

## Judges

The title of the book in both Hebrew and Greek is *Judges*, named so from the principal characters in the story. The first word of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers has a prefix—the Hebrew letter *waw*. This is called a *waw*-consecutive, which creates a conjunction with the meaning of “and” or “and the.” This means that they were meant to be read as the sequel to Genesis—and sequentially from there. Conversely, the book of Deuteronomy does not begin with the conjunction *and*, while the books of Joshua through Kings do begin with the conjunction *and*. Thus, Genesis through Numbers are linked together and tell of Israel outside of the Promised Land. Deuteronomy is the bridge between Israel not being in the land and Israel being in the land. In the same way, Joshua through Kings are linked together and tell about Israel in the Promised Land. Deuteronomy is the beginning of what scholars call the Deuteronomic History, which includes the books of Deuteronomy through Kings.

The authorship of the book of Judges is anonymous, though some have suggested that Samuel began the compiling and editing of the book. Six times the narrator uses the comment “to this day” (Judg. 1:21, 26; 6:24; 10:4; 15:19; 18:12). Judg. 1:21 gives a clue to the date of the book when it mentions the Jebusites occupying Jerusalem. This points to a date no later than the 1000s BC because the Jebusites were not removed from Jerusalem until David in 1003 BC (2 Sam 5:6-10). The entire book makes references to the fact that there is no king in Israel, which supports a dating before the monarchy of Saul. However, Judg. 18:30 refers to “the exile of the land,” which means that it must be after the exile of the northern kingdom in 734-722 BC. It is clear that the compiling and editing of the book began sometime in the 1000s BC but was later added upon or edited sometime after the exile. Other than this, determining the author and date of the book is not possible at this point.<sup>1</sup>

### Setting

Genesis began by revealing Yahweh as the unique and sovereign creator over all creation. But Yahweh is also a relational being who created humanity as His image bearers to rule and subdue creation and to dwell with Him. Yet, humanity lost this intimate relationship with Yahweh when they chose self-autonomy over obeying Yahweh. However, because Yahweh is also a loving and covenantal God, He chose Abraham and His descendants to work out His plan of redemption for all of humanity and creation. Yahweh promised to give them land, to make them a great nation, to bless them, and to make them a blessing to the whole earth. Yahweh’s ultimate goal was to make Abraham into the great nation of Israel, which would serve Him by becoming a righteous people who would represent Him as His image; in doing so, they could bless the entire world by restoring the world back to what was lost in the Garden of Eden.

The book of Exodus tells of how Yahweh delivered His people from bondage and led them to Mount Sinai, where they would be brought into the presence of Yahweh and officially become His chosen nation. It is here that Yahweh gave them the Law (Ex. 19-24), the instructions for the tabernacle (Ex. 25-31), and the sacrificial system (Leviticus). The Law would reveal Yahweh’s righteous standards by which they were to live so that they could be the image of God to the world. The tabernacle would be a means for Yahweh to dwell with His people and guide them.

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<sup>1</sup> For a further discussion see Daniel I. Block. *Judges, Ruth*, pp. 25-26.; and Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 53-56.

This is the beginning of the restoration of the Garden. And the sacrificial system taught Israel what it meant to be clean and unclean, holy and common, along with the means to become clean and holy after one had become defiled by sin or death.

The book of Joshua tells of Joshua leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land in fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to Israel, to make them into the nation He intended them to be. The book of Joshua tells of Israel's successful conquest of the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. Joshua led Israel in conquering the major cities and subduing the land. There were still many cities left behind to be conquered, but Yahweh had commanded that those be left so that the next generation could conquer them. It was now up the individual tribes to settle their allotted territory and to finish the conquest of Canaan within their specific boundaries.

The book of Judges tells of the following generation's failure to finish the conquest of Canaan because of their lack of trust in Yahweh and idolatry. Thus Yahweh handed them over to be oppressed by the hands of the Canaanites in judgment. In His loving faithfulness, however, Yahweh raised up judges to deliver Israel from their enemies who had oppressed them.

Ever since Israel had become a nation after their exodus from Egypt, Moses had been their leader. Moses functioned primarily as a prophet who spoke the words and Law of Yahweh to the people. But he also functioned as judge (or a political leader) over the people. Over time, Moses delegated his leadership responsibilities over the everyday issues to elders who functioned as judges. Likewise, the priesthood, under Aaron and then his son Eleazar, became influential over the people as they served to lead the people spiritually.

After Moses' death, Joshua became the new leader over Israel. However, he was not so much a prophet or even a political leader as much as he was a military leader. Thus, during this time the priesthood gained more influence as they lived among the people in Levitical cities. And with the absence of Moses, they could know Yahweh's will only through the priests' use of the Urim and the Thummim. Likewise, the political leaders and judges became more prominent in leading the people of Israel, especially as the Israelites began to grow in numbers and spread throughout the Promised Land. With the death of Joshua and now the people living in their own tribal allotments, the judges became the leaders among the tribal people.

The most common translation of the Hebrew word *shaphat* is "judge"—in the legal sense, as one who oversees legal disputes (Deut. 16:18; 17:9, 12; 19:17-18; 21:2; 25:1-2; 1 Sam. 7:15-17; 2 Sam. 15:4; 1 Kgs. 3:9, 28). This sense also seems to be present with Deborah's settling the disputes of the Israelites. However, everywhere else in the book of Judges those who were judges were primarily military leaders who defeated foreign nations that were oppressing Israel. Daniel Block argues that the judges are viewed more as "deliverers" in the book of Judges. After the judge had delivered the people, he seems to become more of a ruler over the people. Thus, in the book's context, the word *shaphat* would be better translated as "lead" or "govern."

The judges described in the book are portrayed as governing only certain regions in Israel. Also, the judges mentioned represent only a selective list of many judges that were governing during this time period. Thus, several judges were ruling over different regions of Israel at the same time. A judge, therefore, was a local military and political leader. Not much is known of their careers after they delivered their people, so probably as a political leader they did take the role of judge in a legal sense as well.

If the Israelite exodus happened in 1446 BC (1 Kgs. 6:1) and they were then in the wilderness for forty years, then Israel would have entered the Promised Land in about 1406 BC. The book of Joshua covers about 35 years of Israel's history. The book of Judges begins with the death of Joshua (roughly 1360 BC) and covers about 300 hundred years of Israel's history.<sup>2</sup>

## Structure

The book of Judges is divided into three parts: the prologue (Judg. 1:1-3:6), the central body containing accounts of individual judges (Judg. 3:7-16:31), and the epilogue (Judg. 17:1-21:25). The prologue is a summary of the period of the judges describing how the nation as a whole failed to carry out Yahweh's commands because they went after the pagan idols.

The central part of the narrative shows in detail how this compromise with the pagan nations worked itself out in the everyday lives of Israel's leaders and led to their greater failure to accomplish Yahweh's will. There are six cycles within the central body of the book. Each one of these cycles begins with the phrase "Israel did evil in the eyes of Yahweh." Each cycle contains the following stages: Israel's apostasy, Israel being oppressed, Israel crying out, Yahweh raising up a judge to deliver them, and Israel experiencing peace.

The narrator uses literary devices to show the gradual decline of the judges and Israel as he moves from one judge to the next. Only Othniel and Ehud are specifically called judges or deliverers (Judg. 3:9, 15), and Deborah is said to be judging (Judg. 4:5). Barak and the others are not specifically called judges even though historically speaking they were (Judg. 2:16). Though the narrator omits that Yahweh provided a deliverer in the Gideon story, he does include a commissioning account in which Yahweh commands Gideon to deliver Israel (Judg. 6:14). There is no indication that Yahweh raised up Jephthah or even commissioned him for battle, though He did energize him for war (Judg. 11:29). There is no formal statement about Yahweh raising up Samson as a deliverer, yet Yahweh made it clear to his mother that he was to begin the deliverance of Israel (Judg. 13:5)—even though his mother failed to communicate this to him. And Yahweh did energize Samson several times for battle. The point is that in Yahweh's eyes they do not function as true judges or deliverers for different reasons.

In the accounts of Othniel, Ehud, Deborah/Barak, and Gideon, there is no summarizing reference to a leader judging for a specific number of years. The land simply had rest for a certain number of years (Judg. 3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28). This changes with the minor judges listed in Judges 10. From this point on, the narrator states specifically how long the leader judged. However, after Gideon there is no mention to the land having rest. This prepares the reader for the epilogue where civil discord is unleashed. This means that even though Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson won military battles, they brought no real peace to the land.

With each cycle, the people cry out, and Yahweh responds by sending them a deliverer. After this happened so many times that in the Jephthah story, Yahweh initially refused to respond when the people cried out, but later softened when Israel persisted. In the Samson story, Israel was so compromised that they did not even cry out for help and Samson had no concept of his role is as a deliverer.

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<sup>2</sup> See Daniel I. Block. *Judges, Ruth*, pp. 25-26.

With each cycle there is also escalating civil conflict. Deborah's song mentions that some tribes did not help in the battle (Judg. 5:15-17). Gideon faced opposition from his own people (Judg. 7:24-8:17). Gideon's son, Abimelech, instigated a civil war (Judg. 9). Jephthah massacred the Ephraimites (Judg. 12:1-6). The Judahites handed Samson over to the Philistines (Judg. 15:11-13). All of these pave the way for the epilogue of total national civil war.

The epilogue shows how bad leadership played out in the nation as a whole as they were enveloped in moral wickedness and civil war, and develops the idea that Israel needed a Deuteronomic king to save them (Deut. 17:14-20).

## Purpose

The first purpose of the book of Judges is a defense for Yahweh's character and reputation, which had been soiled by Israel's failures, sin, and rebellion.<sup>3</sup> In the ancient Near East, the power and character of a god were reflected in the nation or people group over which he ruled. If the nation of Israel was continually oppressed by foreign powers, this would communicate that Israel's God was weaker than the gods of the other nations. On the contrary, Judges explains that the people sinned against Yahweh and went after the pagan gods, so Yahweh gave them over to those pagan gods and their nations. Therefore, the oppression of Israel was a judgment for their sin and reflects more the pagan gods' character than Yahweh's (Judg. 11:10-14) since this is how the pagan gods treat their followers, ignoring their cries for help. This contrast is most fully developed in Yahweh's conflict with the Canaanite storm god Ba'al. Ba'al was the god to which Israel most frequently prostituted themselves, and Judges is the first book that really begins to attack Ba'al (Judg. 2:13; 6:25-32; 8:33; 10:6). The polemic is first seen in the song of Deborah (Judg. 5:4-5) and continues on in the Gideon and Samson stories. It reaches its climax at Mount Carmel with Elijah (1 Kgs. 18). One of the major things that Yahweh emphasizes about Himself is His unwavering faithfulness to Israel despite their sin and rebellion. He is portrayed as a covenantal God who, despite His handing them over to the enemy for discipline, constantly steps in and compassionately delivers His people by raising up judges.

The second purpose of Judges is to warn of the danger of compromise and assimilation with the surrounding cultures.<sup>4</sup> Israel was to be separate and distinct from all other nations (Ex. 19:3-6), but in Judges they choose to violate this distinction by living among the Canaanites and intermarrying with them (Judg. 1:29-32; 3:6). As a result, the enemy turned on them and oppressed them into hard labor (Judg. 1:33, 35). But worse was that Israel began to adopt a Canaanite way of thinking and its practices. This happened slowly over time, each judge looking and acting like the pagans a little bit more than the previous until Samson bears no resemblance to Yahweh in any way (Gen. 1:26-28). Finally, the book ends with Israel as a nation acting the same as, if not worse than, the Canaanites.

The third purpose is to demonstrate the need for godly leadership.<sup>5</sup> The primary focus of the book is not on the people but on the leaders. As the reader watches the decline of leadership in Israel because of their lack of faith and wisdom, one assumes that the people are emulating their leaders as they do in every culture. If the leaders do not reflect the nature of Yahweh and serve Him, then there is no hope for the followers as whole, and then the whole culture will plummet.

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>5</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 61-62.

This corruption is shown in its most horrific sense when the book ends with the morally corrupt Levitical priests (Judg. 17-19). The book ends with the statement “In those days Israel had no king. Each man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25). The implication is that if Israel had a leader who fit the Deuteronomic ideal (Deut. 17:14-20), then Israel would have reflected Yahweh much better than they did. Though Yahweh accomplished great deeds through flawed human leaders, their lack of faith and wisdom marred Israel’s leaders and kept them from realizing their potential. This all leads to Samuel, a judge and priest who began to turn the nation around because he demonstrated the godly character traits the other judges lacked (1 Sam. 1-8). Judges also prepares the reader for the Davidic dynasty, which would prepare the world for the ultimate godly leader, the Messiah.

Many have misinterpreted the book of Judges, viewing the judges as great men of faith and role models for leadership. This is partly based on a misunderstanding of the culture of the time period, the literary devices of the stories, and Hebrews 11. The first two will be addressed throughout this commentary. Hebrews 11 must not be understood as the “hall of faith,” as many have called it, but rather as examples of what faith can do. The point was not to glorify the people in the chapter as great people of faith whom should be seen as role models. On the contrary, Hebrews 1-10 is all about the supremacy of Christ in the light that all before Him have failed and that He is our great example of faith in Yahweh. The writer, beginning in Hebrews 11, calls us to demonstrate the same faith in Yahweh that Jesus Christ exemplified. Hebrews makes the point that faith can accomplish anything for the kingdom of Yahweh. This point is emphasized by the repetition of the phrase “by faith,” not by the names of the people. The point of mentioning the names of the First Testament figures was to show that if these sinful people were able to do great things with their little faith pre-Christ, how much more can we do *by faith* with Jesus Christ in our lives? Thus, do not think of the judges, especially Gideon and Samson, as role models but as sinners who were able to do some great things *by the little faith* they had.

## Themes

There are many themes in the book of Judges, but the main ones focus on how Israel’s sin affected them in different ways as a nation and on Yahweh’s willingness to deliver them despite their disobedience to His covenant. The major themes in the book of Judges are built upon and flow out of its purposes.

### ***Israel’s Downward Spiral***

The primary theme is how Israel, who was to be the image of God to the world, began to decline morally and reflect the world more than Yahweh. Israel was chosen from among all the other nations in order to be separate and unique, reflecting the image of God to the other nations (Gen. 1:26-28; 12:1-4; Ex. 19:3-6; Josh. 24:1-13). After the death of Joshua Israel began to compromise, to live among the enemy and intermarry with them. This caused them to lose their distinction, and they began to practice the same lifestyle that led to Yahweh’s judgment of the Canaanites (Judg. 1:29-32; 3:6). The narrator identifies idolatry as the fundamental problem behind Israel’s decline (Judg. 2:11-13). When Israel worshiped the pagan gods, they rejected their covenantal God and therefore forfeited His protection and blessings. Because they worshiped the other gods, they began to act like those gods as well as the people who worshiped those gods. This was why Yahweh wanted Israel to be separate and distinct from all the other

nations. Yahweh wanted Israel to be greater than what the other gods had to offer and so be a light to the other nations so that they would come to know Him as well.

This moral decline of Israel is developed primarily through the leaders of Israel. The book begins with the death of Joshua, a great and godly leader who led a faithful generation of Israelites. Caleb's success—his defeat of the cities given to him and the way he took care of his family—becomes a foil to the failure of the rest of the judges. Othniel and Ehud led the next generation and were godly leaders who acted on Yahweh's behalf without hesitation. Each judge after that knew and were faithful to Yahweh less and less, which led to their lack of leadership over Israel. Each one demonstrated a greater hesitancy to serve Yahweh, a more evident desire to make deals with Him, and acted and treated their own people like the Canaanites did. The book ends with the spiritual priests, the Levites, acting just like the Canaanites.

The role of women also highlights this decline. Acsah, the daughter of Caleb, sets the standard for the way that women are to be viewed and treated. She was a woman for whom Othniel was willing to fight and for whom Caleb provided. The father and husband show their godliness by taking care of and protecting the woman. Later, in the Barak story, the women are leading and delivering the very men who should be doing this. Jephthah offered his own daughter as a sacrifice instead of caring for and protecting her. Samson went after the Philistine women and treated them like objects and dogs. The book ends with a Levite cutting up his concubine and Israel approving the kidnap and rape of 600 Israelite women. This all paves the way for 1 Samuel, where Hannah is oppressed by another woman (1 Sam. 1).

### ***Yahweh's Willingness to Deliver***

Despite the fact that Israel broke the Mosaic Covenant over and over, many times within each generation, Yahweh continued to honor His side. The repetition of the cycle—Israel compromising, Israel being oppressed, Israel crying out, and Yahweh delivering Israel—shows that Yahweh is first and foremost a deliverer and a redeemer. This is the most dominant theme throughout the entire Bible and is seen very clearly through Israel's constant turning away and its need for a deliverer. But more than this, the book of Judges shows, perhaps more clearly than any other book, that Yahweh can and will use flawed people. He takes imperfect people—Gideon who was weak and a coward, Jephthah who was a mercenary, and Samson who was ruled by his lust—and gives them the chance to become more than they were. And even when they did not completely rise to the occasion, He takes the little faith that they did have and does something amazing with it.

Many people make the mistake of thinking that these men were great men of faith because they show up in Hebrews 11 the "hall of faith." But this is a misinterpretation of Hebrews 11, which is not talking about how great these people were but about what Yahweh was able to do with their faith. It is about how great Yahweh is and how He can use people even when they demonstrate very little faith. These judges should not be viewed as great leaders but by what Yahweh was able to do with them even with the little bit that they offered to Him. In this way Judges shows that Yahweh can do anything with anyone to fulfill His will. Imagine what He could accomplish with someone fully committed to Him.

### ***The Need for a Godly King***

Each cycle begins with the phrase "Israel did evil in the eyes of Yahweh." This is followed by mostly flawed judges who did what was right in their own eyes. The book concludes with the

breakdown of national unity and morality as they enter into civil war. Within this concluding civil war is the repeating line “in those days Israel had no king, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The point that is being made is that Israel needed a godly king to ensure social order. This becomes justification for the monarchy and for the Davidic dynasty in the book of Samuel. But the narrator does not have just any king in mind, rather the Deuteronomic king spoken of by Yahweh in Deut. 17:14-20. Though Yahweh speaks of a king in Deuteronomy, the one He had in mind was one limited in power, almost equal with the people, and a vice-regent to the kingship of Yahweh. When the people asked Gideon to be their king, Gideon reminded the people (although with ulterior motives) that human rulers must be subservient to Yahweh, the ultimate King (Judg. 8:23). The main point that the narrator is making is that a king should point the people toward Yahweh and the covenant so that people do not become an authority unto themselves.<sup>6</sup> Only when Israel acknowledged Yahweh as their true and ultimate King would Yahweh’s covenant vision for Israel be realized. This would be partially fulfilled with the coming of David, but even he failed to truly deliver his people. Judges lays the foundation for the point made in the books of Samuel, Kings, and the prophets—that the Messiah is the Deuteronomic king whom Israel needs to completely deliver them.

