up under the blessing of the Lord.

²⁵ **And the Spirit of Yahweh began to move upon him at Mahaneh Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol.**

One day the Spirit of the Lord began to stir Samson, that is, to empower him to begin to deliver Israel. This happened at Mahaneh Dan ("Camp of Dan"; cf. Judges 18:11-12 for the origin of the name) between Zorah (Samson's home; cf. Judges 13:2) and Eshtaol (a town about one and one-half miles east by northeast of Zorah). Samson was later buried between these two towns (Judges 16:31; also cf. Judges 18:2, Judges 18:8, Judges 18:11). Samson's leadership as judge or deliverer did not take the form of leading an army against the Philistines. Rather it consisted of his being a lone champion for the cause of his people. His exploits, the record of which begins in Judges 14:1-20, distracted the Philistines from more serious invasions into the tribal areas of Benjamin and Judah.

E. The Woman of Timnah – 14:1-7

¹ **And Samson went down to Timnah, and saw a woman in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines.**

² **And he went up and told his father and mother, saying, I have seen a woman in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife.**

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³ **And his father and mother said to him, Is there no woman among the daughters of your brethren, or among all my people, that you must go and get a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said to his father, Get her for me, for she pleases me well.**

⁴ **And his father and mother knew not that it was of Yahweh – that He was seeking an occasion to move against the Philistines. For at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.**

Samson's exploits with the Philistines began with his desire for a young Philistine woman who lived in Timnah (probably modern Tell el-Batashi, four miles northwest down the Sorek Valley from Beth Shemesh). Since marriages were contracted by the parents (cf. Genesis 21:21), Samson insisted that his parents get her for him as his wife. Since marriage with a non-Israelite was expressly forbidden by the Mosaic Law (Exodus 34:16; Deuteronomy 7:3), his parents objected to his marrying a Philistine (cf. Judges 14:3). Other peoples around Israel, whether Egyptians or Semites, practiced circumcision, but the Philistines did not. By citing this fact Samson's parents were deriding the Philistines.

Though Samson's parents objected to his marrying a Philistine, they allowed Samson's wishes to prevail. They did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines. This does not mean that breaking the Law was desired by God but that Samson's decision was overruled by God for His own purpose and glory.

⁵ **And Samson, with his father and mother, went down to Timnah and came to the vineyards of Timnah. Now behold, a young lion came roaring against him.**

⁶ **And the Spirit of Yahweh came mightily upon him, and he tore the lion apart as one would have torn apart a young goat, though he had nothing in his hand. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done.**

⁷ **And he went down and talked with the woman; and she pleased Samson well.**

Samson took his parents down to Timnah to arrange the wedding. He apparently turned aside into the vineyards of Timnah, perhaps to obtain grapes, where he was attacked by a young lion. Under the empowerment of the Spirit of the Lord (cf. Judges 14:19; Judges 15:14) he tore the lion apart with his bare hands, probably in the manner Near-Easterners rend a young goat, pulling it in half by the hind legs. That he did not tell his father or mother about this implies that they had proceeded on to Timnah to complete the betrothal arrangement. When Samson arrived in Timnah, he could then actually talk to the woman, perhaps for the first time (before he had only "seen" her, Judges 14:2), and he liked her.

F. The Riddle of Samson – 14:8-14

⁸ **And after some time, when he returned to get her, he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion. And behold, a swarm of bees and honey were in the carcass of the lion.**

⁹ **And he took some of it in his hands and went along, eating. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them, and they also ate. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey out of the carcass of the lion.**

Some time later, when the betrothal period was completed, he was on his way to the wedding. Again he turned aside into the vineyards, this time to look at the lion's carcass in which he discovered a swarm of bees and some honey. He scooped out the honey to eat it, and shared it with his parents without informing them of its source. While the Nazirite law strictly prohibited contact with a dead person, the purpose of this was to avoid ceremonial uncleanness (Numbers 6:7). Since touching the carcass of even a clean animal made a person (with the obvious exception of an officiating priest) ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 11:39-40), probably Samson's scooping the honey from the lion's carcass was a violation of his Nazirite vow. His participation in the wedding feast (Judges 14:10) may also have violated his vow to abstain from fermented drink. However, only one Nazirite qualification was specifically indicated before his birth — "No razor may be used on his head" (Judges 13:5). Later a violation of this specific practice would lead to the removal of the power of God's Spirit from him (Judges 16:17-20).

¹⁰ **And his father went down to the woman. And Samson gave a feast there, for so did the young men.**

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¹¹ And it happened, when they saw him, that they brought thirty companions to be with him.

¹² And Samson said to them, Let me pose a riddle to you. If you can correctly solve and explain it to me within the seven days of the feast, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothing.

¹³ But if you cannot explain it to me, then you will give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothing. And they said to him, Pose your riddle, that we may hear it.

¹⁴ And he said to them: Out of the eater came something to eat, And out of the strong came something sweet. Now for three days they could not explain the riddle.

At the seven-day wedding ceremony, Samson conducted the customary feast (lit., “drinking party”) and was accompanied by 30 companions (typical “friends of the bridegroom,” apparently provided by the Philistine family). Samson told his companions a riddle, the meaning of which he made more challenging with a wager of 30 linen garments (large rectangular sheets often used as undergarments) and 30 sets of clothes (festal garments, often embroidered). Solving Samson’s poetically phrased riddle — Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet — would require a knowledge of his having taken honey from the lion’s carcass.

G. The Coercion of the Philistines – 14:15-18

¹⁵ And it happened on the seventh day that they said to Samson’s wife, Entice your husband, that he may explain the riddle to us, or else we will burn you and your father’s house with fire. Have you invited us in order to take what is ours? Is that not so?

¹⁶ And Samson’s wife wept on him, and said, You only hate me! You do not love me! You have posed a riddle to the sons of my people, but you have not explained it to me. And he said to her, Behold, I have not explained it to my father or my mother; so *why* should I explain it to you?

¹⁷ And she had wept on him the seven days while their feast lasted. And it happened on the seventh day that he told her, because she pressed him so much. Then she explained the riddle to the sons of her people.

¹⁸ And the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down: What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion? And he said to them: If you had not plowed with my heifer, You would not have solved my riddle!

Unable to solve the riddle after three days, the companions threatened Samson’s bride and her family with death if she would not obtain the answer for them. They implied that she might have been involved in a scheme with Samson to rob them by means of the wager. Samson withstood bridal tears till the seventh day of the feast when the time to solve the riddle would expire (cf. Judges 14:12). Then Samson’s weakness to give in to the tears or pleadings of a woman (cf. Judges 16:16) was expressed. He finally told her and she in turn explained the riddle to the 30 Philistines. When they informed Samson of the solution which, like the riddle, they phrased in poetic parallelism, Samson retorted concerning his bride with a scornful but picturesque figure of speech: If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle. In calling her a “heifer” he was ridiculing her for her untamed and stubborn spirit (cf. Jeremiah 50:11; Hosea 4:16).

H. The Retaliation against the Ashkelonites – 14:19-20

¹⁹ And the Spirit of Yahweh came upon him mightily, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck thirty of their men, took their apparel, and gave the changes of clothing to those who had explained the riddle. So his anger was aroused, and he went back up to his father’s house.

²⁰ And Samson’s wife was given to his companion, who was his friend.

To fulfill his obligation in the wager (cf. Judges 14:12) Samson attacked 30 Philistines in Ashkelon (23 miles southwestward on the Mediterranean coast — far enough away not to be associated with Samson in Timnah) and took their clothes to the Philistines who had explained the riddle. God overruled Samson’s foolishness by the enabling power of the Spirit of the Lord (cf. Judges 14:6; Judges 15:14) to accomplish His purpose of disrupting the Philistine status quo of easy dominance over Israel (cf. Judges 14:4). Still angry, Samson went up to his father’s house in Zorah without returning to his wife on the seventh night of

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the wedding to consummate the marriage. The bride's father, to avoid the disgrace of what he perceived as an annulment (cf. Judges 15:2), gave her to the best man.

