

THE  
BOOKS OF  
HISTORY



Old Testament Survey Series

THE  
BOOKS OF  
HISTORY

JAMES E. SMITH



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DEDICATED TO

GLENN BOURNE  
LYLE BUNDY  
MICHAEL CHAMBERS  
TWILA SIAS

MY COLLEAGUES OF MANY YEARS  
AT  
FLORIDA CHRISTIAN COLLEGE



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## PREFACE

Modern man views history with disdain. Many would agree with Shakespeare that history is “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Others would echo the more blunt assessment of Henry Ford: “History is bunk!” Casual students find history a dull recitation of facts and dates. Believers, however, find God in all history. It is truly HIS-story! The unshakable conviction of the Christian faith is that the Lord rules forever; his throne is from generation to generation (Lam 5:19).

The focus of the following pages is on the so-called historical books of the Old Testament. Though much biblical history is contained in the Pentateuch, the bulk of the history of Israel as a nation is contained in the twelve books beginning with Joshua. These books relate the history of God’s interaction with his people from the time they entered Canaan about 1407 BC to the reforms instigated by Nehemiah about 432 BC.

This survey proceeds from the general to the specific. The opening

chapter is an overview of the twelve books as a collection. The collection is then subdivided into three parts according to the period of history which each relates. The first three books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth) are the pre-monarchy books. The three double books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles narrate the history of Israel's monarchy. The last three books (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther) describe events following the collapse of the monarchy. Each of the three parts has its own introductory chapter.

The translation of Scripture in the following pages is that of the author unless otherwise indicated. The notes themselves have been collected over thirty years of teaching a freshman level course in the history of Israel at Cincinnati Bible College and Florida Christian College. Every effort has been made to credit secondary literature where appropriate. From time to time over the years, however, lecture notes were supplemented with citations without documentation.

In the production of this volume the encouragement and assistance of Linda Stark, Librarian of Florida Christian College, is gratefully acknowledged.

## The Books of History An Overview

Sunday School children memorize the divisions of the Old Testament library as five books of law, twelve books of history, five books of poetry, five major and twelve minor prophets. The second of these divisions is the focus of this volume.

### THE TWELVE VOLUME COLLECTION

Actually the 5-12-5-5-12 breakdown of the thirty-nine Old Testament books is but one of several systems for organizing this material. The rabbis of old, as well as modern writers, have proposed other schemes of representing the organization of the Old Testament library.

#### **A. Ancient Arrangements.**

As early as the second century BC Jews saw their Bible as consisting of three divisions: Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Nebhi'im*) and Writings

(*Kethubhim*). The modern Hebrew Bible follows this arrangement. The five books of Moses—the so-called Pentateuch—constitute the first division. The Prophets consists of eight books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings (the Former Prophets); Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve (the Latter Prophets). The remaining books are considered the Writings. In this system the books which follow the Book of the Twelve (the Minor Prophets) are: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

Not much has been written about the twelve historical books as a collection. This is probably due to the false perception that the arrangement of books in the modern Hebrew Bible represents an ancient assessment of the Old Testament collection. The evidence, however, points in a different direction.

While it is true that the tripartite organization of the Old Testament can be traced to pre-Christian times, the present-day assignment of books to the three divisions (5-8-11) can be traced only to the fourth century AD. In the days of Josephus (c. AD 90) the second division (*Nebhi'im*) contained thirteen books. According to Josephus the third division (*Kethubhim*) consisted of four books containing “hymns to God” and “precepts for the conduct of human life” (*Against Apion* 1:8). Most likely those four books were Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

The reasons for shifting Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Ruth and Esther from the *Nebhi'im* to the *Kethubhim* after the days of Josephus are obscure. The important point is, however, that the twelve historical books were considered as being “prophetic,” i.e., written by prophets. These twelve books—eleven when Ruth is counted as part of Judges—were a unit even from pre-Christian times.

Whereas the tripartite arrangement of the Old Testament books is attested as early as Ben Sira (c. 280 BC), the Dead Sea Scrolls point toward a twofold breakdown, namely, the law and the prophets. Both the twofold and the threefold system are reflected in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> One is therefore forced to conclude that the two ways of organizing the Old Testament books enjoy equal antiquity.<sup>2</sup>

Other ancient evidence regarding the organization of the Old Testament books is more difficult to assess. The earliest extant

manuscripts of the Septuagint (Greek) version come from the fourth century AD and come from Christian circles. Here the books of the Apocrypha—books which never were accepted as Scripture in authoritative Jewish circles—have been mingled with the canonical books of Scripture. A discussion of the reasons for this strange circumstance lies beyond the scope of the present volume. The lists of Old Testament books which come from the early Church Fathers support the conclusion that at least the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and 1 & 2 Chronicles were regarded as a unit. Ruth and Esther and sometimes Ezra and Nehemiah were mingled in these lists with the poetic books.<sup>3</sup>

## **B. Modern Arrangements.**

J. Sidlow Baxter<sup>4</sup> has proposed a modern threefold breakdown of Old Testament books as they appear in the English Bible. He classifies the first seventeen books as history and the last seventeen as prophecy. Sandwiched between are the five experiential books which focus on the inner life of Old Testament believers. In detail his organizational scheme looks like this:

- I. HISTORY (17)
  - A. Basic Law (5)
  - B. Preexilic Records (9)
  - C. Postexilic Records (3)
- II. EXPERIENCE (5): the heart
- III. PROPHECY (17)
  - A. Basic Prophecy (5)
  - B. Preexilic Prophets (9)
  - C. Postexilic Prophets (3)

Another threefold way of viewing the Old Testament library is as follows:

- I. FOUNDATIONAL BOOKS (5): Genesis–Deuteronomy
- II. FRAMEWORK BOOKS (12): Joshua–Nehemiah
  - A. Premonarchy (3)
  - B. Monarchy (3 double books)
  - C. Postmonarchy (3)

- III. FOCUS BOOKS (22): Psalms-Malachi  
 A. Focus on Individuals (5): Psalms-Song  
 B. Focus on Issues (17): Isaiah-Malachi

**Chart No. 1**

THE CONTENTS OF THE HISTORICAL BOOKS					
PRE-CROWN		CROWN		POST-CROWN	
Joshua Conquest of Canaan	Judges Unrest in Canaan  Ruth A Family Preserved	1-2 Samuel Birth & Expansion of the Kingdom	1-2 Kings Decline & Destruction of the Kingdom	Ezra Return to Canaan  Esther A Nation Preserved	Nehemiah Rebuilding in Canaan
Settling in Canaan		Ruling over Canaan		Returning to Canaan	

In the above scheme the framework books are those which give the outline for the history of Israel from the time of the conquest through the second governorship of Nehemiah. Merely seeing these twelve books in a list, however, conveys the erroneous impression that each continues the history which was recorded in the preceding book. Actually in each of the triads of books the first two might be designated “forward motion books” because they advance the history of Israel chronologically. Thus Judges, for example, advances the history which was narrated in the Book of Joshua. Kings advances the history of Samuel and Nehemiah that of Ezra.

The third book in each triad might be labeled a “sidestep book” or “spotlight book.” The Book of Ruth highlights an incident which chronologically fits somewhere into the Book of Judges, probably into chapter 10. The two books of Chronicles (considered one book in Jewish tradition) spotlight God’s dealings with the Davidic dynasty. The Book of Esther fits chronologically between chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Ezra. Ruth records the preservation of a family, Chronicles the preservation of a dynasty, and Esther the preservation of a nation. The arrangement of the historical books in the English Bible



moving two steps forward and one to the side creates the impression that one is virtually waltzing through a thousand years of history.

## THE SCOPE OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY

History has been defined as that branch of knowledge which records and explains the past. Bible history would then be that recitation and interpretation of the past which is recorded in the Bible. Perhaps Old Testament history could be defined as that part of history in which God prepared for Christ through a specially chosen and trained people. The history of Israel should be defined still more narrowly as the history of that people which became a nation at Mt. Sinai and was subsequently known as Israel.

Those who have written in the field are not united in their understanding of the scope of the history of Israel. The *terminus a quo* for this study has been taken to be creation (Sanders, Snell, Ottley); Abraham (Payne, Bright); the Exodus (Oesterley and Robinson, Bailey and Kent); and the settlement in Palestine (Noth). The present work is not technically a history of Israel, but is a survey of the historical books of the Old Testament. Hence the starting point has been defined by the historical circumstances reflected in the first chapter of the Book of Joshua.

Scholars are also divided over the *terminus ad quem* (ending point) of the history of Israel. Should it be the second governorship of Nehemiah (Flanders, Crapps, W. Smith)? The end of the Maccabean revolt in 165 BC (Bright)? The first Roman conquest of Jerusalem in AD 70 (H. Wheeler Robinson)? Or the final revolt against Rome in AD 135 (Noth, Payne, Oesterley and Robinson)? Some would even argue that the history of Israel continues to modern times (Bailey and Kent). Because this present volume is a survey of the twelve historical books of the Old Testament the *terminus ad quem* has been defined as the conclusion of the Book of Nehemiah which relates what is chronologically the last event of the Old Testament.

## THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL HISTORY

In one of the most significant studies of the past fifty years Mered-

ith Kline<sup>5</sup> has proposed a revolutionary way of looking at the Old Testament canon. Building upon research into ancient treaty forms, Kline has proposed viewing the entire Old Testament as a treaty (covenant) document consisting of a basic treaty core (Genesis-Deuteronomy) and four types of related treaty documents. The core consists of a prologue (Genesis-Exodus 19) and stipulations (Exodus 20-Deuteronomy). All the other books are creative expansions of that core document.

Kline saw the Old Testament wisdom books—especially Proverbs—as an expansion of the stipulation section of the core document. These books also explore the mysteries of the government of Yahweh the Great King to whom Israel had pledged allegiance at Sinai. The Psalms expand upon the vassal ratification response of the people found in the treaties of the ancient Near East and in the core covenant document (e.g., Exod 24:1-8).<sup>6</sup> The role of the prophets in Israel corresponds to the role of the ambassadors of the great kings in the politics of the ancient world. Their job was to declare Yahweh's claims, enforce his will, and apply the ancient covenant sanctions in new situations.

According to Kline, the so-called historical books are an extension of the prologue in the core document. The theme of these twelve books is the covenant relationship with God. In these books Yahweh's fidelity to the covenant is placed in juxtaposition to Israel's infidelity.

The shape of all historical works is determined by the sources available to the historian and the focus which he wishes to give to the material. Thus some choose to focus on economics, others on political history, still others on social institutions. The biblical historians wrote from a prophetic point of view. They wrote sacred history which emphasizes the role of God in human events. They feature the acts of prophets like Samuel. They emphasize the great prophetic themes of the Exodus, the gift of the land of Canaan, and the covenant obligations of justice and exclusive worship of Yahweh. This, then, is sacred history. The persons, peoples, movements, institutions herein described are those which God used to fulfill his gracious and holy purpose.

## THE METHOD OF BIBLICAL HISTORY

All historians are dependent on contemporary sources. The biblical books of history, with the possible exception of Joshua and Nehemiah, cover such enormous time spans that the use of earlier written sources and oral tradition was mandatory. The biblical historians often mention the sources from which they derived their information. In Chronicles, for example, some twenty-five extrabiblical documents are named.<sup>7</sup> Some of these sources were journals or day books in which principal events of the two kingdoms were recorded by court “remembrancers.” Other sources were memoirs of various prophets. The “Book of Jasher” mentioned twice in the text (Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18) appears to have been a poetic account of the battles of ancient Israel.

From these ancient sources the biblical historians selected the strands of raw material with which they wove their account of covenant history. The Holy Spirit guided in the selection process so that no erroneous material was incorporated into the text. These twelve books are part of Holy Scripture which the Lord Jesus, the Apostles and the early church regarded as inspired of God (2 Tim 3:16). The exact mechanics of the working of the Spirit cannot now be explained. What is important is that the writings of these historians are different from all other histories ever written except those which are found in the New Testament. Thus these books contain “sacred history” not only because of the facts related therein, but because this material has the imprimatur of God’s Holy Spirit.

## COMPOSITION OF THE BOOKS

As in the case of most of the Old Testament library, the critical and conservative explanations of the composition of the historical books are quite different.

### A. Critical View.

Modern historical criticism has proposed two alternative theories to explain the composition of the historical books. The first—the so-called documentary theory—was advanced by Otto Eissfeldt. In this

theory the Book of Joshua is regarded as the concluding volume of a Hexateuch. The documentary sources (J,E,D & P) which the critics imagine they have discovered in the Pentateuch are traced through Joshua. The second theory, which was put forward by Martin Noth, envisions an independent historical work consisting of the Book of Deuteronomy followed by Joshua through Kings. This material was organized sometime after the Exile by a redactor which the critics have dubbed the “deuteronomist.”

These critical theories flounder on one hard fact. Both historically and exegetically the historical books are distinct from the Pentateuch. The trend in Old Testament studies is to focus on the final shape of each of the canonical books, to appreciate each as separate and distinct from the others. While there is certainly interdependence among these books, they yet reflect a certain independence. In any case, after a century of scholarly debate agreement among the critics remains an elusive goal.<sup>8</sup>

Critics generally regard Esther as a literary romance, i.e., a good story with a kernel of truth. Ruth is regarded as a postexilic tract written to oppose the harsh exclusiveness of Ezra and Nehemiah.

## **B. Conservative View.**

The authorship of the various historical books will be discussed later in this volume. Suffice it to say that conservative scholars are more open to the possibility that the traditional authors of these books did in fact author them. Tradition associates the name of Joshua with the authorship of the book that bears his name. Samuel is said to have been the author of Judges. The life of David as recorded in the books of Samuel was chronicled by the prophets Samuel, Nathan and Gad (1 Chr 29:29). Tradition assigned the authorship of Kings to Jeremiah. Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah may have come from the pen of Ezra. Jewish tradition is not united on the authorship of Esther. Mordecai and Ezra have both been nominated.

Each book in this collection of twelve (with the possible exception of Ruth) should be regarded as a separate entity. The authors, however, seem to have been conscious of contributing to a continuing history. By means of a literary “hook” an author would connect his work to the work which preceded. Joshua 24:26 suggests that Joshua

added his work to that of Moses. His work probably begins with Deuteronomy 34 and concludes with Joshua 24:28. The author of Judges would have added the record of Joshua's death (Josh 24:29-33). The author of Kings joins his work to Samuel by opening his book with the narration of David's death.

An obvious discontinuity occurs at the conclusion of Kings. Chronicles begins with genealogies stretching back to Adam. The focus quickly moves, however, to David and his descendants. The hooking principle is again evident with the opening verses of Ezra. They repeat verbatim the concluding verses of Chronicles.<sup>9</sup>

## CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

Chronologically speaking, Old Testament history begins with Abraham. Attempts to establish chronology prior to the call of this great patriarch are futile. In the broadest possible outline of Old Testament history, about six hundred years elapsed between Abraham and Moses. About four hundred years passed between Moses and David. Between David and the conclusion of Old Testament history (Ezra-Nehemiah) another six hundred years can be assigned. The intertestamental period lasted about four hundred years. Thus a pattern emerges which may be illustrated as follows:

Abraham to Moses	600 years.
Moses to David	400 years.
David to Nehemiah	600 years.
Nehemiah to Christ	400 years.

To fine tune this general picture, Old Testament history is frequently divided into twelve periods. Five of these periods are covered in the Pentateuch. These are:

Antediluvian	Duration unknown.
Postdiluvian	Duration unknown.
Patriarchal	215 years.
Egyptian	430 years.
Wilderness	40 years.

The history related in the framework books (Joshua-Esther) is usually divided into seven periods.

Conquest	40 years (1407-1367 BC).
Judges	324 years (1367-1043 BC).
United Monarchy	112 years (1043-930 BC).
Divided Monarchy	210 years (930-722 BC).
Judean	135 years (722-586 BC).
Exilic	48 years (586-538 BC).
Postexilic	106 years (538-432 BC).

## THEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

The faith of Israel's historians is transparent in their writings. These writers were passionately monotheistic and aniconic (worship without idols or images). Though they were aware of the existence of local "godlings" (e.g., Baal; Asherah) and even of the national gods of surrounding nations (e.g., Chemosh, Milcom), they believed that one God—Yahweh—ruled over all. All other pretenders to deity were worthless nonentities.

The biblical historians also firmly believed that the one true God had revealed himself to man. For them the primary source of this revelation was the Mosaic law. Yahweh, however, also spoke to his people through priestly oracle, the so-called Urim (1 Sam 14:41; 23:2; 30:7f.), dreams (1 Kgs 3:5), and prophets both named (e.g., Micaiah in 1 Kgs 22) and unnamed (e.g., 1 Sam 2:27). In 1 Samuel 28:6 the three means by which God might be expected to speak to a reigning king are brought together: "When Saul inquired of Yahweh, Yahweh did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets."

If the Pentateuch lays the foundation for the coming of Christ, the historical books relate the preparation for his coming. Since the revelation at Mt. Sinai Yahweh had chosen to identify with one nation. To that people he gave his revelation (Rom 3:2). Through his special ambassadors, the prophets, he shaped and molded that people. He carved out of national Israel a spiritual remnant which longed for the Messiah. This remnant kept faith alive even in the most trying circum-

stances. From the vantage point of the New Testament, Old Testament history consists of a myriad of arrows pointing to the fullness of times (Gal 4:4-5). Even so, Old Testament history is not merely a period of aimless waiting. Throughout these millennia God was moving decisively toward the goal of redemption for all people in Christ Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

Israel was called of God to be a light to the nations of the world, a testament to the power and grace of God. The ultimate plan was to bless all nations through Christ, the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To that end the Lord endured a thousand years of indifference and outright apostasy broken up only occasionally by periods of renewal and revival. The history of Israel is in many ways a tragic history with a predictable conclusion. As horrendous as it was, the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC marked a turning point, at least as far as overt idolatry was concerned. When the Jews returned from exile in Babylon the old Canaanite idolatry which had polluted the nation since the days of Joshua was a thing of the past.

The message of the historical books revolves around four axes: kingship, prophets, the sanctuary and worship. Regarding kingship, the message is that God was faithful to the promises he made to David. Man-made kings were a disaster. Regarding prophets the message is that God sought at every opportunity to evoke repentance in his people. Through interpretation of past disasters and warnings of worse things to come mingled with assurances of blessing to reward fidelity, the prophets sought to impress upon Israel the need for a daily walk with the Lord.

As regards the sanctuary, the historical books make the point that the physical sanctuary—tabernacle or temple—was the earthly dwelling place of God. The one God required and permitted but one sanctuary and that could be located only at the place of his choosing. Worship was the standard by which the biblical historians measured the characters who appeared on this millennial stage. No matter what a person's accomplishments might be, if he did not worship the Lord in spirit and truth that man is judged by these historians to be a failure. The sanctuary was the nerve center of the nation.

## IMPORTANCE OF OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

Many Christians have never made a serious study of the Old Testament historical books because they perceive them to be boring and impractical. What possible relevance can anything have which happened “way over there” on a sliver of real estate called Canaan over 2500 years ago? The main characters in this history have now been dead for thirty centuries or so. Even when alive they lived in a world totally different from anything experienced by the contemporary Christian. Some of their beliefs and practices offend modern sensitivities and seem, on the surface at least, to oppose the spirit of Christ. So why bother with the twelve historical books?

Many good reasons can be advanced for studying these books. First, Israel’s historians produced great literature, though that was not their purpose. They tell thrilling stories with consummate skill. Indeed the books of Samuel and Kings “contain some of the noblest and most moving stories in all literature.” Like all great literature these books have the power to uplift, delight, console, encourage and warn the human heart.<sup>11</sup>

The historical books have a certain ethical power. Both by example and warning they inspire noble conduct. The challenging stories found here challenge the readers to make a decision to emulate what is worthy and to shun what is base.<sup>12</sup>

Even more important, the twelve historical books were part of the Bible of the Lord Jesus. He knew and loved these books. If no other reason could be offered for a study of Old Testament history this alone should cause the disciple of Christ to want to master the content of these books.

The Apostle Paul suggested that Old Testament history offered many valuable lessons for Christians (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11). The Scriptures of the Old Testament were capable of making one wise unto salvation (2 Tim 3:15). In these books are prophecies and pointers toward Christ (John 5:39; Luke 24:44f.).

Still other good reasons for the study of the historical books can be advanced. First, these documents are completely true (John 10:35; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21). Virtually every issue of archaeological journals contains verification of details of the history contained in these books.



Second, the historical books of the Old Testament have had a major influence on the fine arts.<sup>13</sup> Third, these books contain the record of God's dealings with a unique and wonderful people. Fourth, these books are valuable for homiletical purposes. Fifth, these books throw invaluable light upon ancient practices and beliefs. Sixth, they furnish a framework in which the message of Israel's prophets can be understood.

Perhaps the best statement ever written about the value of studying Old Testament history was penned by F.K. Sanders in 1914.