## Outline

- I. Prologue (1:1-3:6)
  - A. Compromise and Intermixing with the Canaanites (1:1-2:5)
  - B. Worshipping the Canaanite Gods (2:6-3:6)
- II. The Downward Spiral of Israel (3:7-16:31)
  - A. Othniel Sets the Standard (3:7-11)
  - B. Ehud Strikes the Enemy (3:12-31)
  - C. Barak, a Hesitant General and a Heroic Woman (4:1-5:31)
  - D. Gideon, Coward Turned to Corrupt King (6:1-8:32)
  - E. Abimelech, a Man Like His Father (8:33-10:5)
  - F. Jephthah, a Tragic Hero (10:6-12:15)
  - G. Samson, a Man Ruled by Lust (13:1-16:31)
- III. Everyone Did as He Saw Fit (17:1-21:25)
  - A. Idolatry, a Corrupt Levite, and a Renegade Tribe (17:1-19:1a)
  - B. Moral Anarchy Engulfs a Nation (19:1b-21:25)

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<sup>6</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 62.

## I. Prologue (1:1-3:6)

Although the land of Canaan had been subdued, the individual tribes were now responsible for continuing the conquest of the land. The prologue explains that Israel was unable to finish the conquest of Canaan because of their lack of faith and obedience, which led to their idolatry and rebellion, not because of Yahweh's lack of faithfulness to Israel.

The first section of the prologue (Judg. 1:1-2:5) is primarily descriptive. The narrator does give theological insights at times (Judg. 1:19a, 22), but it is for rhetorical purposes since he allows the people's perspective to dominate. The narrator gives a partial answer at the incident at Bokim (Judg. 2:1-5). Israel's failure was not really because of the military might of the Canaanites (Judg. 1:19, 27, 35) but because the Israelites failed to trust Yahweh and assimilated into the Canaanite culture and idolatry.

The second section of the prologue (Judg. 2:6-3:6) begins with a flashback to when Joshua was still alive. This account is more reflective and theological and gives Yahweh's perspective to the question. The narrator emphasizes that idolatry was the primary problem in Israel's failure. The narrator makes the point that remaining loyal to Yahweh and maintaining covenant distinctiveness is the key to a complete conquest of the land and covenant blessings.

The prologue also sets the stage for the judges and their failures as leaders to be faithful to Yahweh.

### A. Compromise and Intermixing with the Canaanites (1:1-2:5)

This section has three major literary units: The account of Judah and Simeon's conquests (Josh. 1:1-21), the successes and failures of the other tribes (Josh. 1:22-36), and the judgment at Bokim (Josh. 2:1-5). This section begins with the overall obedience and success of the tribe of Judah. However, there are a few statements that suggest that they were not completely obedient in every circumstance. After Judah the narrator points out the repeated failures of the other tribes to finish the conquest, which eventually leads to their judgment.

**1:1-3** Judges begins with the same success that ended the book of Joshua. Now that Joshua had died, Israel asked Yahweh who would lead the attack against the Canaanites. The fact that they did not ask "if they should go" should not be seen as a bad thing since Joshua had already told Israel that they were to continue the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 23:4-5). Yahweh responded by saying that Judah was to be the lead tribe. This should be no surprise since Jacob had prophesied that Judah was to be the head tribe and rule the nation (Gen. 49:8-12). Judah then made an alliance with the Simeonites to attack the Canaanites. This would be a natural alliance since Simeon was given cities within Judah's territory (Josh. 19:1-9) This alliance would become a foil to all the bad alliances that Israel would make with the Canaanites later in the chapter.

**1:4-8** The fact that the narrator did not describe the battle but merely stated the victory points to Israel's obedience to Yahweh and their victory without complications. Adoni-Bezek ("lord of righteousness") is most likely a title, like Pharaoh, and not a personal name. The cutting off of Adoni-Bezek's thumbs and big toes would have crippled him as a warrior, removing his ability to carry a sword and run with agility. It would also disqualify him as a priest since he was physically mutilated and blemished. It was not uncommon for a Canaanite king to also be the high priest (Gen. 14:18). This could be seen as a just punishment (Gen. 15:16; Lev. 18:24-28), and Adoni-Bezek could be a symbol and example to all of the Canaanites—that Yahweh



intended to punish them for their sins and defilement of the land (Gen. 15:16; Lev. 18:24-28). Yahweh's punishment of this wicked Canaanite man was an object lesson of what Yahweh intended to do to the entire nation. That the narrator allows this pagan to speak in the story and that his words acknowledge Yahweh's judgment on him also imply that his treatment is justified.

However, Yahweh never commanded nor allowed torture or cutting off of body parts, a Canaanite practice. This means that Israel was beginning to adopt Canaanite practices.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Yahweh commanded that the Canaanites be exterminated and not kept alive as a trophy. The narrator does not state that the Israelites killed him but, rather, that he was moved to Jerusalem and then died, implying that he died naturally. Though it seems small, Israel is already beginning to compromise and not completely obey Yahweh. When Saul failed to kill all the Amalekites as instructed by Yahweh, Yahweh abandoned him in judgement (1 Sam. 15). The first step into the downward spiral is always a small and seemingly insignificant step.

**1:9-11** The quick listing of all the cities that were defeated by Judah points to the fact that they were conquered with relative ease because Judah was obedient to Yahweh and He gave them success. The mention of cities of Hebron and Debir having new names, which Israel gave them, reminds the reader that Israel had displaced the Canaanites in the land.

**1:12-15** The story of Caleb and his nephew Othniel is repeated again from the book of Joshua (Josh. 15:13-19) in order to contrast the success of Joshua's generation with the failures of the judges. Othniel is a positive character in the faithful generation of Joshua, and he is now carried over into Judges to be established as a standard of what a judge is to be; as such he will serve as the foil for those that will follow.

Caleb and Othniel are portrayed as militarily effective men who were daring and courageous. But Caleb is a man who also cares for his family and provides for his daughter and her future. In order to ensure that a godly man would marry his daughter Acsah, Caleb issued the test that anyone who could conquer Debir (Kiriath Sepher) would get her hand in marriage. Caleb knew that the only way a person could conquer the city was if Yahweh was with them (Num. 14:36:45). Likewise, their conquering of the city showed their trust in and obedience to Yahweh.

Othniel, Caleb's nephew took the challenge to be Acsah's husband. The Hebrew here could read that Caleb was the brother of Othniel or Kenaz. The text makes it clear that Othniel is the son of Kenaz. Caleb could not be the brother of Othniel *and* Kenaz's son, for several times the Bible says that Caleb was the son of Jephunneh (Num. 13:6; 14:6, 30, 38; 26:65; 32:12; 34:19; Deut. 1:36; Josh. 14:6, 13, 14; 15:13; 21:12; 1 Chr. 4:15; 6:56). Thus, Othniel must be the nephew of Caleb since Othniel's father was Kenaz.<sup>8</sup>

Othniel without hesitation conquered the city with the same determination and faith in Yahweh that Caleb had demonstrated. Acsah (Judg. 1:12-15), the daughter of Caleb, is portrayed as a woman who inspired great military acts. She also showed great respect to her father by bowing before him after she got off her horse. The point is that women are worth fighting for and providing for.

Caleb continued to show his desire to provide for and protect his daughter by giving her springs, to go along with the land that he had given her. In the ancient world, springs symbolized fertility, blessings, and a future. Caleb demonstrates here the love and protection that men should give

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<sup>7</sup> See Daniel I. Block. *Judges, Ruth*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>8</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 124.

their wives and daughters. Though this does not seem significant now, later, in the book of Judges, women will be treated worse and worse. The climax is with Jephthah, who will take away not only his daughter's ability to be married and have children and a future but will take her life as well (Judg. 11:30-39). And the book of Judges ends with the nation of Israel approving the kidnapping and rape of 600 Israelite women (Judg. 19-21).

**1:16-18** The reference to the Kenites is probably here to show that Yahweh fulfilled Moses' promise to his wife's family to give them land as a reward for the assistance they had given Israel (Num. 10:29-32). This note also fits well with the context of Yahweh's reward to Caleb for his faithfulness in Numbers. Once again, the listing of the cities defeated emphasizes Judah's obedience.

**1:19-21** The narrator states that Yahweh was with Israel but then makes the point that Israel could not conquer the people of the coastal plains because they had iron chariots. This is an odd statement since iron chariots have never and could never thwart Yahweh. Yahweh defeated the iron chariots of Egypt (Ex. 14:23-28; 15:4) and promised to give Joshua victory over the iron chariots of the Canaanites (Josh. 11:4-6). The narrator is giving the reader the people's false perspective, stating it as he does to get the reader to ask what is going on and why he would say that. Then, in Judg. 2:1-5, he states that the real reason Judah failed was because of their spiritual compromise.<sup>9</sup>

“The reference to iron chariots (v. 19) has caused problems for some readers since archaeologists have dated the Iron Age beginning in 1200 B.C., about 150 years after the event recorded here took place. However, the Hittites had mastered the production of iron by 1400 B.C. Evidently the Canaanites and Philistines had iron implements by 1350 B.C. The Iron Age is, after all, a general description of the period during which iron was the most important metal.”<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, Benjamin was not able to defeat the Jebusites in Jerusalem. Judg. 1:8 says that Judah captured the city of Jerusalem, but Josh. 15:63 says that Judah could not take the city of Jerusalem and it remained a Jebusite city until David defeated it (2 Sam. 5:6). Here it says that Benjamin was not able to take the city of Jerusalem. Most likely, Israel had some kind of partial victory over the Jebusites in or around the city of Jerusalem but were not able to maintain it. Judah and Benjamin are mentioned because Joshua had allotted the city to Benjamin (Josh. 18:28), which was also on Judah's northern border (Josh. 15:8). Not only did the Benjaminites fail, but they also began to dwell with the Jebusites. This foreshadows the tragedy that is to come in the epilogue of the book, where the Benjaminites will act like the Jebusites (Judg. 19).

In contrast to the Benjaminites' failure, Caleb was not only able to defeat the enemy but the giants that lived in the land. Nothing can thwart Yahweh, but our lack of faith and obedience can make us miss out on His blessings.

**1:22-26** The city of Bethel was a significant spiritual place to Israel because it was one of the first places Abraham lived and built an altar to Yahweh after arriving in the Promised Land (Gen. 12:8; 13:3). The Canaanites called the city Luz but Jacob was the one who re-named the

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<sup>9</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Judges*, p. 13. See also Jacquetta Hawkes, *The First Great Civilizations*, p. 113; V. Gordon Childe, *New Light on the Most Ancient East*, p. 157; Leonard Cottrell, *The Anvil of Civilization*, p. 157; and Volkmar Fritz, “Conquest or Settlement? The Early Iron Age in Palestine,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 50:2 (June 1987):84-100.

city Bethel (“house of God”) after his vision wherein Yahweh confirmed the Abrahamic Covenant with him (Gen. 28:10-22). When Yahweh later appeared in a dream to Jacob, He referred to himself as the “God of Bethel” (Gen. 31:13). Jacob returned to Bethel after Yahweh instructed him to, and he buried his idols (Gen. 35:1-15).

The destruction of Bethel is similar to and a reminder of the destruction of Jericho (Josh. 2; 5:13-6:27). In both cases native Canaanites cooperated with the Israelite spies for which they are promised that they would be spared. However, Jericho was destroyed through Yahweh’s power whereas Bethel was destroyed by a pagan. Rahab proclaimed Yahweh’s greatness and lived among the Israelites. Mr. No-name was selfish, moved to a foreign land, and built a city and named it Luz, the Canaanite name for Bethel. The point is that the Canaanite city of Luz (re-named Bethel by Jacob) had not really been conquered but had merely moved. The Israelites’ employing the help of a Canaanite and letting him go had led them to the false perception that they had conquered the Canaanites of Luz.

**1:27-36** Over and over again the tribes are listed as being unable to conquer the Canaanites who lived in their tribal allotments. They instead chose to live among the Canaanites, which would lead to their eventual compromise and oppression by the very people they failed to conquer. Issachar’s actions are left out to further illustrate the above point in that Issachar is so passive in the conquest of the land that they are not even worth mentioning.

**2:1-5** Yahweh had repeatedly stated that Israel was to destroy all the Canaanites, yet Israel failed to obey and do so (Ex. 23:33; 34:11-16; Num. 33:51-56; Deut. 7:1-5). Yahweh sent an angel to tell the people that because they failed to trust and obey Him, He was no longer going to enable them to defeat the Canaanites and was instead going to allow them to be oppressed by the Canaanites as judgment for their sins (Rom. 1-2). Yahweh concluded His judgment with an allusion to a warning that Joshua had given Israel (Josh. 23:13). The only part that was left out here was that Yahweh would drive Israel out of the land. This implies that Israel had not yet sinned enough for Yahweh to judge them in the same way He had the Canaanites (Gen. 15:12-16).

Even though Israel cried out to Yahweh upon hearing their judgment, there is no evidence that they repented in any way. Nowhere is there any evidence of a change of their hearts or in their behavior, or any mention of them getting rid of their idols as their father Jacob had (Gen. 35:2-3).

Though Israel may have thought their failure to defeat the Canaanites was due to the Canaanites’ military strength, the real reason was their failure to obey Yahweh. Because Israel failed to obey Yahweh, they forfeited the blessings of Yahweh. One cannot expect Yahweh to guide, protect, and give success while refusing to submit to His will.

## **B. Worshiping the Canaanite Gods (2:6-3:6)**

This section parallels the previous section in outlining Israel's spiritual decline following the death of Israel. Both sections begin with references to Joshua (Judg. 1:1 and Judg. 2:6-9), outline Israel's spiritual failures, and conclude with an account of Yahweh's disfavor of Israel (Judg. 2:1-3 and Judg. 2:20-3:4). The final verses (Judg. 3:5-6) summarize the major themes of the first two chapters. This section also serves as an introduction to the central portion of the book—the continual downfall of Israel into eventual total chaos (Judg. 2:6-16:31). This section has two major literary units: the end of Joshua's era (Judg. 2:6-10) and an account of Israel's idolatry and Yahweh's resulting anger (Judg. 2:11-3:4).<sup>11</sup>

**2:6-10** The death and burial of Joshua are retold from Josh. 24:28-31 to highlight that Yahweh is faithful to and rewards those who remain faithful to Him, often with a long life (Gen. 50:22). The narrator points out that the following generation had not “seen” the mighty works of Yahweh. How could a whole generation fall away from Yahweh after the greatness of the previous generation? Perhaps despite all the previous generation's greatness they failed to teach their children who Yahweh is and what He had done (Deut. 6:4-9). Yet neither the narrator nor Yahweh place fault at the feet of the previous generation. For whatever reason it is not important why it happened, only that they failed to obey Yahweh.

**2:11-15** The phrase “the Israelites did evil in the eyes of Yahweh” describes idolatry (Deut. 4:25; 9:18; 17:2-3; 31:29; Judg. 3:7; 10:6). It also becomes the structural key for the main part of the book (see Judg. 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). The seven following items elaborate on the sins of the people (Judg. 2:11-13). As a result of their rebellion, Yahweh gave them over to the enemy.

Ba'al was the god of the storm and rain and was the chief Canaanite deity. He was worshiped as a fertility god along with his father Dagon, the grain god. Asherah (or Ashtar) was the moon goddess of the Canaanites and was worshiped as the feminine principle of nature. She was also associated with fertility, often represented by an evergreen carved into the shape of a woman.

“The greatest sin a human being can commit is not murder or rape or other despicable acts of atrocity. It is to turn his back on the living God to serve man-made gods.”<sup>12</sup>

**2:16-19** Despite the rebellion of the people, Yahweh was still with Israel and raised up leaders to deliver the people. Over and over throughout history Yahweh continually demonstrates His willingness to redeem a world and a people who continually rebel against Him. Yet even then, Israel chose to rebel against the very leaders who were rescuing them. And once the leader died, the people went right back into their idolatry.

**2:20-3:6** Yahweh then gave them over to the enemy to be oppressed. In His judgment Yahweh typically does not punish His people actively, instead removing His protection and blessing from His people so that the natural evil of the world and surrounding nations are no longer held at bay. If the people reject Yahweh, then He will no longer protect them from the world that wants to do them harm. This giving over becomes both a judgment and a test. Yahweh left some of the nations to test the next generation on whether they would step out in faith and destroy the enemy.

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<sup>11</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 151-152.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Inrig. *Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay*, p. 37.

Yahweh's desire was for the enemy to be destroyed; anyone who in faith began to do this would find Yahweh giving them success.

This section ends with the intermarrying of Israel with the Canaanite women. The point is not just that they married foreign women but that they brought pagan idolaters into the covenant community of Yahweh. It would be these women who would speed up the decline and apostasy of Israel by bringing their pagan gods and ways into the families of Israel and teaching the children their ways rather than the ways of Yahweh (Deut. 6:4-9). Once the family is compromised, then the whole nation will begin to decline. This willingness to bring in foreigners to pollute the covenant community of Yahweh rather than convert the foreign nations goes directly against the nature and character of the redeeming God of Israel.

The cycle of Israel's apostasy is laid out in this section. Israel departed from Yahweh and served idols (Judg. 2:11-13). Yahweh then disciplined His people by allowing them to be oppressed by their enemies (Judg. 2:14-15). Yahweh then raised up judges to deliver Israel (Judg. 2:16). Israel returned to idolatry (Judg. 2:17). Then they started the cycle all over again (Judg. 2:18-19). This continual rebellion resulted in Yahweh not driving Israel's enemies out of their land (Judg. 2:20-21) but leaving the enemies in Canaan to test Israel (Judg. 2:22-23).

It is clear in this section that Yahweh does not tolerate rival gods or devotion to them and that He will deal with His people when they abandon Him. However, He is also a covenantal God who will deliver them and restore them because He is loving and faithful.



## II. The Downward Spiral of Israel (3:7-16:31)

After giving a summary of Israel's failure to trust Yahweh and finish the conquest of the land, the narrator gives specific examples of judges who started off well and then gradually became worse. The prologue described the judges in a fairly positive way as instruments of Yahweh who attempted to lead the people (Judg. 2:17). However, here it becomes clear that though Yahweh used them in great ways, they failed to trust Yahweh and were morally flawed in their obedience. Joshua and Caleb are used as foils for the remaining failed leaders. The decline of Israel's leaders would eventually lead to the moral bankruptcy of the nation (Judg. 17-21). The main idea is that a nation is only as good as its leaders.