I. Samson's Revenge Against the Philistines – 15:1-8

¹ After a while, in the time of wheat harvest, it happened that Samson visited his wife with a young goat. And he said, Let me go in to my wife, into her room. But her father would not permit him to go in.

² Her father said, I really thought that you thoroughly hated her; therefore I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister better than she? Please, take her instead.

³ And Samson said to them, This time I will be blameless regarding the Philistines if I harm them!

⁴ Then Samson went and caught three hundred foxes; and he took torches, turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails.

⁵ When he had set the torches on fire, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up both the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves.

Samson later (in the wheat harvest, i.e., May) returned to Timnah with a present of a young goat (cf. Judges 13:15, Judges 13:19) for his wife. Samson's marriage was apparently the *ṣadiqa* type in which the bride remained with her parents and was visited periodically by her husband (cf. Judges 8:31). Thus Samson's present was probably not a reconciliation gift for his previous behavior, but merely the expected gift on a husband's periodic visit. However, Samson soon discovered that his bride had been given to another by her father who thought Samson hated her (the word is used in a divorce context in Deuteronomy 24:3).

Unimpressed with the offer of marriage to her younger sister, Samson again vented his anger on the Philistines, this time by burning their grain (wheat, Judges 15:1) fields. He did this by fastening torches to the tied tails of pairs of 300 foxes (the Heb. word can also mean jackals which run in packs and are more easily caught). The fiery destruction included the dry shocks of grain already harvested along with the dry standing grain yet to be harvested and spread also to the vineyards and olive groves (thus destroying the land's three main crops; cf. Deuteronomy 7:13; Haggai 1:11).

⁶ Then the Philistines said, Who has done this? And they answered, Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken his wife and given her to his companion. So the Philistines attacked and burned her and her father with fire.

⁷ Samson said to them, Since you would do a thing like this, I will surely take revenge on you, and after that I will cease.

⁸ So he struck them hip and thigh with a great slaughter; then he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock of Etam.

When the Philistines learned that Samson caused the destruction, they retaliated by burning his wife and her father to death (apparently destroying the entire Timnite household). Motivated again by personal revenge, Samson viciously slaughtered many of the Philistines and then walked to a cave in the rock of Etam. The term "viciously" is literally "leg on thigh," a wrestling metaphor for a ferocious attack. Though there is a town named Etam about 2 miles southwest of Bethlehem in Judah (about 17 miles from Timnah), another possibility is to identify the site with a cleft above the Wadi Isma'in about 2 miles southeast of Zorah.

J. The Delivery of Samson to the Philistines – 15:9-13

⁹ And the Philistines went up, camped in Judah, and deployed themselves against Lehi.

¹⁰ And the men of Judah said, Why have you come up against us? So they answered, We have come up to arrest Samson, to do to him as he has done to us.

¹¹ And three thousand men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson, Do you not know that the Philistines rule over us? What is this you have done to us? And he said to them, As they did to me, so I have done to them.

¹² And they said to him, We have come down to arrest you, that we may deliver you into the hand of the Philistines. Then Samson said to them, Swear to me that you will not kill me yourselves.

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¹³ And they spoke to him, saying, No, but we will bind you tightly and deliver you into their hand; and we will certainly not kill you. And they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.

Pursuing Samson, the Philistines camped in Judah near Lehi (lit., “jawbone”; perhaps modern Khirbet es-Siyyaj). When the Judeans learned the reason for the Philistine show of force, they sought Samson with 3,000 men to turn him over to the Philistines. Apparently satisfied with the status quo, they asked Samson, Don’t you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? When the Judeans agreed not to kill him themselves, Samson (not wanting to shed Israelite blood) let them surrender him to the Philistines. They bound him with two new ropes, but these became like charred flax and dropped from his hands when he came near the jubilant Philistines. Again special strength was given him by the Spirit of the Lord (cf. Judges 14:6, Judges 14:19).

K. The Jawbone of a Donkey – 15:14-20

¹⁴ And he came as far as Lehi, and the Philistines came shouting against him. And the Spirit of Yahweh came powerfully upon him; and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds broke loose from his hands.

¹⁵ And he found a fresh jawbone of a male donkey, and he put out his hand and took it, and struck a thousand men with it.

¹⁶ Then Samson said: With the jawbone of a male donkey, a heap, two heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey I have struck a thousand men!

¹⁷ And it happened, when he finished speaking, he threw the jawbone from his hand, and called that place Ramath Lehi.

Grabbing a fresh jawbone of a donkey (an old one would have been too brittle), Samson slaughtered 1,000 Philistines. His words of triumph included a play on the Hebrew *hamor* which can mean either “donkey” or “heap.” Thus the phrase translated I have made donkeys of them is often translated “heaps upon heaps” (NASB) and interpreted to mean something like, “I have piled them in heaps.” The place where this happened was Ramath Lehi, which probably means “the hill (height) of the jawbone.”

¹⁸ And he was very thirsty; so he cried out to Yahweh and said, You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant; and now will I die of thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?

¹⁹ And God cut the hollow place that is in Lehi, and water came out, and he drank; and his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore he called its name En Hakkore, which is in Lehi to this day.

²⁰ And he judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

The next incident in Samson’s life was God’s provision of water for him. Samson was extremely thirsty after his difficult effort in the hot, dry climate. His cry to the Lord was miraculously answered as God opened up the hollow place (*maktes*, lit., “mortar,” i.e., basin) and water came out. This place where Samson’s strength was restored was still called En Hakkore (“spring of the caller”) when the Book of Judges was completed (it is still there).

Samson’s leadership over Israel, summarized at this point, is also noted in Judges 16:31. The 20 years (about 1069-1049 b.c.) would cover Samson’s adult life until his death in Gaza (cf. Judges 16:30-31).

L. The Prostitute of Gaza – 16:1-3

¹ And Samson went to Gaza and saw a prostitute there, and went in to her.

² And to the Gazites it was said, Samson has come here! And they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the gate of the city. They were silent all night, saying, We will kill him in the morning, when it is daylight.

³ And Samson lay until midnight; and arose at midnight, and he took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two gateposts, and pulled them up, with the bar, put them on his shoulders, and carried them to the top of the hill in front of Hebron.

The incident of Samson’s removing the doors of Gaza showed that his physical strength was unmatched except by his moral weakness. No reason is given why Samson went to Gaza, perhaps the most important Philistine city, which was near the coast about 35 miles southwest of his home in Zorah. Whatever the

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reason, his sensual inclinations overcame him and he spent the night with a prostitute. Aware of Samson's presence in the city, the Philistines of Gaza lay in wait for him all night at the city gate, planning to kill him when he left at dawn. However, Samson arose in the middle of the night, apparently catching them by such surprise that he escaped even though he pulled away the doors of the city gate, together with the two post bar and all. In fact, he carried the doors to the top of the hill that faces Hebron. Whether this is a hill outside of Gaza that has a view eastward toward Hebron, or whether Samson carried the doors uphill 37 miles to a hill outside of Hebron, is not clear from the text. Local tradition identifies the hill as El Montar just east of Gaza. There seems to be no reason why Samson would carry the doors farther, since he had already insulted the people of the city by removing its gate of security.