The study of history ought to inspire students with generous ideals of active and responsible citizenship, with sincere ambitions for sane, strong leadership, with convictions regarding national policies and the power to distinguish between that which is clever and that which is fine and noble. No history surpasses that of the Hebrew people in its power to transmit and impress such results as these.<sup>14</sup>

### **INTERPRETING BIBLICAL HISTORY<sup>15</sup>**

About forty percent of the Old Testament is in narrative form. Most of that material is contained in the twelve books which are the subject of this study. Those who read these narratives tend to make several mistakes in interpretation. They tend, for example, to regard these narratives as simply being stories about those who lived in Old Testament times. The biblical authors were not entertainers who could spin a good yarn. It is the work of God through people which should be emphasized. In the final analysis God is the hero of Old Testament narrative.

Others treat the stories as allegories which teach mysterious truths. Some even go so far as to read into the narratives such outlandish things as spaceships and extraterrestrials.

Another mistake which is commonly made is the attempt to identify some direct lesson or moral in each story. Every individual account is like the piece of a puzzle, which when joined to other pieces, presents the big picture. Biblical narrative illustrates what is explicitly taught elsewhere. One should not attempt to formulate doctrinal propositions based solely on a narrative.

Interpreters of Old Testament history should remember that narratives record what actually happened, not necessarily what should have happened. Therefore, the conduct of individuals in these accounts is often less than praiseworthy, and sometimes just plain despicable.

By its very nature narrative is selective and incomplete. Not all questions about an episode that one might wish to be answered are in fact answered. For this reason the Old Testament deuterographs—substantially the same narrative appearing in two separate books—may seem on the surface to be contradictory. One writer chose to emphasize certain details of what took place, while another adds additional details. A student would do well to purchase a harmony of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles before undertaking a serious study of these books. In the bibliography for the monarchy books two of these tools will be cited.

## ENDNOTES

1. The twofold arrangement is reflected in such passages as Matt 5:17 and Luke 16:16-17; the threefold in Luke 24:44.

2. R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), pp. 140-48.

3. F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), pp. 68-97.

4. J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 1:15-20.

5. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

6. Kline did not address the issue of the Song of Solomon in relation to his covenant theory. The core document, however, has much to say about sexuality. The Song may be a positive expansion of those stipulations dealing with sex.

7. These sources are conveniently itemized by Willis J. Beecher, "Chronicles, Book of" in *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 1:630.

8. Peter Craigie, *The Old Testament, Its Background, Growth and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), p. 144.

9. R. Laird Harris, "What Books Belong in the Canon of Scripture?" in *Can I Trust the Bible?* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), pp. 71ff.

10. Walter Roehrs, *Survey of Covenant History* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989), p. 11.

11. Gordon Robinson, *Historians of Israel (1)* in "Bible Guides" (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p. 81.

12. Ibid., p. 83.

13. Cynthia P. Maus devotes over six hundred pages to a discussion of the art, music and literature generated by the events in Israel's history. *The Old Testament and the Fine Arts* (New York: Harper, 1954).

14. F.K. Sanders, *The History of the Hebrews* (New York: Scribners, 1914), pp. 6-7.

15. The material in this section is a summarization of the excellent chapter on the proper use of Old Testament narrative in *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), esp., pp. 74-78.

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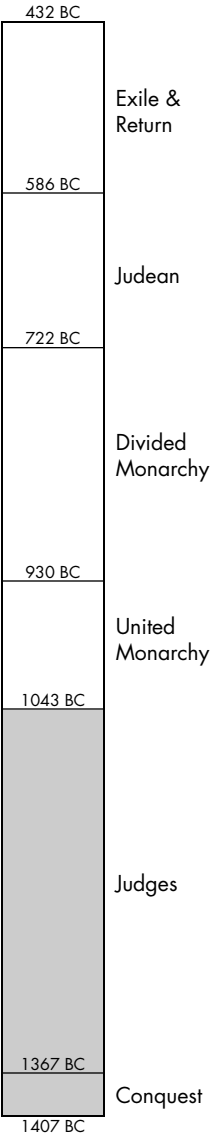
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PART ONE  
THE SETTLEMENT  
PERIOD

**PART ONE**  
**THE SETTLEMENT**  
**1407-1043 BC**



**Sources:**  
**Joshua**  
**Judges**  
**Ruth**

## CHAPTER TWO

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# The Premonarchy Books An Introduction

Joshua, Judges and Ruth describe Israel's history between 1407 and 1043 BC. This is sometimes called the Settlement Period of Old Testament history. These four centuries may be subdivided into the Conquest Period (1407-1367 BC) and the Judges Period (1367-1043).

### **THE BOOK OF JOSHUA**

The Book of Joshua occurs at a strategic place in the Old Testament canon. The book forms a bridge between the Pentateuch and that which follows. The Pentateuch concludes with the account of the death of Moses, the great Lawgiver. The Book of Joshua begins with the words "*After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, it came to pass that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister . . .*" Thus the Historical Books take up the account of God's dealings with Israel where the Pentateuch left off.

The Mosaic books depict Israel moving toward Canaan. Joshua describes Israel entering into Canaan.

Besides this continuity of event, the book indicates continuity of authority. Joshua succeeded Moses. In many respects Joshua functioned like a second Moses. He enjoyed many of the privileges accorded the great Lawgiver. Scripture, however, takes care to point out frequently that the entire conquest of Canaan corresponded to the arrangements Moses had set forth as God's command.<sup>1</sup> Thus Moses is honored as the architect of the Conquest. Joshua is presented as the faithful executor of Moses' will (cf. Deut 31:3-8).

Continuity, however, is not the whole story. The Book of Joshua is a kind of climax of all which had gone before. The land promise made to Abram almost seven centuries earlier (c. 2092 BC) was now fulfilled. Israel's earlier failure to enter the land (Num 14:39-35) was now reversed. The glorious *vision* of faith set forth by Moses in his closing speeches (Deut 26-33) now became the *venture* of faith. The prospect of a land flowing with milk and honey now became the possession of Canaan. Israel was on the pinnacle. The predominant note (with an occasional sour note) in Joshua is one of joy, confidence and exuberance.

With the possession of the land a new phase of Israel's history began. Joshua is the threshold of a thousand years of sacred history. Here and there the book anticipates the future. The last speeches of Joshua contain admonitions for continued faithfulness and warnings that all will be lost if Israel proves unfaithful (23:15-16; 24:19-20).

Thus the Book of Joshua honors past revelation, celebrates present success and anticipates future problems. It is a connecting link between the promise made to the Fathers and the perils which tested the people of God once that promise had been realized. In the words of Baxter, Joshua is "complementary to the five books of Moses, and introductory to the new historical group of twelve books."<sup>2</sup>

### **A. Background.**

After emerging from the wilderness, Israel fought major battles in Transjordan with the Amorite kings Sihon and Og. While camped at Shittim on the edge of Canaan, the men of Israel yielded to the seduction of the Midianite women and their fertility dances. Moses launched



a holy war of retribution against the Midianites because of this incident. Following his final discourses to the nation, Moses climbed Mt. Nebo to view the Promised Land and depart to meet his Maker. After an appropriate period of mourning for the death of Moses, the Israelites were ready to march into the land of promise under the leadership of Joshua the son of Nun.

### **B. Circumstances of Writing.**

The sixth book of the Old Testament is named after the leading character of the narrative. The name Joshua means “Yahweh is salvation.” In the Greek language the name *Joshua* becomes *Jesus*. Hebrews 4:8 in the King James Version has confused some students because it uses the Greek spelling *Jesus* to refer to the Old Testament leader.

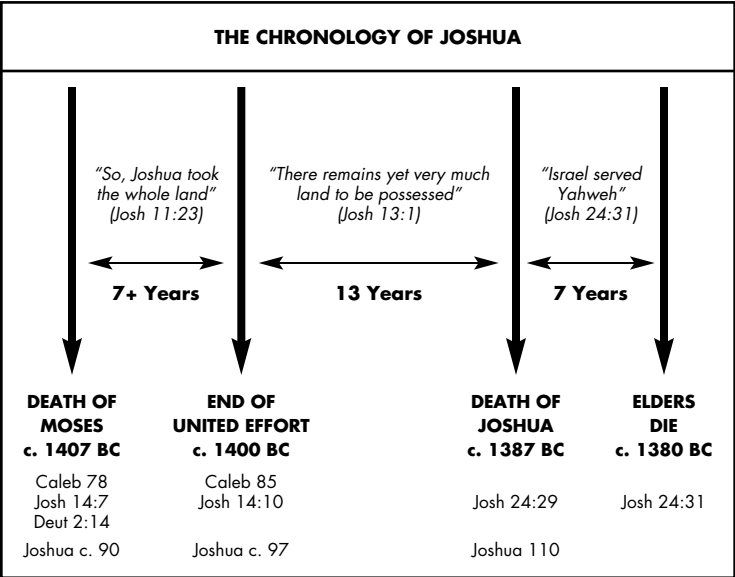
Jewish tradition ascribes the authorship of the sixth book in the Old Testament to Joshua himself. No solid reasons have been put forth for categorically rejecting this view. Certainly Joshua knew how to write (8:32). In fact, Joshua 24:26 states that he wrote covenant stipulations in “*the book of the law of God*.” This indicates that Joshua was regarded even during his lifetime as a prophet inspired of God. Only one who spoke inspired words would have been permitted to add anything to the writing of the great prophet Moses.

The author of the book participated in the events which he narrates (5:1,6). Rahab, the harlot who was spared when Jericho fell to the Israelites was still living when the book was written. Thus the author must have been part of the Conquest. No better candidate than Joshua has been proposed as the author of this book.

The concluding verses of the book which narrate the death of Joshua were no doubt appended by a later prophet. This prophet may have been Samuel. Two accounts in the book may have been inserted into the book by this same prophetic figure. The first episode is Othniel’s capture of Kiriath-sepher (15:13-17; cf. Judg 1:9-13). The second episode which might be post-Joshuanic is the Danite migration of Joshua 19:47 (cf. Judg 18:27-29). The chronological placement of these events is problematic.

C. Chronology of the Book.

Chart No. 2



The crossing of the Jordan by the children of Israel (ch. 3) can be dated about 1407 BC. The last event recorded in the book is the assembly at Shechem in which Joshua delivered his farewell address to the nation (ch. 24). A comment by Caleb (Josh 14:7-10) enables the modern student to compute the length of time which the united effort against the Canaanites took. Caleb was forty when he had been sent forth from Kadesh-barnea with eleven others to spy out Canaan. He was eighty-five at the time he was given his personal inheritance within the tribal territory of Judah. Presumably this took place after the united tribal conquest led by Joshua. Of the forty-five years which elapsed between Kadesh-barnea and the designation of Caleb's inheritance in Joshua 14, thirty-eight years were consumed in the wilderness wandering (Deut 2:14). Thus seven years must have been consumed in the united conquest of Canaan. The final allotment of the newly conquered land must have been made about 1400 BC.

How much time is covered in the Book of Joshua after the final allotment of the land cannot be computed precisely. The only clue is found in the concluding verses of the book. Israel served Yahweh during the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who outlived Joshua (Josh 24:31). Twenty years would be a conservative estimate of the time which elapsed from the time of Caleb’s inheritance to the passing of Joshua and the elders. The Book of Joshua, then, covers a period of roughly twenty-seven years.

**D. Contents of the Book.**

The Book of Joshua contains a variety of types of literature, some inspirational and exciting, others, quite frankly, boring to the average reader. The historical narrative of the book pulsates with excitement. The divine revelation, farewell speeches, and prayers are full of spiritual challenge. On the other hand, nothing in the Bible is less interesting than the seemingly endless lists of villages assigned to this or that tribe (chs. 12–21).

**Chart No. 3**

THE STRUCTURE OF JOSHUA				
PREPARING FOR VICTORY	ENGAGING THE FOE	CONQUERING THE LAND	POSSESSING THE INHERITANCE	ENCOURAGING THE COMMITMENT
chs. 1–5	chs. 6–9	chs. 10–12	chs. 13–22	chs. 23–24
The Lord Reveals the Plan	The Lord Gives the Victory	The Lord Empowers Israel	The Lord Fulfills the Promise	The Lord Demands Fidelity
THEME: THE VICTORY OF FAITH				

The theme of the Book of Joshua is *the victory of faith*. Joshua 1:3 is probably the key to the entire book “*Every place upon which the sole of your foot shall tread, to you I have given it, just as I spoke unto Moses.*”<sup>3</sup> The key thought in the book is *God’s faithfulness*. The God who brought them out of Egypt also brought them

into the Land of Promise (Deut 4:37f.), and that in spite of the unworthiness of two generations of Israelites.

The Book of Joshua opens with a word of the Lord for Joshua. That opening speech virtually outlines the entire book. *“Arise, go over Jordan”* (1:2) points to the preparation for conquest (chs. 1–5). *“No man shall be able to stand before you”* (1:5) announces in advance the result of the Israelite-Canaanite clash (chs. 6–12). *“You shall cause this people to possess this land which I swore to give to their fathers”* (1:6) is prophetic of what is described in chapters 13–22. The exhortation *“Be strong . . . to guard to do [i.e., to carefully do] according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you”* (1:7) anticipates the concluding hortatory section of the book (chs. 23–24) in which Joshua pleads with the people to be faithful to the Lord. Chart 3 diagrams the structure of the book.

### **E. Teaching of Joshua.**

Christians who find significance only in Old Testament books which prophetically portray the coming of Christ will be disappointed with the Book of Joshua. The book contains no personal messianic prophecy. Some see in the Captain of Yahweh’s host (5:13-15) a Christophany or a pre-incarnate manifestation of Christ (cf. Rev 19:11-14). While this view is probably correct, the passage is not predictive. Consequently it adds little to the great stream of messianic revelation in the Old Testament.

According to Hebrews 3–4, Old Testament Canaan is a type of the believer’s present position and possessions in Christ. Thus the Christian teacher does not err by suggesting comparisons between the present spiritual warfare and the ancient efforts of Israel to conquer Canaan.

The Book of Joshua illustrates two great principles of Scripture. The first is, *“Yahweh is a man of war”* (Exod 15:3). Yahweh ordered Israel into battle against the Canaanites. The God of holiness is in perpetual conflict with the forces of evil. To be sure, this move to exterminate the Canaanites came only after lengthy probation (Gen 15:16) and only after dramatic illustrations of Yahweh’s wrath against immorality right there in the land of Canaan (Gen 18–19). In the course of time the cup of Canaanite iniquity was full. The holiness of

God could no longer overlook the corruption of those peoples (Lev 18:24-27). He therefore commissioned Joshua to unleash his wrath upon these hardened sinners. Total surrender to Yahweh was the only escape from destruction. Every Canaanite who surrendered to Yahweh was spared. Thus even in the midst of judgment the Lord showed mercy to those who sought it.

The second grand principle which is illustrated in the Book of Joshua is found in 1 John 5:4. *"This is the victory which has overcome the world, even our faith."* In battle after battle the Israelites fought against superior numbers and superior weaponry. Yet they prevailed. God gave the victory! When they marched, walls came tumbling down!

## THE BOOK OF JUDGES

The seventh book of the Old Testament takes its name from a series of twelve individuals who arose in Israel as military leaders in emergency situations. Even the chapters which do not speak directly of the Judges (chs. 1, 9, 17-21) contribute to explaining the underlying causes of the national predicaments which caused God to raise up these military reformers. This book, then, is appropriately named. One should not conclude, however, that this book contains the accounts of *all* of Israel's Judges. Both Eli and Samuel (1 Sam 1-7) are said to have judged Israel, but they differed in important respects from those who are introduced in the Book of Judges.

In general the following observations can be made about Israel's Judges. They were God's vice-regents in the land. They seem to have experienced some "call" from God and thereafter served lifelong. No regular succession of Judges is in evidence. God raised them up as needed. They served without pomp and equipage. They had no power to make laws, for the law had already been given at Sinai. They had no power to interpret laws, for that was the responsibility of the priests. Their prime responsibility was to enforce God's law or justice and thereby bring "rest" to the land.

### A. Background of the Book.

The united tribal effort to conquer Canaan lasted seven plus years.

Once Joshua had broken the back of Canaanite resistance, he assigned the tribes to their territories within the land. The individual tribes were required to eliminate any remaining enclaves of Canaanites within their borders. This process actually began before the death of Joshua in about 1387 BC. For a brief time after the death of Joshua the tribes attempted to continue clearing the Canaanites from the land. Gradually, however, conquest gave way to toleration, accommodation and assimilation. Israel departed from the Lord. God then sent against them a series of foreign invaders. This process began with the invasion of Cushan-rishathaim from Mesopotamia. With this invasion at about 1367 BC the period of the Judges began.

### **B. Circumstances of Writing.**

Although the Book of Judges is anonymous, several clues point to the time of its origin. Judges was composed after the death of Joshua (2:7) and after “*the captivity of the land*” (18:30). This “captivity” is sometimes taken to be a reference to the Assyrian captivity of the northern kingdom which occurred in stages toward the end of the eighth century BC. This interpretation, however, is not necessary. The reference is probably to the Philistine captivity of Israel which occurred in the Judgeship of Eli (1 Sam 4–6). The book was probably written before the seventh year of David’s reign (1004 BC) since the Jebusites still were holding Jerusalem (Judg 1:21; cf. 2 Sam 5:6). The book was written from a prophetic point of view (cf. 3:7; 4:1). A date of about 1035 BC during the reign of Saul would be close to the time of the composition of this book. Jewish tradition assigns the authorship to Samuel, and nothing in the contents precludes his authorship.

The immediate purpose of the author of Judges was to record the major events from the death of Joshua to the founding of the monarchy. By so doing the author was attempting to explain the establishment of the monarchy as necessitated by the social and political chaos which resulted from disobedience to God’s word.

### **C. Chronology of the Book.**

One of the most difficult problems facing the student of the Old Testament is the chronology of the Book of Judges. Part of the problem is created by the structure of the book itself. The opening verse

announces the death of Joshua and gives the impression that what follows occurred after the old warrior had departed this world scene.<sup>4</sup> Some of the episodes narrated in that first chapter, however, have already been recounted in the Book of Joshua. To complicate matters further, the death of Joshua is narrated a second time (2:8). Apparently the author began this book with a series of episodes, some of which happened before the death of Joshua and some of which followed his death.<sup>5</sup>

A still more formidable chronological problem faces the interpreter in the last five chapters of Judges. Two episodes are recorded in these chapters: (1) the Danite migration; and (2) the civil war against the tribe of Benjamin. A careful study of the details in these episodes indicates that they most likely transpired even before the invasion of Cushan in 1367 BC. Since the Danite migration is recorded in the Book of Joshua (Jos 19:47), Judges 17–18 may be narrating an event which transpired even before the death of Joshua!

Aside from these internal chronological problems, reconciling the data in Judges with external chronological data is extremely difficult. The stated periods of oppression and rest in the book total 370 years. Scholars opting for the late date for the Exodus are forced to reduce this figure by almost fifty percent in order to make the period of the Judges fit between an Exodus in 1275 BC and the crowning of Saul at about 1043 BC. However, even scholars opting for the early date for the Exodus (1447 BC) cannot comfortably fit in a period of Judges lasting 370 years. Therefore, some compression seems necessary. Some of the Judges must have been regional heroes whose judgeship was concurrent with similar leaders in other parts of the land. Determining how much compression must be applied to the figures in Judges, and where that compression should be applied are difficult problems. Chart 4 (next page) indicates the scheme adopted in this survey.

#### **D. Contents of the Book.**

The transition from the Book of Joshua to the Book of Judges is abrupt. If Joshua rings with shouts of victory, Judges echoes with sobs of defeat. Possession of the land becomes oppression within the land. Freedom and progress give way to bondage and regression. The

Chart No. 4

<b>THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES</b> <b>306 Years</b>			
AGENTS	PERIOD	YEARS	DATE BC
TRIBES	TRANSITION	20	1387-1367
CUSHAN	OPPRESSION	8	1367-1359
OTHNIEL	DELIVERANCE	40	1359-1319
EGLON	OPPRESSION	18	1319-1301
EHUD	DELIVERANCE	80	1301-1221
SISERA	OPPRESSION	20	1281-1261*
DEBORAH	DELIVERANCE	40	1261-1221*
MIDIAN	OPPRESSION	7	1221-1214
GIDEON	DELIVERANCE	40	1214-1174
ABIMELECH	OPPRESSION	3	1174-1171
TOLA	JUDGESHIP	23	1171-1148
JAIR	JUDGESHIP	22	1148-1126
AMMON	OPPRESSION	18	1126-1108
JEPHTHA	DELIVERANCE	6	1108-1102
IBZAN	JUDGESHIP	7	1105-1098*
ELON	JUDGESHIP	10	1097-1087
ABDON	JUDGESHIP	8	1089-1081*
*Overlaps previous period			

faithfulness of God's people in Joshua is countered by their faithlessness in Judges. If the Israelites are walking by faith in Joshua, they are living in the flesh in Judges. Jensen calls Judges "one of the saddest parts of the Bible . . . a book of failure."<sup>6</sup> Baxter calls Judges "a pathetic anticlimax" to the Book of Joshua.<sup>7</sup>

Judges does not offer a wide variety of literary genres. The book is mostly historical narrative with a few speeches and one song (ch. 5) mixed in. Two verses vie for the designation of key verse in the book. The first is 2:19 (*"And it came to pass when the Judge died they again acted more corruptly than their fathers to follow after other gods and bow down to them; they did not cease from their practices nor their stubborn ways"*). The second is 17:6 (*"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes"*). The key word in the book is *deliver* and its cognates (some 49 times). The key phrase is "*did evil*."