There are six cycles within this division. Each one of these cycles begins with the phrase "Israel did evil in the eyes of Yahweh." Each cycle contains the following stages: Israel's apostasy, Israel being oppressed, Israel crying out, Yahweh raising up a judge to deliver them, and Israel experiencing peace.

### A. Othniel Sets the Standard (3:7-11)

The statement "the Israelites did evil in Yahweh's sight" begins the first cycle of the judges. The point is that Israel was no longer interested in what Yahweh wanted, but rather they were defining good and evil according to their own desires and then acting upon those desires. Just like Adam and Eve, they chose autonomy from Yahweh (Gen. 3:6-7).

Othniel and Ehud are the only two positive examples of judges in the book. Othniel's story is short and to the point. He is an example of a godly man who simply obeyed Yahweh without hesitation and so needs very little elaboration on his life. Othniel sets the standard for all other judges to follow.

**3:7-11** The time period of the judges begins with Israel abandoning Yahweh and going after the Ba'als and Asherahs. The pluralization of the pagan god names refers to the local manifestations of these two pagan gods. Though the people of the ancient Near East believed that there was one Ba'al, they believed that his image was represented by the many different idols throughout the land of Canaan. Yahweh gave them over into the hands of King Cushan. The last part of his hyphenated name *rishathaim* means "doubly wicked." This last part may have been a name that the Israelites gave him. Notice that Israel cried out for help but did not repent of their idolatry, yet Yahweh still rescued them out of His covenant character and His compassion for them.

Cushan was a Mesopotamian king who may have controlled most, if not all, of Israel. This is based on the fact that Mesopotamia lay northeast of Canaan, but Othniel lived in the southwest part of Canaan. Normally Yahweh raised up local leaders who lived in the region of Israel that was oppressed.

Yahweh raised up Othniel as a deliverer and placed the Spirit of Yahweh upon him to give him the power and ability to deliver Israel from their oppressors (Num. 24:2; Judg. 11:29; 1 Sam. 19:20, 23; 2 Chr. 20:14). The Spirit of Yahweh did not indwell people in the First Testament since the blood of Christ had not yet been shed for them (Ps. 51:11; Ezek. 11:17-21; Acts. 1:8; 2:1-12). The Spirit of Yahweh would sometimes come down and rest temporarily upon an individual to give him or her supernatural ability to accomplish the will of Yahweh. In this case, the will of Yahweh was the conquest of the land, so that was what Othniel was to accomplish supernaturally through the power of the Spirit of Yahweh. Yahweh then expected the person to

go into action immediately after feeling the power of the Spirit of Yahweh had come. Here in Judges, the energizing of the Spirit of Yahweh was temporary for a very specific task. Only the prophets, priests, and kings would be anointed with the Spirit of Yahweh for their entire career.

Othniel is portrayed as the new Caleb. Unlike the many other Israelites who married the Canaanite women (Judg. 3:6), Othniel married within the covenant community. He was a godly and heroic conqueror who acted without hesitation when the Spirit of Yahweh came upon him. He is the ideal model of faith producing courage and obedience. Othniel brought many more years of peace than the years Israel had been oppressed.

Othniel and Ehud are the only two judges who are actually called *deliverers* and of whom the narrator specifically says, “Yahweh raised up a deliverer (Judg. 3:9, 15). The rest of the judges may actually deliver Israel in different ways, but the narrator will never give them the actual title of deliverer. This point emphasizes the godly character of Othniel and Ehud all the more.



## B. Ehud Tricks the Enemy (3:12-31)

The statement “the Israelites *again* did evil in Yahweh’s sight” marks the beginning of the second cycle of the judges. Ehud is portrayed as the second and last positive judge. Unlike Othniel, Ehud’s account reads more like a narrative story. Ehud is portrayed almost in a romantic way as an unexpected hero who defeats a physically superior but intellectually inferior enemy through his courage and wit.<sup>13</sup> The story reads like a satire wherein the narrator makes fun of the enemy in order to excite the reader over what Yahweh accomplished. However, the narrator uses this in order to emphasize that despite the pathetic state of Moab, Israel was still oppressed by them.

**3:12-14** Because of Israel’s sin Yahweh gave them over to Eglon the king of the Moabites who made alliances with the Ammonites and Amalekites. These three nations occupied the eastern and southern parts of the Dead Sea region. The City of Palms describes the city of Jericho (Deut. 34:3; 2 Chr. 28:15), but 1 Kgs. 16:34 states that Jericho was not rebuilt until the time of King Ahab in the ninth century BC (see Josh. 6:26, but note 2 Sam. 10:5). It could be that the Moabites had established a military outpost there without rebuilding the city.<sup>14</sup> Notice that Israel’s oppression was longer this time compared to the last (Judg. 3:8).

**3:15-17** Ehud is described as a Benjaminite and a left-handed man. The phrase “left-handed” in the Hebrew is literally “bound in the right hand.” This does not mean that he was literally left handed but that in training as a warrior he literally bound his right hand to force himself to become ambidextrous as a warrior. There is evidence in antiquity that warriors intentionally bound their right hand in training from a young age to be able to use the left hand with skill in battle. This can be seen in the 700 Benjaminite slingers in Judg. 20:16 who were described in the same way.<sup>15</sup> It is ironic that he is a Benjaminite since the name Benjamin means “son of my right hand.”

The fact that Ehud was a Benjaminite is important in light of how the book of Judges will end. Whereas a Benjaminite is portrayed now as a godly hero who rescued Israel, by the end of the book the Benjaminites would be horribly compromised in their morality and were even the cause of civil war (Judg. 19:1-2, 18). The contrast is made to show by the end of the book how far Israel has fallen.

Ehud was responsible for bringing the regular tribute (taxes) to the king. This means that Ehud had been to the palace several times and knew the layout and the routine. Ehud showed wit and skill by fashioning a short, double-edged sword (about eighteen inches) to his right side in concealment. A right-handed swordsman would carry his sword on the left. Since left-handed people were uncommon as warriors, the Moabites would not be looking for a sword of a left-handed man strapped to his right side.

Eglon’s name means “calflike,” and he is described as an obese man. In the ancient Near East, people worked in the fields all day and ate very little compared to people today and were unlikely to be overweight. Thus, Eglon’s obesity emphasizes his greed and that he was a tyrant who had grown fat and lazy at the expense of the Israelites whom he had oppressed. His luxury

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<sup>13</sup> See Greger Andersson. *The Book and Its Narratives*, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 180.

<sup>15</sup> See George F. Moore. *Judges*, p. 94. Also Baruch Halpern. *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History*, pp. 40-43.

had made him cocky and overconfident and brought laxity to his security. Eglon is portrayed as immobile, comical, and stupid in contrast to Ehud's stealth, courage, and cleverness.

**3:18-25** There were three rooms next to each other. The first was the outer court that then went into the audience hall, where Ehud presented his tribute. This then went into the well-ventilated room (a room with latticed windows which allowed the breeze to pass through), where Eglon was seated. Ehud maneuvered Eglon into a vulnerable position by telling him that he had a secret message from God, which led to Eglon sending his guards and attendants away and out of the audience hall, into the outer court. Ehud was thus permitted to enter the well-ventilated room where Eglon was.

Ehud used the generic title "Elohim" for God rather than the Israelite covenantal name "Yahweh" to keep from arousing suspicion. While Eglon eagerly awaited a message from God he received a sword to the gut instead. The description of the fat closing around the sword not only adds to the comicalness of Eglon but also explains why Ehud is able to walk out of the king's chambers and past the guards without any blood on himself that would draw their attention to him.

Ehud left the well-ventilated room, then closed and locked the door behind him.<sup>16</sup> Every time the phrase "locked the door behind" in connection to a person is used it refers to them being in the room and locking the door (2 Kgs. 4:4-5; Isa. 26:20). This causes confusion because it leads scholars to think that Ehud escaped through a window since the door was locked yet the guards were not suspicious of why Ehud had not come out. However, every time that phrase is used it is used of someone entering the room so that it makes sense that they are in the room when they locked the door behind themselves. In this case, Ehud was leaving the room when he locked the door behind himself. Ehud then walked through the audience hall and then the outer court, passing the guards and leaving the palace. The guards then moved into the audience hall adjoining the well-ventilated room, where Eglon lay dead. The guards assumed that Ehud's business was done and that Eglon remained in his chambers. The long wait for Eglon to come out led them to assume that he was on the toilet, and they waited until the point that it became awkward. All this continues to poke fun at the stupidity of the Moabites who had no idea what was going on.

**3:26-30** Unlike the Moabite guards, Ehud does not delay and exploits their lack of leadership to attack. The verbs "blew" (Judg. 3:27) and "plunged" (Judg. 3:21) come from the same root and connect Ehud's decisive actions. Up to this point Ehud had been acting on his own, but it was at this point that the narrator makes it clear that Ehud was doing all of this in obedience to Yahweh and to deliver Israel. His action of passing by the idols was a very intentional and significant statement. In the ancient Near East, there is no way that a pagan warrior would not make an offering to the idols to ensure that the gods' blessings went with him into battle. The fact that Ehud did not do this shows that his devotion belonged to Yahweh. Likewise, he called Israel to join him in battle and gave glory to Yahweh, now using His covenantal name. Ehud then proceeded to deliver Israel from the hand of the Moabites, which would not have been possible if Yahweh were not backing him. Ehud brought eighty years of peace to Israel—twice the length of time of the previous deliverance (Judg. 3:11).

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<sup>16</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 187-188.

What is meant by the “land” is most likely not all of Israel since Shamgar comes during this eighty-year period of Ehud’s provided peace and defeats the Philistines (Judg. 3:31). The “land” here refers to only the portion that the Moabites had dominated. Sometimes the reference to the “land” in Judges can refer to a portion of the land (Judg. 1:2; 6:4; 18:30) or the entire Promised Land (Judg. 2:1-2, 6).

Ehud is much like Othniel in that he did not hesitate in his military action, nor did he compromise with the enemy. Ehud is an example of a warrior who used his intelligence and skill to serve Yahweh, while Yahweh used Ehud to bring about Israel’s deliverance. Ehud was obedient to Yahweh, but he demonstrated his understanding of human responsibility by taking action and not expecting Yahweh to do everything.

There are some who have questioned Ehud’s character because he used deception to kill the enemy. However, this argument is made from a more western and modern civilization perspective. Eglon was the enemy whom Yahweh had commanded Israel to kill; sometimes deception needs to be employed to fight the enemy. For example, a family might keep their lights on when they leave their house to make bad people think they are at home so that no one breaks in. Moses and Joshua both sent spies into Canaan (Num. 13:1-2; Josh. 2:1). The deception also needs to be seen in the light that Yahweh Himself sometimes uses deception in order bring about His will (Judg. 14:19; 1 Kgs. 22:19-28; 2 Kgs. 9-10; Ps. 58:1, 11; Isa. 63).<sup>17</sup> Nowhere in the Bible is the use of deception used by many godly men and women ever condemned. Later, in fact, the prophetess Deborah in a song praises Jael’s act of deception in the elimination of Sisera. One is inclined to take this as a positive statement since it is the song of a prophetess and the narrator included it in the Bible. Though this is still a difficult issue, one should not so quickly dismiss Ehud’s actions as sinful.

Some have also questioned his character because the narrator never mentions the Spirit of Yahweh coming upon Ehud like with other judges. However, it is important to remember that that this is also true of Abraham, Joseph, Joshua, Samuel, David, Daniel, and many others. Likewise, as mentioned before, Othniel and Ehud are the only two of whom the narrator specifically states that Yahweh raised them up as deliverers (Judg. 3:9, 15) and portrays Ehud’s victory in a positive light. This automatically puts Othniel and Ehud in a much more favorable category than the rest of the judges. There are also parallels between Ehud’s victory and Jael’s victory (which will be mentioned in the notes at the end of Judges 5), who is praised for her victory. The silence does not mean divine disapproval, but rather it shows human initiative and, when combined with faith, is not in opposition with Yahweh.

**3:31** Very little is known about Shamgar. Shamgar’s name is a Hurrian (Canaanite) name; he also seems to have a military title connected to the Canaanite war goddess Anat. Whether Shamgar was a Canaanite is not clear, but if he was not, he at least had a Canaanite background and his name may be due to his parents intermarrying (Judg. 3:6). The reference to Anat the goddess of war may be a humorous hint of Jael to come, a female “warrior” (Judg. 4:21). The narrator does not mention whether he was a judge or that Yahweh specifically called him into action. Yet this might be implied by the fact that the narrator states “he *too* delivered Israel” or “*like* Ehud he delivered Israel.”

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<sup>17</sup> For a much more detailed argument on the issue, see Robert B. Chisholm, “Does God Deceive?”

An ox goad is a long, pointed cattle prod. This weapon may suggest that he was not a military warrior but a farmer. It is not clear whether Shamgar killed 600 Philistines all at once or over a period of time. The Philistines had been in the land of Canaan since Abraham's day (Gen. 21:32). However, a large group of people called the Sea Peoples migrated from the Aegean Sea region in about 1230 BC (during the time of the judges) and settled the coastal plains of Canaan. It was these people who majorly oppressed Israel during the time of Samson and Samuel until David finally put them down.

The point that is being made here is that Yahweh used a Canaanite who fought with an unconventional weapon in order to deliver Israel. Meaning that Yahweh can sovereignly use anyone in any way that He chooses. This unconventional person used in an unconventional way hints at Deborah to come in the next story. Perhaps Yahweh used him because there were no faithful or capable Israelites to call upon. Yahweh can use whomever He wants in order to bring about His will.

### **C. Barak, a Hesitant General and a Heroic Woman (4:1-5:31)**

The reference “the Israelites again did evil in Yahweh’s sight” begins the third cycle of the judges. This section is divided into two literary units: first the narrative account of the battle (Judg. 4) and then the poetic account of the battle (Judg. 5). Barak is the first judge who does not match up to the standard of Joshua, Caleb, Othniel, and Ehud. Not only does this story show how the judges began to show a lack of faith in Yahweh but also how the men are failing as leaders.

**4:1-3** In Judg. 3:8 Cushan-Rishathaim, king of Aram Naharaim, was the ruler of a region far to the north of Israel. In Judg. 3:12 Eglon, king of Moab, was ruler of a region right next to Israel in the south. In Judg. 4:2 Jabin, a king of Canaan who reigned in Hazor, was a ruler right in the middle of Israel. Israel became more and more compromised and weak. Israel’s oppression was worse now than previously. Whereas previously the narrator stated that Yahweh gave Israel over to the enemy, this time the enemy is the subject of Israel’s oppression. Now it was Sisera’s cruelty that oppressed Israel. The irony here is that Joshua defeated an earlier Jabin of Hazor by burning his chariots and then burning down Hazor (Josh. 11:1-11). Israel has been so disobedient and apathetic that Hazor has been rebuilt, and they were now oppressing Israel. Israel’s wickedness had undone Joshua’s previous success. Once again there is an emphasis on iron chariots as the reason for the enemy’s superiority (Judg. 1:19). This again points to the false thinking of Israel—iron chariots are not a problem for Yahweh (Ex. 14:23-28; 15:4; Josh. 11:4-6; 17:18).

**4:4-5** Previously Yahweh responded to Israel’s cry for help by raising up a deliverer (Judg. 3:9, 15). This time the narrator states that Deborah, a woman, was leading Israel. The point here is that according to Gen. 3:16 (Ex. 18:21-22) a man should be leading Israel. Though there are cases in Israel’s history of female prophets (Ex. 15:20; 2 Kgs. 22:14; Neh. 6:14), there was still a male leader over them. And nowhere else is a female judge or ruler seen in all of the Bible. The reader should be noting that the men are failing so much that a woman must lead Israel. The text highlights the oddity of the situation by its very word choice and syntax. It reads literally, “Now Deborah, *a woman*, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth—she was judging Israel at this time.” This is not a negative statement against her character; rather, the narrator uses her to illustrate the dying character of the Israelite men. As one continues to read further, everything in the story seems to enforce this point.<sup>18</sup> This is especially seen with Deborah’s own insulting words of judgment to Barak that a woman would get the glory instead of him (Judg. 4:9). The role of Deborah next to Barak is drastically different from the role of Acsah next to Othniel, the only other woman mentioned positively in Judges (Judg. 2:9-15). This unnatural role especially stands out after reading that Yahweh had to use Shamgar, a non-Israelite, to deliver Israel (Judg. 3:31). This should not discourage the reader that Israel was doomed, for Shamgar also shows that Yahweh can use anyone to accomplish His will.

Deborah is said to be judging outside Ramah in the Ephraimite hill country. The phrase Ephraimite can refer either to those who come from Ephrath (also known as Bethlehem; Gen. 35:19) or those who come from the northern tribe of Ephraim (Judg. 12:5; 1 Kgs. 11:26).<sup>19</sup> Deborah may have been from the city of Bethlehem rather than from the tribe of Ephraim.

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<sup>18</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 223-224.

<sup>19</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 107.

**4:6-10** Barak lived all the way in northern Israel in the tribal territory of Naphtali. Yet Yahweh used Deborah in the central part of Israel to call Barak all the way down to her so that she could tell him to go all the way north, where he lived, to defeat the enemy that was oppressing him. This may further point to the fact that there was no one godly enough for Yahweh to speak through. Deborah informed Barak that Yahweh had called him to defeat the enemy. Barak had the backing and promise of victory of Yahweh, yet he refused to obey Yahweh. The irony is that Barak, whose name means “lightning-flash,” did not live up to his name when he hesitated to go. Unlike Othniel and Ehud, Barak was reluctant and makes an ultimatum with Yahweh that he would only go if Deborah went with him. It was not uncommon in the ancient Near East for pagans to view the prophet as a direct link to the gods and as some special guarantee of the gods’ backing in battle. Barak showed that he had placed more faith in Deborah for success than he had in the presence and word of Yahweh himself.

Deborah agreed to go but pronounced the judgment upon him that Yahweh would still use him to deliver Israel but that the glory for killing Sisera would go to a woman. One assumes at this point that the woman is Deborah, but as the story moves on a different woman is revealed. The fact that he, not Deborah, was a man whom had been called by Yahweh and that a woman would get the glory at the end is seen as a judgment and continues to make the point that a woman leading Israel is not Yahweh’s ideal. The pathetic nature of the male leadership in Israel is emphasized by the fact that Barak needs Deborah for military victory, and she insults him with the fact that a woman, not he, would get the glory. Barak’s actions were weak and passive and came from a lack of faith in Yahweh. Twice the narrator repeats that Deborah went with Barak as if to emphasize his lack of confidence and faith.