M. The Seduction by Delilah – 16:4-19

⁴ **And it happened that he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.**

⁵ **And the lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, Entice him, and find out where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, so that we may bind him to afflict him; and every one of us will give you eleven hundred pieces of silver.**

⁶ **So Delilah said to Samson, Please tell me where your great strength lies, and with what you may be bound to afflict you.**

⁷ **And Samson said to her, If they bind me with seven fresh cords, not yet dried, then I will become weak, and be like any other man.**

⁸ **And the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh cords, not yet dried, and she bound him with them.**

⁹ **And men were lying in wait, staying with her in the room. And she said to him, The Philistines are upon you, Samson! And he broke the cords like a strand of yarn breaks when it touches fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.**

¹⁰ **And Delilah said to Samson, Behold, you have mocked me and told me lies. Now, please tell me what you may be bound with.**

¹¹ **And he said to her, If they bind me securely with new ropes that have never been used, then I will become weak, and be like any other man.**

¹² **And Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and said to him, The Philistines are upon you, Samson! And men were lying in wait, staying in the room. And he broke them off his arms like a thread.**

¹³ **Delilah said to Samson, Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me what you may be bound with. And he said to her, If you weave the seven locks of my head into the web of the loom.**

¹⁴ **And she tightened it with the peg of the loom, and said to him, The Philistines are upon you, Samson! But he awoke from his sleep, and pulled out the peg and the web from the loom.**

Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah (though she was probably a Philistine, she had a Semitic name meaning “devotee” so she may have been a temple prostitute). She was at least the third woman with whom Samson had been involved (cf. Judges 14:1-2; Judges 16:1). The town where Delilah lived in the Valley of Sorek (where Samson spent most of his life) is not named, whether Har-heres (Beth Shemesh), or Timnah, or some other town.

The Philistine rulers devised a plot to capture Samson. The Bible does not say how many rulers were involved, but probably the number was five, one for each of the major Philistine cities. They hired Delilah to learn the secret of his great strength and how to overpower and subdue him. The rulers each promised to give her the exorbitant amount of 1,100 pieces of silver, equal to many thousands of dollars. Delilah made three fruitless attempts to gain Samson's confidence and secret. Each time he teased her by inventing a means whereby he would become as weak as any other man and could be captured: (a) if he were tied up with seven fresh thongs (i.e., bowstrings prepared from animal viscera); (b) if he were tied up with new ropes that have never been used (but the effectiveness of this had already been disproven; Judges 15:13); and (c) if his hair (getting closer to the truth) was woven into the fabric on the loom. Delilah futilely tried each method, apparently while Samson slept (as in Judges 16:13), and seemed to tease him by crying out, Samson, the Philistines are upon you! (Judges 16:9, Judges 16:12, Judges 16:14)

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when in reality she was testing the success or failure of each method before the Philistines, hidden in the room (Judges 16:9, Judges 16:12), dared show themselves.

¹⁵ And she said to him, How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and have not told me where your great strength lies.

¹⁶ And it happened, she pressed him daily with her words and urged him, so that his soul was annoyed to death, ¹⁷ and he told her all his heart, and said to her, No razor has ever come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaven, then my strength will leave me, and I will become weak, and be like any other man.

Samson finally revealed the source of his strength, which was not a magical secret, as the Philistines had supposed, but a supernatural enablement from the Spirit of God (cf. Judges 13:25; Judges 14:6, Judges 14:19; Judges 15:14). This enablement was associated with Samson's special separation to the Lord through his Nazirite status, which was especially symbolized by his uncut hair (Judges 13:5). Samson explained his Nazirite status to Delilah when he could no longer bear her nagging him for his secret. He said that if his head were shaved, he would become as weak as any other man. This was not because his strength was in his hair but because cutting it would manifest his disobedience to the Lord, a disobedience that had already begun by his revealing the truth to Delilah whom he had no reason to trust.

¹⁸ When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines, saying, Come up once more, for he has told me all his heart. So the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hand.

¹⁹ And she caused him to sleep on her knees, and called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. And she began to afflict him, and his strength left him.

Samson's indiscretion led to his imprisonment by the Philistines. This time Delilah sensed that Samson had told her everything, so she set the trap again and had his hair shaved while he slept on her lap. As a fruit of his foolish disobedience to the Lord, Samson's strength left him. Apparently Samson was also bound since, when Delilah cried out The Philistines are upon you! he attempted to shake himself free. The tragic fact was that he did not know that the Lord had left him. The departure of the Spirit of the Lord was tantamount to discharging him from his role as judge.

N. The Degradation of Samson – 16:20-25

²⁰ And she said, The Philistines are upon you, Samson! And he awoke from his sleep, and said, I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free! But he knew not that Yahweh had departed from him.

²¹ And the Philistines took him and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza. They bound him with bronze chains, and he was grinding in the prison.

²² However, the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaven.

The powerless Samson was then seized by the Philistines who blinded him and took him down to Gaza, a just retribution they no doubt thought for his stealing its city gate (Judges 16:1-3). They bound him with bronze shackles and set him to grinding meal between millstones in the prison, a woman's work. This may have been a handmill with a saddle-quern (cf. comments on Judges 9:53), since it is not certain that large animal-turned mills were used that early. As time passed while Samson was in prison, his hair (the symbol of his Nazirite dedication, Judges 13:5) began to grow again. Since the physical growth of his hair would be expected, the point of this observation must have been the anticipation of Samson's renewed strength for one last act of revenge against the Philistines (cf. Judges 16:28-30).

²³ Now the lords of the Philistines gathered together to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and to rejoice. And they said: Our god has delivered Samson our enemy into our hands!

²⁴ And the people saw him, and they praised their god; for they said: Our god has delivered into our hands our enemy, The destroyer of our land, And the one who increased our dead.

²⁵ And it happened, when their hearts were merry, that they said, Call for Samson, that he may amuse us. So they called for Samson from the prison, and he entertained them. And they stood him between the pillars.

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The time came for the Philistine rulers to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god. Dagon was a West Semitic grain deity (cf. 1 Samuel 5:2-7; 1 Chronicles 10:10) adopted by the Philistines from the Amorites. Since they believed that their god had delivered Samson into their hands they called Samson out of the prison to entertain them (apparently expecting to see some acts of strength, or perhaps just to mock their now-powerless opponent). A Philistine temple was typically a long inner chamber with two major pillars supporting the roof.

O. The Death of Samson – 16:26-31

²⁶ **And Samson said to the lad who held him by the hand, Allow me feel the pillars which support the temple, so that I can lean on them.**

²⁷ **And the building was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there, about three thousand men and women on the roof watching while Samson entertained.**

²⁸ **And Samson called to Yahweh, saying, O Lord GOD, remember me, please! Strengthen me, please, just this once, O God, that I may with one blow take vengeance on the Philistines for my two eyes!**

²⁹ **And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars which supported the building, and he supported himself against them, one on his right and the other on his left.**

³⁰ **And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines! And he bent forward with all his might, and the temple fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead that he killed at his death were more than he had killed in his life.**

A large group of Philistines (including some 3,000 people on the roof) watched Samson perform, apparently in an outer court. What his “performing” included is not known. Afterward blind Samson had the servant who was guiding him take him to the pillars that support the temple, on the pretext of resting against them. However, he then prayed to the Lord for one final feat of strength to obtain revenge on the Philistines. Samson bracing himself against the pillars (whether between them pushing outward, or adjacent to them leaning forward), said, Let me die with the Philistines! and pushed with all his might. God granted his final prayer and the temple was demolished, killing more people in Samson’s death than he had slain while he lived. Previously he had killed at least 1,030 Philistines (30 in Ashkelon, Judges 14:19; and 1,000 at Ramath Lehi, Judges 15:14-17).

³¹ **And his brothers and all the household of his father came down and took him, and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. He judged Israel twenty years.**

Samson’s whole family (his brothers) who had not been mentioned till this incident (went down to Gaza and brought Samson’s body back for burial between Zorah (his birthplace, Judges 13:2) and Eshtaol (cf. Judges 13:25; Judges 18:2, Judges 18:8, Judges 18:11) in Manoah’s tomb. Thus ended Samson’s 20 years of judgeship over Israel (cf. Judges 15:20). Though Samson had great ability and was endowed with physical power by the Holy Spirit, he gave in to temptation several times and suffered the consequences. His life is a stern warning to others who are prone to follow the path of sensuality.