Those who characterize the Book of Judges as consisting of cycles



of rebellion, retribution, repentance and rest have not given careful attention to the text. The history of this period did not go in cycles like a carousel. Rather it moved like the plunge of a roller coaster with peaks and valleys, yet ever winding its way toward rock bottom. To change the metaphor, the author traces the deterioration of Israel from good health in the days of Joshua through the stages of ill, seriously ill, to critically ill.

The Book of Judges consists of a central core of narratives which focus on Israel’s sin, servitude, supplication and salvation over the course of some three centuries. Each episode in the central core is introduced by a literary framework which when complete contains five elements.<sup>8</sup>

Chart No. 5

THE STRUCTURE OF JUDGES "THE DARKNESS OF DISOBEDIENCE"				
EXPLANATORY PROLOGUE		THE NARRATIVE CORE	ILLUSTRATIVE EPILOGUE	
National Sin  1:1–2:5  Review	National Servitude  2:6–3:6	God's Awesome Wrath  SIN SERVITUDE SUPPLICATION SALVATION 3:7–16:31  God's Amazing Grace	A Migration  chs. 17–18	A Mustering  chs. 19–21
	Preview		Idolatry in Dan	Immorality in Benjamin

The core material in Judges is framed by a prologue (1:1–3:6) and epilogue (chs. 17–21) which depict the disunity of Israel. The prologue contains two distinct parts. In the first the conquest efforts of the various tribes before and after the death of Joshua are reviewed (1:1–2:5). The prologue then goes on to preview the theological rhythm of the period of the Judges. Ever-increasing sin was followed by ever more severe oppressions, and these in turn by ever less spec-

tacular deliverances (2:6–3:6). The epilogue contains two narratives illustrating the extent to which idolatry and immorality had permeated Israel in this period. If the prologue stresses the need for political unity, the epilogue emphasizes the need for moral unity. Chart 5 diagrams the structure of the Book of Judges.

### **E. Teaching of the Book.**

The Book of Judges demonstrates the terrible consequences of disobedience to God. The path to destruction is clearly marked in the book. Disregard for God's command to drive out the Canaanites led to toleration, compromise, intermarriage and outright apostasy. This path led to political disunity, foreign oppression, social chaos, and individual immorality. A basic lesson in Judges can be discovered by placing in juxtaposition two emphases. Twice the book declares that *"every man did what was right in his own eyes"* (17:6; 21:25). Seven times Judges states that *"the children of Israel did evil in the sight of Yahweh"* (e.g., 2:11). These two emphases stress that the natural man is inclined to do evil. Without revelation and the motivation to obey it man will inevitably choose the path of destruction.

Judges illustrates the methods God employs in dealing with his people. Here the anger of God burns against sin (2:14,20). He *"sold"* his people (2:14; 3:8; 4:2; 10:7) or *"gave"* them (2:14; 6:1; 13:1) into the hand of some enemy. Once God is said to have *"strengthened the hand"* of an enemy against Israel (3:12). Thus the God of holiness cannot and does not ignore sin but on the contrary, he punishes it.

The Book of Judges also illustrates the principle that where sin abounds, grace abounds much more (Rom 5:20). Five times Israel *"cried"* (*za'ag*) unto Yahweh (3:9,15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10). Three times God spoke to his people, presumably through prophet-like individuals (2:1-3; 6:8-10; 10:11-14). Only once is national repentance clearly indicated in the text (10:10-16).<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the Lord was moved to pity by the the groaning of his people in the midst of their various oppressions (2:18). Therefore, he raised up a deliverer for them (3:9,15) through whom the current enemy was subdued (3:30; 4:23; 8:28; 11:33). Then the land would enjoy *"rest"* for a time (3:11,30; 5:31; 8:28). The lack of emphasis on the repentance of Israel in the text serves to underscore the amazing grace of God in this book.

On a more devotional level, Judges illustrates the principle that God chooses weak and foolish things to confound the wise and powerful things of this world (1 Cor 1:27). To gain the victory in Judges God used an ox goad (3:31), a nail (4:21), some trumpets, pitchers and lamps (7:20), a millstone (9:53) and the jawbone of a donkey (15:15). Some of the deliverers God raised up were most unlikely candidates: a bastard son, a ladies' man, a left-handed butcher, a mother, and a cowardly idol worshiper.

## THE BOOK OF RUTH

Two books in the Bible bear the names of women: Ruth and Esther. Both of these heroines were great and good women. Here, however, the similarity ends. Ruth was a young Moabite girl who came to live with the Israelites. Esther was a Jewess who lived in far-away Persia. A marriage figures prominently in both books. Ruth married a wealthy Israelite farmer and became part of the royal line of David. Esther married a foreign king and became a queen. Ruth knew the discipline of field work. Esther was pampered with beauty treatments in the royal harem. The books named for these women are a contrast as well. They differ in size (four chapters vs. ten) and the degree to which the heroine is involved in the story. The Book of Ruth is the only instance in the Bible in which an entire book is devoted to a woman.

### A. Background.

The setting of the Book of Ruth is "*in the days when the Judges ruled*" (1:1). Yet the contrast between this small book and the Book of Judges is stark. After navigating through the turbulent rapids of Joshua and Judges the reader comes at last to the placid waters of the Book of Ruth. Here there are no more sordid stories of crime and bloodshed, of lawlessness and savage revenge. The atmosphere of simple devotion pervades the story. One senses throughout the overruling providence of God quietly moving forward with his program in those dark days of the Judges.

**B. Circumstances of Writing.**

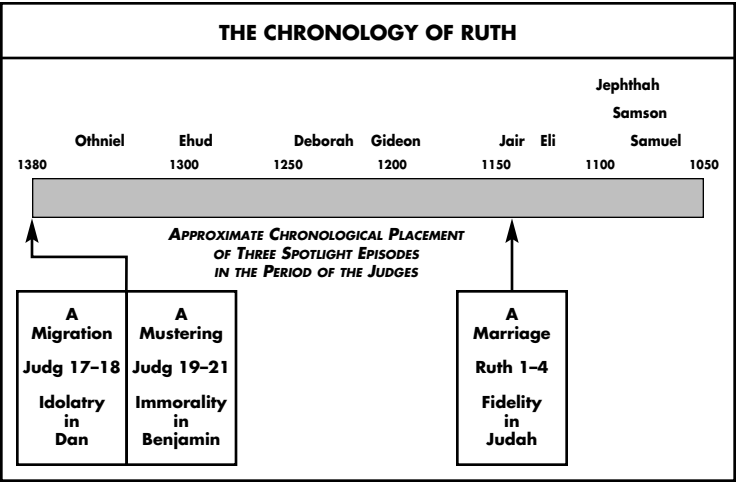
The Book of Ruth has been dubbed a “masterpiece . . . one of the world’s greatest short stories.”<sup>10</sup> Such language suggests that the book is an independent composition which may have had as its original purpose merely the entertainment of the reader. Actually the “book” of Ruth was originally the concluding portion of the Book of Judges. Ruth derives its ultimate significance from its original context as part of the larger book.

When was the story of Ruth excised from the Book of Judges? Sometime after the time of Josephus (c. AD 90). Why was this done? Apparently to facilitate the ease with which this material could be read at the feast of Pentecost. The newly created book was placed along with four other short Old Testament books in a collection called in Jewish tradition *Megilloth* (“Scrolls”). Rabbinic tradition required that each of these small books be read at major religious observances.<sup>11</sup>

Since Ruth was originally part of Judges, this book must have been penned by the author of that book. As noted above, Samuel is the traditional author of Judges.

**C. Chronology of the Book.**

**Chart No. 6**



The Book of Ruth is a sidestep book. Like the two appendices which follow the Samson saga in the Book of Judges (chs. 17–21), Ruth does not advance the history of God's people. The last five chapters of Judges and the four chapters of Ruth—three distinct episodes—are like three spotlights on social life during the period of the Judges. Though the events in Ruth clearly took place during the period of the Judges (1:1), exactly at what point in those three plus centuries is not easy to determine. Since Boaz was the great grandfather of David (Ruth 4:21), a date of about 1130 BC for these events would not be far off. For this reason several scholars date events in the book to the judgeship of Jair (1148-1126 BC).

#### **D. Contents of the Book.**

The purpose of Ruth must have been the same as the two episodes with which the present Book of Judges concludes, namely, to shed light on the everyday life in Israel during the period of the Judges. In the first two episodes the author depicted the idolatry in the tribe of Dan and the immorality in the tribe of Benjamin. Ruth stresses fidelity in the tribe of Judah. All was not completely black in Israel's dark ages. Boaz, "*a man of wealth*" (NASB) or "*standing*" (NIV), is portrayed as a devout and obedient follower of Yahweh. Boaz stands out in this period as one stalwart oak in a forest of fallen timber. Ruth's devotion to the Lord is even more amazing. In spite of her pagan Moabite upbringing, in spite of seeing God's people in circumstances of suffering and deprivation, in spite of Israelite prejudice against her race, she still chose to worship Yahweh and identify with his people.

#### **E. Teaching of Ruth.**

No personal messianic prophecy is found in Judges-Ruth. In Ruth, however, rich typology is present. The kinsman redeemer (*go'el*) in Ruth is taken to be a type of Christ. Archer goes so far as to say that Ruth is one of the most instructive books in the Old Testament concerning the mediatorial work of Christ.<sup>12</sup> Ruth demonstrates that the *go'el* must (1) be a blood relative; (2) have the wherewithal to purchase the forfeited inheritance; (3) be willing to buy back that inheritance; and (4) be willing to marry the wife of a deceased kinsman.

The genealogy at the end of Ruth deserves special attention. Such genealogies in Scripture remind the reader of “the continuity of God’s purpose through the ages.”<sup>13</sup> Behind the romantic short story is the genealogy of Messiah. Thus the author relates to his readers the long-range consequence of Ruth’s devotion to Naomi and her God. Her faith and love put her into the direct line of the Messiah.<sup>14</sup>

For the second time in the historical books the principle is established that those who were far off from the covenant promises could become part of the family of God through obedient faith. Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite demonstrate that those who cried out to Yahweh for refuge found a loving welcome.

In a more devotional vein the book teaches that it is possible to live for God in the darkest circumstances. Boaz was loyal to God while surrounded by immorality and idolatry. Materially and socially speaking, Ruth had everything to lose and nothing to gain by casting her lot with the people of God. Yet she chose Yahweh. Although God’s grace is free and open to all, it can save only those who make it theirs by an act of deliberate choice.

## ENDNOTES

1. C.J. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Bible Student’s Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 5f. Passages indicating compliance with Mosaic instruction: 8:31; 11:15,20,23; 13:8,15,32,33; 20:2.

2. J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), I, 237.

3. These other passages have been nominated as the key texts in the Book of Joshua: 1:5-9; 23:3b-11; 24:14-15.

4. A.E. Cundall considers Judg 1:1a to be the title for the whole book. He assigns the events of 1:1b-2:6 to the lifetime of Joshua. A.E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968), p. 51.

5. K.A. Kitchen cited by M. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 10.

6. Irving Jensen, *Jensen’s Survey of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), p. 152.

7. Baxter, *Explore*, II, 9.

8. The five parts of the literary framework of the Book of Judges are: (1) the assessment of evil (“*Israel did evil*”); (2) the assertion of judgment (Yah-

weh “sold” or “delivered” them into the hand of an enemy, or “strengthened” an enemy against them); (3) the appeal for intervention (“Israel cried unto Yahweh”); (4) the announcement of action (“Yahweh raised up a deliverer” or “subdued” the enemy); (5) the analysis of results (“the land had rest”).

**9.** Dale Ralph Davis questions whether Israel’s cry implies repentance. His study of the uses of the Hebrew *za’aq* led him to conclude that the word by itself does not connote repentance. See *Such a Great Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), pp. 49f.

**10.** J. Lawrence Eason, *The New Bible Survey* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), p. 128.

**11.** The other four books of the *Megilloth* and their place in the annual cycle of religious observances were Song of Solomon (Passover), Lamentations (Ninth of Ab), Ecclesiastes (Tabernacles) and Esther (Purim).

**12.** Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Rev. ed.; Chicago: Moody, 1985), p. 287.

**13.** Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, p. 318.

**14.** Ruth is one of four women listed in Matthew’s genealogy of Christ (Matt 1:1-16). The other three—Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba—are associated with unworthy conduct. Ruth’s life is without blemish, unless it be that she was a Gentile by birth and once gave allegiance to pagan gods.

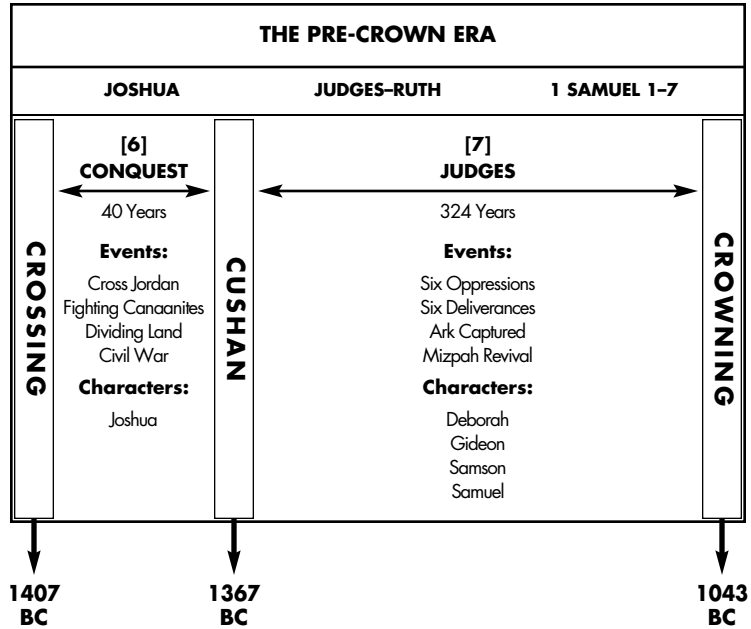
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Chart No. 7



## CHAPTER THREE

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### Preparing for Victory Joshua 1:1-5:12

As the Book of Joshua opens, the people of Israel are poised to push into Cis-jordan, the heart of the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The plan of God revealed by Moses required the armies of Israel to cross the Jordan and dislodge those who were occupying the territory which was Israel's by divine decree. That would not be an easy task. Canaanite cities were well fortified; their armies were well equipped. In theory at least Canaan at this period was under Egyptian hegemony. The Pharaoh's assistance to his vassal clients was always a possibility. Even with his limited military experience Joshua must have realized that, humanly speaking, his forces faced incredible odds against success beyond the Jordan.

The opening chapters of Joshua focus on the preparations which were ordered before the commencement of the campaign. Four types of preparation are in evidence here: (1) hortatory, (2) military, (3) logistical, and (4) spiritual.

**HORTATORY PREPARATION**  
**Joshua 1:1-18**

The Book of Joshua opens and closes with exhortation. The first chapter consists of three hortatory utterances: (1) Yahweh to Joshua, (2) Joshua to the tribes, and (3) the people to Joshua.

**A. Yahweh to Joshua (Josh 1:1-9).**

At about the age of ninety Joshua must have been filled with apprehension about succeeding Moses. The very fact that God would speak directly to him (1:1) was of itself a significant encouragement to this aging man of God. Previously the Lord had spoken only to Moses, “*the servant of Yahweh.*”<sup>1</sup> Joshua had been only Moses’ servant, a position of honor and apprenticeship (cf. Num 27:15-23; Deut 1:38; 3:21f.), but nonetheless a secondary position. Now Joshua would be the intermediary for divine revelation to Israel. That God broke the silence was the first of several steps taken by the Lord to bolster the confidence of Joshua and to magnify him in the eyes of the people. In his message the Lord first brought encouragement and then he offered exhortation to Joshua.

**Chart No. 8**

THE LIFE OF JOSHUA					
IN EGYPT	IN THE DESERT	IN CANAAN	A WARRIOR	AN ADMINSTRATOR	AN ORATOR
			3 Great Campaigns	Land Division	2 Great Speeches
A SLAVE	A SERVANT	A SPY	chs. 1-12	chs. 13-22	chs. 23-24
PREPARATION c. 90 Years			↓ Death of Moses 1407 BC	LEADERSHIP c. 20 Years	

1. *The encouragement (1:2-5).* The encouragement took several forms. First, Yahweh assured Joshua that the plan to conquer Canaan had not been altered by the death of Moses. Joshua and the people were to arise and pass over Jordan (1:2a). Earlier the Lord had told Joshua that he would lead Israel into the Promised Land (Deut 31:7,23). Now he was being encouraged to assume that leadership role. Second, Yahweh reassured Joshua that he was about to give them (a participle implying imminent action) the land (1:2a).<sup>2</sup>

In the third and fourth words of encouragement God is addressing the entire nation through Joshua. This is indicated by the switch from the singular to the plural second person pronoun in the Hebrew. The Lord declared that he had already given (perfect form of the verb) every place within that territory where they would have the faith to tread (1:3). The gift would be in proportion to the faith which they exercised in marching through the land. God always rewards courageous faith!

To magnify the promise just made, the Lord gave a verbal sketch of the broad contours of the territory he intended to give Israel (1:4).<sup>3</sup> Their territory would stretch from the wilderness<sup>4</sup> to the Lebanon mountains and Euphrates river in the north, and from the territory they already occupied in the east to the Great (Mediterranean) Sea in the west. The Lord specifically indicates that “*all the land of the Hittites*” would be theirs. The Hittites had in recent years been an international power which controlled territory in Syria and northern Palestine.<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, God assured Joshua—the pronoun now reverts to singular—that, though Israel would face resistance, anyone who would try to defend the land would not be able to stand before him (1:5).<sup>6</sup> Sixth, the Lord repeated what Moses had already told Joshua (cf. Deut 31:8), that he could count on the same divine assistance which Moses had received during his tenure as leader. With his own eyes Joshua had seen the supernatural intervention with which the Lord had come to the aid of Moses in crisis after crisis.

2. *The exhortation (1:6-9).* The promises just made to Joshua were conditional. Joshua was commanded three times to “*be strong and courageous.*”<sup>7</sup> He must manifest a fearless confidence in God’s ability to fulfill what he had sworn to do for his people.<sup>8</sup> Joshua must

believe that he would lead his people to “*inherit*”<sup>9</sup> their land (1:6). If he would enjoy success in his work he must manifest that same fearless confidence in executing exactly what Moses had commanded in the Law regarding the Conquest. Joshua’s “*way*”—his life and leadership—would be prosperous if he was careful to obey the stipulations of God’s word (1:7-8). Finally, God commanded fearless confidence because that is the only appropriate disposition for one who has God as a traveling companion (1:9). Fear and anxiety are tantamount to unbelief.

### **B. Joshua to the Tribes (Josh 1:10-15).**

Bolstered by the encouraging revelation from the Lord, Joshua immediately began to exercise his authority over the people. He spoke first to the officers, and then to the eastern tribes.

*1. Commandment to the officers (1:10-11).* A chain of command within Israel was recognized. The tribal officers<sup>10</sup> were to pass on to the people a command, an explanation and a promise. The command was to “prepare provisions” (NASB), i.e., to gather up all supplies they might need to sustain them until they were established in Canaan.<sup>11</sup> The explanation for the command was that within three days they would be crossing over Jordan to possess their inheritance. The promise was that God would give them that land as their own possession.

*2. Conversation with the eastern tribes (1:12-15).* Joshua immediately sought out the leaders of the two and a half tribes which were intending to settle in Transjordan. He reminded them that Moses had already given them their rest—their inheritance (cf. Num 32:16-32). That gift, however, had been made conditionally. The Reubenites, Gadites and half tribe of Manasseh were to leave their families in Transjordan and lead the way across the Jordan “in battle array” (NASB) or “fully armed” (NIV).<sup>12</sup> They were to help their brothers until they had been given rest, i.e., the cessation of hostilities, and had possessed their inheritance. Joshua understood that in the wars of the Lord God’s people must be united. The issue which Joshua explored with these tribes was that of leadership. Would they honor their word to Moses? Would they recognize Joshua as Moses’ legitimate successor?

**C. The People to Joshua (Josh 1:16-18).**

The leaders of the eastern tribes immediately recognized the authority of Joshua. *"All that you have commanded us we will do."* They would leave their families behind and march together with their brothers until the victory was achieved. They were willing to go wherever Joshua might wish to send them. The eastern tribes would render to Joshua the same cheerful obedience which they had given to his predecessor. Furthermore, they would regard as treason any rebellion against the authority of Joshua. The death penalty would be executed against any who refused to obey the voice of the new leader (cf. Deut 17:12).

The speech of the Transjordan leaders contains provisos which are certainly wishes and may be prayers. Both are introduced by the word *"only."* First, they expressed the hope (condition?) that God would be with Joshua as he had been with Moses. These men realized that divine intervention would be necessary if the campaign in Canaan was to be successful. Second, the easterners prayed that Joshua might *"be strong and courageous."*<sup>13</sup> They knew that without courageous leadership the mission would fail.