**4:11** This brief parenthetical comment seems irrelevant, interrupting the flow of the story. However, this is a foreshadowing comment telling the reader that Heber the Kenite would somehow play a role in the coming battle. The Kenites were the descendants of Moses’ father-in-law who were given land by Joshua for their faithfulness to Israel (Judg. 1:16; Num. 10:29-32). The fact that Heber had moved away from the other Kenites makes one wonder if he had defected to the Canaanites.

**4:12-16** The massive numbers of soldiers and chariots that Sisera had creates a sense of dread given Israel’s track record. But this time when Deborah commanded Barak to spring into action, Barak did not hesitate, and he attacked with lightning-flash speed. Yahweh then routed the enemy before Barak. The Hebrew verb *hamam*, translated “routed” was also used of Moses and Joshua’s previous victories (Ex. 14:24; Josh. 10:10). The narrator does not state how Yahweh defeated Sisera until Judges 5. Sisera’s army is put to the sword, but he escapes.

**4:17-24** The narrator now points out that Heber had defected to the Canaanites and had a treaty with King Jabin. This is disconcerting because Sisera had now sought refuge in Heber’s wife’s tent. Heber’s wife Jael treated Sisera like her master and son. She came out to meet the general, called him “my lord,” and provided him sanctuary. She then showed motherly concern by providing him with a blanket, giving him milk when he asked for water, and letting him sleep in her lap. But then Jael nailed his head to the ground with a tent peg and presented him to Barak. Jael was the woman who would get the glory. Israel followed up by putting King Jabin down.

The narrator never reveals Jael’s motives for killing Sisera, but it is clear from all the parallels that she is to be viewed as an Ehud/Shamgar-like figure. Like Ehud, Jael used deception and wit to defeat the enemy and did not hesitate when the opportunity came; they both killed the enemy

behind closed doors. The same Hebrew verb is used to describe Ehud's sword thrust ("plunged" in Judg. 3:21) and Jael's hammer blow ("drove" in Judg. 4:21). Like Shamgar, Jael was a non-Israelite, non-warrior who used an unconventional weapon. The fallen corpses of Eglon and Sisera are described in almost the same terms.<sup>20</sup> Jael is also similar to Deborah in that as a woman she was forced to do the work of a man because there were no good men to be found as leaders and warriors.

**5:1-5** Judges 5 is the poem that Deborah, and probably secondarily Barak, sung in praise of Yahweh's victory over the Canaanites. The opening verses of the poem make it clear that Yahweh was the true warrior and victor in the battle. Yahweh is portrayed as a cosmic giant who marches from Sinai to Israel's rescue. The reference to Sinai, the mountain on which the covenant was given (Ex. 19-20), and the titles that the Israelites have given Him make it clear that He is Israel's King and is still very much alive, in power, and active on Israel's behalf. The language of Yahweh's using the storm, lightning, and river in a supernatural way develops the polemic of Yahweh versus Ba'al (Canaanite storm god). It is here that the Ba'al polemic begins to develop and build throughout Judges until it reaches its climax at Mount Carmel with Elijah (1 Kgs. 18). Ba'al was the major god that Yahweh combated throughout the history of Israel because he was the most prevalent god to which the Israelites prostituted themselves.

**5:6-19** The poem tells how warriors in Israel were scarce until Deborah came and Yahweh chose new warriors. There is praise for those who actually showed up for battle in a time period of fear and cowardice. Deborah led into battle all those who were faithful. The poem then lists the tribes that joined Deborah in battle and then intentionally mentions the ones who refused to join her—Reuben, Gilead (which probably refers to Gad, see Josh. 13:24-25), Dan, and Asher. Dan and Asher's lack of participation is not surprising (Judg. 1:31-32, 34), but Reuben and Gad's is surprising since they were so faithful to Joshua in the conquest of the land (Josh. 1:12-15; 4:12; 22:1-9). Their abandonment shows that not only has Israel failed to unite after Joshua, but they were falling apart, which will become a sub-theme throughout the Bible until Israel finally splits (1 Kgs. 11-12).

**5:20-23** Whereas previously in Judges 4 the narrator did not state how Yahweh had routed the enemy, now the poem states that Yahweh had used the storm and the river. Just as Joshua's generation had the miraculous splitting and crossing of the Jordan River and the fall of Jericho to remind them of the plagues on Egypt, their exodus, and the splitting of the Red Sea, so this generation was given the defeat of Sisera's powerful army through the waters of the Kishon River. Yahweh made it rain hard enough that the ground grew so muddy that all the chariots were made useless when they got bogged down in the mud. Once again Yahweh showed that chariots stand no chance against Him. The mention of the stars may refer to the angels. The people of the ancient Near East believed that the stars were gods, and in the Bible they are sometimes used to represent the angels (Job. 38:7; Isa. 40:26; Dan. 8:10; Rev. 1:20; 9:1; 12:4; see also Deut. 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kgs. 17:16; 21:3, 5; 23:4-5; 2 Chr. 33:3, 5.). It could be that Yahweh used the angels as well as the river against Sisera's army just as He had with the death of the firstborn in Egypt (Ex. 12: 29-30). In the ancient Near East the stars were also seen as a source of rain. It is now clear that Yahweh did all the fighting and Barak did not do much at all. This further emphasizes his lack of faith, for Yahweh had planned to do all the fighting. All Barak had to do was show up and behold the power of Yahweh.

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<sup>20</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 234-235.

**5:24-27** The poem then praises Jael, not Barak, for her bravery and action just as Deborah had predicted. Four synonyms are used of Jael's death blow to Sisera's head. The poem uses the repetition to slow the action down to allow the reader to vent their judgment for Sisera. The twice mention of Sisera dying between Jael's legs sets up an ironic connection with Judg. 5:30 where Sisera's mother refers to the female genitalia between women's legs.<sup>21</sup>

**5:28-30** The poem ends with the perspective of Sisera's mother. At first one would be tempted to feel sorry for her until her greed and immorality are revealed. Sisera's mother was greedy for plunder and praises her son's rape of the Israelite women. The Hebrew word *racham* translated "girl" literally reads "a womb." In this context it refers to the female genitalia and the rape of women. This obscene language emphasizes the sexual brutality that typically followed a Canaanite victory in battle and how the Canaanite culture as a whole looked on in favor. If this is how a mother thinks, then Israel's war against the Canaanites is a just one.

The juxtaposition of narrative and poetic accounts of the victory parallels Ex. 14:1-15:21, which also reports and praises Yahweh's defeat of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea. There are many other similarities between these two accounts to suggest that Sisera should be viewed as another Pharaoh whom Yahweh has defeated on Israel's behalf. Both accounts emphasize the strength of the enemy's horses and chariots (Ex. 14:9, 17-18, 23, 28; 15:1, 4, 19; Judg. 4:3, 7, 13, 15-16; 5:22, 28). The waters of the Red Sea and Kishon River are both used by Yahweh to destroy the enemy (Judg. 5:21; Ex. 15:6, 10). In both instances Yahweh confused/routed the enemy (Judg. 4:15; Ex. 14:24) and the enemy was totally destroyed ("not even one of them remained" in Ex. 14:28 and "not even one was left," in Judg. 4:16).

Barak is portrayed as a judge whose doubts and fears were greater than his faith and trust in Yahweh. Though Barak knew Yahweh and did obey him, he would only obey if his conditions were met. The judges did not immediately become people who were oblivious to Yahweh and did their own thing; it was a gradual decline and starts with Barak merely wanting more of a guarantee than what Yahweh was giving him. Also the story shows the role of women beginning to change. As men are failing to be men and the women have to be the leaders and warriors, this is the beginning of a gradual decline into the human sacrifice and sexual brutality of women.

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<sup>21</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 241.



## D. Gideon, a Coward Turned to Corrupt King (6:1-8:32)

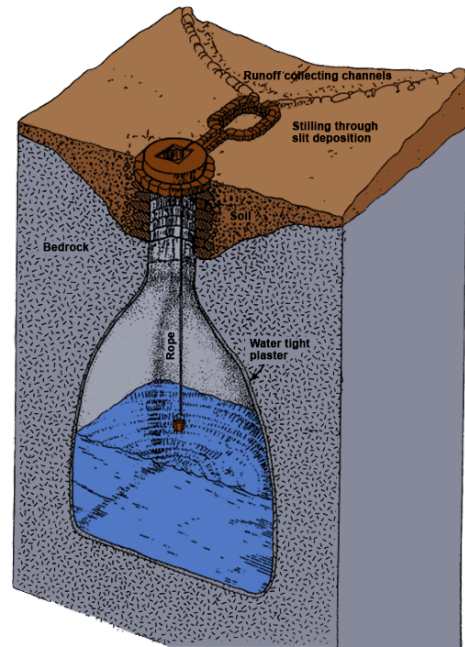
The statement “the Israelites did evil in Yahweh’s sight” begins the fourth cycle in the book of Judges. Gideon is probably one of the most misunderstood characters in the Bible. He is often lifted up as a great man of faith yet he demonstrated very little faith throughout his life and even ended up leaving Israel worse off than he found it. Not only did he demonstrate the hesitancy of Barak, but he also showed what happens when one begins to think he is responsible for the victories that Yahweh has provided.

**6:1-6** Though the oppression was shorter than the previous periods, it was more intense. Israel was now forced to live in the mountains as the enemy came and pillaged their crops at harvest time. The irony here is that the same phrase used in Judg. 3:10 to describe Othniel’s victory over Cushan-Rishathaim (“his hand was made strong against them”) is used in Judg. 6:2 of Midian’s subjugation of Israel (“the hand of Midian was strong against Israel”). The comparison of the Midianites to hordes of locusts echoes the covenantal curse of Deut. 28:38. Also ironic is the attack of the Amalekites, for Moses had instructed Israel to annihilate the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17-19). Again Israel’s failure to destroy the enemy was coming back to haunt them (Judg. 3:13).<sup>22</sup>

**6:7-10** Unlike the previous times where Yahweh had responded to the people’s cry with a deliverer, He now responded with a prophet with a message. Even though Yahweh would still deliver Israel, He wanted to remind them why they were in the trouble that they were. He reminded them of all He had done for them, their need to be faithful to Him, and that they had not been faithful. At some point they had to come grips with the underlying issue of their unfaithfulness.

**6:11** The first introduction to Gideon is of a man threshing his grain in a winepress. Threshing is the process of beating the grain head off the wheat stalk after it has been harvested. The grain head of a wheat stalk has a mixture of edible grain seeds and non-edible chaff. Threshing leaves the farmer with a pile of grain and chaff. The farmer then throws the grain up into the air with a pitchfork or a basket in order to separate the two, which is called winnowing. It is a very dirty and dusty job and is usually done on a hill so that the grain, which is heavier, will fall to the ground and the chaff, which is lighter, will be blown down the hill. A winepress is where the grapes are squeezed and processed into wine. This is done in a cold cave or in a broken and converted cistern. Instead of on a hill, Gideon was threshing grain in a windless cave because he was afraid that the Midianites would take it.

**6:12-13** When the angel of Yahweh appeared to Gideon, he called Gideon a mighty warrior, which was not what he was but rather what he *could be* by surrendering to Yahweh’s will. Just as Moses before him, neither had Gideon seen any involvement of Yahweh in the affairs of Israel to allow him to trust easily in Yahweh (Ex. 3-4). It is clear from Gideon’s comment that though he



<sup>22</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 270.

knew of the stories of Yahweh he had no relationship with Yahweh. Thus it is clear that Yahweh chose him not for how great he was but for what He could turn Gideon into, just like Moses.

**6:14-16** After Gideon expressed his doubt, Yahweh Himself turned to Gideon and addressed him. Some see Yahweh and His angel as the same being here; however, there are indications that they are distinct. The switch to the first person (“Have I not sent you?”) suggests Yahweh Himself was now speaking. Later, after the angel disappeared, Yahweh and Gideon continued to talk. One can see this same distinction between Yahweh and His angel in Ex. 3 and Gen. 21:17-19.<sup>23</sup>

Yahweh told Gideon, just as He had told Moses, that He would be with him and that was all that mattered. And just as Moses had, Gideon responded by stating that he was the least in the weakest tribe in Israel. Once again Yahweh told him that He would be with Gideon, using the same words that He had with the patriarchs (Gen. 26:3; 31:3), Moses (Ex. 3:12), and Joshua (Josh. 1:5). Yahweh then stated that Gideon would defeat the Midianites “as one man.” This was a Hebrew idiom to emphasize the collective unity of a large group (Num. 14:15; Judg. 20:8, 11; 1 Sam. 11:7; 2 Sam. 19:15), yet Gideon and Yahweh were the only ones present. Yahweh wanted Gideon to defeat the Midianites all by himself through the power of Yahweh. This would be a drastic change from the Gideon hiding in the cave.<sup>24</sup>

**6:17-24** Gideon knew that this promise of Yahweh’s presence was only valid if it was truly Yahweh speaking to him. Gideon decided to ask for a sign to see if it was really Yahweh speaking to him or not. There is nothing wrong with what Gideon did here because the Bible commands us to test spirits and prophets who claim that they come in the name of Yahweh (Deut. 13; 18:14-22; 1 Jn. 4:1-6). Yahweh’s consumption of the sacrifice with fire demonstrated that He was truly who He said He was and that He had accepted Gideon. Upon seeing the fire, Gideon realized that it was Yahweh. Whereas Gideon had addressed Him previously as *adonay* (Judg. 6:15), which means “lord” or “sir,” he now addressed Him as *Yahweh* (Judg. 6:22), which is the unique covenantal name of God. Gideon responded by building an altar to Yahweh and worshipping Him.

**6:25-27** The Ba’al altar and Asherah pole in an Israelite town show how much Israel had strayed from Yahweh. Whereas they were supposed to remove anyone who brought these practices into their village, they were now the ones leading the practices (Deut. 13:6-10). Before Gideon could defeat the Midianite army Yahweh had a smaller yet significant task for him. This is also significant because Ba’al had to be removed from his own village before the Midianites could be removed, and Yahweh’s altar could not stand until Ba’al’s altar was destroyed. Gideon had to clean up his own backyard before he could serve and represent Yahweh.

Though Gideon did demonstrate faith by tearing down his own father’s Ba’al altar, which would have brought the death penalty, he did it fearfully, at night, with the help of his servants. How could Gideon trust Yahweh to give him the ability to defeat the Midianite army all by himself if he could not even face his village?

**6:28-32** It did not take long for the people to figure out who had destroyed their altar, which means Gideon’s subterfuge was pointless. However, instead of standing before the people as Yahweh’s representative, Gideon hid behind his pagan father and allowed him to do all the

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<sup>23</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 272-273.

<sup>24</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 273.

talking. Perhaps Joash defended Gideon because Ba'al's lack of response made him doubt his own faith. This can be seen in the fact that Joash renamed Gideon *Jerub-Ba'al*, meaning "may Ba'al deal with Gideon." If lightning came down and struck Gideon, then Ba'al was the true god; if not, then Yahweh was true. Gideon's life would be a testament to the sovereignty of Yahweh.

**6:33-40** The Spirit of Yahweh came upon Gideon, but instead of going out "as one man" as Yahweh had commanded, he raised an army. Instead of going to action and fulfilling Yahweh's will, he tested Yahweh again. This test was not legitimate for this time he was testing Yahweh to see if He was capable and faithful enough to use Gideon to deliver Israel as He had already promised (Deut. 6:16). This is wrong because Yahweh had already proven His capability and faithfulness throughout Israel's history as well as to Gideon through the acceptance of the goat sacrifice. Gideon even knew that this was not right as he asked Yahweh to not be angry when he did the test with the fleece a second time. This is made clearer by the fact that Gideon no longer addressed God as *Yahweh* but instead as *Elohim*, which is a generic term for god.

"Gideon's fleece is not a sign of faith. It is the opposite. It is not a search for God's will. It is a desperate grasp for security by one who knows clearly what that will is but who is reluctant to do it."<sup>25</sup>

Gideon's choice of a sign is significant in light of Ba'al being the storm god. Gideon was seeing who really controlled the dew. In one of the Ugaritic legends, Ba'al's weakness resulted in the absence of rain and dew.<sup>26</sup> Ba'al even had a daughter by the name of Tallaya, meaning "dew." Though Ba'al's lightning bolt had not come to kill Gideon, he wanted more proof that Yahweh was sovereign.

Not only did Gideon start off with the same doubts as Moses, but he was also hesitant to obey Yahweh and wanted a guarantee of Yahweh's presence and power just like Barak before him. However, despite Gideon's lack of faith and even his blatant questioning of Yahweh, Yahweh tolerated Gideon's immaturity to help him grow in his understanding of and faith in Himself.

**7:1-8** The narrator calling Gideon *Jerub-Ba'al* shows his renewed faith in Yahweh and his readiness to go out and demonstrate the sovereignty of Yahweh. The fact that Yahweh reduced Gideon's army reinforces His command to go out "as one man" and defeat the Midianites and that his raising of an army was in violation of this command. However, in light of Gideon's struggling faith, Yahweh still allowed him to have an army. Yahweh took Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300 in order to make it clear to everyone that the only way Israel could ever have a victory is if Yahweh were with them. Yahweh devised a two-part plan to reduce Gideon's army. First, Gideon was to send away those who were afraid, which is ironic since the name of the spring they were next to was Harod, meaning "terrified" (Deut. 20:8). Second, those who knelt to drink from the spring were sent away and those who lapped it up like a dog remained.

"As it stands, the Hebrew text of verses 5b-6 makes little sense. It reads: "Everyone who laps with his tongue from the water as a dog laps, put him by himself, as well as everyone who kneels to drink. And the number of those who lapped with their hand to their mouth was 300 men, and all the rest of the army knelt to drink water." Verse 5 seems to distinguish between two groups, dog-like lappers and kneelers, but verse 6 contrasts those who "lap" by putting their hand to their mouth (dogs don't do this!) with kneelers. The simplest solution is to view

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel Block, "Gideon: A Rough Vessel," *The Standard*, 77:2 (February 1987): 25.

<sup>26</sup> For the text, see Gibson. *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, p. 115.

the phrase “with their hands to their mouths” as originally an explanatory, marginal gloss which has been accidentally put into the text at the wrong place. It was probably originally designed to explain how the kneelers drank. It fits well at the end of verse 5: “Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink with their hands to their mouths. Three hundred men lapped; all the rest got down on their knees to drink.” Or one could place it at the end of verse 6: “Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink. Three hundred men lapped; all the rest got down on their knees to drink with their hands to their mouths.”<sup>27</sup>

The meaning of the second test is not clear. It is not likely that those who lapped up the water and remained should be seen in a negative light since Yahweh had previously kept those who were not afraid. It may be that those who lay on their belly at the spring were stealthier, like snipers in the brush, considering that Israel and the Midianites were divided by a hill. Those who were on their knees may have been an easier target for archers. On the other hand, there may have been no significance but that Yahweh knew that those who lapped up the water would be fewer in number. With a small army Gideon had to fall back on Yahweh’s promise that He would be with Gideon and give him victory.