X. The Idolatry of Micah and the Danites – 17:1-18:31

A. The Idol of Silver – 17:1-4

¹ **And there was a man from the mountains of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.**

² **And he said to his mother, The eleven hundred pieces of silver that were taken from you, and on which you put a curse, even saying it in my ears – Behold, the silver is with me; I took it. And his mother said, May you my son be blessed by Yahweh!**

³ **And when he had returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother, his mother said, I had wholly dedicated the silver from my hand to Yahweh for my son, to make a carved image and a molded image; now therefore, I will return it to you.**

⁴ **Thus he returned the silver to his mother. Then his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave them to the silversmith, and he made it into a carved image and a molded image; and they were in the house of Micah.**

Theologically chapters 17-21 constitute an epilogue giving illustrations of the religious apostasy and social degradation that characterized the period of the Judges. Those conditions were viewed by the

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author (probably early in the monarchy) as indicative of the anarchy which prevailed when “Israel had no king” (Judges 17:6; Judges 18:1; Judges 19:1; Judges 21:25). Historically the events recorded in these chapters form an appendix to the book, having transpired fairly early in the preceding history. An early date is indicated by the presence of the grandsons of both Moses (Judges 18:30) and Aaron (Judges 20:28) and by reference to the ark at Bethel (Judges 20:27-28). Possibly the events in chapters 17-18 took place in the days of Othniel, the first judge.

The epilogue consists of two major sections: (1) Chapters 17-18 interweave stories of the household idolatry of Micah the Ephraimite who hired the Levite Jonathan, Moses’ grandson (Judges 18:30), as his personal priest, and the migration and tribal idolatry of the Danites. (2) Chapters 19-21 narrate an atrocity perpetrated on another Levite’s concubine at Gibeah, and the ensuing civil war against the recalcitrant tribe of Benjamin, leading to its near annihilation.

It is ironic that a man named Micah (meaning “Who is like Yahweh?”) should establish an apostate shrine with an unlawful priesthood. Such a situation came about, in part, when he heard his mother utter a curse against the thief who had stolen her 1,100 pieces of silver, and then confessed, I took it. (These 1,100 silver pieces are not to be confused with the 1,100 silver pieces that each of the Philistine rulers gave Delilah, Judges 16:5, Judges 16:18.) As a reward for such “honesty,” his mother sought to neutralize her curse with a blessing (The Lord bless you, my son!). Her subsequent consecration of the silver to the Lord to make a carved image was in disobedience to the command in Exodus 20:4, and reflects the idolatrous Canaanite influence on the Israelites during this period.

The phrase a carved image and a cast idol suggests two objects of false worship, an image carved out of stone or wood, and a cast idol made out of melted metal poured into a mold. But some scholars think the phrase is a hendiadys (referring to only one molded image), perhaps a wooden idol overlaid with silver which Micah’s mother had made and placed in the house. However, in Judges 18:18 the objects are clearly distinct. Micah’s mother paid a silversmith 200 silver pieces — equal to several thousand dollars — to make those objects of worship.

B. The Levite from Judah – 17:5-13

⁵ And the man Micah had a house of gods, and made an ephod and teraphim; and he consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.

The carved and a molded image was not the only idol in Micah’s aberrant shrine (lit., “house of god[s]”), for he had an ephod (possibly as an object of worship; cf. Judges 8:24-27; or for a priest to wear) and some idols (*teraphim*; cf. Genesis 31:17-50). He then installed one of his sons as his priest to conduct worship in this shrine (later Micah installed another priest, Judges 17:12).

⁶ In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

The author, writing from the viewpoint of the early monarchy, explained Micah’s religious lawlessness as a characteristic of a period without the centralized authority of a king (cf. Judges 18:1; Judges 19:1; Judges 21:25).

⁷ And there was a young man from Bethlehem-Judah, of the family of Judah; he was a Levite, and was staying there.

⁸ And the man departed from the city, Bethlehem-Judah, to stay wherever he could find. And as he traveled he came to the mountain of Ephraim, to the house of Micah.

⁹ And Micah said to him, From where do you come? And he said to him, I am a Levite from Bethlehem-Judah, and I am on my way to find somewhere to stay.

¹⁰ And Micah said to him, Live with me, and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten pieces of silver per year, a suit of clothing, and your sustenance. And the Levite went in.

¹¹ And the Levite was content to live with the man; and the young man became to him like one of his sons.

¹² So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and abode in the house of Micah.

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¹³ **And Micah said, Now I know that Yahweh will do good for me, since I have a Levite as priest!**

A young Bethlehem Levite (Moses' grandson, Jonathan son of Gershom; cf. Judges 18:30) moved to the hill country of Ephraim where he was employed by Micah to be his father (a term of honor; cf. Genesis 45:8; 2 Kings 6:21; 2 Kings 13:14) and priest. Micah took care of him like one of his sons. So Micah installed the Levite (cf. Judges 18:4) as his priest (in addition to Micah's own son, who was made a priest, Judges 17:5). Micah rejoiced because of his superstitious notion that having a Levite (a young man; cf. Judges 18:3) for his priest would bring blessings from the Lord, when in fact it was forbidden in the Law (cf. Numbers 3:10). The Levite, of course, was as much (or more) to blame for having accepted the position. These acts of disobedience to God's Law were typical of the Israelites in the time of the Judges.

C. The Idolatry of the Danites – 18:1-6

¹ **No king was in Israel in those days. And in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for itself to abide in; for until that day their inheritance among the tribes of Israel had not been allotted to them.**

This chapter repeats the refrain of the epilogue that Israel had no king (Judges 17:6; Judges 19:1; Judges 21:25). This lack of a central authority to muster an Israelite army no doubt aggravated the problem faced by the tribe of Dan, namely, Dan's inability (or lack of faith) to come into an inheritance. The Danites were being pushed by the Amorites (Judges 1:34-35; cf. Joshua 19:47) and later the Philistines (with the rest of Israel; cf. Judges 13:1; Judges 14:4; Judges 15:11). Dan was forced more and more eastward into the territory of Benjamin and Ephraim. Because of Dan's cramped living conditions its people decided to seek a new territory.

² **So the sons of Dan sent five men of their number from their territory, men of valor from Zorah and Eshtaol, to spy out the land and search it, and said to them, Go, search the land. So they went to the mountain of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there.**

³ **When they were by the house of Micah, they knew the voice of the young man, the Levite; and they turned aside there, and said unto him, Who brought you here? And what do you do in this place? and what do you have here?**

⁴ **He said to them, Thus and so has Micah done for me, and has hired me, and I am his priest.**

⁵ **And they said to him, Ask, please, of God, that we may know whether the way on which we go will be prosperous.**

⁶ **And the priest said to them, Go in peace. Yahweh be before you on your way.**

The clans of the Danites sent five warriors from Zorah and Eshtaol (cf. Judges 13:25; Judges 16:31) to explore the land. Early in their journey they lodged for the night in the house of Micah in the hill country of Ephraim (cf. Judges 17:1). There they recognized the voice (probably the Judean accent) of Micah's priest (the young Levite Jonathan; cf. Judges 17:12) and inquired concerning his presence and activities in Ephraim. When they learned that he was functioning as a priest, they superstitiously sought some word of God's blessing on their mission. One wonders about the source of the priest's confident answer: Your journey has the Lord's approval. The outward success of their mission did not correspond with the Lord's revealed plan for the tribe of Dan, and eventuated in the establishing of a major center of idolatry (cf. Judges 18:30-31; 1 Kings 12:28-30).

D. The Spying on Laish – 18: 7-10

⁷ **And the five men departed and went to Laish. They saw the people who were there, how they lived in safety, in the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and secure. There were no one in the land having authority who might put them to shame for anything, and they were far from the Sidonians, and they had no dealings with any man.**

As the five spies continued to explore the land they eventually came to Laish (Leshem in Joshua 19:47; modern Tell el-Qadi) about 25 miles north of the Sea of Kinnereth and 27 miles east of Tyre. Located on the north edge of the fertile Huleh Basin, the land lacked nothing and the people were prosperous. Their town was also isolated from the Sidonians by the Lebanon range of mountains, and from Syria by Mount

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Hermon and the Anti-Lebanon range, so that they were without close military allies. Possibly Hazor had already been destroyed (Judges 4:2, Judges 4:23-24), though this may raise some chronological problems concerning the Levite as Moses' grandson (cf. Judges 18:30).