**MILITARY PREPARATION****Joshua 2:1-24**

Jericho was the first objective beyond the river. Joshua needed to know what he was up against there. Perhaps he anticipated receiving information which would bolster troop morale on the eve of the river crossing. In any case, the dispatching of the two spies is evidence of Joshua's foresight as a general.

**A. The Mission of the Spies (Josh 2:1-7).**

Joshua secretly dispatched two men from Shittim<sup>14</sup> to spy out Canaan, especially Jericho. Why secretly? Did he not wish his own people to know what he had done? Did he think that such a move might imply that his faith was not strong? Or was the stealth necessary to avoid Canaanite patrols on the western bank of the Jordan? The text offers no clue. Nor does the account describe what must have been a harrowing adventure for these two men in crossing that rampaging, flood-swollen river (2:1).

The spies proceeded immediately to Jericho. They found lodging in the house of a harlot<sup>15</sup> named Rahab. Perhaps they chose this house of ill repute because they thought that fewer questions might be asked of them there. Even so, the men were quickly spotted, recognized as Israelites, and reported to the king of the city. Messengers were sent to Rahab ordering her to bring out the men who had entered her house. If Rahab was a sacred prostitute connected with one of the temples of the city that might explain why the authorities did not simply barge into the house and seize the strangers (2:2-3).

Rahab was not too sure that the sanctuary of her house would be respected by the king's men. She took the precaution of hiding her guests among stalks of flax on the flat roof of her house. As it turned out, this was unnecessary. Rahab was able to convince the soldiers that the strangers had indeed come, but they had left about sundown when the city gate was closed. She feigned concern that the soldiers pursue immediately after these men so that they might overtake them (2:4-6).

The soldiers followed the woman's advice. They searched every road leading to the Jordan. Though a sizable search party must have been sent out of the city, precautions were taken to shut the gate after their departure. Fear gripped the city that the Israelites might launch a surprise attack even during the night (2:7).

### **B. The Covenant of the Spies (Josh 2:8-21).**

After the soldiers left, Rahab went immediately to the roof to converse with her two guests. At the door of her home she had taken a stand. She had renounced her country and its gods. Now she enthusiastically embraced Yahweh as "*God in heaven above and earth beneath.*" She confessed her faith in the program of God: "*I know that Yahweh has given you the land.*" Her conviction grew out of personal observation and prior testimony. Rahab had personally observed that the Canaanites already had lost their land because they were too terrified to offer effective resistance.<sup>16</sup> This fear grew because of reports of what Yahweh had done for Israel over the past forty years. Through traveling merchants the Canaanites knew of the crossing of the Red Sea on dry land. Within the past few months fugitives from the Amorite kingdoms of Sihon and Og had reported how



Israel had put their nations under the curse (*cherem*) of total destruction. These reports led to two results: fear and faith. For most Canaanites it was only fear; for Rahab, both fear and faith (2:8-10).

Rahab not only believed in the power of Yahweh, she must have also believed in his mercy. For this reason she pled with the spies to enter into a covenant with her that she and her household might be spared in the day of attack. On condition that she tell no one about their mission the two spies pledged on their lives that Israel would deal “*in covenant loyalty and faithfulness*,” i.e., they would honor the covenant with Rahab (2:12-14).

In the overcrowded city of Jericho Rahab’s house had been built upon the wall. When the men descended by rope from the window of her house they would be outside the walls. Rahab urged the men to head west toward the nearby mountains which are honeycombed with caves. If they waited there for three days it would be safe for them to return to their camp east of Jordan (2:15-16).

Before leaving the scene the spies underscored again the conditions of the oath which they had just made to spare Rahab and her house. The oath would not be binding if these conditions were not met. First, she would need to tie “*this cord*”—apparently the rope upon which they had descended—in her window. This rope was made of bright scarlet thread woven together; it would be easily recognizable in the day of battle. (At this point the men assumed Jericho would fall by battle). Second, she would be responsible for gathering her family into the designated house. The spies would not guarantee the safety of anyone outside the house. Third, they underscored again the necessity of absolute secrecy. Rahab agreed to those conditions. She put the scarlet cord in her window apparently that very night (2:17-21).

### **C. The Report of the Spies (Josh 2:22-24).**

The spies disappeared into the night. They followed the advice of Rahab and headed for the hills, exactly the opposite direction of that which the pursuers assumed they had taken. There they hid for three days. Then they returned to camp by the route they had come. They reported to Joshua that the Canaanites had melted away in fear before Israel. Their conclusion was “*Surely Yahweh has given all*

*the land into our hands.*” This is now the fifth utterance of this glorious truth. The Lord said it to Joshua (1:2,3), Joshua said it to the officers and the Transjordan tribes (1:11,15), Rahab said it to the spies (2:9) and now the spies say these words to Joshua.

## **LOGISTICAL PREPARATION**

### **Joshua 3:1-4:18**

Before undertaking the Conquest one formidable challenge had to be met. The Jordan river, never easy to cross, was in flood (3:5). Though two robust spies had navigated that river, now an army of thousands, not to mention women, children and livestock, would have to cross.

#### **A. Approaching Jordan (Josh 3:1).**

After three days of breaking camp (1:11), Joshua led the Israelites to a position closer to the Jordan. No hint had yet been given as to how they would be able to negotiate that raging river. In miles the distance from Shittim east of Jordan to Gilgal on the western bank was not more than six miles. Those miles, however, were potentially the most difficult and terrifying traveled thus far by Israel. Yet if there was to be a Conquest at all, Joshua had to reposition his forces in a staging area west of the river. For three days they awaited further instructions.

#### **B. Further Instructions (Josh 3:2-13).**

After three days the plan for crossing Jordan began to take shape. Instructions were passed from the Lord to Joshua, and from Joshua and the officers to the people.

1. *Instructions of the officers (3:2-4).* The plan was for the people to follow the ark of the covenant as it was carried by the Levitical priests.<sup>17</sup> Because of the vast number of people, the ark would be 2000 cubits (3000 feet or over half a mile) in front of the group. That way every Israelite would know that Yahweh was leading them forward. The rationale for letting the Lord lead is as valid for the believer today as for the Israelites then: “*You have not passed this way before.*” The officers mentioned nothing of a miraculous crossing on

dry land. That, apparently, had not yet been revealed. They simply were trusting God to provide a way through an impassable barrier.

2. *Initial instructions of Joshua (3:5-6).* Joshua addressed first the people and then the priests. He urged the people to “consecrate” themselves. He challenged them to believe that on the morrow they would see Yahweh “do wonders”<sup>18</sup> among them. He did not state, however, what those wonders would be. Perhaps his words would bring to their mind what had happened at the Red Sea some forty years earlier.

Joshua then spoke to the priests, directing them to take up the ark and move forward ahead of the people. They immediately obeyed. What great faith was being demonstrated by these men of God! God’s people can only do the impossible when the leaders of the faith are willing to be out in front.

3. *Instructions of the Lord (3:7-8).* Yahweh revealed a bit more of the plan to Joshua. He was first assured that the events of that day would exalt him in the eyes of his people. They would realize that Joshua enjoyed the divine blessing upon his work as much as Moses had before. What God had promised in his commission (1:5,9) would now be fulfilled. The great miracle would be initiated by the courage of the priests. Joshua was to command those men to wade out into the the river and stand there. The Lord needed to say no more. Joshua got the picture. He hastened to pass his vision on to the people.

4. *Final instructions by Joshua (3:9-13).* Joshua introduced his final precrossing directive to the people as “the words of Yahweh.” This suggests that Joshua received more direct information from the Lord than has been recorded in the text in 3:7-8. The miracle of the crossing would lead to experiential knowledge of two key propositions of faith. First, what happened at the river would prove that the “living God” was among his people. Second, the river crossing would be a pledge that all the “ites”—the seven ethnic groups which occupied Canaan—would be dispossessed by the invading Israelites (3:9-10).

Joshua pointed out that the ark was already moving forward. He ordered that one man from each of the twelve tribes be designated. Presumably they were to follow the priests into the river. Joshua then indicated that at the moment those priestly feet entered the river, the

Jordan would stop flowing south (3:11-13). That Joshua was able to *predict* the miracle adds to the wonder of the event. God may have used natural means to produce the path across the river, but the timing of that action requires that the event be regarded as thoroughly supernatural.

### **C. Crossing Jordan (Josh 3:14-17).**

The remaining verses in typical Hebrew style relate in detail how the predictions of Joshua came to pass. When the priests carrying the ark dipped their feet into the river, the flow of water was cut off “*a great distance away at Adam.*” The priests stood on dry ground in the middle of the river bed while all the people passed over on dry ground.

### **D. Commemorating the Crossing (Josh 4:1-9).**

After the crossing, Yahweh spoke directly to Joshua for the third time. The function of the twelve men previously designated (3:12) was now indicated. These men were to pick up twelve stones from the place where the priests had stood in the midst of the riverbed. They were to carry these stones to the lodging place on the western bank and erect them as a monument. Those stones would be a “*sign*” or monument to provoke inquiries from future generations. Adults would be able to rehearse in the ears of the children the wondrous act of covenant faithfulness which God had performed for them through his ark (4:1-8).

Joshua himself erected a twelve-stone monument in the riverbed where the feet of the priests had stood. Those stones still protruded above the waters of the river at the time the Book of Joshua was written, about twenty years later (4:9).

### **E. Conclusion of the Crossing (Josh 4:10-18).**

The conclusion of the crossing account stresses the obedience of all those who participated. Joshua had faithfully carried out all that the Lord had spoken to him in the past through Moses and more recently in direct communication. The priests had also done exactly as Joshua had commanded them. The people cooperated by hurrying across the dry riverbed (4:10).

When the crossing ended, the ark of God again moved to the lead position in the march formation.<sup>19</sup> The Transjordan contingent—forty thousand strong<sup>20</sup>—followed the ark. Again the emphasis is on the obedience of these warriors to the instruction which Moses had given them (4:11-13).

Yahweh honored his own word that day. He had promised to exalt Joshua in the eyes of the people. That is exactly what he did. The people came to revere Joshua all the days of his life just as they had revered his predecessor (4:14).

The description of the ark's departure out of the Jordan is every bit as dramatic as that of the ark's approach to the river. The priests left the riverbed at Joshua's command which was issued in obedience to the directive of the Lord.<sup>21</sup> As soon as their feet touched the western bank a raging wall of water came down the riverbed. The water again overflowed its banks as before. The timing of the return of the waters was just as much a miracle as the crossing had been a few hours before (4:15-18).

## **SPIRITUAL PREPARATION**

### **Joshua 4:19-5:12**

After crossing the river the people camped at Gilgal (location uncertain). The event is so important that the date was long remembered. Israel camped in Canaan for the first time on the tenth day of the first month in the forty-first year after leaving Egypt (4:19). While encamped there the children of Israel made spiritual preparation for the long struggle to follow.

#### **A. Covenant Faithfulness Recalled (Josh 4:19-5:1).**

Under Joshua's direction the twelve stones taken from the midst of the Jordan were set up in Gilgal. The establishment of this memorial was accompanied by a brief speech by Joshua. As he had previously indicated (4:6f.), those stones were to have a pedagogical purpose. Children over the years would be inclined to ask what those twelve huge boulders, obviously stacked by human hands, meant. Adults would then be able to recount the glorious story of the crossing. The crossing of the Jordan is linked by Joshua to the crossing of the Red Sea. Both

miracles were designed to teach all peoples that Yahweh is indeed mighty. At the same time, both miracles were designed to underscore God's special relationship with Israel. Such mighty acts should have made Israel reverence Yahweh their God forever (4:19-24).<sup>22</sup>

Rahab had alluded to the Red Sea crossing and the effect of that miracle on the peoples in Canaan who had heard about it. The author now indicates the effect of the Jordan crossing upon those same people. Not just the common people, but even the kings of the region melted in fear at the news that Israel had transversed the Jordan on dry ground. The kings knew that they would now be compelled to face the armies of the Living God, the God of heaven and earth (5:1).

### **B. Covenant Sign Renewed (Josh 5:2-9).**

In the fourth direct divine communication with Joshua, the Lord ordered a renewal of the rite of circumcision. This very basic covenant rite (Gen 17:11) had been suspended during the years of desert punishment, but for what reason is a matter of conjecture. In any case, Joshua was ordered to make flint knives<sup>23</sup> and circumcise that second generation of Israelites who had never received the sign of the Abrahamic covenant in their flesh. The place where the surgery was performed was called Gibeath-haaraloth, the hill of the foreskins. The men were forced to remain in camp until all were healed (5:2-8).

A declaration of the Lord to Joshua—the sixth divine communication to him—provided the name for that first camping spot. Now that Israel had been brought into the land flowing with milk and honey, and through circumcision had recommitted themselves to the covenant of the fathers, “*the reproach of Egypt*” had been rolled away. The Egyptians had heaped ridicule on the people of God with their dreams of a homeland. This was especially the case when the Israelites had been forced to wander so many years in the desert. Merchants and desert nomads kept the Egyptians informed of the whereabouts of this nation of former slaves. While Israel wandered in circles in the desert they must have been the butt of many a joke in Egypt. But no more. The God who had brought them out of Egypt had now brought them into Canaan. So they called that first camping spot Gilgal, “*rolling*,” to commemorate the fact that God had rolled away their reproach (5:9).

**C. Covenant Meal Revived (Josh 5:10-12).**

The first Passover was observed in Egypt the night of the death plague against the firstborn of the land. The second Passover was observed while Israel was camped at Mt. Sinai. So far as the record goes, the third observance of this great festival took place at Gilgal. Henceforth the Passover celebration would not only commemorate the “going out” (Exodus), it would also commemorate the “entering in.”

Like circumcision, Passover seems to have been suspended during the period of wilderness wandering. In fact, no uncircumcised person was permitted to participate in the Passover ritual (Exod 12:48). Therefore, as the years of wandering progressed, an ever increasing percentage of Israelites would have been disqualified from observing the feast. Now that barrier had been removed. On the fourteenth day of Nisan, four days after the circumcision (cf. 4:19), the nation observed the first of thousands of Passovers in the Promised Land. Most of the males were still quite sore from the surgery which had been performed upon them. Nonetheless, the celebration must have been joyous indeed (5:10).

A special feature of this Passover was the eating for the first time of the “*produce of the land.*” They ate “*parched grain*” along with the unleavened bread which was normally eaten at Passover. Once they were able to feed upon the fruits of Canaan, God no longer miraculously provided for them the manna which he had supplied over the past forty years (5:11-12).

In preparing for victory God’s people had to overcome four great obstacles: (1) the death of Moses (ch. 1); (2) the morale of the troops (ch. 2); (3) the raging waters of Jordan (chs. 3-4); and (4) the spiritual condition of the people (ch. 5). The first obstacle was surmounted by words of encouragement and exhortation; the second, by information derived from reconnaissance; the third, by dramatic manifestation of the power of God; and the fourth, by renewal of basic ceremonies which marked Israel as the special people of God.

## ENDNOTES

1. Moses is called “*the servant of the Lord*” in Deut 34:5 and frequently in the Book of Joshua. At the conclusion of his life Joshua was given this title (Josh 24:29). Others who were called “*the servant of the Lord*” were Abraham (Gen 26:24), David (1 Kgs 8:66) and even Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 25:9).

2. The theme of the “giving” of the land can be traced back to the Patriarchal narratives. See Gen 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 26:3-4. That which had been promised was about to be fulfilled (cf. 13:1).

3. In different language, but with the same geographical vista, the boundaries of the Promised Land are given in Gen 15:18; Deut 1:7; 11:24. Only during the days of David and Solomon did Israel control all the territory encompassed here.

4. “The wilderness” in Josh 1:4 is the desert of Zin or perhaps the desert of Paran lying south of Canaan (Num 13:3,21).

5. “Hittites” may be used in Josh 1:4 in a representative sense to embrace all those who lived within the territory broadly sketched out here. For centuries after the time of Joshua the region of Syria-Canaan was known as the “Hatti (Hittite) land” in the Near East.

6. The promise given to the entire nation in Deut 11:25 is now given to Joshua personally as the leader of that people.

7. In the Hebrew the terms “*be strong*” and “*be courageous*” are virtually synonymous.

8. God’s oath to the fathers concerning the land can be found in Gen 15:18; 24:7; Exod 32:13.

9. The verb inherit (*nachalah*) and the derived noun are important words in Joshua. They appear in 11:23; 14:13; 16:4; 17:6. Cf. also Deut 1:38; 12:10. The word argues for Israel’s legitimate claim to the land. The concept has been carried over into the New Testament to speak of kingdom blessings which are inherited by the believer (e.g., 1 Pet 1:4).

10. The Hebrew term translated “*officers*” (NASB; NIV) literally means “literate men” or “scribes.” The same term is used in Josh 3:2; 8:33; 23:2. These men were probably civil servants rather than military men.

11. The “*provisions*” would not include the manna, which could not be stored from day to day. Deut 2:6 suggests that Israel was able to secure other provisions now that they were out of the desert.

12. The Hebrew term *hamushim* literally means “a fivefold arrangement of army troops.”

13. Joshua was hearing the exhortation “*be strong and courageous*” for the fifth time. Previously he had heard these words from Moses (Deut 31:6) and three times from the Lord (Josh 1:6,7,9).

14. Shittim is probably the same as Abel-shittim (Num 33:49). Here Israel sinned with Baal of Peor (Num 25:1-3). “Shittim” means “acacia trees.” The site is uncertain.



**15.** Rahab is called a *zonah*. Heb 11:31 and Jas 2:25 confirm that she was a harlot or prostitute. Josephus and the Jewish Targums call her an “innkeeper.”

**16.** Rahab’s words confirm the fulfillment of one of the Exodus promises, namely, that God would put his terror in the hearts of those who inhabited the Promised Land. See Exod 15:14ff.; 23:27.

**17.** Literally, “*the priests, the Levites*.” Normally the Levites of the clan of Kohath carried the ark. On special occasions, however, the priests carried the ark. See e.g., Deut 31:9; 1 Kgs 8:3,6. They are called Levitical priests, not to distinguish them from other priests (Woudstra) but to underscore the signal honor bestowed upon their tribe through its priestly members in leading the procession into the Promised Land.

**18.** Hebrew *niphla’oth*. Literally, “things to be astounded at.”

**19.** Another understanding of the expression *liphne ha ‘am* is “*before the eyes of the people*,” i.e., while they were watching from the western bank.

**20.** The forty thousand from the Transjordan tribes constitutes less than forty percent of the men of war of these tribes counted in the census taken a few weeks before by Moses (Num 26).

**21.** Josh 4:15f. is the fourth direct revelation to Joshua. The ark is here called “*the ark of the testimony*” because the ark contained the testimony (Exod 31:18), i.e., the tablets containing the ten commandments.

**22.** “*Fearing Yahweh*” includes all that is involved in Old Testament religion. The expression conveys the recognition of God’s glory and loving obedience to his commandments.

**23.** *Flint* knives may have been used to convey the thought of the antiquity of the ceremony as dating to a time before the use of metal was common.



## CHAPTER FOUR

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### Engaging the Foe Joshua 5:13-9:27

In the initial engagements of the Canaan campaign the Israelites encountered three very different types of enemies. At Jericho the enemy was holed up within their fortifications. At Ai the enemy was more bold, venturing beyond their walls to attack the Israelites. The Hivites who dwelled in Gibeon resorted to trickery to avoid a military confrontation with Israel.

#### **FAITH INSTRUCTED** **Joshua 5:13-6:5**

A parenthetical note (6:1) makes clear the condition of the first enemy which Israel faced. The city gates were tightly shut. No one was entering and leaving the city. Israel was unskilled in siege warfare. The situation was hopeless from a military standpoint.

Thus far the author has indicated six occasions when Yahweh spoke directly to Joshua. The seventh divine communication came in

a theophany—a visible manifestation of God. The captain of Yahweh's host revealed to Joshua the battle plan for the first campaign in Canaan.

### **A. The Encounter (Josh 5:13-15).**

Joshua had assumed even before the river crossing that Jericho would be the first objective in Canaan. From a distance he reconnoitered the city and contemplated what strategies might give Israel access to those walls with the least amount of casualties. Joshua thought he was alone with his thoughts. As he lifted up his eyes, however, he was shocked to see “a man” standing before him with a drawn sword, i.e., ready for combat. The scene was full of ambiguity. Joshua drew near with a question: “*Are you for us or for our adversaries?*” (5:13).

The stranger responded that he was not a mere soldier fighting on either side. Rather he was the commander of the host of Yahweh.<sup>1</sup> Joshua immediately bowed to the ground in respect to this one who was his military superior. He indicated that he was prepared to receive any orders which the captain might have for him. The captain let Joshua know that mere respect such as one officer might have for a superior was not sufficient. He, like Moses at the burning bush, was standing on holy ground. He needed to remove his sandals. This was a symbol of the removal of impurity and a token of respect for the holy presence of God. Joshua immediately complied (5:14-15).