“Judges 7:2 is one of the most important verses in the Bible for understanding God’s principles of spiritual warfare. God is not interested in simply giving His people victory. He is concerned with teaching us *trust*. In fact, if our victories make us self-reliant, they are ultimately more disastrous than defeat.”<sup>28</sup>

**7:9-14** The reference to night ties Gideon’s wavering faith to his previous times of wavering faith (Judg. 6:27, 36-40). The fact that Gideon took Yahweh’s offer reveals that the diminishing of his army rattled his confidence. In the ancient Near East, dreams were considered very important and as coming from the gods. The Midianites—warriors who raided Israel—were depicted as the military camp, and Israel—an agricultural people—was symbolized by the loaf of barley bread. Hearing this dream of the Midianite, its interpretation, and their fear gave Gideon confidence again. What is interesting is that it was not the presence of Yahweh that gave him confidence but the enemy’s fear. Even so, he did respond by worshiping Yahweh.

“The textual patterning of the Gideon narrative is carefully composed to highlight not the deliverance from Midian but the change that transpired in Gideon’s heart, and it is precisely there that the greatest theological lesson in these chapters is found. The fear in Gideon’s heart held him back from being able to trust the promise God had given about his delivering Israel from the Midianites. To overcome this deficiency in Gideon’s life, God uniquely worked to expose the problem of fear in his life and to bring him to a point of worship and faith. Then and only then was Gideon ready to lead Israel in battle... Furthermore all the struggles in the book result from a lack of faith. This struggle is most fully spelled out in the Gideon narrative, which accords with this event (his religious struggle) being put in the very center of the book... the narrator leaves the reader with a penetrating message: God must bring His servant to a moment when all human confidence is stripped away, he sits silently in humble adoration of his God as the One who is totally sufficient against all odds to accomplish His

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<sup>27</sup> Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 282.

<sup>28</sup> Gary Inrig. *Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay*, p. 125.

divine will. Then and only then is he ready to move forward to taste God’s victory, though that victory is no more secure or certain than before.”<sup>29</sup>

“We sometimes dupe ourselves into thinking that a real servant of Christ is only someone who is dynamic, assured, confident, brash, fearless, witty, adventuresome, or glamorous—with one or two appearances on a Christian television network. Don’t think you are unusable because you don’t have that air about you. Christ takes uncertain and fearful folk, strengthens their hands in the oddest ways, and makes them able to stand for him in school or home or work.”<sup>30</sup>

**7:15-18** Like Ehud and Jael before him, Gideon used deception to attack the enemy, and like Shamgar and Jael, he used an unconventional means to defeat the enemy. Gideon divided his men into three units and then spread them out to make them look more numerous. Normally there would be one torchbearer for every one or two hundred soldiers for rallying purposes and the same of the trumpeter for giving out commands. By giving every soldier a torch and a trumpet in the night, Gideon deceived the enemy into thinking there were several thousand soldiers. He also probably planned to use the torches to burn down the Mediantes tents. The trumpets also look back to Yahweh’s destruction of Jericho (Josh. 6).

Sadly, whereas Joshua (Josh. 6:16; 8:7) and Ehud gave the battle cry for Yahweh (Judg. 3:28), Gideon gave the battle cry for Yahweh and for himself (Judg. 7:18).<sup>31</sup> This is the beginning of what will follow, where Gideon’s fear and lack of confidence turn to delusions of grandeur. Later the Israelites will give Gideon credit for the victory as well (Judg. 8:22).

**7:19-23** Though Gideon’s plan did work, the reason that not one soldier used a sword against the Midianites in the initial battle is because Yahweh intervened and confused the Midianites, causing them to attack and kill each other (Judg. 7:22). Yahweh demonstrated that He really meant that He would be with Gideon and that he would defeat the Midianites “as one man.” Yahweh did not need Gideon to defeat the Midianites but just for him to step out in faith so that he and Israel could see what Yahweh was capable of.

**7:24-8:3** With the enemy on the run, Gideon called the Ephraimites to guard the fords of the Jordan River to keep the enemy from crossing. However, in light of Judg. 7:2, one wonders if Gideon was justified in doing this especially after Yahweh had just reduced his army. The Ephraimites were upset that Gideon had not called them to battle (Judg. 6:35). Gideon cunningly appeased their anger by flattering them and pointing out how they had helped him. Here Gideon showed that he was committed to tribal unity.

**8:4-9** Two story lines are developed in the following verses. The primary story line is Gideon’s relationship with the Israelite cities he encountered in his pursuit of the two Midianite kings. The secondary story line is the pursuit of the Midianite kings and what Gideon did with them after their capture.

Exhausted in pursuit of the Midianite kings, Gideon asked for food and water from two Israelite towns of Succoth and Penuel in the tribal territory of Gad in the Transjordan region (east of the Jordan River). They refused to help until he could bring back the heads of Zebah and Zalmunna

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<sup>29</sup> Paul J. Tanner. “The Gideon Narrative as the Focal Point of Judges,” p. 160.

<sup>30</sup> John J. Davis. “Conquest and Crisis,” pp. 106-7.

<sup>31</sup> See J. Clinton McCann. *Judges*, pp. 67-69. And Daniel I. Block. *Judges, Ruth*, p. 282.

as proof of victory. Gideon then swore to them when he came back he would thresh the skin off the backs of the men of Succoth with desert thorns and tear down the tower of the city of Penuel.

**8:10-12** With the Midianite generals Oreb and Zeeb dead, Gideon was now in pursuit of the Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmunna. Gideon then caught up with Zebah and Zalmuna and captured them alive. The question at this point is why Gideon had not yet killed the two kings if Yahweh had commanded their execution.

**8:13-17** Gideon returned to the towns of Succoth and Penuel and did to them what he had promised. Using desert thorns, he threshed and scourged the 70 leaders of Succoth to death, then he executed the men of Penuel and tore down its tower. Though Gideon was justified in punishing them for not aiding him, his motivation, means, and harshness were not. This was about vengeance, not justice. The brief brother cooperation that is seen with the tribes coming to Gideon's aid is now lost here (Deut. 33:17) This cruel treatment of his own people, merely for not giving him food and water, shows that he has oppressed his own people to the same extent as the Midianites. The oppressor was no longer the foreign Canaanites; now it was an Israelite.

**8:18-21** When Gideon captured Zebah and Zalmuna, he was willing to spare their lives, a violation of Yahweh's command (Deut. 7:1-6), but killed them out of vengeance for their killing of his brothers. Gideon showed that vengeance for himself—not obedience to Yahweh—was his motivation. This is a serious offense, for Yahweh punished Saul severely when he refused to kill the Amalekite king as he had been commanded (1 Sam. 15). No other judge showed leniency to the enemy like Gideon did.

Gideon wanted his son Jether to do the killing, either to “make him into a man” or to humiliate the two kings by being killed by a boy. His son refused to kill the two kings out of fear. Jether is a foil to who Gideon had become compared to who he was at the beginning of the story.<sup>32</sup>

Gideon was more willing to spare the enemy than his own countrymen. He showed no concern for tribal unity here as he had with the Ephraimites. And the death that he dealt the kings was more merciful than the fact that he tortured the leaders of Succoth to death. Once again Gideon's motivation was vengeance not obedience to Yahweh. Power had gone to Gideon's head, the hesitancy that he first showed was now replaced with uncontrolled vengeance. His treatment of his people foreshadows the anarchy to come at the end of the book. Except for Gideon's empty use of the name Yahweh, the mention of Yahweh has disappeared from the story.

**8:22-27** The Israelites, looking only at Gideon's victory and making no mention of Yahweh's involvement, asked him and his descendants to be king over them. The mention of grandsons means they want to create a dynasty of kings from Gideon's line. Although Yahweh had said that He wanted the glory for the battle (Judg. 7:2), the people now attributed the glory to Gideon (Judg. 7:18). One could interpret Gideon's refusal as a copout since Israel anticipated a king (Deut. 17:14-20) or as an act of humility since they attributed their victory to him instead of Yahweh, an error he pointed out to them. However, the fact that he would now act like their king showed that neither was true of his refusal.

The first thing Gideon did was tax the people by asking them all for a gold earring, which he used to make into a gold ephod. An ephod was a garment worn by the priests to represent their office (Ex. 28:6-14). By making the ephod Gideon may have been trying to take the role of royal priesthood (Gen. 14:18; 1 Sam. 14:3, 18; 23:9; 30:7) or set up a direct line of communication

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<sup>32</sup> Gary B. Webb. *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*, pp. 151-152.

with Yahweh outside the priesthood. Either way, he was creating and doing only what Yahweh had given permission to the Levites to do. What is clear is that this ephod became an idol that Israel, Gideon, and Gideon's family began to worship. The irony here is that Gideon began his career by tearing down an idol, but in the end he erected one to take its place. This event is identical to everyone giving Aaron their gold earrings in order to make the golden calf that they worshiped (Ex. 32).<sup>33</sup>

**8:28-32** The second thing Gideon did in acting like a king was having seventy sons by many wives. The only reason a king would have that many wives was to make treaties with other nations, which was in violation of Deut. 17:14-20. The only way that some could afford that many wives and children is if they were extremely wealthy. Gideon even had a concubine on the side who may have been a Canaanite (Judg. 9:28, see discussion below).

The third thing Gideon did was name his son from the concubine, whom he named as his successor, Abimelech, which means "my father is king." It is obvious by Gideon's actions that he viewed himself as a king-like figure in Israel. After learning all of this, it is clear that Gideon's rejection of the kingship was because he wanted all the privileges of being king with none of the responsibility. Today this is called a celebrity.

The narrator states that because of Gideon, the Midianites, literally in the Hebrew, "did not raise their heads again." This is a little humorous in light of the fact that Gideon cut off the heads of the Midianite kings (Judg. 7:25). Though by the end of the story Gideon had delivered Israel from the Midianites and brought peace for forty years, the reader realizes that spiritually Israel had not been delivered. Israel still had not recognized Yahweh as Savior and King, and they were still prostituting themselves to idols and pagan gods.

Though Gideon knew Yahweh and did obey Him at times, his overall relationship with and obedience to Yahweh was even more lacking than the previous judges. And worse than the other judges, he ended up leading Israel into idolatry. Gideon illustrates better than anyone the point that Hebrews 11 makes—Yahweh can do amazing things even with the little faith that one offers Him. Gideon is not a role model of what a leader of faith is but of what Yahweh can do despite what He has to work with.

What is interesting about Gideon is that he was the only judge with whom a relationship with Yahweh is developed and emphasized. None of the other judges in the book were specifically approached or talked to by Yahweh, nor did any of the other judges pray to Yahweh (except for two minor cases with Samson that will be discussed later). The Gideon story seems to be less about the deliverance of Israel and more about Yahweh's pursuit of a relationship and instruction for a person who was not fully committed to Yahweh and continued to struggle throughout his life. It is amazing to see the perseverance and patience of Yahweh with such a person, which demonstrates how great His love is for even the weakest and least of humanity and what He can do with someone like that.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p.293.

<sup>34</sup> See Paul J. Tanner. "The Gideon Narrative as the Focal Point of Judges," p. 156.

### E. Abimelech, a Man Like His Father (8:33-10:5)

The Abimelech story does not begin a new cycle but is the sequel to the Gideon narrative. Though Abimelech acted like his father and sought kingship, Yahweh did not raise him up as a judge. He is the logical conclusion of Gideon as a father. Like his father, Abimelech is only interested in his own power and is willing to hurt anyone to maintain it. He becomes so corrupt and reckless that he, an Israelite himself, becomes tyrannical Israel's oppressor.

**8:33-35** Israel had strayed so far from Yahweh that they had built a temple to Ba'al in Shechem and named it Ba'al-Berith, which means "Ba'al of the covenant." The irony is that the very city in which they had renewed their covenant with Yahweh under Joshua's leadership (Josh. 8; 24:32) was where they now made a covenant to Ba'al.

**9:1-6** It is difficult to determine the ethnicity of Shechem at this time. Judg. 8:33 states that the Israelites were worshiping at Ba'al-Berith. However, Ga'al in Judg. 9:28 suggests they were descendants of Hamor, an ancestor of the Canaanite ruler Shechem who once lived in the city (Gen 34). Perhaps the population was both Israelite and Canaanite due to intermarrying (Judg. 3:5-6).

Abimelech decided that he was going to be what his father Gideon had desired to be and live up to his regal name. Gideon had modeled a life of desiring power and wealth; now his son, emulating him, wanted the crown that came with it. He made the argument to the Shechemites that having one ruler was better than having seventy, which is an illogical argument. Likewise, there is no evidence that the other brothers were nor desired to be rulers. The Shechemites agreed and paid him from the Ba'al temple to be their king.

Abimelech then hired, literally in the Hebrew, "empty and reckless" mercenaries as his personal guards. Some translations have "a group of adventurers," but this in no way communicates the lawless nature of the men. The Hebrew word "empty" is used elsewhere of a group of mercenaries and bandits (Judg. 11:3), a person who indecently exposes himself (2 Sam. 6:20), and men who supported a coup against a king (2 Chr. 13:7). Its cognate is used of prophets who abused their office (Jer. 23:32; Zeph. 3:4). The idea communicated here is that these were worthless and amoral men who would do anything for money.<sup>35</sup>

Abimelech then killed seventy of his brothers on one stone, suggesting that this was a well-crafted and premeditated slaughter. Abimelech may have been an Israelite, but his character and actions were Canaanite through and through. The irony here is that though Gideon (aka Jerub-Ba'al), was dead, it seems that Ba'al was dealing with him and fighting back through his son. This is especially seen through the fact that it was Ba'al who was funding his campaign. The name Jerub-Ba'al is used nine times in Judg. 9 to highlight this point and the irony of how Israel had been worshiping Ba'al *despite* how Yahweh had revealed Himself as superior through Gideon. Israel could barely remember and teach what Yahweh had done in their own lifetime let alone what He had done in the past (Deut. 6:4-9).

**9:7-21** Jotham, the one surviving brother, ascended Mount Gerizim to pronounce a curse on the leaders of Shechem. The irony here is that this was the mountain on which Joshua stood half the tribes of Israel to pronounce the blessings of Yahweh's covenant (Deut. 11:29; 27:12; Josh. 8:33). The trees in Jotham's parable represent Israel and specifically Shechem seeking a king. The most likely candidates—the olive tree, fig tree, and grape vine—refused the offer of

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<sup>35</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 311-312.



kingship because they would rather produce fruit than just sway in the wind. The thorn bush, which represents Abimelech, accepted the offer, which is absurd because it provides no fruit or shade and spontaneously bursts into flames. The parable points out Abimelech's lack of qualifications, his inability to provide protection, and that he will burst into flames and burn all of them down with himself. It also points out the stupidity of the Shechemites for thinking a man like Abimelech was fit to be a king.

**9:22-25** The fact that Abimelech ruled Israel for three years is unnerving for it shows that all of Israel, not just Shechem, recognized Abimelech as their king. Yahweh sent an evil spirit upon Israel to bring hostility between Abimelech and Shechem. The name *Elohim* is used here of God, pointing to the fact that He was functioning as a sovereign king, judging them for the murder of Gideon's sons. He was not operating as *Yahweh*, their covenantal God. The irony here is that normally Yahweh would send His Spirit to empower a judge to deliver Israel. Now He sent an evil spirit upon Abimelech to judge Israel. The evil spirit may not be truly evil in nature but simply one who brought calamity to Israel. The Hebrew word for "evil" here can mean the nature of the spirit or can be translated as "calamity" or "disaster," which it brings. There are other times that Yahweh has used this means to punish someone (1 Sam. 16:14; 18:10; 19:10; 2 Sam. 24:11; 1 Chr. 21:1).

**9:26-49** Ga'al, which means, "abhor, loathe" is just as bad as Abimelech and his origin and social status is unknown. He was supported by the Shechemites to get rid of Abimelech. Zebul, Abimelech's governor told Abimelech that he should surprise attack Ga'al. Abimelech attacked Ga'al and defeated him. Abimelech then turned on the city of Shechem and killed everyone on in it. He then burned the tower holding all the Shechemite leaders in it. Yahweh had used Ga'al's arrogance to lead to the punishment of Shechem.

The reference to the temple El-Berith suggests that there was a second temple in Shechem to the Canaanite high god El before Ba'al was the high god. The irony here is that the very temple, Ba'al-Berith, that had funded Abimelech was now destroyed by Abimelech along with El's temple. Yahweh had turned Ba'al's own weapon against him to destroy his temples.

**9:50-57** Abimelech decided to go after Thebez probably because it was an ally of Shechem. However, he attacked with the same recklessness that he had previously shown in Shechem. At Thebez a woman threw a circular upper millstone onto Abimelech and cracked his skull. An upper millstone was a circular stone that would be rolled on top of another stone in order to grind grain. The irony is that just as Abimelech had murdered his brothers with one stone, he was killed with one stone.

The verb "threw" (Judg. 9:53) suggests a heroic act of strength comparable to that of a warrior. Once again there is a woman with an unconventional weapon acting as a warrior in order to deliver Israel from an oppressor (Judg. 5:26), except that this time the oppressor was an Israelite. The fact that Abimelech's burial is omitted is contrasted with obituaries that appeared before (Judg. 8:32) and after this (Judg. 10:2, 5; 12:7, 10-11, 15; 16:31). Yahweh used the woman of Thebez to punish Abimelech for the murder of Gideon's other sons. The death of the Shechemites and Abimelech as Yahweh's judgment is made clear by the closing comment of the story (Judg. 9:56-57). Jotham's curse had been fulfilled.

Just as Caleb, a godly father and leader, raised a godly woman and set the example for his nephew to be a godly man, so Gideon, a self-absorbed and power-hungry father, set an example for his son. Though Gideon did not seem that bad, Abimelech was the logical conclusion of the

father who raised him. Even so, Yahweh once again showed Himself superior to Ba'al despite the disloyalty of Israel. Unlike the pagan gods, Yahweh does not need humanity's devotion in order to maintain His sovereignty and power. Likewise, not only was Yahweh able to use the little faith of Gideon to accomplish His will, but He was able to use Abimelech, who had completely opposed Him, to accomplish His will.