⁸ And the spies returned to their brothers at Zorah and Eshtaol, and their brothers said to them, What do you say?

⁹ And they said, Arise, let us attack them. For we have seen the land, and behold, it is very good, and you are still. Do not be sluggish to go, and enter to possess the land.

¹⁰ When you enter, you will come to a secure people and a large land; for God has given it into your hands, a place where there is no lack of anything that is on the earth.

Returning home, the five spies reported an unsuspecting people and a spacious land that lacks nothing whatever. They encouraged the Danites to attack Laish without hesitation. They felt that God had given it to them. Though their theological affirmation is debatable, their anticipated victory seemed inevitable.

E. The Expedition of the Danites – 18:11-13

¹¹ And there went from there from the family of the Danites, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, six hundred men girded with weapons of war.

¹² And they went up and camped in Kirjath-jearim, in Judah; therefore they call that place Mahaneh-Dan to this day. Behold, it is behind⁸ Kirjath-jearim.

¹³ And they passed from there to mount Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah.

The Danites armed 600 men for battle who first camped near Kiriath Jearim (about six miles east of the Zorah-Eshtaol area). Their campsite, Mahaneh Dan ("Camp of Dan"), was where Samson later first sensed the work of God's Spirit in his life (Judges 13:25). The Danites then went on to Ephraim where Micah (cf. Judges 17:1; Judges 18:2) lived.

F. The Theft by the Danites – 18:14-21

¹⁴ Then the five men who had gone to spy out the country of Laish spoke and said to their brothers, Do you know that in these houses is an ephod, and teraphim, and a carved image, and a molten image? And now you know what to do.

¹⁵ And they turned aside there, and came to the house of the young Levite man, to the house of Micah, inquired after his welfare.

¹⁶ The six hundred men armed girded with their weapons of war, who were of the sons of Dan, stood by the entrance of the gate.

¹⁷ And the five men who had gone to spy out the land went up, entered there, and took the carved image, and the ephod, and the teraphim, and the molten image. And the priest stood at the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men who were girded with weapons of war.

And these went into Micah's house, and took the carved image, the ephod, and the teraphim, and the molten image. And the priest said to them, What are you doing?

¹⁹ And they said to him, Keep quiet, put your hand over your mouth, and come with us. Be for us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be a priest to the household of one man, or that you be a priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?

²⁰ And the priest's heart was glad; and he took the ephod, the teraphim, and the carved image, and took his place among the people.

²¹ And they turned and departed, and put the little ones, the livestock, and the baggage in front of them.

The five spies then informed their fellow warriors about the house and shrine of Micah (cf. Judges 17:5). While the fighters waited outside, the five men greeted Micah's priest, and then proceeded to steal Micah's image, ephod, and idols. When the priest challenged them, they told him, Be quiet! and invited him to become their tribal priest rather than just a household priest. He gladly accepted the offer and went with them carrying Micah's ephod, the other household gods, and the carved image (cf. Judges 17:4-5). Anticipating that Micah might pursue them, the Danites sent their families and possessions on ahead of them and formed a rear guard.

⁸ According to the custom of the day, it was "behind" when facing east. Therefore, it was to the west.

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G. The Response by Micah – 18:22-26

They were already far from the house of Micah, when the men who were in the houses near to Micah's house were gathered together, and overtook the sons of Dan.

And they cried out to the sons of Dan. And they turned their faces, and said to Micah, What ails you, that that you are gathered together with such a company?

²⁴ And he said, You took away my gods which I made, and the priest, and you went away. Now what more do I have? How can you say to me, 'What ails you?'

²⁵ And the sons of Dan said to him, Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest men bitter of soul fall upon you, and you lose your life, with the lives of your household!

²⁶ Then the sons of Dan went their way. And when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his house.

Micah soon discovered his loss, and accompanied by his friends and neighbors he pursued the Danites. Micah accused them of appropriating his gods and priests. But when they intimidated him with threats of violence he reluctantly but wisely turned around and went back home. His pathetic question concerning his idols — What else do I have? — reflects the emptiness of idolatry.

H. The Destruction of Laish – 18:27-28

²⁷ And they took that which Micah had made, and the priest that he had, and came to Laish, to a people quiet and secure; and they struck them with the edge of the sword, and burned the city with fire.

²⁸ And no deliverer was there, for it was far from Sidon, and they had no ties with anyone. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth-Rehob. And they built the city and lived there.

The peaceful and unsuspecting people of Laish (cf. Judges 18:7) were no match for the determined Danites who defeated them and burned down their city. The people of Laish were 27 miles from Sidon (cf. Judges 18:7) and had no allies to come to their rescue.

I. The False Worship of Dan – 18:29-31

And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father, who was born to Israel; although Laish was the name of the city at the beginning.

³⁰ Then the sons of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of Danites until the day of the captivity of the land.

³¹ And they set up for themselves Micah's carved image which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh.

The Danites rebuilt the city and named it Dan after their tribal forefather. More significantly (and sadly), they established a tribal center of idolatrous worship under the priesthood of Jonathan son of Gershom (cf. Exodus 2:22) which extended through his descendants until the time of the captivity of the land. Many scholars refer this to either the Assyrian captivity of Israel in 722 b.c. (2 Kings 17:6) or the captivity of the Galilean population under Tiglath-Pileser III in 733-732 b.c. (2 Kings 15:29). However, an early monarchical date of the authorship of Judges suggests that the statement refers to an earlier unknown captivity (some have suggested the Philistine capture of the ark; cf. 1 Samuel 4:11). For Moses the Hebrew text has inserted a superlinear *n* into the name of Moses (*mosheh*) to make it read "Manasseh" (*m^enasseh*). This was apparently a pious scribe's attempt to relieve Moses' grandson, Jonathan, of involvement with idolatry. The reference to the house of God in Shiloh (modern Seilun 19 miles north of Jerusalem) implies that the worship at the Danite shrine opposed the true worship of the Lord at Shiloh (cf. Joshua 18:1). This false worship in Dan was a forerunner of that of Jeroboam I who later established a Northern Kingdom shrine at Dan (cf. 1 Kings 12:28-31).

XI. The Story of Gibeah – 19:1-21:25

A. The Levite from Ephraim – 19:1-13

¹ And it happened in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite staying in the remote mountains of Ephraim. He took for himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.

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² And his concubine played the prostitute against him, and went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there four whole months.

³ And her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back, having his servant and a couple of donkeys with him. And she brought him into her father's house and when the young woman's father saw him, he was happy to meet him.

⁴ And his father-in-law, the young woman's father, detained him; and he remained with him three days. So they ate and drank and stayed there.

⁵ And it happened on the fourth day that they arose early in the morning, and he stood to leave; but the young woman's father said to his son-in-law, Refresh your heart with a piece of bread, and afterward go your way.

⁶ And they sat, and the two ate and drank together. And the young woman's father said to the man, Please be content to stay all night, and let your heart be merry.

⁷ And the man rose to leave, his and father-in-law urged him, and he stayed there again.

⁸ And he arose early in the morning on the fifth day to leave, but the young woman's father said, Please refresh your heart. And they waited until afternoon; and both of them ate.

⁹ And the man stood to depart, he and his concubine and his servant, and his father-in-law, the young woman's father, said to him, Behold, the day is becoming evening; please spend the night. Behold, the day is ending; lodge here, that your heart may be merry. Tomorrow go your way early, so that you may get home.

This chapter opens with the slogan, In those days Israel had no king (cf. Judges 17:6; Judges 18:1; Judges 21:25). This indicates that chapters 19-21 illustrate the *anarchy and injustice* that prevailed when the Israelites did not have the centralized authority of a king. Chapters 17-18 illustrate the *idolatry* that characterized the nation.