Clearly a superhuman presence is depicted here. This person was undoubtedly the same as the angel of the Lord who appeared at various points in Patriarchal history,<sup>2</sup> a visible manifestation of God's presence. The drawn sword conveyed the thought that God himself would fight for Israel.

### **B. The Plan (Josh 6:1-5).**

In the person of the captain of Yahweh's host the Lord assured Joshua that “*I have given Jericho into your hands.*” The king of the city and all his valiant warriors would fall into Joshua's hands. Chapter 6 of the Book of Joshua celebrates the most outstanding instance of God's “giving” of the land to Israel.<sup>3</sup> God always has a better plan. The fall of Jericho would be an act of faith (Heb 11:30) as well as an

act of God. What a relief those words must have been to Joshua (6:2).

The plan was simple. The Israelite army was to march around the walls of Jericho every day for six days. Seven priests carrying ram's horn trumpets were to escort the ark in that procession. On the seventh day the Israelite troops were to march seven times around the walls. The number seven is obviously symbolical, recalling God's works of creation.<sup>4</sup> Then the priests were to blow their trumpets, and the people were to shout with a great shout. At that moment, God promised, the walls would "*fall down flat*." At whatever point in the procession an Israelite soldier might find himself, he would be able to move straight ahead into the city. The protective walls of Jericho would virtually melt away (6:3-5).

## **FAITH TRIUMPHANT**

### **Joshua 6:6-7:1**

The Hebrew narrative skillfully employs repetition to underscore what the author considered important in the account. His style emphasizes the exact compliance with the directives of the captain of Yahweh's host.

#### **A. The Plan Presented (Josh 6:6-10).**

Joshua immediately passed on the instructions of the Lord. He first explained the role of the priests (6:6). He then told the people (6:7) about the march around the city. A unit dressed in full battle array would precede the ark. This may be a reference to the forty thousand Transjordan contingent of 4:13. The advanced guard was followed by the priests who marched "*before Yahweh*," i.e., the ark which symbolized Yahweh's presence. Another military contingent—the rear guard—would follow the ark. Apparently the strange plan for the conquest of Jericho was accepted without question. Both the people and the priests fulfilled their respective roles in the strategy (6:8-9). A final detail of the plan was that the procession was to march in silence. Not one word was to be spoken until Joshua gave the signal (6:10).

#### **B. The Plan Executed (Josh 6:11-15).**

Apparently on the same day the captain of Yahweh's host

appeared to Joshua, the Israelites began their march around the walls. Given the known size of ancient Jericho—about thirteen acres—a trip around the walls would have only taken about an hour. The text gives the impression that the first day’s march took place late in the day. When the ark—the emphasis on the ark should be noted—had made its trip around the walls the first day the soldiers returned to the camp at Gilgal where they spent the night (6:11).

The march was repeated on each of the next five days. On the seventh day the procession marched around the wall seven times as God had ordained (6:12-15).

Chart No. 9

VICTORIOUS FAITH: A COMPARISON		
Hebrews 11:30		Galatians 3:26,27
The walls of Jericho fell down	WHAT	You are all the children of God
by faith	How	by faith
after they had been compassed about seven days	WHEN	for as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ
TO SAY THAT WE ARE SAVED BY FAITH WITHOUT OBEDIENCE IN BAPTISM IS TO SAY THE WALLS OF JERICO WOULD HAVE FALLEN WITHOUT MARCHING		

C. The Ban Applied (Josh 6:16-25).

On the seventh circuit of the seventh day the priests gave a special blast on the trumpets. Joshua signaled for the shout of victory. Standing before those towering walls which as yet had shown no signs of weakening Joshua made a great proclamation of faith: “Yahweh has given you the city!” (6:16).

At this point the text records Joshua’s orders regarding the ban (*cherem*) which was to be placed on the city. He probably had given these orders to tribal officers earlier in the camp, but they are placed

here in the account because they were about to be executed. The concept of the ban was simple: everything within the city belonged to God either to be used in his worship or destroyed. In this case all metallic objects were to be considered holy, i.e., set apart for God, and therefore placed in the treasury of the Lord. No captives were to be taken. All human inhabitants and animals were to be slain.<sup>5</sup> To confiscate for private use anything within the city would bring a curse on the camp. The only exception to these general rules was Rahab. Since she had hidden the Israelite spies, Rahab and her family were to be spared (6:16-19).

When the trumpets blew and the people shouted with a great shout, the walls of Jericho “*fell down flat*,” i.e., crumbled before them. The Israelite soldiers surged forward and took the city, apparently with some resistance on the part of the inhabitants (cf. 24:11). Every living thing in the city was utterly destroyed with the edge of the sword. The exception was Rahab and her family (6:20-21).

Joshua assigned the task of protecting Rahab’s family to the two spies who had stayed in her home. Apparently one portion of the wall had been left standing, namely, the portion where Rahab’s house was located. The converted harlot and her relatives were brought out safely. Since they were Gentiles and inhabitants of a city under God’s curse they were ceremonially unclean (Lev 13:46; Deut 23:3). They were therefore compelled to live for a time outside the camp of Israel. After certain days, Rahab lived in the midst of Israel. Eventually she even married an Israelite man. She was still living in the midst of Israel at the time the Book of Joshua was written (6:22-25). Israel was a community of faith. Purely racial components never have defined “Israel.”<sup>6</sup>

### **D. Concluding Notes (Josh 6:26–7:1).**

Joshua made the children of Israel take an oath that Jericho would never be refortified.<sup>7</sup> Anyone who violated that oath would be cursed before Yahweh. In the process of trying to rebuild the walls and gates of the place the violator would lose his own sons in death (6:27).<sup>8</sup>

What happened at Jericho is a magnificent example of the divine assistance promised at the outset of the campaign. Because Yahweh was with him, the fame of Joshua spread throughout the region (6:27).

The account of the glorious triumph at Jericho is marked by one sour note. The terms of the ban were not strictly observed by everyone. Achan of the tribe of Judah took for his personal use some objects which were under the ban, and which therefore belonged to God. Although only one man was the offender, the entire people were viewed as having “*acted unfaithfully*.”<sup>9</sup> God considered Israel an organic unity. A sin by one brought guilt upon all. Achan’s sin caused the anger of the Lord to burn against the sons of Israel. Corporate guilt and individual responsibility go hand in hand in Joshua 7.<sup>10</sup> Thus the author prepares the reader for the account of the first setback experienced by Israel in their inheritance campaign (7:1).

### **FAITH FALTERING** **Joshua 7:2-26**

Following the great victory at Jericho, Joshua was determined to press his advantage. His strategy was to knife up into the mountains and dissect the land separating the powerful Canaanite forces in the northern part of the land from those in the south. Joshua soon learned that not all the enemy would cower within walled cities. He learned too that on the road to ultimate victory Israel would have to cope with setbacks.

#### **A. Defeat at Ai (Josh 7:2-5).**

Joshua determined that Ai would be the next objective of the campaign. Ai was a military outpost in the mountains which guarded the approach to the larger city of Bethel. Ai is said to have been near to Beth-aven (location uncertain).<sup>11</sup> Following the same strategy he had used at Jericho, Joshua dispatched some men to reconnoiter Ai. These men returned with the report that Ai was not heavily defended. Two or three thousand men should be sufficient to capture the place. The entire armed forces need not make the toilsome trip up into the mountains (7:2-3).

Joshua dispatched three thousand troops to attack Ai. The defenders launched a counterattack which caught the overconfident Israelites off guard. Joshua’s troops “*fled from before the men of Ai*.” Thirty-six Israelites died on the mountain slopes, the first to taste death in



the inheritance campaign. This setback rekindled fear in the hearts of the people of Israel. In their first attempt to take a city of Canaan by military means they had failed. God was not going to hand them Canaan on a silver platter. They would have to fight for their inheritance, and in the process of that fighting many would die (7:4-5).

### **B. Distress in the Camp (Josh 7:6-9).**

Joshua was distraught by this experience of defeat. He tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the covenant. Both he and the elders put dust on their heads as a symbol of mourning. The leaders remained prone before the ark until that evening (7:6).

Out of his despondency Joshua voiced a pathetic prayer. He began with the word “*Alas!*” by which he expressed deep pain and perplexity.” Second, Joshua requested light in the present darkness. “*Why did you, Lord, bring this people over the Jordan only to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites?*” How prone are believers in times of discouragement to blame God for life’s setbacks (7:7).

Third, Joshua actually expressed the wish that the entire nation had remained on the eastern side of Jordan. Fourth, he used narrative prayer to describe to God the tragedy which so concerned him: “*Israel has turned their backs before their enemies.*” The anticipated result of this would be that the inhabitants of Canaan would be emboldened by this news. They would surround and exterminate Israel at Gilgal. Finally, Joshua made an oblique request in the form of a question: “*Then what will you do for your great name?*” Yahweh’s reputation was linked with the people who worshiped him. If Israel disappeared, so would any reputation that Yahweh might have among the Gentiles. Thus Joshua was appealing for help. He was suggesting that helping Israel would be in God’s own self-interest (7:8-9).

### **C. Directions for Joshua (7:10-15).**

The Lord rebuked Joshua for lingering in this prayer of discouragement. He should have known when God did not aid his people at Ai that there must be sin in the camp. After all, Joshua had just warned Israel that if they violated the ban at Jericho they would bring trouble

to the camp (6:18). That was exactly what had happened. Israel had sinned in regard to the things which were put under the ban at Jericho. The contraband objects were still in the camp. Thus a curse rested upon the camp. Until those objects were destroyed God would no longer be with his people. The sons of Israel would continue to flee before their enemies (7:10-12).

So what must be done? First, God told Joshua to “*rise up*.” Prayer must never be a substitute for action! Second, he was to order the people to “*consecrate*” themselves. Third, he was to announce to the people what most would be horrified to hear: “*Things under the ban are in your midst*.” Fourth, he was to indicate the results of the presence of this forbidden material within the camp: “*You cannot stand before your enemies*.” Fifth, he was to outline a process by which the guilty party could be identified. Tribes, clans, families, households and finally individuals would “*come near*” presumably to the ark of the covenant. There by lot God would indicate where the guilt lay.<sup>12</sup> Sixth, he was to stipulate the punishment which would be heaped upon the guilty party. The violator and all which belonged to him would be burned (following execution by stoning) because of the magnitude of the sin committed. The guilty party had “*transgressed*” and had committed a “*shameful thing*” in Israel (7:13-15).

#### **D. Discovery of the Culprit (Josh 7:16-21).**

Early the next morning Joshua did exactly what God told him to do. In the lengthy process of finding the culprit first the tribe of Judah was taken, then the clan of the Zerahites, and finally the family of Zabdi. When Zabdi brought his family near the ark the lot fell on Achan (7:16-18). Why did not the Lord simply reveal the name of the trespasser to Joshua? Why this time-consuming identification process? Probably the intention was to give the guilty party opportunity to repent. By refusing to come forth earlier in the process Achan revealed his hardened and defiant heart.

Joshua pled with Achan to acknowledge his guilt. Though it was too late for forgiveness, his admission would at least bear witness to the omniscience of God in pointing him out. Now that the finger of accusation pointed straight at him, Achan admitted what he had done. He confessed to stealing from the contraband (1) a beautiful

garment from Shinar (Babylon), (2) two hundred shekels of silver (about 6.5 lbs.), and (3) a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels (about 1.1 lbs.). The irony of his sin is that he never received any benefit at all from that which he had stolen. In his own words, he *saw*, *coveted*, *took* and *concealed* that which he had taken in the soil beneath his tent (7:19-21).

### **E. Death to the Guilty (7:22-26).**

Messengers were dispatched immediately to the tent of Achan. There they found the contraband just where Achan had said. These items were brought to Joshua and the congregation. They were then “*poured out before Yahweh*” in acknowledgment that the Lord was the true owner. None of these items, however, could be placed in the treasury. The taint of Achan’s sin required their destruction (7:22-23).

Joshua and all Israel took Achan, the items he had stolen, and all his possessions and brought them to a valley which after this event was named Achor (“Trouble”). Before the execution Joshua pointed out the appropriateness of what was taking place. Achan had troubled Israel; now he was to be troubled. All Israel then stoned Achan and his children. The fact that the children (Achan seems to have been a widower) were also stoned suggests that they were accessories after the fact (if not actual accomplices) to the transgression. The bodies of the guilty were then burned along with all the possessions of the man (7:24-25).

A great heap of stones—the third thus far—was raised up over the charred carcass of Achan to bear witness through the years to the necessity of rendering unto God his due. Thus was the fierce anger of the Lord, which had come against Israel because of Achan’s transgression (7:1), now turned away (7:26).

## **FAITH REBOUNDED**

### **Joshua 8:1-29**

Once the camp had been purged, the time had come to get back on the victory trail. After the Ai debacle Joshua needed special encouragement if he was to continue in his mission. He would not dare have renewed the Conquest without an express word from the

Lord. In his ninth direct revelation to Joshua the Lord commanded his captain to take all the army and proceed to Ai. This directive contains an oblique rebuke to Joshua for having misjudged the enemy strength earlier. At the same time it was a reminder that the Conquest was to be a united effort of all the people. God promised that he would now give Ai into the hands of the Israelites (8:1).

The rules of engagement were a bit different. First, like Jericho, Ai was to be completely destroyed. All the inhabitants of the place were to be executed. Second, permission was granted for the spoils and livestock to be taken as plunder by the Israelites.<sup>13</sup> This was the standard procedure both before (Deut 2:34f.; 3:6f.) and after Jericho. Third, the Lord briefly revealed how Joshua was to organize the attack against Ai. The method of victory this time would be a military stratagem (8:2).

Joshua sent forth 30,000 valiant warriors by night to become part of an elaborate ambush at Ai. The plan was for the main body of troops to lure the soldiers out of Ai by feigning a rout. The ambushment would then seize the city and burn it.<sup>14</sup> Joshua assured the men that the strategy came from the Lord. If they followed that strategy they would be victorious over Ai. With these words of reassurance the thirty thousand immediately departed and assumed their position "*between Bethel and Ai*" on the west of Ai (8:3-9).

Joshua and the elders led the main body of troops to Ai early the next morning. He pitched camp on the north side of Ai in a valley. Joshua dispatched another five thousand men to serve as a rear guard still further to the west of where the ambushment had been deployed the previous night. These men were probably guarding against any attempted intervention from Bethel (8:10-13).

The strategy at Ai worked to perfection. The king of Ai saw Joshua and some of his men deployed in the valley. A sortie was sent forth to test the attackers. Then Joshua feigned a rout. The king of Ai ordered a total mobilization to pursue the Israelites. No one was left behind to guard Ai or Bethel.<sup>15</sup> At this point the Lord took direct control of the operation. He ordered Joshua to give the signal to begin the full attack on Ai. This tenth direct divine communication with Joshua concluded with the encouraging words "*I have given it into your hands*" (8:14-18).

When they saw Joshua raise his javelin, the ambushment arose, entered Ai, and set the town ablaze. This fire was probably intended as the signal for the retreating Israelite forces to turn and press the attack toward the city. When the men of Ai looked behind them they knew they were trapped “*in the midst of Israel*.” Every soldier of Ai was cut down. Only the king was spared and brought to Joshua. Once the field army was destroyed the troops returned to the burning city and put the rest of the inhabitants to the sword (8:19-24).

Twelve thousand inhabitants of Ai died that day, the entire population. The Israelites took the spoils of Ai as their own. Ai was left “*a heap*,” i.e., a total ruin. The king of Ai was killed (cf. 10:26) and then his corpse was impaled on a tree until evening. This disgrace demonstrated the curse of God upon those who resisted the movement of God’s people. The body of the king was then buried beneath a heap of stones in front of the gate of Ai (8:25-29). This is now the fourth heap of stones erected by Joshua during the Conquest.

### **FAITH RENEWED** **Joshua 8:30-35**

Now that resistance in central Canaan had been neutralized, Joshua was able to carry out a directive of Moses (Deut 11:29; 27:2-8). He led the tribes to the area of Shechem, right in the center of Canaan. At Mount Ebal he built an altar of uncut stones in order to avoid even the slightest hint of the “*graven images*” forbidden in the Ten Commandments. There they offered burnt offerings (symbolic of complete commitment) and peace offerings (symbolic of unbroken fellowship with God) before the Lord. On plaster covered stones (cf. Deut 27:1-8) Joshua wrote the law of Moses in the presence of the sons of Israel. How much of the law was written on the stones is not indicated (8:30-32).<sup>16</sup> This mound of stones—the fifth to be erected by the Israelites—proclaimed the sovereignty of Yahweh over the entire land.

Something else took place at the twin mounts. The new generation of Israelites formally accepted Yahweh as their king by accepting the terms of his law. Joshua positioned the tribes, half on Mount Ebal and half on Mount Gerizim just as Moses had commanded. The Levit-

ical priests who carried the ark of the covenant were positioned in the valley between the two mountains. Joshua read aloud the blessings and the curses of the law. The people responded by saying “Amen” (cf. Deut 27:11-26). All Israel, including women and children, recommitted themselves to observe the law of Moses (8:33-35).

The importance of the covenant renewal ceremony at the twin mounts cannot be overstated. The passage is a key for understanding the Book of Joshua. The main point is that possession of the land was granted those who voluntarily chose to place themselves under the authority of God as revealed in the Sinai covenant. The ceremony also served to formally recognize Joshua as Moses’ successor.<sup>17</sup>

### **FAITH ENDANGERED** **Joshua 9:1-27**

Among the inhabitants west of Jordan two reactions to Joshua’s initial successes manifested themselves. Most of the city states determined to band together to withstand the advance of the Israelites. The inhabitants of Gibeon,<sup>18</sup> however, “*acted craftily*.” They determined that they would try to trick the Israelites into a solemn nonaggression treaty (9:1-3).

The Gibeonite plan was simple. They sent envoys to Joshua who pretended to be from a distant land. These men were dressed in tattered clothing, they carried worn-out sacks and mended wineskins. Even their bread was dry and crumbled. From their home in the mountains these envoys traveled the nineteen miles to Gilgal to which Israel had returned after the covenant renewal ceremony at Mount Ebal (9:4-6).<sup>19</sup>

Though the Israelites suspected a ruse, the envoys nonetheless convinced them that they had come from a distant land. They claimed that the fame of Yahweh had caused them to seek out Joshua. They had heard of what the Lord had done for his people in Egypt and in Transjordan. They were too cunning to mention the more recent news of the fall of Jericho and Ai since news of these victories would not yet have reached a distant land. The elders<sup>20</sup> of Gibeon had dispatched these envoys with instructions to seek a peace treaty with Israel (9:7-13).<sup>21</sup>

Because they were suspicious, the men of Israel checked the provisions in the knapsacks of the travelers. Everything seemed to be as the envoys claimed. Therefore, the men of Israel “took some of their provisions” (NASB).<sup>22</sup> Here, however, the leaders of Israel were making a tragic mistake. They were trusting their senses. “*They did not ask counsel of Yahweh.*” Joshua made “peace” and a “covenant” with the Gibeonites. The leaders of Israel bound themselves to the covenant with a solemn oath (9:14-15).

Three days after the covenant had been negotiated, the Israelites discovered that these envoys were Hivites who came from a city within the territorial limits which Yahweh had assigned to Israel. The Israelites immediately marched toward Gibeon to demand an account. No doubt the Gibeonites met them at the border to remind them of the covenant and to point out that the terms of that covenant also applied to three neighboring villages under Gibeon’s jurisdiction. The advance troops refused to attack because of the oath which the leaders had taken. Though they honored the oath, the whole congregation grumbled against the leaders (9:16-18).<sup>23</sup>

The leaders explained to the people that an oath taken in the name of God could not be broken even if that oath had been negotiated under false pretenses. Israel would incur the wrath of God should they slay any of these Hivites. The terms of the covenant, however, did not prohibit other kinds of action against the Hivites. The plan was to subject the Hivites to rigorous and humiliating servitude (9:19-21).

Joshua summoned the Hivite leaders to report the decision to them. He first reproached the Hivites for their deception. He then announced that these people would be under a perpetual curse as slaves to Israel. The Hivites attempted to explain their actions. They had heard that Yahweh had commanded Moses to give the land of Canaan to Israel and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land. “*We feared greatly,*” the Hivites admitted. They seemed to be very grateful to accept whatever fate short of death that the Israelites might assign them (9:22-25).

So Joshua prevented the Hivites from being killed. He made them, however, lowly servants from that day forth. Their twofold task was to serve as hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation in

nonreligious activities, and for the worship center as well. Since the Lord had not yet indicated where his sanctuary would be, the text does not name the place where the Gibeonites would serve (9:26-27).

## ENDNOTES

1. Yahweh's army is composed angels (1 Kgs 22:19; Ps 103:20f.; 148:2). In other passages the term includes to the armies of Israel.

2. The Angel of the Lord appeared in Gen 16:7-14; 21:14-21. Later he appeared in Judg 2:1 and 6:12,22.

3. M.H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 108.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

5. Transjordan also had been placed under the *cherem* (Josh 2:10; Num 21:21-35; Deut 2:34; 3:4). The temporal *cherem* foreshadows the final judgment upon rebellious sinners at the end of days.