**10:1-5** Though Tola and Jair, unlike Abimelech, delivered Israel, the earlier formulaic conclusions of the land having peace (Judg. 3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28) does not appear here or later. Israel's continued idolatry and Abimelech's quest for power marked a transition for Israel; genuine peace was no longer a reality. Likewise, the desire for kingship and violation of Deut. 17:14-20 is also seen with Jair who had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys. Once again, the many sons communicate that he was a polygamist acting as a king. In addition to this, they all viewed themselves as princes; donkeys were the symbol of kingship in the ancient Near East (2 Sam. 13:29; 16:2; 1 Kgs. 1:32-35; Matt. 21:1-11). Despite the fact that Gideon had rejected kingship, he had set a standard in Israel for king-like behavior that was like the pagan culture.

## F. Jephthah, a Tragic Hero (10:6-12:15)

The statement “the Israelites again did evil in Yahweh’s sight” begins the fifth cycle in the book of Judges. Jephthah is an interesting character. He used the name Yahweh frequently in his life, yet his actions point to a lack of understanding of who Yahweh is. Jephthah started off potentially following in the footsteps of Ehud but quickly went downhill and brought greater devastation to Israel than any of the judges before him.

**10:6-9** Israel was now oppressed by the enemy from two different directions: the Ammonites in the east and the Philistines in the west. Not only this, but Israel was now under greater spiritual bondage beyond the normal Canaanite gods they normally worshiped. This time they were also worshiping the gods of the surrounding nations (Josh. 2:12). Israel does not seem to be syncretistic in its worship anymore; rather, they have completely abandoned their worship of Yahweh in favor of the pagan gods.

**10:10-16** When Israel cried out to Yahweh in the first three cycles, He immediately responded. In the fourth cycle, with Gideon, He delayed deliverance and sent a prophet to confront the people. Now Yahweh completely refused to deliver Israel. Instead Yahweh reminded them of all the other times that He had delivered them while they responded by going after the pagan gods. Yahweh had delivered them from the Egyptians (Exod. 14), Amorites (Num. 31:3), Ammonites (Judg. 3:12-30), Philistines (Judg. 3:31), Sidonians (Judg. 4), Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16), and Maunites. (The Maunites may be the Midianites, according to the Septuagint (Judg. 6-8), or the Meunites, who do not appear until a much later time in Israel’s history (1 Chr. 4:41; 2 Chr. 20:1; 26:7).)

Israel responded to this by repenting for the first time. They demonstrated their repentance by getting rid of their idols. This is what it means to truly repent—the turning away from and removal of the sin that caused offense to Yahweh. Thus Yahweh’s refusal should be seen as a conditional declaration based on whether or not there was repentance (Deut. 11:22-32; 30:1-10; 2 Chr. 7:14).

**10:17-18** Even though the Israelites repented of their idolatry, they did not seek out Yahweh when it came to dealing with the enemy. Instead they looked for a leader from among their own and offered kingship to the one who would deliver them. They were rejecting Yahweh’s kingship by doing this (Deut. 17:14-20; 1 Sam. 8:7).

**11:1-3** Jephthah was the son of Gilead and a prostitute. Because of this, his other brothers resented him and drove him from his home. However, Jephthah, unlike Gideon, was a natural leader and a skilled warrior and soon had a group of mercenaries under his command. At this point it becomes clear that his upbringing was pagan, his family was dysfunctional, and his companions were a group of morally worthless and reckless men. Although Jephthah was not as rash and careless, he is already a lot like Abimelech.

**11:4-11** The Israelites, desperate for someone to save them, and Jephthah, one of their own and with a reputation as a great warrior for hire, seemed like a perfect match. The town wanted to conveniently forget the way they had treated Jephthah and appealed to him as one of their own. Jephthah was not so willing to forget his past and made sure that there was a payback for him if he helped them. The irony here is that by becoming their ruler he would now control them, which could be payback for when they used to control him. That he did not deliver them because Yahweh called him but for the payment of power and wealth reveals his character. Even though

he seems to be throwing Yahweh's name around more than the previous judges, He did not have a relationship with Yahweh and his character did not match up with the character or will of Yahweh.

**11:12-28** Though Jephthah was a warrior, he was also a wise man who was willing to seek resolution through diplomacy if possible. Jephthah wrote a letter to the king of Ammon in order to correct his understanding of history. Through his letter it is clear that he was aware of Israel's history and Yahweh's involvement. Jephthah stated that at the time Israel entered the land of Canaan, the Ammonites did not control the land east of the Jordan River; the Amorites did. Israel bypassed Edom and Moab in peace and only conquered the Amorites, taking their land because the Amorites attacked them first (Num. 21:10-35).

Jephthah made three points here. First, since Yahweh had given the land to Israel, the Ammonites had no claim. The people of the ancient Near East recognized that when victory was given to them by a god, they had full right to possess that territory. Second, the Ammonite king should follow the example of the Moabite king, Balak, who, after realizing he could not oppose Israel, backed off (Num. 22-24). Third, Israel had occupied the land in question for 300 years, and Ammon had never tried to take the land.<sup>36</sup> This was odd for a nation to go this long if the land technically belonged to them. The king rejected Jephthah's claims.

It is odd that Jephthah referred to Chemosh as the god of the Ammonites (Judg. 11:24) when Chemosh was the god of the Moabites (Num. 21:29; 1 Kgs. 11:7, 33; 2 Kgs. 23:13; Jer. 48:7, 13, 46) and Milcom was the god of the Ammonites (1 Kgs. 11:5, 7, 33; 2 Kgs. 23:13). Jephthah had made it clear that Moab and then Sihon the Amorite controlled the land originally. It could be that by speaking to the Ammonite king as if he were a Moabite king, Jephthah sarcastically reminded him that he could claim the land only if he were Moabite. Even then Chemosh had surrendered this area long ago.<sup>37</sup>

**11:29-31** Yahweh showed that He approved of Jephthah's appeal to justice and was ready to vindicate Israel by putting His Spirit upon him. However, like Barak and Gideon before him he hesitated and asked for a guarantee from Yahweh. There is nothing wrong with making a vow to dedicate oneself to Yahweh or to make a sacrifice for a victory He gave (Num. 21:2; 1 Sam. 1:11). However, Jephthah's request was wrong given the context of already having the Spirit of Yahweh on him, the negotiating way he went about it as if he was not certain that Yahweh could or would (note the *if-then* language he used), and the nature of what he was offering.

Jephthah promised Yahweh that the first one to come out of his house to greet him after victory he would offer as a burnt sacrifice to Yahweh. The phrase normally translated "whatever comes out" (Judg. 11:31) can also be translated "whoever comes out" and is a translation choice based on the context.<sup>38</sup> Given how the story ends and the fact that Israel has been thoroughly Canaanized, it is more likely that Jephthah had a person rather than a thing in mind. Although the way that homes were structured during this time allowed for an animal to come out, it was more likely that a human would come out to greet him after being away at battle and returning from a

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of Jephthah's use of the number 300, see Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 34-53, and Daniel I. Block. *Judges, Ruth*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>37</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 349.

<sup>38</sup> The substantival masculine singular participle "the one coming out" (*hayyotse*) is used elsewhere of inanimate objects, such as a desert (Num. 21:13), a word (Num. 32:24), or persons (Jer. 5:6; 21:9; 38:2). In each case context must determine the referent.

victory (1 Sam 18:6). Even if Jephthah did not intend his vow for a human, this was still a rash and foolish vow to make considering that humans come out of homes.

The Spirit of Yahweh came upon Jephthah, but instead of going into action, he began to make deals with Yahweh. This demonstrates his pagan thinking because he thought he could manipulate Yahweh. He made a rash vow without thinking about the implications. Jephthah may have known the language of a Yahweh-worshiper, but he did not think it or live it.

“His negotiations with the elders, his diplomacy with the Ammonites, and his vow, have all amply displayed Jephthah’s facility with words. Jephthah, we know, is *good* at opening his mouth. (How ironical that his name means literally ‘he opens’!). What has precipitated the crisis with his daughter is that he has opened his mouth to *Yahweh*, that is, he has tried to conduct his relationship with God in the same way that he has conducted his relationships with men. He has debased religion (a vow, an offering) into politics.”<sup>39</sup>

**11:32-33** Yahweh gave Jephthah victory over the Ammonites, which was His intention all along as testified by the coming of the Spirit of Yahweh. What should have been a great celebration, however, has the potential to be a great tragedy.

**11:34-40** Just as one feared, Jephthah’s daughter came out dancing and celebrating his victory and safe return, not knowing the great tragedy that had just fallen on her. Whatever Jephthah originally had in mind, it is clear here that he was willing to sacrifice his daughter if necessary, for this was exactly what he did. Some have argued that the emphasis on the daughter’s virginity means that she was not sacrificed but dedicated to a life of celibacy. However, this is not what the context says. Jephthah specifically vowed that he would “offer it as a *burnt sacrifice*” (Judg. 11:31), and the account ends with the statement “he did to her just as he had vowed” (Judg. 11:39). The mention of her virginity is structured grammatically to support this. If she had been dedicated to a monastery, one would expect the clause to be cause and effect; e.g., “He did to her as he vowed and consequently she never knew a man.” However, the structure is descriptive or parenthetical: “He did to her as he vowed—now she had never known/did not know a man.” The emphasis on her virginity highlights the tragedy of her unrealized potential and her inability to continue on the genealogical line, both of which were very important to the Israelites. Likewise, the fact that she was nameless suggests that the family line ended with her.

Some are bothered by the fact that neither the narrator nor Yahweh condemned the actions of Jephthah in this story. However, the narrator probably expects the reader to evaluate his actions since Yahweh had already clearly forbidden human sacrifice (Deut. 12:29-31). This is not uncommon in the Bible, like the fact that neither the narrator nor Yahweh condemn David and Solomon’s marriages to multiple wives since it had already been condemned earlier in Deut. 17:14-20. Others ask why Yahweh did not stop Jephthah from doing what he did. He did not stop him for the same reason that He does not stop many bad decisions that the other biblical characters and people today make, in which people are harmed. Perhaps many have learned a lesson from this that they would not have otherwise.

Jephthah showed that his vow was more important than the life of his own daughter. Maintaining his own honor was more important than loving Yahweh and loving his neighbor. Yes, Yahweh takes vows seriously, and to break them is a sin (Lev. 27; Num. 30), but to break a vow is a far

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<sup>39</sup> Barry G. Webb, “The Theme of the Jephthah Story (Judges 10:6–12:7),” *Reformed Theological Review* 45:2 (May-August 1986): 42.

lesser and less destructive sin than sacrificing your daughter. This is why it is so important to carefully think through a vow before making it. If Jephthah had been so concerned about not violating the Mosaic Law by breaking his vow, then he would have never made such an immoral vow to begin with. Likewise, even Yahweh allowed for one to get out of a vow with tithe in Lev. 27:1-8. Jephthah could have offered tithe or even an animal as a substitutionary sacrifice for his daughter since Lev. 27:1-8 does not totally apply to Jephthah. One could argue that Lev. 27:28-29 negates Lev. 27:1-8 as it applies to Jephthah's situation. However, it is still better to break the vow and seek the forgiveness and redemption of Yahweh, who is a merciful and compassionate God, than to commit such a grievous sin. One cannot help but think that this is the Abraham and Isaac story gone wrong (Gen. 22).

By now it is clear that even though Jephthah frequently used the name Yahweh and even prayed to Him as so, he really did not know Yahweh in a relational way. He was so ignorant of the person and character of Yahweh that he viewed and treated Him as one of the pagan gods. Israel had strayed so far from Yahweh that its leaders only knew Him by name. What is so shocking and so sad is that Jephthah had become deeply paganized yet did not even know it because he used the name Yahweh (Matt. 25).

It is obvious that the role of women had degraded even further. Not only have the men so failed to be the leaders that they should be that women now have to take their role, but now women were being sacrificed by their own fathers. This is a far cry from Caleb and Othniel who provided and fought for Acsah (Judg. 1:12-15).

**12:1-7** Just as in the Gideon story, the Ephraimites were upset again that they had not been called to battle. Jephthah's encounter with the Ephraimites also shows that the tribal unity of Israel was fracturing even more. Whereas Ehud had received full cooperation from Ephraim (Judg. 3:27-29), Gideon's relationship with them was rocky (Judg. 7:24-8:3). Though the Ephraimites did not cooperate with him, Gideon was able to appease them. Jephthah, on the other hand, did not show the same diplomacy that Gideon had shown with them or that he had shown with the Ammonite enemy; rather, he slaughtered them instead. Just as he had brought destruction to his own home, he now brought civil war to his nation. Jephthah showed greater mercy to the enemy than he did to his own people just as Gideon had before him at Succoth and Penuel (Judg. 8:4-21). This illustrates the continued splintering among the tribes that is destroying the nation's unity and will lead to civil war at the end of the book (Judg. 19-21).

The narrative ends by pointing out that the length of leadership of Jephthah over Israel was far less than any judge before him. And once again there is no mention of peace in the land just as there was none at the end of the previous cycle.

**12:8-15** The cycle ends with the leadership of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. Once again they had multiple wives and sons, and they rode on donkeys, a detail that implies kingship and a violation of Deut. 17:14-20 (Judg. 10:1-5). There is an additional comment that Ibzan had married all his sons off to foreign women—possibly Canaanite women—which was also a violation of the Mosaic Law and a perversion of Israel's holiness (Deut. 7:3-4; Judg. 3:6).

## G. Samson, a Man Ruled by Lust (13:1-16:31)

The statement “the Israelites again did evil in Yahweh’s sight” begins the sixth and final cycle in the book of Judges. The Samson narrative develops in detail just like the Gideon narrative, except whereas the Gideon narrative emphasized Yahweh’s relationship with Gideon, the Samson narrative emphasizes the complete lack of a relationship between Samson and Yahweh. With each judge there has been a decrease in understanding of who Yahweh is. With Samson, not only did he not understand who Yahweh truly was, but he also seemed to be completely oblivious to Yahweh.

**13:1** Israel was handed over to the Philistines for forty years, the longest time of oppression recorded in the book of Judges. However, unlike in the earlier cycles, Israel did not cry out to Yahweh for help. They had fallen so far away from Yahweh that as the story unfolds it is clear that Israel viewed their spiritual compromises and bondage as normal and saw no reason for deliverance. Even when Samson demonstrated a great defeat against the Philistines, Israel showed no desire to rally behind him. Despite their complete apathy, Yahweh still chose to intervene in their nation, reminding us that He will never forsake His people.

“What does he [God] do when he has a people who refuse to forsake Baal and have no desire to forsake Philistia? A people grown so used to bondage they don’t even have sense to call out for relief? At least here the very God who judges them (v. 1b) begins to work their deliverance—anyway (vv. 2-5). That is grace—grace greater than all our sin, than all our stupidity, than all our density.”<sup>40</sup>

**13:2-5** The fact that the story begins with the announcement of a miraculous birth is significant since the previous story ended with the death of Jephthah’s child. Yahweh is correcting the faulty view of Jephthah by demonstrating His desire to provide Israel with children, not to take them away.

Manoah’s wife was visited by an angel who announced that she would conceive and that she and the boy were to be Nazirites. A Nazirite vow was a covenant that an individual could make to dedicate himself to Yahweh for a temporary amount of time (Num. 6:1-6). The person was not allowed to drink anything from the vine (fermented or not), go near anything dead, or cut their hair. The growing of the hair was the public sign of the covenant with Yahweh. Samson was called by Yahweh to be a Nazirite for life like Samuel. The most important part of the angel’s message was Samson purpose: He would begin to deliver Israel from the power of the Philistines.

This account is similar to the accounts of other barren women in the Bible—Sarah (Gen. 11:30), Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), and Rachel (Gen. 29:31). Yahweh miraculously opened their wombs to enable them to give birth to sons (Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) who played an important role in the history of the covenant community of Israel. One assumes that Samson would become like one of these sons.

**13:6-7** The narrator’s account of the couple shows that neither seemed to have any spiritual discernment or maturity. Not only did Manoah’s wife not test the angel to see who he was, but also she reported that “a man from God” (the phrase used to describe prophets; Josh. 14:6; 1 Sam. 9:6-10) came to her and she thought that it might have been an angel. She failed to tell her husband the requirement of not cutting the boy’s hair or his intended purpose. One could argue

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<sup>40</sup> John J. Davis. “Conquest and Crisis,” p. 160.

that the “no razor” part was understood since he was to be a Nazirite, but leaving out his purpose was a pretty big deal. If she failed to communicate Samson’s purpose to her husband within an hour of the angel’s visit, what was the likelihood that she would communicate it to Samson nine months later and throughout his life? Samson’s mother also added the words “until the day of his death” to the angel’s message, which carries an ominous, foreshadowing tone—Samson’s death would be the result of his hair being cut off and the fact that he never realized his purpose.

**13:8-14** Manoah must have realized that there was something missing from his wife’s report because he prayed to Yahweh to send the messenger to him as well. This is made evident by his question, “How should the child be raised and what should he do?” (Judg. 13:12) This question would have been unnecessary if she had communicated it to him in the first place. It is interesting that the angel only repeated what the wife had already told Manoah as if he expected her to be the one to tell Manoah.

**13:15-23** When Manoah asked the angel to stay and eat, the angel declined but hinted that maybe this would be a good time for Manoah to offer up a sacrifice. Manoah did not really get that an angel had come to him representing Yahweh; he wanted to know the angel’s name so that he could honor him rather than Yahweh. Manoah’s lack of understanding is all highlighted by the fact the Hebrew word Elohim (“God”) has been used to address God generally, not Yahweh specifically. The narrator even makes the point in Judg. 13:16 that Manoah was completely oblivious to the fact that the angel represented Yahweh. When Yahweh consumed the sacrifice, Manoah feared that he would now die because he had seen a god (this is the best understanding of the Hebrew word Elohim used here in the context (Judg. 13:22). It was his wife who had to tell him that if they were going to die, then God would have never accepted the sacrifice.

**13:24-25** When the boy was born, Manoah’s wife named him Samson, meaning “one like the sun.” This is interesting because she did not give him a name that honored Yahweh like other biblical characters (see Gen. 17:19; 30:24; 1 Sam. 1:20) but named him after the sun, a created thing. Given the fact that Israel had become thoroughly Canaanite in their idolatry and worldview and that the city of Beth Shemesh (meaning “house of the sun”) was nearby (where the Canaanite sun god was worshiped—Judg. 1:33) suggests that she named him after a pagan sun god.<sup>41</sup>

Because Manoah’s wife failed to communicate the purpose of Samson to her husband and most likely to her son Yahweh left her name out of the Bible, to be forgotten forever. The narrator has shown that Manoah and his wife were very spiritually dull and that Samson was going to enter and be raised in this environment of spiritual dullness. Even so, Samson has the Spirit of Yahweh upon him. The stage has been set—what kind of a deliverer would Samson be?