The Levite mentioned in this chapter is not Micah's Levite (chaps. 17-18) though both had connections with Bethlehem in Judah and both lived in the hill country of Ephraim. The remote area (lit., "backside of") was off the main north-south ridge route. This Levite's concubine (a second-status wife, a practice that was never divinely approved; cf. Judges 8:31) was unfaithful to him (lit., "played the harlot"), after which she returned to her father's house in Bethlehem. Four months later the Levite traveled to Bethlehem where he initiated a reconciliation with his concubine. He was gladly welcomed by his father-in-law who, with typical Near-Eastern hospitality, entertained him for four days and part of a fifth before the Levite decided he could stay no longer.

¹⁰ But the man was not willing to spend that night; so he rose and left, and came to opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). With him were the two saddled donkeys; his concubine was with him also.

¹¹ They were near Jebus, and the day was far spent; and the servant said to his master, Please, come and let us turn aside into this city of the Jebusites and stay in it.

¹² But his master said to him, We will not turn aside here into a city of a foreigner, who are not of the sons of Israel; we will go on to Gibeah.

¹³ And he said to his servant, Come and let us draw near to one of these places, and spend the night in Gibeah or in Ramah.

The Levite took his servant, his two donkeys (cf. Judges 19:3), and his concubine, and traveled northward six miles to pass by Jebus (a name for Jerusalem used only here in Judges 19:10-11 and 1 Chronicles 11:4-5, so named for the Amorite group of Jebusites who lived there). He declined his servant's suggestion to spend the night in Jebus because it was an alien city, whose people were not Israelites. The Levite determined to move on to more friendly territory (an ironic and unfortunate decision in view of the following events). So they pressed four miles farther north to Gibeah (modern Tell el-Ful) where they stopped to spend the night. However, though they sat in the city square, the hospitality of the Benjamites was not forthcoming.

B. The Hospitality of an Old Man – 19:14-21

¹⁴ And they passed by and went their way; and the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin.

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¹⁵ And they turned aside there to enter to stay in Gibeah. And he went in, and sat down in the open place of the city; and there was no one who received him into his house to pass the night.

¹⁶ And behold, there came an old man from his work out of the field at evening; and the man was of mount Ephraim, and he living in Gibeah; but the men of the place were Benjaminites.

¹⁷ And he lifted up his eyes, and saw the traveling man in the open place of the city; and the old man said, Where are you going? and from where do you come?

¹⁸ And he said to him, We are traveling from Bethlehem in Judah toward the far side of mount Ephraim; I am from there. I went to Bethlehem-Judah; now I am going to the house of Yahweh. But there is no one who will take me into his house, ¹⁹ although we have both straw and fodder for our donkeys, and bread and wine for myself, for your woman servant, and for the young man who is with your servant; there is no lack of anything.

²⁰ And the old man said, Peace be with you! However, let all your needs be my responsibility; only do not spend the night in the open square.

²¹ And he brought him into his house, and gave fodder to the donkeys. And they washed their feet, and ate and drank.

At the last minute they were saved from a night of danger in the city square by an old man from the hill country of Ephraim who invited them to spend the night at his house in Gibeah.

C. The Perversion of the Benjamites – 19:22-25

²² They were making their hearts merry, when behold, the men of the city, sons of Belial, surrounded the house, beating at the door; and they spoke to the master of the house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man that came into your house, that we may know him!

²³ And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, No, my brothers! I beg you, do not act so wickedly! Seeing this man has come into my house, do not perform this wickedness.

²⁴ Behold, my daughter, who is a virgin, and his concubine. Let me bring them out, and humble them, and do to them as is good in your sight; but to this man do not so vile a thing!

²⁵ But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and brought her out to them. And they knew her and abused her all night until morning; and when the dawn began to break, they let her go.

Reminiscent of the wicked Sodomites in the time of Lot (cf. Genesis 19:1-11), the wicked men (or “worthless men”; lit., “sons of Belial”; cf. 1 Samuel 1:16; 1 Samuel 2:12) of Gibeah surrounded the house and demanded that the old man send out the Levite to satisfy their homosexual desires. Considering the laws of hospitality more important than chivalry toward the opposite sex, the old man offered them instead his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine. The men either did not hear or refused his offer, but when the Levite thrust his concubine outside to them, they took her and sexually abused her throughout the night. At daybreak she was released to return; she fell at the door of the house where she died.

D. The Gruesome Messages – 19:26-30

²⁶ And the woman came at the dawn of the day, and fell down at the entrance of the man's house where her lord was, until it was light.

²⁷ And her lord rose in the morning, and opened the door of the house, and went out to go his way, and behold, there lay the woman, his concubine, at the entrance of the house, and her hands were upon the threshold.

²⁸ And he said to her, Arise and let's go, but no one answered. And he took her upon the donkey; and the man rose up, and went to his place.

²⁹ And when he was come into his house, he took the knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, according to her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the borders of Israel.

³⁰ And it happened that every one that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the sons of Israel came out of Egypt to this day. Consider it, take counsel, and speak.

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When the Levite stepped out of the door to continue on his way (not to look for his concubine!), he discovered her corpse in the doorway, and put her on his donkey and set out for home. The Levite next performed an almost unbelievable cruelty, cutting up his concubine limb by limb (lit., “according to her bones,” like a priest preparing a sacrifice) into 12 parts (apparently one for each tribe) to be sent into all the areas of Israel (cf. 1 Samuel 11:7; 1 Kings 11:30). While this is difficult for modern readers to understand (as well as for the Levite’s contemporaries; Judges 19:30; cf. Hosea 9:9), he meant to arouse the nation to action by calling for a national judicial hearing. Perhaps he was charging them with the responsibility of removing the bloodguiltiness that rested on the entire nation for his concubine’s death. The people who saw a part of her were appalled and bewildered as to what to do.

E. The Gathering of the Tribes – 20:1-2

¹ And all the sons of Israel went forth, and the assembly gathered together as one man unto Yahweh at Mizpah, from Dan to Beer-sheba, and the land of Gilead.

² And the leaders of all the people, even of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand footmen who drew the sword.

The Benjamite war narrated in this chapter resulted from the inquiry into the death of the Levite’s concubine (cf. Judges 19:1-30). It describes an unusually dark hour in Israel’s history.

In response to the Levite’s call for an inquest, all the Israelites from Dan to Beersheba (i.e., from the northern to southern boundaries of Israel; this is a stereotyped expression written from the perspective of the early monarchical author) and from the land of Gilead (here referring to all the Transjordanian tribes) assembled. They gathered before the Lord in Mizpah (Tell en-Nasba, eight miles north of Jerusalem and only four miles north of Gibeah; not the Mizpah in Gilead; cf. Judges 10:17; Judges 11:29). The reference to 400,000 soldiers need not be understood as 400 contingents or 400 family units, as some scholars have suggested.

F. The Recounting by the Levite – 19:3-7

³ And the sons of Benjamin heard that the sons of Israel had gone up to Mizpah. And the sons of Israel said, Tell us, how did this wicked deed happen?

⁴ And the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, Judges 20:4 I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to stay.

⁵ And the men of Gibeah rose against me, and surrounded the house because of me at night. They thought to kill me, but instead they humbled my concubine so that she died.

⁶ So I laid hold of my concubine, cut her in pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of the inheritance of Israel, because they committed lewdness and villany in Israel.

⁷ Behold, all you are children of Israel; give here your advice and counsel!

The Benjamites were not officially represented at Mizpah since the men who raped the concubine were from Gibeah in Benjamin. Apparently, however, the tribe of Benjamin received 1 of the 12 parts of the concubine (cf. Judges 19:29; Judges 20:6). On request, the Levite explained the circumstances of his concubine’s rape and death, and called for Israel’s verdict.

G. The Establishment of an Army – 20:8-11

⁸ And all the people rose as one man, saying, We will not any of us go to his tent, nor will we any of us turn unto his house.

⁹ But now this is the thing which we will do to Gibeah: we will go up against it by lot, ¹⁰ and we will take ten men of a hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thousand, and a thousand out of ten thousand, to supply food for the people, so that they, when they come to Gibeah of Benjamin, may do according to all the villany that they have performed in Israel.

¹¹ So all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, joined together as one man.

The verdict was unanimous: All the people rose as one man against the town of Gibeah to give them what they deserve by launching an attack. One-tenth of the Israelites’ troops collected supplies for those who did the fighting.