6. Woudstra, *Judges*, p. 116.

7. The curse does not apply to those who merely used the site of Jericho for habitation. See Josh 18:21; Judg 3:13; 2 Sam 10:5.

8. Exactly how the builder of the fortifications would lose the lives of his sons is not clear, whether by sacrificial rite on his own part or by divine action. In any case, 1 Kgs 16:34 reports the fulfillment of the curse.

9. The Hebrew *ma'al* literally means "to act under cover; to deal treacherously." It indicates a breach of trust (Lev 5:15), usually against the Lord.

10. Woudstra, *Judges*, pp. 120f.

11. Hosea and Amos use Beth-aven ("House of Nothingness") as a mocking name for Bethel (e.g., Hos 4:15). Here, however, Beth-aven is clearly distinguished from Bethel.

12. Just how the lot was cast in such situations is unknown. The suggestion has been made that white and black stones were used. A black stone drawn from the pouch would indicate guilt. Whatever the mechanics of the process, the lot was under the direction of God. This was but another means by which God revealed information to his people.

13. The ban was enforced more strictly because (1) this was the first Canaanite city to fall to Israel in the Promised Land; and (2) because the army of Israel played such a small role in the victory there.

14. The Hebrew uses two different verbs to distinguish this initial burning by the ambushment and the final burning of the city in 8:28. The first limited blaze was designed to signal the soldiers of Ai that their cause was now hopeless.

15. Either the defenders of Bethel had reinforced the garrison at Ai before the arrival of Joshua, or some communication system existed between the two sister towns. The Book of Joshua, which gives only an outline of the



Conquest struggles, does not mention the capture of Bethel. The king of Bethel, however, is named among those slain by Joshua (12:16).

**16.** The stones may have contained only the Ten Commandments. Others have suggested that they contained the blessings and curses from Deut 28.

**17.** This conclusion is based on what is known of ceremonies of covenant renewal in countries surrounding Israel. The best treatment of the present passage in the light of ancient Near Eastern custom is found in M.G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 36, 121ff.

**18.** While some still dispute the location of Gibeon, most scholars have settled on a site called el-Jib eight miles north and slightly west of Jerusalem. An imposing ancient water works has been found at this site. See *New Bible Dictionary* (2nd ed.; Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982), s.v. "Gibeon."

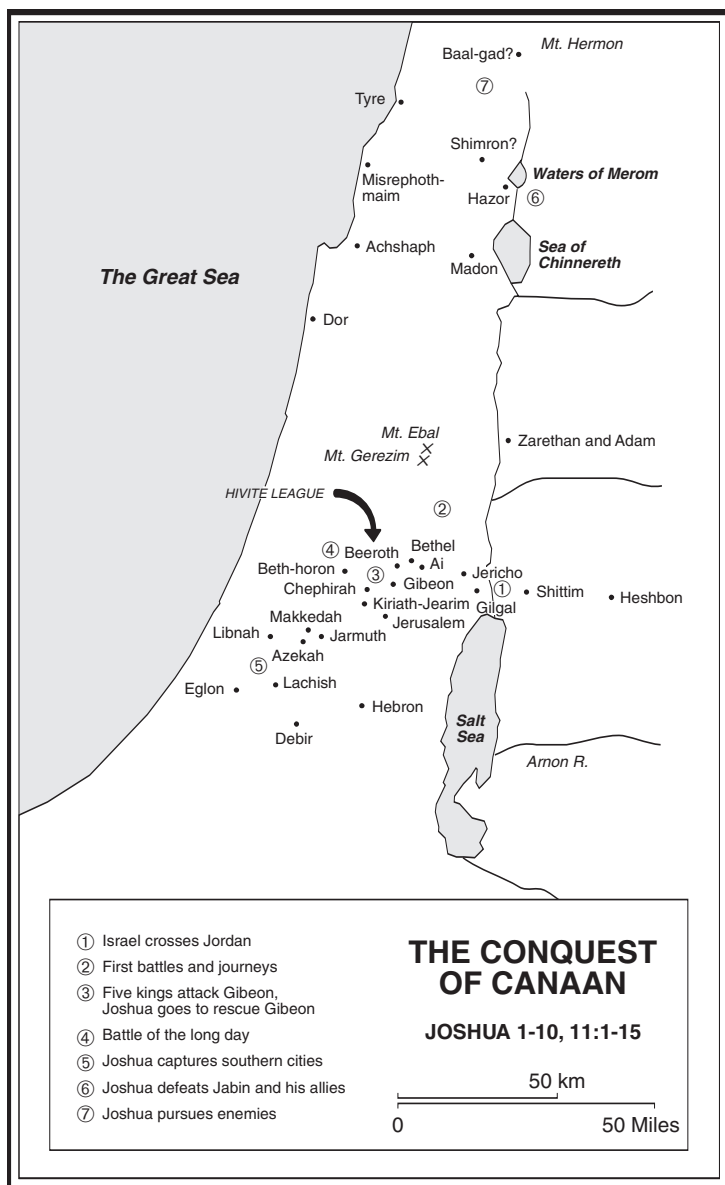
**19.** Some scholars think a different Gilgal, one in the region of Shechem, or Shiloh is intended. For a listing of the various Gilgals of the Book of Joshua, see *New Bible Dictionary*, s.v., "Gilgal."

**20.** Elders are mentioned at Gibeon, but no king. Perhaps Gibeon was under the jurisdiction of the king of Jerusalem. The other alternative would be that Gibeon's government differed from the other cities of the region.

**21.** The words "*we are your servants*" (9:8) were a formal expression of courtesy in the Near East, not an offer of subordination. C.J. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Bible Student's Commentary (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1986), p. 92.

**22.** The men of Israel took the provisions in order to inspect them. Another possibility is that they shared the provisions of the Gibeonites in a meal intended to seal the treaty which had just been made.

**23.** The verb used here (*lun*) is the same one used to describe the murmuring of Israel during the wilderness wandering. See e.g., Num 16:41 (Heb 3:17).



## Conquering the Land Joshua 10-12

With the conquest of Jericho and Ai and the capitulation of Gibeon Joshua was the master of central Canaan. The remaining city states of the area were resolved to band together to resist the Israelite invaders. Unfortunately, from their point of view, Joshua had driven a wedge through the midst of their territories. Nonetheless, two major coalitions did emerge, one in southern Canaan, the other in the north.

### **THE SOUTHERN CAMPAIGN** **Joshua 10:1-43**

Adoni-zedek king of Jerusalem was concerned about the destruction of Ai and the capitulation of Gibeon. Ai was a relatively small village. Gibeon, however, was “a great city.” Historians theorize that Gibeon was within the jurisdiction of the king of Jerusalem. Therefore Gibeon’s treaty with Israel would be a renunciation of its allegiance to Jerusalem.

**A. Attack against Gibeon (Josh 10:1-8).**

Adoni-zedek invited four other kings of the region to join him in an attack against Gibeon. By military pressure the coalition would punish Gibeon for having taken the part of the Israelites. So the five kings went up, camped against Gibeon and initiated the hostilities. This assault was the first serious effort on the part of the Canaanite kings to resist the invasion of the Israelites (10:1-5).

**Chart No. 10**

THE SOUTHERN COALITION Joshua 10			
KING	CITY	AMARNA LETTERS	LOCATION
Adoni-zedek	Jerusalem	yes	
Hoham	Hebron	no	19 miles SSE of Jerusalem
Piram	Jarmuth	yes	16 miles W of Jerusalem
Japhia	Lachish	yes	25 miles SW of Jerusalem
Debir	Eglon	yes	Near Lachish (?)

The Gibeonites reported this attack to Joshua. They requested immediate help against the hill country coalition. Probably the covenant which the Israelites had signed with the Gibeonites provided for such military support (10:6).

Joshua immediately mobilized his troops. He took not only the elite troops (“*valiant warriors*”) but all the rest of the army as well. In his eleventh direct communication to Joshua, Yahweh urged his general not to be afraid. He promised to deliver the enemy into the hand of Joshua. Not one of the enemy would be able to stand before the army of Israel (10:8).

**B. Victory by Israel (Josh 10:9-11).**

Joshua 10 clearly reveals again the principle which has appeared again and again in this book, namely, that God *gives*, and Israel *takes*.<sup>1</sup> The narrative alternates between the actions of Joshua’s army and the supernatural acts of God.

By means of a night march up steep terrain Joshua was able to position his troops for an attack upon the southern coalition. The forced march caught the enemy by surprise. The summary of the

great battle is first stated, and then the details are added. Four statements are made about the outcome. First, “*Yahweh confounded*” the enemy before Israel.<sup>2</sup> Whether the enemy was confounded by the surprise attack or by the hailstorm which followed is not clear. Second, Yahweh “*slew them*” with a great slaughter at Gibeon. Third, when the enemy fled via the road leading to Beth-horon,<sup>3</sup> Yahweh pursued them. The Canaanites fled in a westerly direction toward the coastal plain. The slopes above the road gave the Israelites excellent opportunity to continue to bombard the fleeing remnants of the enemy army. Finally, Yahweh continued to strike down the enemy as far south as Azekah and Makkedah (10:10).

Yahweh used a hailstorm to smite down the enemy troops as they tried to escape from the Gibeon area. The “*great stones*”<sup>4</sup> continued to fall upon them from the “*ascent of Beth-horon*” as far as Azekah. More died in the hailstorm than died by the sword of the Israelites (10:11).

### **C. Miracle in the Heavens (Josh 10:12-15).**

The narrator has established that the Lord fought for Israel in the battle of Beth-horon after the initial rout of the enemy at Gibeon. Next he explains how the divine intervention came about. “*Then Joshua spoke unto Yahweh,*” i.e., he prayed. When? After the hailstorm? Not necessarily. “*Then*” (‘az) in Hebrew does not necessarily imply sequence. It is an indefinite indication of time. The prayer *may* have come before the great hailstorm. In any case, the prayer was “*in the sight of Israel.*” Perhaps Joshua assumed some posture which the Israelites immediately associated with prayer. He must have uttered his words audibly with Israel as eyewitness (10:12a).

Joshua’s prayer was that the sun might “*stand still*” at Gibeon and the moon over the valley of Aijalon (10:12b). The verb used here (*damam*) literally means “to be still, dumb or silent.” Why did Joshua utter such a prayer? Three basic positions have been taken by the commentators. First, the oldest interpretation is that Joshua wished to prolong the sunlight so that the enemy might be completely destroyed before darkness provided an opportunity to escape. Second, some have suggested that Joshua was praying for relief from the heat of the day so that his troops could press the attack more effectively. Third,

others have proposed that Joshua wished to maintain the advantage of darkness as he attacked the enemy in the earliest part of the day. In the first and third views Joshua's objective was virtually to make time stand still.

The inspired writer next describes how Joshua's prayer was answered. The sun "*stood still*" (another form of the verb *damam*) and the moon "*stopped*" (*'amad*). The verbs could be understood to indicate that the heavenly bodies ceased in their motion or that they ceased in their function. Joshua 10:13 could be understood to declare that either the daylight or the darkness was prolonged. If the sun stopped, or appeared to stop, in its *motion*, then daylight would be prolonged. If the sun stopped in its *function*, then the darkness would be prolonged. In any case, this unusual day continued until "*the nation avenged themselves of their enemies*" (10:13).

In what he has reported thus far about the battle of Beth-horon the author of the Book of Joshua has been citing the Book of Jashar (lit., upright, just). Holy Spirit inspiration does not mandate originality, only accuracy and truthfulness. The Holy Spirit often guided biblical writers to cite resource material. The Book of Jashar is mentioned one other time in the Old Testament (2 Sam 1:18). It appears to have been a poetic composition describing the wars of Yahweh. The original Book of Jashar is not extant. It is not properly speaking "a lost book of the Bible." Had God intended for it to be part of the sacred collection, the book providentially would have been preserved. A spurious edition of the Book of Jashar is available, but it is worthless for any serious historical investigation (10:13).

Some commentators attempt to explain away the miracle of Joshua 10 as poetic exaggeration. The Israelites supposedly accomplished as much in one day as they would normally accomplish in two. This approach to the text is entirely unacceptable. Though it is true that Joshua's prayer is cited in poetic form, the sacred historian himself verifies that a miracle actually happened in the heavens in response to that prayer. "*The sun stopped [or ceased] in the midst of the sky.*" The sun "*did not hasten to go down [or come] for about a whole day.*" The report of what happened, like the prayer which called it forth, is ambiguous. The Hebrew verbs could just as easily be taken to refer to a prolonged night as to a prolonged day (10:13).

Whatever happened that day in the sky over Gibeon was a miracle wrought in answer to Joshua's prayer. Never before nor since had the Lord listened to the voice of a man to alter the normal routine of the heavenly bodies. By answering Joshua's prayer Yahweh "*fought for Israel*" (10:14). This phrase used in verse 14 in connection with the sun "*standing still*" recalls the language of verses 10-11 where the Lord caused great hailstones to fall on the enemy. When the Lord caused the sun to "*stand still*" he created the weather conditions which produced the hailstones of verses 10-11. A rapid cooling of moisture laden air is the natural cause of hail. Joshua's prayer was answered when God caused the sun to cease producing light. This may have been done by means of a cloud. The sudden change in temperature produced the hailstorm. Fleeing down the ascent of Beth-horon the Canaanites were pelted by the huge hailstones.

At the conclusion of the great victory over the armies of the southern coalition Joshua and his troops returned to the camp at Gilgal (10:15). To the western reader 10:15 seems out of place. It signals the end of the story whereas it is clear from what follows that another dramatic incident occurred on that same day. The verse serves to mark the conclusion of phase one of the conquest in the south, namely, the defeat of the enemy host. Now having related the striking defeat of the armies of the southern coalition, the author relates another incident which occurred later that same day—the capture and execution of the five kings.

#### **D. Execution of the Kings (Josh 10:16-21).**

During the flight from the battle of Beth-horon, the five kings had hidden themselves in "*the cave at Makkedah*." After an unspecified period of time, the Israelites found the kings. Their whereabouts was reported to Joshua. The general issued an order that the cave be sealed and guarded. The troops were to continue to press the remnants of the southern coalition. Every effort was to be made to prevent these Canaanites from returning to their cities (10:16-19).

How long the great campaign in the south lasted is not stated in the text. After the southern coalition was completely crushed and the few survivors had entered their cities, the Israelites returned to the camp which Joshua had established at Makkedah. No one dared

challenge Israel or even utter a negative word against them in view of the smashing success which they had experienced (10:20-21).

Joshua then ordered the cave of Makkedah opened and the five kings brought out. He ordered that the military officers who were with him on this campaign come near and put their feet upon the necks of the captive kings. This act symbolized what God would do to all the enemies of Israel. Therefore, Joshua urged his subordinates to “*be strong and courageous*” (10:22-25). These words had previously been spoken to Joshua by Moses, the Lord and the people (e.g., 1:6,18). Now he for the first time uses these words to encourage his subordinates.

The kings were then executed, and impaled on five “*trees*” until evening. One who hung on a tree was considered cursed of God (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13). In compliance with the law of Moses (Deut 21:23), before sunset Joshua ordered the corpses taken down. They were thrown in the cave in which earlier they had taken refuge. Huge stones were then placed over the entrance of the cave to serve as another stone monument, the sixth in the book (10:26-27).

### **E. Capture of Cities (Josh 10:28-39).**

At this point the author lists a number of cities in southern Canaan—the future territory of Judah—which were captured by Joshua. The passage is characterized by a certain monotony of repetition. It emphasizes the role of Yahweh in “*giving*” these cities into the hands of Israel. In each case the ban was applied. All the inhabitants were executed including the king. Six southern cities are listed: (1) Makkedah (10:28); (2) Libnah (10:29-30); (3) Lachish (10:31-32); (4) Eglon (10:34-35); (5) Hebron (10:36-37); and (6) Debir (10:38-39). Three of these cities were mentioned earlier in the chapter as part of the southern coalition. While the author presents a stereotypical description of the capture of each of these cities, certain individual variations in the reports are present.

1. In four of the six reports the execution of the king is mentioned. No mention is made of the fate of the kings of Lachish and Eglon.

2. The language used to describe the movements of Joshua’s army is different depending on the geographical circumstances of each particular city. So Joshua “*passed on*” or “*went up*” or simply “*returned*” (NASB).



3. The city of Lachish received aid from the king of Gezer delaying the capture of that city by one day. The army from Gezer was crushed (10:33).

4. Both Debir and Hebron had to be recaptured at a later period.<sup>5</sup>

5. The mention of the execution of the king of Hebron in 10:37 is interesting in the light of 10:23 in which he was executed on the day of the smashing victory. The conquests reported in 10:28-39 must have stretched over considerable time. The citizens of Hebron had replaced their fallen king.

### **F. Southern Region Summary (Josh 10:40-43).**

The author of the Book of Joshua next gives a description of the territory controlled by Israel at this point in the Conquest. First, he describes the four natural regions which had fallen into Israelite hands: (1) the hill country; (2) the Negev; (3) the lowland; and (4) the slopes. The hill country and the lowland (Shephelah) were mentioned in 9:1-2 as areas in which the kings were alarmed over the success of Joshua. The Negev ("dry area") is the region roughly south of the Gaza-Beersheba road. The southern border of the Negev merges into the highlands of the Sinai Peninsula. This region of about 4,500 square miles is nearly half the area of the modern state of Israel. The "slopes" mentioned here lie between the Judean mountains and the Shephelah (10:40a).

Second, the author indicates that Joshua applied the ban to all inhabitants within the area conquered. This was done, the reader is again reminded, at the command of Yahweh. In the light of verses to follow (15:14f., 63) it is clear that some inhabitants of these cities did escape. The text therefore means that no one was deliberately spared by Joshua's forces (10:40b).

Third, the author gives the dimensions of the territory thus far conquered in terms of terminal points in four directions. Kadesh-barnea marked the southernmost point of Conquest. This is the oasis in the wilderness of Zin where the Israelites had faltered in their faith some forty years before (Num 13). On the west the Israelites had taken Gaza. They controlled all the land of Goshen. This was a border region between the Judean mountains and the Negev. It is not to be confused with the famous land of Goshen in Egypt. The northern extremity of the Conquest at this point was Gibeon (10:41).

Fourth, the southern region had all been captured “*at one time*,” i.e., in one campaign. The author does not indicate how long the campaign lasted. It probably extended over several months (10:42a).

Fifth, the author again inserts a reminder that all the victories in the south had been made possible “*because Yahweh, the God of Israel, fought for Israel*” (10:42b).

to the north of the Sea of Galilee to make their stand against Israel (11:4-5).

### **B. Battle at Merom (Josh 11:6-9).**

Once again prior to the battle the Lord spoke words of encouragement to Joshua. This was now the twelfth recorded time when Yahweh spoke directly to Joshua. First, the Lord urged Joshua not to be afraid. Without doubt the general already knew through reconnaissance the strength of the enemy forces. Second, there was the gift promise: *"I will give all of them as slain before Israel."* Third, Yahweh gave new instructions. Joshua was to hamstring their horses and burn their chariots. To hamstring a horse—cutting the tendons at the hoof or knee—renders the animal unsuitable for further military usage (11:6).<sup>7</sup>

The next day the Israelite army swooped down *"suddenly"* upon the northern kings near the waters of Merom. True to his word, the Lord gave the northern army into the hand of Israel. The coalition broke apart. Every contingent fled for its own territory. The Israelite forces chased them in three different directions. No survivor was left to the Canaanite forces. Following the battle Joshua carried out exactly the orders he had been given by the Lord. He hamstrung their horses and burned their chariots (11:7-9).

### **C. Capture of Cities (Josh 11:10-15).**

Once the main force of the enemy had been routed, Joshua turned his attention to capturing the various cities in the north. Hazor, *"the head of all those kingdoms,"* is mentioned first. The king—presumably Jabin had escaped to the safety of his walls—was put to the edge of the sword. All the inhabitants of the city were destroyed. For the first time since Jericho and Ai Joshua ordered the city burned. Because Hazor had held the leading position among the northern cities it received a special exemplary punishment (11:10-11).

All the other cities of the northern coalition were captured. Their kings and populations were executed, utterly destroyed, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded. However, no city in the north was burned except Hazor. Apparently the Israelites took possession of these cities, thus fulfilling the promise of Deut 6:10. The plunder of the cities belonged to Israel, but the inhabitants were

executed. That standing order had originated with the Lord. It was passed down to Moses, and from Moses to Joshua. The author is anxious to emphasize that Joshua carried out exactly what he had been instructed to do (11:12-15).

### **THE ENTIRE CAMPAIGN** **Joshua 11:16-12:24**

Following the account of the southern and northern campaigns the author presents an overview of the entire campaign.

#### **A. Geography of the Conquest (Josh 11:16-18).**

The author loved to paint verbal pictures of the extent to which the Israelites had been successful in the conquest. He first states a generalization: “*Joshua took all that land.*” The author emphasized that point by enumerating the various regions which comprised “*that land:*” (1) the hill country; (2) the Negev; (3) “*all that land of Goshen*”; (4) the lowland; (5) the Arabah or plain; (6) the hill country of Israel; and (7) the lowland of Israel. To be more precise, the area conquered by the united effort of the tribes extended from Mount Halak<sup>8</sup> in the south to the Mount Hermon in the north. Baal-gad at the foot of Mount Hermon is the northernmost site mentioned. In this entire region the kings were all executed. The duration of this phase of the conquest is said to have been “*a long time.*” From data presented later in the text that “*long time*” can be computed to be just over seven years.