**14:1-4** The narrator’s first introduction to Samson is that he wanted to marry a Philistine woman, which not only went completely contrary to the will of Yahweh but also to his purpose of defeating the Philistines in order to deliver Israel. Even his parents understood that this was not a good idea, but Samson demanded it anyway. What is interesting is that the narrator states that “his parents did not know that this was from Yahweh, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.” Why would Yahweh approve of such actions when He had clearly forbidden it (Deut. 7:1-4; Judg. 3:6)? Yahweh knew that Samson’s desire for the girl and sense of self-entitlement (demonstrated more as the story moves

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<sup>41</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 402.



on) would lead to strife between him and the Philistines, which, combined with his temper, would be the catalyst for war with the Philistines and lead to Israel's deliverance (Judg. 13:5).<sup>42</sup> If Samson was not going to fulfill his purpose out of obedience to Yahweh, then Yahweh was going to use his lust and temper to accomplish His will (Gen. 50:20). The narrator did not say that Yahweh approved of the marriage; rather, He was allowing Samson to follow his selfish desires into Philistine territory to be used as a part of His greater plan and will.

**14:5-6** On Samson's way down to Timnah, he was attacked by a lion next to the vineyards. Though there is no mention of him eating or drinking from the vine, the question is why he was near the vineyards when he was not supposed to go near anything from the vine? Just like a pastor has not sinned by being in the parking lot of a strip club, one would be especially suspicious of his intentions.

The Spirit of Yahweh came upon Samson to give him the power to kill the lion. Unlike Barak, Gideon, and Jephthah, Samson did not hesitate or call for help; he acted instantly and killed the lion. Finally, like Ohniel and Ehud, here is another judge who does not hesitate. However, Samson did not do it for the glory of Yahweh, nor was he even fully aware of Yahweh, as will be seen as the story continues to develop. This feat is impressive in three ways.<sup>43</sup> First, people do not even tear goats apart, let alone a lion, to have it said this is easy to do. Second, the tearing of the lion was done with his bare hands. The Hebrew word *kēphiyā* refers to a "young" lion, which is one of the most dangerous lions since they have been driven from the pride to prove themselves and claim their territory.

It is not clear why his parents were not with him. Perhaps he separated himself from them partway through the trip, though it would be odd that the text would omit this. His parents' going down with him could have been an accidental scribal error added in by mistake. Why then did he not tell them what happened when he saw them later? Perhaps he saw it as a bad omen that would prove to them that he should not be marrying a Philistine girl. Most importantly, this sets the stage for two events that would follow.

**14:7-9** It seems that this was the first time Samson had talked with the Philistine woman, upon which he decided that he liked her. He had evidently decided previously that he had wanted her from looks alone.

The second time he went down to Timnah, he ate honey from inside the lion's carcass. This time Samson did violate his Nazirite vow by not only going near a dead body but also touching it. Along with his desire for a Philistine girl whom he did not know, Samson showed that his desire for honey was more important than his Nazirite vows. The picture that is being developed is that Samson was ruled by his desires and his sense of entitlement with no regard to morality or others. Not only this, but Samson did not shave his head and start over for violating his Nazirite vow, a step required by Yahweh according to Numbers 6. Samson did not tell his parents where he got the honey because he knew he had broken his vow. But what made this worse is that he gave the unclean honey to his parents to eat, making them unclean (Lev. 17: 15-16; Num. 9:6-10; 19:11-13). Yet because he did not tell them where he got it, they did not even know that they were unclean, that they needed to perform ritual purification to worship in the tabernacle.

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<sup>42</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 403.

<sup>43</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 404.

**14:10-14** It was not uncommon in the ancient Near East to have a seven-day celebration before the actual wedding. Wine was always a part of these celebrations and, given the fact that Samson had already broken his Nazarite vow without repenting, it would not be surprising if he was drinking wine along with the other guests. The fact that he was given thirty groomsmen at his own party may suggest that he had no friends to be his groomsmen or any who were willing to attend a Philistine wedding. Telling riddles was also common at these celebrations. Samson's lust and greed are made evident again as in his arrogance of making a bet that would give the winner thirty sets of clothing. This would have made him an extremely wealthy person if he received it. It was also unlikely he had this many sets of clothing, seen in the fact that he killed Philistines to get them (Judg. 14:19), which means he was betting what he did not have. His confidence came from the fact that the riddle would have been impossible for them to solve since it came from his own unique experience rather than something that was common to all people.

**14:15-18** After four days, the Philistine men could not figure out the riddle, so they went to Samson's bride and threatened to kill her if she did not get the answer from Samson. This is extremely dysfunctional, that her own family and friends at her wedding are threatening to kill her over a bet. This shows the wickedness of the Philistines and why Israel was not allowed to intermix with them, yet Samson was. Samson was undone by his vulnerability to women, giving in to his bride's nagging and revealing the answer to her. It is obvious that the bride nagged Samson out of fear for her own and her family's lives, not knowing that he could protect her. One can tell by the way he spoke to her that he did not really respect her.

**14:19-20** In his anger, Samson decided to get the clothing from the Philistines forcibly. Perhaps to avoid recognition he went to Ashkelon, twenty-three miles southwest from Timnah. Even though Samson killed thirty Philistines out of vengeance for his wounded pride, Yahweh used this opportunity and empowered Samson to kill the Philistines in order to begin the deliverance of Israel.

Rather than returning to his bride to consummate his marriage he went home in his anger. Even though Yahweh used him, Samson's lack of self-control and disobedience to Yahweh resulted in him losing everything he desired to have in Timnah. Samson is portrayed as an entitled brat who throws a tantrum when he does not get what he wants. Unfortunately, this is all that Yahweh had to work with in the defeat of the Philistines.

**15:1-3** Sometime later Samson decided that he wanted his bride after all. He went down to Timnah and demanded that his bride be given to him so that he could consummate the marriage. The father, however, had been convinced that Samson did not want her since he was gone so long and so gave her to another man. Even though Samson was the one who had abandoned her, in his self-centeredness he believed he had been wronged and stated that he was justified in getting revenge. The fact that he said, "*this time* I am justified in doing the Philistines harm," shows that he knew last time he was not justified in harming the Philistines.

**15:4-8** Samson went out and somehow caught 300 jackals (traditionally foxes) and tied them in pairs by their tails. The Hebrew word *shuw'al* traditionally translated "foxes" in Judg. 15:4 is most likely "jackals." Foxes are solitary animals whereas jackals roam in packs and are relatively easier to catch. Notice there is no mention of the empowering of the Spirit of Yahweh. Samson's burning of the Philistine crops would have been an attack against Dagon the grain god, portraying him as unable to protect his people's crops. This foreshadows the destruction of the Dagon temple in Judg. 16:23-30. Vengeance begets vengeance. Because of what Samson did, the

Philistines burned his bride and her family in their house and thus became a major conflict between Samson and the Philistines. In retaliation, Samson killed them and then hid out in a cave.

**15:9-13** The Philistines decided to retaliate against Judah with an army for the actions of Samson. This scene demonstrates how much Israel had compromised and how pathetic their leadership had become. Israel showed no interest in being freed from the Philistine oppression, and they were angry with Samson because he had upset the Philistines. Likewise, Samson showed no interest in leading Israel and rallying them to his cause. He continued to show his selfishness and ignorance to Yahweh's calling by telling the men of Judah that he was only doing to the Philistines what they had done to him first. He did not see Yahweh's plan in any of the preceding events (Judg. 15:11). This was not a godly judge leading the Israelites in the conquest of Canaan in obedience to Yahweh; rather, this was a self-entitled man seeking vengeance for perceived wrongs committed against him personally. Samson surrendered himself to Judah on the condition that they would not kill him but only tie him up.

**15:14-17** Once again the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Samson and empowered him to easily break the ropes and defeat the Philistines. However, Samson slayed them all with a donkey's jawbone, another violation of his Nazirite vow since it was a dead animal. Samson then came up with another poem meant to gloat over the Philistines rather than praise Yahweh for the victory he had been given.

The exact meaning of the second half of the second line is unclear. It could either be translated "I have left them in a heap" referring to the pile of dead bodies or "I have made donkeys/asses of them." The former meaning is probably more likely given the fact that he named the place *Ramath Lehi* meaning "Height of the Jawbone."<sup>44</sup>

**15:18-19** Samson was so exhausted from the killing, he became thirsty and demanded that Yahweh give him water. This was the first of two times that Samson ever acknowledged a divine presence in his life. Not only was it new, but also he never addressed Yahweh by His name (or even as God) but addressed him as "You." This shows how disconnected Samson was from Yahweh. Samson acknowledged Yahweh's hand in his victory but showed that he was mostly concerned with his own wellbeing. Likewise his tone was less of a humble request and more of a prideful, entitled, demand. Despite this, Yahweh responded with grace and miraculously provided him with a spring from which to drink. Samson continued to show his arrogance by naming the spring after himself rather than Yahweh who had provided it for him. The name *En Hakkore* means "Spring of the one who cries out."

**15:20** The narrator ends the story with the fact that Samson led Israel for twenty years, but the usual comments about his death are left out. Rather than a single line about Samson's death, as with the previous judges, the narrator will tell a story about how he died in the following chapter. Samson's disregard for Yahweh and the Nazirite vow, his carelessness in dealing with the Philistines, and his obsession with fulfilling his own desires will all work together to bring about his demise.

**16:1-3** The story of Samson's death began with him going to a Philistine prostitute in Gaza. This story summarizes perfectly the character of Samson as a fool and highlights that it was his lust that led to his death (Prov. 6:26; 7:10; 23:27). In the middle of the night, the Philistines

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<sup>44</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 413.

surrounded the city and waited for him to come out in order to kill him. Right under the noses of the Philistines Samson made his escape and took the city gate with him. He carried it more than forty miles. The city gate was a symbol of a city's authority and power. The city gate was also where the judges ruled cases during times of peace thus giving the gate its authority. During times of war a city was only as powerful as the strength of its gate to keep the enemy out. By removing the city gate Samson was mocking the authority and power of Gaza. Samson's removal of the gate of Gaza foreshadows the destruction that would come to the city at the story's end of his story.

**16:4-5** Once again Samson allowed a woman to seduce him. What is interesting is that nowhere does the text say that Delilah loved him in return. This is also the first time that the narrator used the word "love" to describe Samson's emotions, which leads the reader to assume that he will be blinded by his lust more than ever. The narrator does not state whether Delilah was an Israelite or a Philistine. What is important is that her allegiance is definitely to the Philistines. Delilah was willing to seduce Samson sexually and lead him to his demise for money. Her reward was 1,100 pieces of silver from each of the rulers. There were probably five Philistine rulers representing the five major Philistine cities. This was an astronomical amount of money since the average *annual* wage was ten pieces of silver.<sup>45</sup>

**16:6-14** Three times Delilah tried to get Samson to tell her the secret of his strength. She may have believed him each time because Samson used the number seven, a highly symbolic number that might suggest magical power, the first time with the bowstrings, which was a weapon. The second time he emphasized the words *new* and *securely* with the ropes. And the third time was so elaborate and detailed she figured it could not be made up. The loom was a wooden frame used to weave yarn or wool of some kind into a fabric. What is awkward is that Samson said that Delilah was to weave his hair into this and pin it and then he fell asleep.

Samson may not have caught onto her deception if he thought that they were playing a game or involved in some kind of kinky sex role-playing. The narrator has already shown that Samson was susceptible to nagging (Judg. 14:16). Maybe, desperate for returned affection, he thought that she would withhold sexual favors if he did not "prove" his love. Maybe alcohol was also involved since he was able to fall asleep with his hair in the loom. Samson was so blinded by his lust for Delilah that he did not see her true intentions. The comical nature of this scene further emphasizes the tragic nature of Samson being played as a fool. What further highlights his foolishness is that the Philistines were hiding in the bedroom during all of this and he did not even know it (Judg. 16:9).

**16:15-20** Samson was so confident in his own ability and finally gave in and told Delilah that his strength was in his hair. It was not uncommon to believe that the gods would grant one a magical talisman that would give one a great ability. This is seen in many of the ancient Greek mythologies and in the modern-day Harry Potter novels. Samson's believing that his hair was his strength further reveals his disconnectedness from Yahweh and from the nature and purpose of his Nazirite vow. The narrator makes it clear that Samson lost his strength because Yahweh had left him, not because he had lost his hair. The hair was the sign of the covenant, much like a wedding ring as the sign of marriage. Samson's disregard for the sign, figuratively tossing it

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<sup>45</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 419.

aside like a spouse tossing the wedding ring away, is what led to Yahweh's departing from him—not that the hair itself was magical.

Yahweh had been patient with Samson up to this point, but now Samson showed no regard to the sacredness of his covenant or to Yahweh as the source of his abilities. Samson made it clear that Delilah's happiness and his sexual satisfaction were more important than his divine calling. What makes this even sadder was that Samson's understanding and awareness of Yahweh's involvement in His life were so lacking that he did not even know Yahweh had left him.

**16:21-22** The irony here is that Samson's spiritual blindness had now caused him to be physically blind. The one named "sunlike" now lived in darkness. Since Yahweh's strength had left him, he was able to be bound by chains, unlike all the other times with the Philistines and Delilah, reduced to the life of grinding grain. From the perspective of the Philistines, there is an irony in that the great warrior who had burned down their grain fields was now grinding their grain—a task done by women.<sup>46</sup> Samson had now become like Sisera, lured to his death by Delilah, a woman like Jael. But just when one might think that the story is over, the narrator hints that there is a surprise ending coming, stating that Samson's hair began to grow back, the sign of the covenant. This is significant since it shows that despite Samson's repeated, unrepentant violations of the covenant, Yahweh, in His compassion, was willing to restore him to the covenant and use him once again.

**16:23-27** The Philistines gathered together at the temple of Dagon—their grain god—to celebrate their victory over Samson, the great champion of Yahweh, and to humiliate him in his defeated blindness. The narrator's pointing out the detail that Samson was leaning against the temple pillars in conjunction with mentioning the number of people on the temple roof lets the reader know that Samson's strength was going to be revealed again. Given that there were 3,000 on the roof alone means there would have to be thousands of people within the temple. These were not just normal people either; these were the leaders and noble people of Philistia, which means their death would drastically weaken the entire Philistine nation.

**16:28-31** This was the second time in the story that Samson cried out to Yahweh. However, it is clear from Samson's prayer that his defeat had humbled him and that grinding grain in the darkness had given him a lot of time to think. For the first time Samson addressed Yahweh by his personal name. His prayer was less arrogant and demanding and more of a request and an acknowledgement of Yahweh as the source of his strength. It is clear that Samson had changed and had begun to show true faith in Yahweh (thus his mention in Hebrews 11). However, he still had a long way to go because it was still about him and not the glory of Yahweh, evidenced when he asked for revenge for *his* eyes. He still did not understand his role as Yahweh's deliverer for Israel. Yet he did show some faith, and Yahweh responded by giving him the strength to push the pillars down and kill all the Philistines. The narrator ends the story with the sad note that Samson killed more Philistines in his death than in his life. Samson accomplished the will of Yahweh and fulfilled his calling to a greater extent in his death than in his entire life.

Samson is said to have led Israel but he is never said to have been a judge or deliverer. Nor does the narrator state whether he truly began to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines. Yes, he delivered the Philistines a devastating blow, but the deliverance of Israel is never mentioned or implied. Unlike the leaders before him, Samson never wasted the Spirit of Yahweh when it came

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<sup>46</sup> Daniel I. Block. *Judges, Ruth*, p. 462.

upon him. However, he used it selfishly, for his own desires, and never pointed to the glory of Yahweh. Samson was so narcissistic in the pursuit of his own cravings that he was oblivious to his purpose in life and to the oppression of his fellow Israelites. Yahweh's involvement in Samson's life illustrates not only His grace and sovereignty in that He can use anyone but also that there may have not been a lot of godly men or true men of leadership left for Yahweh to use.

### III. Everyone Did as He Saw Fit (17:1-21:25)

The events of this division do not happen *after* the time period of the judges but rather *during* their judgeship. The last division told the story of the decline of the leadership in Israel over the last 300 hundred years. This division tells about how the people as a whole acted in a morally corrupt way during the same time period in which the judges were ruling. The lack of leadership in Israel has led to anarchy in the nation. The repetition of the phrase “in those days Israel had no king” shows that the presence of a Deuteronomic king (Deut. 17:14-20) would have prevented all the events that are to come in the remainder of the book. Without a king enforcing the standards of Yahweh, “each man did what was right in his own eyes.” By suggesting that a king was needed, the narrator is already preparing the reader for later stories in the Bible, especially the coming of David, who did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh (1 Kgs. 11:33, 38; 14:23; 15:5), as well as other godly kings, including Asa (1 Kgs. 15:11), Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs. 22:43), Joash (2 Kgs. 12:2), Amaziah (2 Kgs. 14:3), Azariah (2 Kgs. 15:3), Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 18:3), and Josiah (2 Kgs. 22:2). Ultimately, this statement is fulfilled in the true Deuteronomic king, Jesus Christ.

This division also highlights the moral corruption of the priesthood. In both stories a morally compromised Levitical priest is highlighted as one of the major characters. The point the narrator is making is that Israel has truly become morally bankrupt when even the spiritual priesthood who was holy unto Yahweh is rotten to the core.

#### A. Idolatry, a Corrupt Levite, and a Renegade Tribe (17:1-19:1a)

This section deals primarily with the corruption of the Levitical priesthood who had become no different from the pagan priests. It also tells of how Dan failed to settle in their land and came to live in the north of Israel. This will set up the reader for 2 Kgs. 12 when Dan becomes the headquarters of idolatry for the northern kingdom.

**17:1-2** The story begins with a theft and a confession. On the surface, the confession would seem as a righteous act until it becomes clear that both Micah and his mother were extremely dysfunctional in their family relationship, beliefs, and sense of morality. Not only did Micah steal from his own mother, but he only returned the money when he heard his mother pronounce a curse upon the one who stole it. He did not return the money because he realized it was wrong but because he feared what the God or the gods would do to him.

**17:3-4** The mother decided to offer a portion of the money to Yahweh as a thanks offering, but her idea of an offering was to make an idol. While she was cursing and blessing in almost the same breath, she was bringing a curse down on herself through her own actions. Deut. 27:15 curses the one who makes an idol, and 1 Sam. 15:23 denounces household idols (Deut. 12:8).

**17:5-6** Micah is portrayed as the spiritual leader of the house because he had his own altar and ephod—a violation of the Levitical laws since the official altar was in Shiloh (Judg. 18:31). The reference to his personal ephod is alarming since it was last mentioned with occult divination in the Gideon story (Judg. 8:27). The irony is that the name Micah means “who is like Yah.” Micah was also violating the Levitical laws by operating as a priest and appointing one of his sons, rather than a Levite, as a priest. This total disregard for Yahweh’s law is emphasized by the statement “in those days Israel had no king; each man did what was right in his own eyes.”