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H. The Reaction of Benjamin – 20:12-16

¹² And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, What is this evil that has occurred among you?

¹³ Now therefore, give up the men, the sons of Belial, who are in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and put away the evil from Israel! But the sons of Benjamin would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the sons of Israel.

The Benjamites rejected the request of the other tribes to surrender those wicked men of Gibeah for execution in order to purge the evil (of bloodguiltiness) from Israel. Therefore Israel took the final step and attacked Gibeah.

¹⁴ Instead, the sons of Benjamin gathered together from their cities to Gibeah, to go to battle against the sons of Israel.

¹⁵ And from their cities at that time the sons of Benjamin numbered twenty-six thousand men who drew the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who numbered seven hundred chosen men.

¹⁶ Among all this people were seven hundred chosen men who were left-handed. Every one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.

Having rejected the request of their fellow Israelites (cf. Judges 20:13), the Benjamites mobilized 26,000 swordsmen plus 700 left-handed men from Gibeah who were all experts with slings.

I. The Initial Defeat of Israel – 20:17-25

¹⁷ And besides Benjamin, the men of Israel numbered four hundred thousand men who drew the sword; all of these were men of war.

¹⁸ And the sons of Israel rose and went up to the house of God to inquire of God, and said, Which of us will go up first to battle against the sons of Benjamin? And Yahweh said, Judah first!

As noted previously (Judges 20:2), the 11 tribes had the advantage of a much larger army — 400,000 men. They went up to Bethel (meaning “house of God”) to inquire of the Lord (probably through the high priest’s Urim and Thummim; cf. Leviticus 8:8; Numbers 27:21; Deuteronomy 33:8) concerning which tribe should lead the attack against the Benjamites. The Lord’s answer was, Judah shall go first. Since the tabernacle (or similar central sanctuary where the high priest could be consulted) was located in Shiloh both before (cf. Joshua 18:1) and after (cf. 1 Samuel 1:9) this incident, some scholars refer “Bethel” here not to the city but to “the house of God” which was at Shiloh (cf. Judges 18:31, “the house of God was in Shiloh”). However, in Judges 18:31 and elsewhere when the sanctuary is called “the house of God” the Hebrew phrase is *bet-ha’elohim*, not just *bet-’el* (as in Judges 20:18, Judges 20:26). Possibly the central sanctuary was moved back and forth between Shiloh and Bethel, perhaps more than once. So it is preferable to regard Bethel in Judges 20:18 and Judges 20:26 as the city on the central ridge route 10 or 12 miles north of Jerusalem.

¹⁹ And the sons of Israel rose in the morning and camped against Gibeah.

²⁰ And the men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel put themselves in battle array to fight against them at Gibeah.

²¹ And the sons of Benjamin came out of Gibeah, and on that day destroyed down to the ground twenty-two thousand men of the Israelites.

²² And the people, that is, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and again formed the battle line at the *same* place where they had put themselves in array on the first day.

²³ And the sons of Israel went up and wept before Yahweh until evening, and inquired of Yahweh, saying, Will I again draw near for battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin? And Yahweh said, Attack him.

The location and topography of Gibeah made it easy to defend. The Benjamites came out of Gibeah, attacked the Israelite battle positions, and slayed 22,000 Israelites. The Israelites encouraged one another and regrouped at the same battle positions for another day’s fighting. In view of their defeat they also went up to Bethel and wept before the Lord, inquiring this time whether they should continue to battle against the Benjamites. The Lord’s answer was affirmative: Go up against them.

²⁴ So the sons of Israel approached the sons of Benjamin on the second day.

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²⁵ And Benjamin attacked them from Gibeah on the second day, and destroyed down to the ground eighteen thousand more of the sons of Israel; all these drew the sword.

The strategy and events of the previous day were repeated on the second day, but this time Israel lost “only” 18,000 men.

J. The Promise by Yahweh – 20:26-28

²⁶ And all the sons of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept, and sat there before Yahweh and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before Yahweh.

²⁷ So the sons of Israel inquired of Yahweh (the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, ²⁸ and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days), saying, Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease? And Yahweh said, Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand.

This second defeat motivated the Israelites to return to Bethel where they wept before the Lord and fasted and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the Lord (cf. Judges 21:4). Perhaps one reason the Lord permitted their initial defeats was to bring them back in a spirit of repentance to the neglected sacrificial worship. This time their inquiry about whether they should continue the battle not only received a positive reply (Go) but also included a promise of victory (tomorrow I will give them into your hands). The mention of Phinehas son of Eleazar (i.e., Aaron’s grandson) implies that he was instrumental in procuring the oracle from the Lord. It also indicates that this event occurred not much later than the death of Joshua (cf. Judges 18:30).

K. The Tactics of Israel – 20:29-37

²⁹ And Israel set men in ambush all around Gibeah.

³⁰ And the sons of Israel attacked the sons of Benjamin on the third day, and put themselves in battle array against Gibeah as at the other times.

³¹ And the sons of Benjamin attacked the people, and were drawn away from the city. They began to strike and kill some of the people, like at the other times, in the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah, and in the field, about thirty men of Israel.

³² And the sons of Benjamin said, They are struck down before us, as at first. And the sons of Israel said, Let us flee and lead them away from the city to the highways.

³³ So all the men of Israel rose from their place and put themselves in battle array at Ba’al Tamar. And Israel’s men in ambush rushed forth from their position in Maareh-geba.

³⁴ And ten thousand chosen men from all Israel came against Gibeah, and the battle was fierce. But the men of Benjamin did not know that disaster was upon them.

³⁵ And Yahweh struck Benjamin before Israel, and the sons of Israel destroyed twenty-five thousand one hundred men of Benjamin that day; all these drew the sword.

³⁶ And the sons of Benjamin saw that they were struck. And the men of Israel had given ground to the Benjam, because they trusted the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah.

A general account of the battle (Judges 20:29-36) is followed by a detailed and supplementary account (Judges 20:36-46).

God’s promise of victory (Judges 20:28) did not lead to presumption on Israel’s part, for they reviewed and improved their battle strategy by setting an ambush around Gibeah. This was accomplished as follows: The Israelites took up the same battle positions as before and then deliberately fled as the Benjamites launched their attack, so that the Benjamites were drawn away from the city. Joshua had used a similar ambush strategy against Ai (Joshua 8:1-29). Then 10,000 of Israel’s finest men attacked Gibeah frontally, and the Lord gave them victory in battle. The Benjamites lost 25,100 soldiers — almost their entire force of 26,700 (Judges 20:15).

³⁷ And the men in ambush hurried and rushed upon Gibeah, and the men in ambush drew out and struck the whole city with the edge of the sword.

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L. The Defeat of the Benjamites – 20:38-48

³⁸ Now the appointed signal between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a large cloud of smoke rise up from the city.

³⁹ And when the men of Israel turned back in the battle, Benjamin began to strike, slaying about thirty of the men of Israel; for they said, Certainly they are quite routed before us as in the first battle.

⁴⁰ And when the burning began to rise out of the city like a pillar of smoke, Benjamin looked behind, and behold, the entire city went up in smoke to the heavens.

⁴¹ And when the men of Israel turned back, the men of Benjamin were terrified, for they saw that disaster had come upon them.

⁴² And they turned before the men of Israel into the way of the wilderness. But the battle overtook them, and the ones who came out of the cities destroyed them in their midst.

⁴³ They surrounded the Benjaminites, chased them, trampled them down at the resting-place⁹ near Gibeah toward the sunrise.

⁴⁴ And there fell eighteen thousand men of Benjamin; all these were men of valor.

⁴⁵ And they turned and fled toward the wilderness unto the rock of Rimmon: and they gleaned on the highway five thousand of them, and followed closely after them unto Gidom, and struck two thousand of them.

⁴⁶ So all who fell of Benjamin that day were twenty-five thousand men who drew the sword; all these were men of valor.