#### **B. Theology of the Conquest (Josh 11:19-20).**

Not one city attempted to make peace with Israel with the exception of the Gibeonites who used deception to secure a peace treaty (cf. ch. 9). All of the territory acquired by Israel was won on the battlefield. But why did none of the city states sue for peace? “*It was of Yahweh to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle.*” The destruction of the Canaanites was a judicial act of God. His will was that the Canaanites should be completely destroyed.<sup>9</sup> They should receive no mercy. That will was first revealed to Moses, and Moses laid the burden of execution on Joshua.

Yet it is a fact that one Canaanite begged for mercy and received it (cf. ch. 2). All the Canaanites knew of the mighty acts of God on behalf of his people. Only one was willing to renounce idolatry and embrace the Living God. God is said to harden a heart when an individual has rejected all prior efforts to effect moral change. The hardening of the heart is a withdrawal of further efforts to soften the heart; it is an introduction of circumstances which tend to make the wicked become ever more belligerent. In the case of the Conquest, the more territory Israel captured the more determined the Canaanites were to withstand their advance.

### **C. Climax of the Conquest (Josh 11:21-22).**

No mention has been made heretofore in the book about those dreaded Anakim which had so terrified the ten spies in the initial reconnaissance of the land (Num 13:33). This was a giant race of people which made the Israelites feel like grasshoppers. Anakim were encountered at various locations in the hill country of Judah and in the hill country of Israel. Joshua utterly destroyed them with their cities. No Anakim were left in the land of Israel. Only in three locations in the Philistine plain did any of this race survive. The author surely withheld any information to this point about the Anakim to suggest that in defeating these giants a climax in the Conquest had been reached.

### **D. Concluding Statement (Josh 11:23).**

To his account of the united Conquest the author adds a concluding summary. In it he states first that Joshua took the whole land. In so doing he fulfilled the promises regarding the Promised Land which God had made to Moses. The conquered territory was then divided up as an inheritance to the tribes of Israel. The details of how that was done will be recounted in the following chapters. "*Thus the land had rest from war.*" This note must be understood in a limited sense. The author refers to the massive confrontations of armies and bloody sieges of cities. Certainly he does not mean that once the territory was divided there was no more conflict, for that would contradict what he relates in subsequent chapters. He means that the enemy's chief resistance was now broken. The united effort of "*all Israel*" was

now over. From this point on it would remain for each tribe to remove remaining pockets of Canaanites from their inheritance.

### **E. An Appendix (Josh 12:1-24).**

To the narrative account of the Conquest the author has appended a systematic listing of thirty-three kings defeated by the Israelites. This boring list is in reality a song of praise for the triumph of the King of Kings over the kings of this world. The author speaks first of the conquests under Moses east of Jordan, and then of the more recent conquests under Joshua west of Jordan.

1. *Kings conquered east of Jordan (12:1-6).* The geographical extent of the territory conquered by Israel east of Jordan is first given. This may have been done for three reasons: (1) to draw another parallel between Moses and Joshua; (2) to stress the unity of Israel; and (3) to underscore that the Transjordan area was now considered part of the Promised Land. The Arnon river valley marked the southern boundary, the foothills of Mount Hermon, the northern boundary. This territory included all the Arabah or plain of the Jordan east of the river (12:1).

King Sihon was the first to be conquered when Israel emerged from the desert (Num 21:21-35). His capital was Heshbon. This Amorite kingdom stretched from the Arnon river to the Jabbok river. It included all the valuable Arabah (Plain) between the Sea of Chinneroth (Galilee) and the Salt (Dead) Sea (12:2-3).

The second territory conquered east of Jordan was that of Og who ruled the region north of the Jabbok known as Bashan. Og was a remnant of the Rephaim, a giant race of people. He had two capitals, one at Ashtaroath, the other at Edrei (12:4-5).

Both Sihon and Og were defeated by Israel under the leadership of Moses. This territory was then given to the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh (12:6). Twice in this verse Moses is called "the servant of Yahweh," perhaps to underscore the legitimacy of Israel's claim to the Transjordan territory.

2. *Kings conquered west of Jordan (12:7-24).* The author next lists the kings conquered by Joshua west of the Jordan. These kings had ruled collectively a large territory extending from Baal-gad at the foot of Mount Hermon to Mount Halak in the south. This territory

embraced several distinct geographical regions: (1) hill country, (2) lowlands, (3) Arabah, (4) slopes, (5) wilderness and (6) Negev. Several different ethnic groups lived in this region: (1) Hittite, (2) Amorite, (3) Canaanite, (4) Perizzite, (5) Hivite and (6) Jebusite. Within this territory Joshua conquered thirty-one kings whose cities are now enumerated without comment. Perhaps this list was intended to be recited from time to time to remind the Israelites of the glorious victories that had been theirs when they experienced tribal unity under Joshua’s leadership. Four observations regarding this list are in order.

Chart No. 11

THE CONQUERED KINGS Joshua 12			
Kings East of Jordan Defeated by Moses Sihon Og			
Kings West of Jordan Defeated by Joshua			
1. Jericho	8. Gezer	16. Bethel	24. Achshaph
2. Ai	9. Debir	17. Tappuah	25. Taanach
3. Jerusalem	10. Geder	18. Hepher	26. Megiddo
4. Hebron	11. Hormah	19. Aphek	27. Kadesh
5. Jarmuth	12. Arad	20. Lasharon	28. Jokneam
6. Lachish	13. Libnah	21. Madon	29. Dor
7. Eglon	14. Adullam	22. Hazor	30. Gilgal
	15. Makkedah	23. Shimron-meron	31. Tirzah

First, the list of defeated kings follows roughly the order in which events have been narrated in the preceding chapters. Second, half of the names on the list have not been mentioned in the Conquest narratives. Most of the new names are of cities in central and northern Canaan, where the narratives were extremely sketchy. Third, from subsequent narratives it becomes clear that the Canaanites were not permanently driven out of all of these towns. Some even had to be reconquered.

Fourth, the most puzzling name on the list is the thirtieth—the king of Goiim in Gilgal. Goiim could be translated “*nations*.” Here, however, it is probably the name of a small tribe. Obviously the “*Gilgal*” here is not the camping spot near Jericho. This seems to have

been a Gilgal in the region of Galilee. In fact, the Septuagint here reads “*Galilee*” which may well be the most ancient reading.<sup>10</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. The observation of K. Gutbrod, cited by M.H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 171, n. 12.

2. The Hebrew term *hamam* is used of various meteorological phenomena which God employs against the enemies of Israel on the battlefield. See Exod 14:24; Judg 4:15; 5:20f.; 1 Sam 7:10; 2 Sam 22:15.

3. In Joshua 10 the road to Beth-horon is called both an ascent (v. 10) and a descent (v. 11). The road from Gibeon to Upper Beth-horon first goes up, and then descends to the village. From Upper Beth-horon the road descends sharply to Lower Beth-horon.

4. Some scholars (e.g., Velikovsky) think the “great stones” came from a rain of meteorites.

5. On the recapture of Hebron and Debir see Josh 14:6-15; 15:15-17; Judg 1:10-13.

6. Hazor is mentioned in the Mari tablets dating to the eighteenth century BC as well as the Amarna tablets from the fourteenth century. The city at its height could have accommodated forty thousand people. See *The New Bible Dictionary* (2nd ed. Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982) s.v. “Hazor,” p. 456.

7. H. Freedman, *Joshua*, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino, 1950), p. 64.

8. In 10:41 the southernmost point conquered was Kadesh-barnea which lay further west than Mount Halak (“Bald Mount”). Mount Halak is said to rise toward “Seir” or Edom.

9. God also hardened Pharaoh’s heart. For a discussion of the concept see James E. Smith, *The Pentateuch, A Survey*, 2nd ed. (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1992), pp. 275f.

10. C.J. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Bible Student’s Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 112.



## CHAPTER SIX

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# Possessing the Inheritance Joshua 13-24

The united effort of the tribes in the conquest of Canaan took just over seven years. Under the brilliant generalship of Joshua and the providential intervention of the Lord, the backbone of Canaanite resistance had been broken. The second half of the Book of Joshua deals with issues surrounding the occupation of the land. In these chapters the author discusses (1) the distribution of the land, (2) the dispute among the tribes, and (2) the final discourses of Joshua.

### **DISTRIBUTION OF THE LAND** **Command and Precedent** **Joshua 13:1-33**

Joshua was now approaching a hundred years of age. He is described as “*old and advanced in years*” (13:1). Joshua still had one major part of his commission to carry out. The land which had previously been conquered needed to be parceled out to the various

tribes. This long unit begins by citing the revelation which Joshua received mandating the distribution of the land. The author then describes the allotment east and west of Jordan. The unit concludes with a discussion of the cities of refuge and the Levitical cities.

### **A. The Divine Command (Josh 13:1-7).**

The thirteenth divine communication to Joshua began with a recitation of the lands which were yet to be controlled by Israel. At this point *“very much of the land”* remained to be possessed. This statement, however, seems to be at variance with what the previous chapter declared: *“Joshua took the whole land. . . . Thus the land had rest from war”* (11:23). The victories which Joshua had won gave Israel the possession of the land in principle. No Canaanite forces were left which were capable of presenting any effective resistance to Israel. Occupation in principle, however, is not the same as possession of the land. Pockets of Canaanite resistance remained here and there. These areas are now identified by the author (13:1).

1. The territory of the Philistines and allied Geshurites<sup>1</sup> along the southwest coast of Canaan. Though the Philistines were not themselves Canaanites, this territory was reckoned as *“Canaanite”* probably since the Canaanites occupied the territory before the Philistines arrived on the scene in force about 1200 BC. Since this was Canaanite territory it was part of that Promised Land which God had deeded to the Israelites.

2. The *“whole land of the Canaanite”* along the Phoenician coast as far as Aphek some twenty-three miles north of modern Beirut (13:4).

3. The land of the Gebalite and *“all of Lebanon”* eastward (13:5).

4. The mountain regions from Lebanon to Mesrephoth-maim which was located just south of the so-called Ladder of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast. This area is said to be occupied by the Sidonians (13:6a).

God promised that he would drive out all the remaining inhabitants of the area. In this statement the principle is again operative, God gives, but Israel must take. Even though some of the land was not yet fully possessed, it was to be divided among the nine and a half tribes as an *“inheritance.”* Thus, not all of the land assigned to the various

tribes actually was under effective Israelite control at this time. The very act of assigning that territory was an act of faith (13:6b-7).

### **B. Allotments East of Jordan (Josh 13:8-33).**

As has been his custom thus far, the author first deals with Trans-jordan, then with Cis-jordan. The tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh had received their inheritance east of Jordan. The boundaries which had been worked out for each tribe by Moses "*the servant of the Lord*" are now set forth.

The description of the Transjordan territory given here follows what was presented earlier (12:2-6; cf. Deut 3:8-17). To this general geographical description of Transjordan the author appends two notes. First, he notes that the children of Israel did not dispossess the Geshurites or Maacathites who lived in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee (13:13). Second, he notes that no inheritance was given to the Levites in Transjordan. The offerings made by fire to the Lord were their inheritance (13:14). The reference is to the portions of various sacrifices which were designated for the Levitical priests.

Having introduced the Transjordan allotments the author verbally maps out the areas assigned to the two and a half tribes. The territory was assigned essentially in the order it was conquered. From the Arnon river north to Sihon's old capital at Heshbon was given to Reuben (13:15-23). The territory between Heshbon and Ramoth-gilead—virtually the entire Jordan valley east of the river—belonged to Gad (13:24-28). Manasseh occupied Bashan, the territory formerly ruled by King Og (13:29-31).

The description of the Transjordan allotments concludes with a note that (1) stresses the authority by which these tribal assignments were made; and (2) underscores again that no land inheritance was given to Levi because of the greater spiritual inheritance which that tribe enjoyed (13:32-33).

## **THE GILGAL DISTRIBUTION**

### **Joshua 14:1-17:18**

While the territory east of Jordan was apportioned by Moses, that west of Jordan was done by committee. Joshua, Eleazar the high

priest, and the tribal leaders shared in the decision (14:1). Nine and a half tribes were given territories west of Jordan. All together then, counting the two and a half territories east of Jordan, twelve tribal areas were assigned. The descendants of Joseph received two portions, for Joseph's two sons had become full-fledged tribes in Israel. The Levites, the author continues to emphasize, did not receive a tribal allotment. They did, however, receive cities scattered throughout the tribes. All of these arrangements were exactly what Moses had stipulated (14:3-5).

### **A. The Tribe of Judah (Josh 14:6–15:63).**

The discussion of the allotment to Judah emphasizes the role of Caleb in the settlement of the tribal area. Caleb's faith and courage are held up as a model for what God expected from all of the tribal units. The request of Caleb for an inheritance is followed by a verbal description of the geography of Judah, a note about the early successful efforts of Caleb and Othniel, and a list of the cities which were in this tribal area.

1. *The request of Caleb (14:6-15)*. The first of two apportionments in Canaan occurred at Gilgal. Caleb led a delegation to Joshua and reminded him of the commitments which had been made to him in the wilderness (cf. Num 14:24,30). In making his claim Caleb rehearses the history of how he had been sent from Kadesh-barnea to spy out Canaan. Because Caleb had been fully committed to the Lord, Moses swore that he would have his own personal inheritance in the Promised Land. Now some forty-five years later Caleb at age eighty-five claimed his inheritance. In the wilderness Caleb had risked his life to bring to his countrymen a positive report regarding Canaan. Now Caleb's land inheritance is placed at the head of all the allotments in Cis-jordan (14:6-10).

In spite of his age, Caleb was not inclined to seek retirement. He felt he was as strong as ever. Therefore he requested as his inheritance the hill country where the Anakim—the giants—were located. Apparently some of the Anakim who had escaped Joshua's initial conquest of the area (11:21f.) had returned to the area. Caleb believed that the Lord would honor his word (cf. 13:6) and drive those Anakim from the land. Thus Caleb was modeling the faith which God

desired all his people to have at this stage of the Conquest. This is how Caleb received Hebron and environs as his inheritance. The city, once named Kiriath-arba after Arba the greatest of the Anakim, was now renamed Hebron. Following the conquest of Hebron “*the land had rest from war*” at least for a time. The cessation of hostilities made possible the further distribution of the land (14:11-15).

2. *The borders of Judah (15:1-12)*. The author meticulously traces the tribal borders of Judah. Each tribe’s territory was designated by lot by which divine guidance was assured. The phrase “*according to their families*” suggests that tribal areas were broken down into smaller portions. Mercifully the Holy Spirit has spared modern readers the details of the family assignments. For the Israelites such lists had a legal purpose. Perhaps these boundary lists were also recited in worship liturgy in celebration of the faithfulness of God in keeping his covenant promises. Since many of the places listed in tribal areas were still in Canaanite hands, the boundary lists also served the purpose of establishing a program of expansion for each of the tribes. The overriding spiritual truth in all this is that God has a place in his kingdom for every one of his children.

3. *Caleb’s settlement model (15:13-19)*. The author relates how Caleb was successful in driving out from Kiriath-arba (Hebron) the three giant sons of Anak. Caleb then proceeded to attack Kiriath-sepher (Debir), another city previously conquered (10:36-39) but reoccupied by Canaanites. He offered his daughter Achsah in marriage to the man who could conquer this town. Othniel, his brother or half-brother,<sup>2</sup> captured Hebron and thereby won the hand of Achsah. This young lady was very insightful and determined. She knew that land without water was worthless. So she persuaded her husband to allow her to ask Caleb for some nearby springs of water as a wedding present. Pleased with the pluck of his daughter, Caleb gave her “*the upper and the lower springs*” (15:13-19).

4. *Cities of Judah (15:21-62)*. The text next lists 114 cities along with some villages which were not reckoned as “cities.” The cities are listed in four major regions: the Negev (15:20-32), lowlands (15:33-47), hill country (15:48-60) and desert (15:61-62). Some of these cities would later be taken from Judah and given to the tribe of Dan. A most significant note comes at the conclusion of the long city

catalog. This tribe was unable to drive the Jebusites out of Jerusalem (15:63). Not until the time of David did the city finally and permanently come under Israelite control.

### **B. The Joseph Tribes (Josh 16:1–17:18).**

The descendants of the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, were reckoned as two separate tribes in Israel. The author first presents a general picture of the lot that fell to the Joseph tribes (16:1-4). He then discusses individually these two tribes.

1. *The inheritance of Ephraim (16:5-10)*. To the outline of Ephraim's boundaries (16:5-9) the author adds an important note. The tribe of Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer (16:10). They could have, but they did not. Instead the Ephraimites chose to make forced laborers out of these Canaanites.

2. *The inheritance of Manasseh (17:1-13)*. Part of the tribe of Manasseh had already been given an allotment east of Jordan (17:1). The rest of the tribe received ten portions of land in an area west of the Jordan. Five of those tracts were given to the daughters of Zelophehad. Zelophehad had died in the wilderness. He had no sons. In the plains of Moab his five daughters had come to Moses requesting that they be recognized as the rightful descendants of their father. The young ladies won their case. As long as they did not marry outside their tribe they would each be entitled to a portion in the Promised Land (Num 27:1-11; 36:5-9). Joshua honored the word of the Lord as spoken through Moses regarding these women (17:2-6).

The author next gives a verbal description of the borders of Manasseh (17:7-10). Because the area contained few cities, Manasseh was assigned six cities in neighboring tribal areas (17:11). Unfortunately Manasseh was not able to take control of all these cities. When Israel became strong, however, they put the Canaanites to forced labor (17:12-13).

3. *The complaint of the Joseph tribes (17:14-18)*. The Joseph tribes complained to Joshua about the size of their portion. In point of fact at least three other tribes were more numerous. Joshua, however, did not argue with them. He challenged them to carve out a settlement in "*the forest*" which covered a considerable portion on

the northwest of their allotment. Of course there they would have to tangle with the Perizzites and Rephaim (17:14-15).

Joshua's answer did not satisfy the Joseph tribes. They felt the hill country was not large enough. The Canaanites who lived in the valley of Jezreel possessed "*chariots of iron*." Perhaps the Josephites expected some kind of favoritism from Joshua since he was of the tribe of Ephraim. Joshua, however, would not budge. He repeated their own boasts to them. They were a numerous people. They needed more land. So take the hill country, he charged, and drive the Canaanites out. If they would only assert themselves they would have all the land they needed in spite of the iron chariots of their enemies (17:14-18).

### **THE SHILOH DISTRIBUTION** **Joshua 18:1-19:51**

Shiloh was the site at which the final allotment was made. The tent of meeting was set up there once the main Canaanite resistance had been removed. By some revelation God had designated that spot as the site of his earthly palace (cf. Deut 12:11; Jer 7:12). The site was ideal for a sanctuary because of its central location among the tribes (18:1). The complaint of the Josephites had indicated that tribal self-interest threatened national unity. The relocation of the tabernacle at this point in the tribal area of Ephraim was intended to counter this trend.

After describing how the Shiloh distribution was organized, the author proceeds to describe the territories of the tribes which had not yet received their inheritance. The tribal distribution chapters conclude with a note concerning a special portion given to Joshua.

#### **A. Organization of the Distribution (Josh 18:1-10).**

At this point seven tribes had not yet received their inheritance. Joshua chided these tribes for not entering their respective areas to take possession of them. Three men from each of these tribes were organized into a survey team. They were to go through the land, write a description of the prospective areas, and divide the remaining territory into seven areas. Then Joshua would cast lots "*before Yahweh our God*" to determine how the seven allotments would be assigned.

Joshua used this public speech to do what he did at every opportunity, namely, underscore the national unity of the twelve tribes. He did this by alluding to the Transjordan tribes, the two and a half tribes already assigned territory in Cis-jordan, and the Levites who had the priesthood as their portion (18:2-7).

The twenty-one man survey team completed their work. Probably a good portion of what is recorded in Joshua 13-19 is the result of their work. They described the land “*by cities in seven divisions in a book.*” Joshua cast lots for them before the Lord in Shiloh (18:8-10).

Chart No. 12

COMPARATIVE SIZE OF TRIBAL TERRITORIES In Square Miles			
MANASSEH (EAST)			2,500
JUDAH	1,400	306,000 Population	
GAD	1,300	162,000 Population	
SIMEON	1,000	88,800 Population	
MANASSEH (WEST)	800	210,800 Population*	
NAPHTALI	800	181,600 Population	
REUBEN	700	174,920 Population	
EPHRAIM	600	130,000 Population	
DAN	500	257,600 Population	
ISSACHAR	400	257,200 Population	
ZEBULUN	300	242,000 Population	
ASHER	200	213,600 Population	
BENJAMIN	200	182,400 Population	

Population estimates based on the military census of Num 26 X 4 for an average family. Manasseh east and west are combined.