**17:7-13** With the arrival of a Levitical priest, one would think that the idolatry in Micah's home would be dealt with, but instead the priest joined Micah. Later the narrator states that the priest was a descendant of Gershom, son of Moses (Judg. 18:30), making him a member of the Kohathite branch of the Levitical family tree (1 Chr. 23:12-15). Thus he should have been serving in Ephraim, Dan, or western Manasseh (Josh. 21:5, 20-26). Instead he was serving in Judah and seemed to be wandering around the nation with no direction or purpose. His lack of obedience to Yahweh is further highlighted when he joined Micah in his idolatry for profit. As mentioned above, this scene highlights that Israel had really fallen away from its divine purpose when even the priesthood, especially a descendant of Moses, had become so corrupt. The scene ends with Micah stating that the Levite would make him rich, not that he would bring him closer to Yahweh. The irony is that Micah's shrine and personal Levitical priests would later bring misfortune.

**18:1-6** As if to highlight the coming misfortune, the narrator once again states the repeating phrase of anarchy and Israel's self-autonomy. The narrator now introduces the arrival of the Danites. After being beaten by the Amorites and their failure to take their tribal allotment (Judg. 1:34), the Danites, after all these years, still had not found a home. Danite scouts looking for a place to live stumbled upon the Levite living with Micah and asked for an oracle from God (they did not mention the name Yahweh). Though the priest used the name Yahweh, never did he actually consult Yahweh. He just thoughtlessly threw out "go in confidence before Yahweh." The Danites took this as approval from Yahweh and a promise of success. However, the phrase "before Yahweh" could also mean that their actions are being done before or in full view of Yahweh, who examines their moral quality.<sup>47</sup> The irony is that this is what the narrator would later emphasize.

**18:7-26** The Danite spies reported to the rest of the Danites that they had found a land in the north by the name of Laish, where the people were innocent and unsuspecting, thus easily conquerable (Josh. 19:47). Six hundred armed men and their families set out to take the land. On their way they decided to rob Micah's house and take his idols and ephod. The priest's willingness to sell himself out to the highest bidder continues to highlight his corruption and selfishness. When Micah gathered his neighbors to take back what was his, the Danites had the audacity to question why he had come after them with armed men. When Micah accused them of stealing his gods, they did not defend themselves but threatened that he should back off or "hot-tempered men" might hurt him. Micah, now realizing that that the Levite had not brought good fortune and that he might get killed, backed off and went home.

**18:27-31** The way that the narrator tells the sacking of Laish emphasizes the innocence and vulnerability of the city. The narrator also emphasizes that they were isolated and distinct from all the others who were around them, implying that they were not Canaanites. This would mean that the Danites had violated the Deuteronomic war policy of only attacking the natives of the land but offering peace to all other people groups (Deut. 20:10-18). And they possibly attacked fellow Israelites like Gideon (Judg. 8:13-17) and Jephthah (Judg. 12:1-6) before them. They then named the city after themselves rather than after Yahweh and built a pagan cult, which emphasizes the "everyone did as he saw fit" theme. The irony here is where the Danites failed to obey Yahweh to destroy the wicked Canaanites and take the land assigned to them with the

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<sup>47</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 455-456.



backing of Yahweh they had now attacked innocent people to take a land that was not theirs with the backing of an idolatrous priest.

“In the book of 1 Chronicles, when the list of the tribes and families of Israel is given, Dan is the only tribe which is totally ignored. Zebulun’s genealogy is also not chronicled, but it is mentioned elsewhere (1 Chron. 6:63, 77; 12:33, 40). Dan appears only as a geographical name, not as a tribe. They had vanished into obscurity, probably because of intermarriage with the Philistines. (E.g., 2 Chron. 2:14.) Dan did not take what God had given to them, and they took what God had not given them. In the process, they lost all that they had.”<sup>48</sup>

Though the priests used the name of Yahweh and paid lip service to Him and the Israelites were the people of Yahweh, it is obvious from their actions and motives that they were not interested in carrying out His will. Yahweh had become a God of whom they believed they could invoke His name and manipulate to their own purposes.

“The story of Micah and his Levite thus represents the apostasy and the degeneration of Israelite society as it influences family life and cultic institutions. It is a world where everything is free for the taking by either those who can afford it or those who have the most power. With no eyes to behold and to measure, other than their own, chaos reigns in the world of the judges. Yahweh is absent except for the thwarted visions the characters might have had of Him. He did not act, nor did he speak. He was a mere memory within a curse or a blessing.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Gary Inrig. *Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay*, p. 279.

<sup>49</sup> Jacobus Marais. *Representation in Old Testament Narrative Texts*, p. 138.

## **B. Moral Anarchy Engulfs a Nation (19:1b–21:25)**

This section shows that the breakdown in the family will lead to the moral decline of society and of the nation as a whole. The story begins with trouble between a man and wife, continues on to the trouble within a community (Gibeah), and ends with major trouble in the nation. Because the leadership of Israel failed to show moral righteousness, the people had become morally bankrupt. A nation is only as moral as its leaders and family integrity.

**19:1-2** The narrator introduces another nameless Levite who was married to a concubine. Why is she his concubine and not his wife? Did he not take the marriage union seriously by making her his full-fledged wife, or did he already have a wife or wives, thus violating the will of Yahweh?

Some translations say “she was unfaithful.” They understand the Hebrew verb *vattizneh* as coming from the root word *zanah*, “to be a prostitute.” However, it may be derived from a root meaning “to be angry; to hate,” attested in the Akkadian. Also this verb never appears elsewhere with the pronoun *she*, introducing the party violated by an adulterous act, suggesting that it should not be understood as adultery.

It is never mentioned why the concubine was angry at her husband and left him. But it is obvious that he was not in a hurry to get her back since he waited four months before he went to her.

**19:3-10** The father-in-law not only allowed for her to return with her husband but also showered the Levite with hospitality, persuading him to stay five extra days. The father-in-law was probably happy to see the Levite because it was disgraceful for the woman to leave the husband in this culture. This hospitality and generosity that the Levite received in Bethlehem serves as a foil to highlight the horrendous way that he would be treated at the end of the chapter in Gibeah. There is also the irony that the Levite would have never ended up in Gibeah if he had not been persuaded to stay longer in Bethlehem.

**19:11-14** It became clear to the Levite that there was not enough daylight to arrive home safely. In the ancient Near East it was never safe to travel on the roads after dark. Even though Jebus was close, the Levite feared staying there for the night and chose to travel farther to Gibeah. Jebus was another name for the city of Jerusalem and was about six miles, a two-hour journey, north of Bethlehem. Gibeah was three miles farther north. Jebus was occupied by the Jebusites and was one of the Canaanite nations. The irony was that the Levite did not want to stay in Jebus because he did not feel safe with the wicked Canaanites and wanted to stay in Gibeah, an Israelite town, among his own people.

**19:15** Normally when travelers entered a city they would stay in the city square and wait for someone to invite them to stay with them. The fact that the Levite waited there a long time and no one invited him in reveals the nature of the city, especially when contrasted with the hospitality of the father-in-law in Bethlehem. The question is whether this was how the citizens of Gibeah treated all travelers or just the Levite since he represented Yahweh, whom they most likely wanted nothing to do with, given their actions in the following verses.

**19:16-21** Finally, an Ephraimite staying in the city temporarily invited the Levite into his home. He showed them great hospitality just as the father-in-law had done previously. This hospitality continues to emphasize the foil of inhospitality to come next.

**19:22-24** That night, some of the men of Gibeah came to the house, wanting to rape the Levite. The locals’ desire to have sex with the Levite was not just a sin of homosexuality but, worse, the desire to humiliate and subjugate another. In the ancient Near East, it was not uncommon for

high-ranking men to demonstrate their dominance by raping other men. To be the active homosexual was a sign of masculinity and power, while being the passive homosexual was a sign of weakness. This mentality of homosexual gang rape is not much different from prison rape today. The goal of such an action is to dominate and humiliate the new person in the most degrading way possible in order to demonstrate absolute authority over the person. Even today, this kind of practice would not be accepted in our culture.

There are many parallels between this incident and the incident in the city of Sodom, when the men of the city wanted to rape the two angels visiting Lot in Genesis 19. However, here it is not the wicked Canaanites of Sodom but the Israelites of Gibeah. The point is that these Israelites had become as morally wicked as the Canaanites whom Yahweh had destroyed in Sodom and Gomorrah. This had happened because they had not obeyed Yahweh in removing the Canaanites from the land and not living among them. Now Gibeah, an Israelite town (the chosen people of Yahweh), would face the same judgment as Sodom and Gomorrah before them.

**19:25-26** Shockingly, the Levite grabbed his concubine and threw her to the wolves to be abused all night. Then in the morning, as if nothing had happened, his cruelty is further demonstrated when he came out the next morning and, rather than attending to her, demanded that she get up in order to return home. When there was no response, he laid her on the donkey and went home. Then this sick Levite cut her up into twelve pieces and sent the pieces to the tribes of Israel as a shocking demonstration of what Gibeah had done. Interestingly, the narrator never states who murdered the woman. Was she dead when the Levite found her, or did he kill her when he cut her up? The Levite would later say that the men of Gibeah killed her (Judg. 20:4), but it is obvious that he cannot be trusted. The narrator never specifies, as if to say it does not matter—both the men of Gibeah and the Levite were sick and depraved in their actions.

The point of this scene is to illustrate that Gibeah had become the new Sodom and that the Israelites were becoming just as bad as the Canaanites. The elements of the story are very similar to the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis 19. However, in this account the guest throws his own concubine out to the men, and there was no escape from the city. It is as if the narrator is saying that, unlike Sodom and Gomorrah, there were no righteous people to deliver out of the city (Gen. 18:16-33). This scene also highlights the fact the Levite—the spiritual leader of Israel—was also just as wicked. Not only did he fail to represent Yahweh, but he also demonstrated a complete lack of love toward his neighbor (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18).

“One of the notable features of this story is the anonymity of the characters. What is the significance of this? According to Hudson, the narrator utilizes anonymity in this story (as well as in chapters 20-21) ‘to epitomize familial, tribal and national deterioration.’ He contends that the characters’ anonymity universalizes them. He states: ‘Anonymity gives the implicit impression that every individual within Israel was dangerous because every individual was doing right in his or her own eyes.’ He adds: ‘Moreover, by viewing the anonymity of the concubine the reader gets the impression that ‘every’ concubine from Dan to Beersheba could be raped, murdered and dismembered.’ Hudson argues that anonymity has a second role in these chapters. He points out that Israel during this period ‘was a world of alienation and annihilation populated by ‘the powerful abuser and the powerless victim.’ In such a context ‘anonymity parallels the loss of identity and personhood.’”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 497-498 quoting Don Michael Hudson, “Living in a Land of Epithets: Anonymity in Judges 19-21,” JSOT 62 (1994): 54.

**20:1-11** Upon seeing the gory evidence of Gibeah's crime, the Israelite tribes gathered together at Mizpah, near Gibeah, to execute justice. When the Levite told the assembled tribes what had happened, he focused primarily on the danger he was in and how he had been violated. He also left out the part where he had thrown his concubine to the men of Gibeah. After listening to the Levite's account, the tribes of Israel who had rallied swore an oath that they would punish Gibeah for what they had done. It is interesting that none of people gathered had any problem with the Levite cutting up his concubine. Likewise, there were no other witnesses to confirm the Levite's story (Deut. 17:6; 19:15).

**20:12-17** The tribes of Israel demanded justice and that the tribe of Benjamin hand over the guilty men of Gibeah. Benjamin refused to hand over the men of Gibeah for punishment. This shows that Benjamin valued their tribal loyalty more than they valued justice. Thus the men of Israel gathered together for war against Benjamin. Benjamin was greatly outnumbered by all the other tribes. Israel was about to go into civil war over one crime committed by a few men in one city, based on a faulty testimony.

**20:18-28** The Israelites decided to go to Bethel, where the Ark of the Covenant was, and asked God (no mention of the name Yahweh) who should lead them into battle against the Benjaminites. Yahweh responded that Judah should lead them into battle. This scene is reminiscent of the book's introduction of Israel asking who should lead them, and Yahweh's response being Judah (Judg. 1:1-2). The irony is that in the beginning Israel was united against a common Canaanite foe, whereas here they were fighting against a fellow tribe to punish moral wickedness because they failed to deal with the Canaanites among them.<sup>51</sup>

The next day, the eleven tribes of Israel were defeated by the severely outnumbered Benjaminites. Defeated and with great sorrow, Israel asked Yahweh if they should attack again, to which Yahweh responded with another "yes." Again the Israelites were defeated by the Benjaminites. Here, Yahweh was allowing Israel to be defeated because they never humbled themselves before Yahweh and asked Him, "What should we do?" Instead, they made the assumption that they knew the best way to handle the situation and that Yahweh had approved the way they were handling it.<sup>52</sup> Now that they had been humbled, Israel finally fasted, made atonement sacrifices, and asked Yahweh if they should even go against Benjamin. To this Yahweh said "go" and this time assured them of victory. Their initial defeat taught them that divine approval should be sought before, not during, a mission. Yahweh's delay in giving them victory mirrors their delay in seeking His approval.<sup>53</sup>

The mention of Phinehas emphasizes their lack of desire to do things right. In Josh. 22:10-34, Phinehas carefully investigated the rumor of cultic impropriety on the eastern side of the Jordan River, found that the rumor was false, and civil war was averted. Here, Phinehas is mentioned only briefly. The Israelites were not interested in investigating the rumor of Gibeah and acted rashly, thus they were thrown full speed into civil war. The leadership skills of Joshua were absent in this new generation.

**20:29-48** When Israel went out against Benjamin, they used their last couple of retreats to their advantage. Judg. 20:33-36a gives a condensed version of the battle, while Judg. 20:36b-48 gives a more detailed account of how the ambush led to Gibeah's downfall. Putting the accounts

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<sup>51</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 501-502.

<sup>52</sup> Garry B. Webb. *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*, p. 193.

<sup>53</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 504.

together, the eleven tribes of Israel drew the Benjaminites out of their city with a false retreat while 10,000 Israelite soldiers entered the city, killed the people, and set it on fire. When the main Israelite force saw the smoke, they turned on the Benjaminites, chased them, and cut them down. In the battle, 18,000 Benjaminites died, and Israel chased down and killed the remaining 7,000 men. Only 600 Benjaminites survived. The Hebrew word translated “cut down” in Judg. 20:45 is the same Hebrew word translated “abused” in Judg. 19:25. The wordplay highlights Yahweh’s poetic justice for the Benjaminites tolerating the crime of Gibeah. Judg. 20:35 emphasizes that it was Yahweh who was the true victor in battle. This is made evident by the fact that they did not have success until Yahweh backed them.

**21:1-14** Now Israel had a problem. There were no women for the Benjaminites to marry in order to prevent the tribe from going extinct. A solution to this problem had been made difficult since prior to the battle Israel made a rash vow, just like Jephthah, that they would not marry nor offer their daughters to Benjaminite men. Rather than learning from their mistake in Judges 20 and going to Yahweh for help, they decided to come up with their own solution. The reference to the Israelites sitting before “God” (Judg. 20:26) rather than Yahweh shows that they were disconnected from Yahweh.

Israel found a loophole. Prior to the battle they had also made a vow that anyone who did not show up for battle they would destroy. Assuming that Jabesh Gilead had not shown up, they decided to kill everyone in the town, keeping only the virgin women for the Benjaminites. In their plan, 400 hundred women were abducted and given to the Benjaminite men. Ironically, the Israelites had failed to put the Canaanite cities to the sword but had no problem putting one of their own Israelite cities to the sword.

**21:15-25** However, there was still the need for 200 more women, yet they still did not consult Yahweh. Finding another loophole in their vow, they decided to send the remaining 200 Benjaminite men to Shiloh to find women at the annual feast to Yahweh. They instructed the men to hide in the vineyards, and when the daughters of Shiloh appeared, they were to jump out, abduct the women, and take them home. This way, when the fathers of Shiloh objected to such an act, the Israelites would assure the fathers that they were not breaking their vow to not *give* any of their daughters to the Benjaminites because the Benjaminites were *taking* their daughters against their will. What is unsettling is that they assumed that the breaking of the vow was what would upset them, rather than the abducting of the young women. Israel was now much like its past leader Jephthah, who was more concerned about his vow than about the life of his daughter.

The irony is that despite the abhorrence Israel had for the crime of the Levite’s concubine, which they had set out to punish, they had now approved of the slaughtering of innocent Israelites and the abduction of helpless women on a mass scale. If only they had consulted Yahweh, so much tragedy could have been avoided. Whereas at the beginning of the book women were treated well, protected, and cared for, they were now being abused and debased by their own people. Sisera’s mother’s vision of Israelite women being abused in the aftermath of battle (Judg. 5:30) had become a reality. However, the violators were Israelite men instead of the Canaanites. The Israelites had become the new Canaanites.

As if to leave the reader with the thought and implications of the horrific events at the end of the book, the narrator concludes with one brief and final thought: “In those days Israel had no king. Each man did what was right in his own eyes.”



## Conclusion

At the beginning of the book Israel started off as a faithful nation under the leadership of Joshua and with examples of men like Caleb. However, in fourteen short years the next generation began to take their prosperity for granted and failed to stay dedicated to Yahweh. As the leaders failed to live up to the standard of Joshua and began to do what was right in their own eyes, so too did the people whom they led. With no competent leaders to point Israel to their covenantal God, they declined into and persisted in pagan idolatry. Paul Miller observes:

“...when the covenant relationship between God and God’s people is neglected, the faculty of moral judgment atrophies. It not only becomes impossible to *do* right, it becomes impossible to *know* what is right.”<sup>54</sup>

Thus the people became as pagan and morally corrupt as the Canaanites around them from whom they were to remain distinct and eliminate. Because the chosen and holy people of Yahweh did not take the commands of Yahweh seriously and obey them without hesitation, they became just like the people who were under the judgment of Yahweh.

Judges ends with a sense of hopelessness, that there was no one righteous left in the nation of Israel. This longing for the redemption of Israel despite its darkness is hinted at in the repeating and final phrase, “In those days Israel had no king. Each man did what was right in his own eyes.” The only hope is in the coming of the Deuteronomic king (Deut. 17:14-20; Gen. 49:8-12) who could lead Israel back to Yahweh, their covenantal God. The book of Ruth will restore the hope that there were faithful people during the days of the Judges and ends by preparing the reader for the Davidic line. The book of Samuel will then bring the hope of the Deuteronomic king and Davidic line.

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<sup>54</sup> Paul Miller, “Moral Formation and the Book of Judges,” *EQ* 75 (2003): 103.

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