These verses supplement the previous account by detailing the ambush and the aftermath of the major battle. As the Benjamites were drawn away from the city (cf. Judges 20:31-32), the Israelites who were waiting in ambush dashed into Gibeah, slaying the population and setting the city on fire. The smoke of the whole city going up into the sky was a prearranged signal for the retreating Israelites to turn on the terrified Benjamites who fled toward the desert (eastward; cf. Judges 20:43). Before 600 Benjamites finally escaped to the rock of Rimmon (Judges 20:45; cf. Judges 20:47), they suffered a total loss of approximately 25,000 Benjamite swordsmen (the more exact figure of 25,100 is given in Judges 20:35). The narrative groups their deaths in stages of the battle — 18,000 (Judges 20:44), 5,000 along the roads, and 2,000 (Judges 20:45).

⁴⁷ And six hundred men turned and fled toward the desert to the rock of Rimmon, and they stayed at the rock of Rimmon for four months.

⁴⁸ And the men of Israel turned back against the sons of Benjamin, and struck them with the edge of the sword, men and beasts from every city, all who were found. All the cities they came to they also set on fire.

Six hundred Benjamite warriors were able to reach the defensible stronghold of the rock of Rimmon (modern Rammun, four miles east of Bethel), where they stayed four months (until they received terms of peace from the Israelites; cf. Judges 21:13-14). They were the only survivors from the entire tribe of Benjamin since the Israelite soldiers destroyed and burned all the towns of the Benjamites. Since the destruction included the animals and everything else they found, apparently they had placed the Benjamite towns “under the ban” as in holy war (cf. comments on Judges 1:17).

M. The Dangerous Oath of Israel – 21:1-7

¹ Now the men of Israel swore an oath at Mizpah, saying, None of us will give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife.

² And the people came to Beth-el, and sat there till even before God, and lifted up their voices, and wept terribly, ³ and said, Yahweh God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?

⁴ And it happened on the next morning that the people rose early and built an altar there, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.

⁵ The sons of Israel said, Who is there among all the tribes of Israel who did not come up with the assembly to Yahweh? For they had made a great oath concerning anyone who had not come up to Yahweh at Mizpah, saying, He will certainly be put to death.

⁹ Some translate this word “easy.” The meaning of the Hebrew term is uncertain.

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⁶ And the sons of Israel grieved because of Benjamin their brother, and said, One tribe is cut off from Israel today.

⁷ What will we do for wives for those who remain, seeing we have sworn by Yahweh that we will not give them our daughters for wives?

The atrocity of Gibeah (Judges 19:25-26) had been punished and bloodguiltiness had been removed from Israel by the deaths of the Benjamites (Judges 20:35). However, with the war and destruction behind them, the Israelites became aware of another painful problem — 1 of the 12 tribes of Israel had been nearly exterminated and since only 600 males remained alive, Benjamin was in danger of extinction. The problem was complicated by the fact that the Israelites had taken an oath at Mizpah not to give their daughters in marriage to a Benjamite (cf. Judges 21:7, Judges 21:18). Of course it was contrary to the Mosaic Law for the remaining 600 Benjamites to marry non-Israelites (cf. Exodus 34:16; Deuteronomy 7:3). A secondary matter faced by the Israelites was the fulfillment of another solemn oath to put to death any Israelites who had failed to assemble at Mizpah. The primary matter of Benjamite extinction resulted in another period at Bethel when the Israelites sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly. The content of their lament was, Why should one tribe be missing from Israel today? They also participated in sacrificial worship, giving burnt offerings and fellowship offerings (cf. Judges 20:26).

N. The Destruction of Jabesh Gilead – 21:8-12

⁸ And they said, What one is there from the tribes of Israel who did not come up to Mizpah to Yahweh? And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh Gilead to the assembly.

⁹ For the people were numbered, and behold, none of the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead were there.

¹⁰ And the assembly sent twelve thousand men of the most valiant there and commanded them, saying, Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead with the edge of the sword, and the women and the children.

¹¹ And this is the thing that you will do: You will totally destroy every man, and every woman who has lain with a man.

¹² And they found four hundred young women who were virgins among the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead, who had known no man by lying with any male, and they brought them to the camp, to Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

In researching their secondary problem (cf. Judges 21:5), the Israelites discovered that no one from the town of Jabesh Gilead (located about nine miles southeast of Beth Shan and two miles east of the Jordan River) had responded to the call to Mizpah. So they fulfilled their vow by having 12,000 soldiers exterminate the people of Jabesh Gilead, except that they spared the 400 virgins of the city as a step toward solving the primary problem of Benjamite extinction.

O. The Reconciliation of Benjamin – 21:13-18

¹³ And the whole assembly sent word to the sons of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon, and proclaimed peace to them.

¹⁴ And Benjamin came back at that time, and they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh Gilead; and yet they did not have sufficient for them.

¹⁵ And the people grieved for Benjamin, because Yahweh had made a gap in the tribes of Israel.

¹⁶ Then the elders of the assembly said, What will we do for wives for those who remain, seeing that the women of Benjamin have been destroyed?

¹⁷ And they said, There must be an inheritance for those who escaped of Benjamin, that a tribe may not be destroyed from Israel.

¹⁸ But we cannot give them wives from our daughters, for the sons of Israel swore an oath, saying, Cursed is the one who gives a wife to Benjamin.

The assembly of Israelites next sent to the 600 surviving Benjamites a formal offer of peace (*salom*, implying restoration to covenantal participation). They accepted the peace offer and were granted the 400

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virgins of Jabesh Gilead. Israelite grief continued, however, because 200 Benjamites were still without wives.

P. The Solution from Shiloh – 21:19-24

¹⁹ And they said, Behold, there is a feast of Yahweh in Shiloh from year to year, which is north of Bethel, on the east side of the highway which goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.

The Israelites conceived a plan, based on a loophole in their oath, which they suggested to the Benjamites. The oath said the Israelites could not “give” (Judges 21:1, Judges 21:7, Judges 21:18) their daughters to the Benjamites, but it said nothing about their daughters being “taken.” Conveniently the girls of nearby Shiloh (about 13 miles north by northeast of Mizpah) would soon be participating in a local harvest feast where they would dance in the fields near the vineyards. Lebonah (modern el-Lubban) was about 3 miles north of Shiloh.

²⁰ And they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, Go, lie in wait in the vineyards, ²¹ and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to perform their dances, then you come out from the vineyards, and every man catch a wife for himself from the daughters of Shiloh; then go to the land of Benjamin.

²² And it shall happen that when their fathers or their brothers come to us to complain, we will say to them, ‘Give them to us graciously, for we did not take a wife for them in battle; for you did not give them unto them, so that you now would be guilty.

²³ And the sons of Benjamin did so and they took wives according to their number from those who danced, whom they caught. And they departed and returned to their inheritance, and they built the cities and dwelt in them.

²⁴ And the sons of Israel left there at that time, every man to his tribe and family; they went out from there, every man to his inheritance.

The 200 Benjamites were to hide in the vineyards until the festivities were in progress, and then each was to rush from the vineyards and seize a wife and go to the land of Benjamin. The Israelites would then explain the situation to the men of Shiloh, that they were innocent (of breaking the oath of Mizpah; Judges 21:1) since they did not give their daughters to the Benjamites. So the extinction of the tribe of Benjamin was averted, the Benjamites rebuilt the towns and settled in them, and the Israelites went home. Though the people were guilty of scheming to get around their oath, the tribe of Benjamin was saved from extinction.

Conclusion – 21:25

²⁵ In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

The Book of Judges concludes with a final restatement of human failure concerning the moral and social anarchy of this period which preceded the monarchy. As stated three times before, Israel had no king (cf. Judges 17:6; Judges 18:1; Judges 19:1). The fact that everyone did as he wished is a sad commentary on the deplorable spiritual condition of the nation in those days. Though Israel suffered under the oppression of many enemies, God’s grace was repeatedly evident when the people turned to Him in repentance. The Book of Judges illustrates both God’s justice and His grace — justice in punishing sin and grace in forgiving sin.