**B. Final Tribal Allotments (Josh 18:11-19:48).**

The lot fell in the following order: Benjamin (18:11-28), Simeon (19:1-9), Zebulun (19:10-16), Issachar (19:17-23), Asher (19:24-31), Naphtali (19:32-39), and Dan (19:40-48). Discussion of the multitude of geographical problems in this unit is beyond the scope of this survey. Concerning these allotments, however, the following observations are in order:

1. The lot of Benjamin is the most carefully described. It consists of both border stations and a city list of twenty-six entries.
2. The lot of Simeon was taken from within the tribal area of Judah because the portion of Judah was “*too large for them.*”
3. A portion of the tribe of Dan migrated to the north beyond the



territory assigned to any tribe. There they captured the town of Leshem situated near the headwaters of the Jordan. They subsequently renamed the town Dan. The details of this tribal migration are reported in Judges 18. This event probably took place after the time of Joshua. If that is the case, an editor of the Book of Joshua has placed this brief note here in order to round out his account of the allotment of Dan.

### **C. Joshua's Inheritance (Josh 19:49-51).**

The discussion of the tribal allotments west of Jordan began with the reference to the area assigned to Caleb. The same unit ends with a reference to the personal allotment of Joshua. Caleb and Joshua had risked their lives by bringing a good report regarding the land when Israel was camped at Kadesh-barnea (Num 14:6-10). How appropriate then that the author has used the inheritance of these two men as a frame around the allotment chapters.

In compliance with the commandment of the Lord, "*the sons of Israel*" gave Joshua an inheritance in their midst. The exact command regarding Joshua's inheritance is not recorded, but the idea may be implied in Numbers 14:30. He asked for and received the city of Timnath-serah in the hill country of Ephraim about sixteen miles southwest of Shechem. Joshua is said to have "*built*" (i.e., rebuilt) this city and settled it.

With the allocation of Timnath-serah to Joshua the western tribal allotment came to an end. Eleazar, Joshua and the tribal leaders had fulfilled their responsibility. The final phase of the allotment was performed at Shiloh "*before Yahweh*" at the door of the tent of meeting (19:51).

## **DESIGNATION OF SPECIAL CITIES**

### **Joshua 20:1-21:45**

Appended to the descriptions of the various tribal areas are two lists of important towns, namely, the cities of refuge and the Levitical cities. Actually all six cities of refuge were also Levitical cities which served a special function in the judicial system.

### **A. Cities of Refuge (Josh 20:1-9).**

In the fourteenth direct address to Joshua<sup>3</sup> Yahweh directed that cities of refuge be appointed. In this communication the Lord repeated the principles by which this system of asylum would operate (cf. Deut 19:1-13). Cities of refuge were sanctuaries for those who had committed manslaughter. The “*avenger of blood*” could not execute the manslayer as long as he resided within the walls of one of these cities. Some commentators think the avenger of blood was a kinsman of the person who had been killed. Another view is that the avenger was a title for a government functionary whose job it was to execute those who had committed murder.

The elders of the city of refuge would decide who was eligible for the sanctuary within their walls. The sanctuary could be temporary, i.e., until a formal trial could be conducted, or indefinite where unintentional manslaughter had been determined. In the latter case the manslayer had to remain in the city until the death of the high priest.<sup>4</sup> Then he was free to return to his own city (20:1-6).

Three cities of refuge had already been appointed by Moses east of Jordan: Bezer in Reuben, Ramoth in Gad and Golan in Manasseh. Now Joshua and his advisers appointed three additional cities west of Jordan: Kedesh in Naphtali, Shechem in Ephraim and Hebron in Judah (20:7-9).

### **B. Levitical Cities (Josh 21:1-45).**

Under Moses’ leadership the decision had been made that Levites would be given cities throughout the tribal areas of Israel (Num 35:1-8). Chapter 21 relates how each of the three major branches of Levites received by lot its own cities. Thus the Levites occupied their towns by divine appointment.

The Levites approached Eleazer and Joshua at Shiloh to request that they might be given cities in which to settle. Forty-eight cities were assigned to them. Apparently these teachers of the law and religious leaders were to be readily available to all of the people of God. The descendants of Aaron were situated in the tribal areas of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin. Thus the priests were located relatively close to Jerusalem which God later would designate as the site for his temple.

Chart No. 13

THE LEVITICAL CITIES		
LEVITICAL CLANS	LEVITICAL CLANS	NUMBER
Family of Aaron	Judah-Simeon <sup>(9)</sup> Benjamin <sup>(4)</sup>	13
Other Kohathites	Ephraim <sup>(4)</sup> Dan <sup>(4)</sup> Manasseh West <sup>(2)</sup>	10
Gershonites	Issachar <sup>(4)</sup> Asher <sup>(4)</sup> Naphtali <sup>(3)</sup> Manasseh East <sup>(2)</sup>	13
Merarites	Zebulun <sup>(4)</sup> Reuben <sup>(4)</sup> Gad <sup>(4)</sup>	12
TOTAL LEVITICAL CITIES		48

**DISPUTE AMONG THE TRIBES**  
**Joshua 22:1-34**

Chapter 22 indicates how the national unity which Joshua had cultivated during his years of leadership was nearly broken by foolish actions of the tribal leaders.

**A. Tribal Unity Praised (Josh 22:1-8).**

After the years of united tribal warfare, Joshua summoned to Shiloh the military contingent from the two and a half Transjordan tribes. This group which crossed the Jordan seven years earlier forty thousand strong had served faithfully. They had honored the word which they had given to Moses about fighting with their brethren. They had obeyed every command which Joshua had issued during the campaign. Now that the Cis-jordan tribes had achieved their “rest” it was time for these valiant soldiers to return to the possession which Moses had appointed them on the other side of the Jordan. Joshua, however, did have a parting admonition for these men. He

urged them carefully to observe the law of Moses. This involved loving the Lord, walking in all his ways, keeping his commandments, holding fast to him and serving him with “*with all your heart and with all your soul.*” Only then would they be able to enjoy their rest in Transjordan (22:1-5).

With these words of commendation and admonition Joshua “*blessed*” the troops and sent them away. The “*blessing*” took the form of an imperative. He encouraged them to share with their tribal brothers all the spoils which they had captured in battle. These spoils are called “*great riches.*” They consisted of livestock, silver, gold, bronze, iron and “*very many clothes*” (22:6-8).

## **B. Tribal Unity Threatened (Josh 22:9-20).**

The Reubenites, Gadites and half-tribe of Manasseh departed for the land of Gilead across the Jordan. In the vicinity of the Jordan they decided to build a large altar. When the other tribes heard of this, they gathered together at Shiloh to go into Gilead and make war against their brethren. From a distance it appeared that the eastern tribes were attempting to introduce an altar to rival the one authorized altar at the Tabernacle. A second place of worship would be a serious violation the law of Moses (22:9-12).

Fortunately cooler heads prevailed. A committee consisting of ten tribal leaders led by Phinehas, the son of the high priest, was dispatched to Transjordan to challenge the construction of the altar. Phinehas’ zeal for Yahweh had already been demonstrated in the incident which had taken place at Baal-Peor (Num 25:7).

The committee was harshly accusatory with the eastern tribes. They accused their brethren of an “*unfaithful act*”<sup>5</sup> or “*turning away from following Yahweh.*” By building the altar the eastern tribes had committed a trespass of the magnitude of what had transpired at Peor in the last days of Moses. The committee seemed most afraid that the altar transgression would bring God’s wrath on the entire nation. The committee reminded the eastern tribes that they were welcome to cross the river and take up residence among the nine and a half tribes. By building the altar, however, they were rebelling both against Yahweh and their brothers. The committee closed its presentation with the ominous reminder of what happened when Achan had acted unfaith-

fully. The entire congregation had been punished for the sin of one man. Thus the other tribes had a legitimate concern about the purpose of this altar near the Jordan (22:13-20).

### **C. Tribal Unity Preserved (Josh 22:21-34).**

The eastern tribes responded to the broadside of the committee of tribal leaders with shock and humility. They had not intended their altar to be an act of rebellion. Their altar was not intended for sacrificial purposes. Rather it was a monument to the unity of the nation. A future generation west of Jordan might wish to disown the eastern tribes and cut them off from participation in Tabernacle worship. In such an event the altar near the Jordan would be a reminder of the fact that the eastern tribes had fought alongside their brothers in the conquest of Canaan. Thus the newly constructed “altar” was really a monument celebrating the spiritual unity which bound the tribes on both sides of the Jordan into one nation. The large altar had even been modeled after the altar of the Tabernacle and thus was another expression of their loyalty to Yahweh. The eastern tribes were horrified at the thought that their actions were misconstrued as rebellion against the Lord (22:21-29).

The response from the Transjordan tribes pleased the investigative committee. A serious threat had been averted. No illegal act had been committed. Therefore there was no reason to think that Israel would experience the hand of divine wrath. God was still in their midst. Phinehas and his ten committee members returned from the land of Gilead in Transjordan and reported their findings. The report pleased the congregation. All talk of war against the eastern tribes ceased (22:34).

Misunderstanding between brethren arises when one group launches into some activity without seeking approval from the congregational leadership and without explaining intentions. Often brothers jump to conclusions about motives without first carefully investigating the situation. Joshua 22 contains several lessons which can be helpful in maintaining the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

This account concludes with a note that the eastern tribes named the Jordan altar “Witness.” The altar was intended to bear witness that Yahweh is God (22:34).

## JOSHUA'S FAREWELL ADDRESS

### Joshua 23:1-16

Joshua 23–24 contain Joshua's last words to the people he had served throughout his lifetime. The tone of these chapters is hortatory. Thus the Book of Joshua ends as it began with words of exhortation. Though the two chapters have a great deal in common, certain differences are clear. Chapter 23 is oriented toward what God would do in the future, whereas chapter 24 focuses on what God had done in the past. The location of the two meetings probably was different. Also the scope of the assembly in chapter 24 seems to be larger (*"all the tribes of Israel"*) than that in chapter 23.

Joshua's farewell address was delivered when he was *"old and advanced in years."* Since this same language is used in 13:1 at the time of the land apportionment, it is impossible to determine how much time, if any, had elapsed since that event. Joshua summoned all Israel, but to what place is not indicated. The likely possibilities include Shiloh, Shechem and Timnath-serah. *"All Israel"* was represented in the person of its elders, heads, judges and officers. The address consists of three calls to covenant obedience each of which is preceded by a recitation of past favors bestowed by the Lord (23:1-2).

#### A. A Call to Covenant Faithfulness (Josh 23:3-5).

Joshua began his speech by calling attention to his great age. He was approaching 110. He apparently intended his words to be regarded as a kind of last will and testament. He spent very little time rehearsing the victories of the Conquest period. He first gave credit to the Lord for what was accomplished on the battlefields of Canaan. He then explained that he had given Israel as an inheritance two kinds of land: the land of nations which had been *"cut off;"* and the land of nations which yet remain. Joshua could make these allocations because he was fully confident that Yahweh would fulfill his promises and drive the remaining nations out of the inheritance he had given to Israel (23:1-5).

Joshua urged these leaders of Israel to *"be very firm"* (lit., be strong) to observe the commandments of Moses. Specifically, Joshua was referring to the Mosaic commands regarding absolute separation

between the people of God and the peoples remaining in the land. Israel was not to “associate” with them. To do so would result in gradually making mention of the names of their gods. This certainly would include prayer to those gods.<sup>6</sup> That in turn would lead to taking oaths in the names of their gods, and even worse, the worship of those nonexistent deities. To be successful in their inheritance Israel needed to continue to “cling”<sup>7</sup> to Yahweh (23:6-8).

### **B. Second Call for Covenant Faithfulness (Josh 23:9-13).**

Based on their recent experience there was every reason to remain faithful to Yahweh. The Lord had driven out mighty nations before Israel. No man had been able to stand before their armies. Because the Lord fought for Israel, one Israelite soldier had been able to put to flight a thousand of the enemy. The Lord had kept his word in a marvelous way (23:8-10).

Israel must not assume that such divine aid as they had recently experienced would automatically continue. The Lord’s help was conditional. Israel must continue to love Yahweh, and love for him was an exclusive thing. In Canaan they would be constantly tempted to “go back” (i.e., commit apostasy) and “cling” to surrounding nations. They would be tempted to give the same kind of loyalty to these pagans that they should have been giving to the Lord. Intermarriage is one example of what Joshua meant by clinging to the nations. In the event of such apostasy, God would abandon Israel. No longer would he drive out those nations before Israel. Those heathen nations would become a snare and a trap. They would torment Israel producing pain like that of a whip upon the back or thorns poking into an eye. Ultimately the heathen influence would cause Israel to “*perish from off this good land*” which they had just received from the Lord (23:11-13).

### **C. Third Call for Covenant Faithfulness (Josh 23:14-16).**

Joshua reminded his audience of his impending death: “*I am going the way of all the earth.*” Both Joshua and these leaders had observed that every promise which God had made had been fulfilled. Not one word of promise had failed. The same God who kept his positive promises to Israel would also keep his threats. He would in

fact destroy them from off that land if they did not continue to cling to him. Faithfulness to the covenant was the key. If Israel began to take up with other gods, the Lord would “*burn*” against them. Israel would then “*quickly perish*” off the good land which their God had just given them (23:14-16).

## COVENANT RENEWAL

### Joshua 24:1-28

Because of its ancient Patriarchal connections, Joshua chose Shechem<sup>8</sup> as the site for the final covenant renewal ceremony of his life. “*All the tribes*” were present, at least in the person of their representatives. The elders, heads, officers and judges presented themselves “*before God*.”<sup>9</sup> Joshua then addressed the assembly (24:1).

#### A. The Basis of the Appeal (Josh 24:2-13).

Joshua began his covenant renewal speech by reviewing the history of God’s dealings with Israel, beginning with Abraham.<sup>10</sup> He mentions Abraham’s journey to Canaan, the birth of Isaac, the descent of Jacob and his sons into Egypt. He speaks of the plagues against Egypt, the crossing of the sea, the destruction of the Egyptian army and the preservation of Israel in the wilderness “*for a long time*.” Most of this would be ancient history for the audience of Joshua (24:2-7).

Joshua then began to speak of events with which his audience would have been personally acquainted. He mentioned the defeat of the Transjordan Amorites, and the reversal of the curses of Balaam (Num 22-24). He reminded them of the battle at Jericho and the long campaign against all the ethnic groups which inhabited the land of Canaan. God sent “*the hornet*”<sup>11</sup> before Israel which drove out “*the two kings of the Amorites*.” At this very moment, because of God’s unspeakable blessing, Israel was living in cities which they had not built, and eating from vineyards and groves which they had not planted (24:8-13).

#### B. Exhortation and Response (Josh 24:14-24).

All that he had been saying was building up to a challenge. “*Now*



*therefore, fear Yahweh and serve him in sincerity and truth.*" This would entail two specific actions, one negative and the other positive. (1) They must put away the gods which their fathers served beyond the Euphrates river and in Egypt;<sup>12</sup> and (2) they must serve Yahweh. Service (i.e., worship) to Yahweh must be exclusive. If they did not wish to serve Yahweh, then they should choose which gods they would serve, either the old gods of Mesopotamia or the newer gods which they had encountered in Canaan. In any case, Joshua let the assembly know what his choice would be: "*As for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh*" (24:14-15).

The assembly responded in a forceful way. To forsake Yahweh and serve other gods would be a horrifying thought. After all, it was Yahweh who brought up "*us*" and "*our fathers*" out of the "*house of bondage*," i.e., Egypt. Yahweh is the God who performed great signs in "*our sight*." Yahweh had preserved this people in whatever hostile circumstances they had found themselves over the years. He had driven out the Amorites, i.e., inhabitants of Canaan before Israel. Since Yahweh had demonstrated himself to be their God, the Israelites formally committed themselves anew to serving him (24:16-18).

Joshua then raised the bar of commitment to a higher level. He reminded his audience that Yahweh was a holy God. Yahweh was "*a jealous*"<sup>13</sup> God who would not merely ignore their dalliance with "*strange*" deities. If they turned from serving Yahweh to serve the foreign gods, Yahweh would turn against them and consume them as a nation. Disobedience turns covenant blessings into covenant curses (24:19-20).

Once again, and doubtless even more vociferously, the people declared their intention to serve Yahweh. Then Joshua coaxed yet another statement of commitment from them. They declared that they were witnesses against themselves that they had chosen to serve Yahweh in full knowledge of what the consequences would be if they lapsed into pagan religion. The people affirmed: "*We are witnesses*" (24:21-22). By setting forth the voluntary acceptance of covenant obligation on the part of Israel, the author is making clear that any later calamities which befell Israel for covenant unfaithfulness cannot be blamed upon God.

After these several verbal declarations of devotion to Yahweh, Joshua put the people to the true test of sincerity. *“Put away the foreign gods which are in your midst.”*<sup>14</sup> Such an act would demonstrate that their hearts were inclined to Yahweh. For the fourth time the people declared their intention to serve Yahweh. They add, *“And we will obey his voice.”* Presumably they were referring to the commandments regarding recognizing other gods or making graven images (24:24-25).

### **C. Covenant Documentation (Josh 24:25-28).**

All which had just transpired is described as *“a covenant.”* That covenant became the law of the land. Joshua wrote down these words in the Book of the law of God. Presumably the reference is to the writings of Moses. What Joshua wrote was the nucleus of the present Book of Joshua. The fact that Joshua was permitted to add words of any kind to the book already deemed sacred indicates that the people regarded him as a prophet inspired of God. That which Joshua wrote was immediately regarded as Scripture (24:25-26a).

To mark the spot of this covenant renewal, Joshua erected a large stone and set it under the oak that was *“near the holy place of Yahweh”* (NIV). The sanctity of that spot near Shechem went back to the time of Abraham (Gen 12:6). The stone had been a silent witness to the words of the Lord which Joshua had just spoken. The gracious acts of the Lord which Joshua had rehearsed before Israel at Shechem would testify against them should they ever be unfaithful to the covenant. Having made provision for the stone of witness, Joshua dismissed the tribes, each to its own inheritance (24:26b-28).

## **EPILOGUE**

### **Joshua 24:29-33**

The Book of Joshua concludes with four notes of historical interest. First, it reports that Joshua died at the age of 110 (c. 1387 BC). His age at death was the same as that of Joseph whose final burial is mentioned in the following verses. In this concluding note about him Joshua is given for the first time the title Moses had worn: *“servant*

of *Yahweh*.” Joshua was buried in his own inheritance of Timnath-serah in the hill country of Ephraim (24:29-30).

Second, the sacred historian reports that Israel served *Yahweh* all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua. This probably represents a period of seven years or so. By that time most if not all of the elders who had seen the mighty acts of God in the wilderness and in Canaan would have passed from the scene (24:31).

Third, the Israelites buried the bones of Joseph which they had brought up from the land of Egypt. The burial plot was a piece of ground which Jacob had purchased from the local inhabitants some five centuries earlier (Gen 33:19). That piece of ground had now at long last become part of the inheritance of the sons of Joseph. This had probably been done on the first visit to the vicinity of Shechem early in the Conquest (Josh 8:30-35). The report is delayed until this point in order to serve as a kind of climax to the book. Before Joseph died he had expressed his faith in the fulfillment of God’s land promise (Gen 50:25). Now Joseph’s faith in God’s promise had been vindicated (24:32).

The book concludes with a note on the passing of Eleazar the son of Aaron who was Joshua’s lieutenant during the Conquest. The author may be suggesting that Eleazar’s death (c. 1380 BC) marked the end of the period of the elders who outlived Joshua (24:33).

## ENDNOTES

1. These Geshurites are not to be confused with a people by the same name which occupied an area in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee (Josh 13:11,13; Deut 3:14).

2. The relationship between Othniel and Caleb is disputed. Othniel was the son of Kenaz. If Kenaz was the brother of Caleb, then Othniel would be his nephew. Jewish tradition takes Kenaz to be the father of both Caleb and Othniel.

3. In 20:1 the Hebrew uses the verb *dibber* (“spoke”) rather than *’amar* (“said”) which was used in the previous instances of direct divine communication to Joshua. For this reason Jewish tradition regards this as merely passing on to Israel what the Lord had previously said to Moses. See H. Freedman, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino, 1950), p. 120.

4. Scriptures do not state why the death of the high priest would mean release for the manslayer. These theories have been offered: (1) the death of the high priest had a kind of atoning effect since he had been anointed with oil. (2) Since the high priest was the head of the tribe of Levi, his death released the hold of the Levitical city (city of refuge) over the manslayer. (3) The death of the high priest signaled the end of an era and thus a general amnesty was declared.

5. The same Hebrew word (*ma'al*) is used of the offense committed by Achan (Josh 7:1; 22:20). The word basically refers to a breach of trust or unfaithfulness.

6. "*Making mention of their names*" might also refer to using the names of pagan gods as part of their personal names. Later in the family of Saul two sons had names which included the name of the god Baal. See 1 Chr 8:33; 9:39.

7. "*Cling*" (*dabhaq*) is the same verb used of the husband-wife relationship in Gen 2:24.

8. Shechem is specifically mentioned in the book only in 24:1. The city had special meaning to the Israelites. Here Abraham built his first altar in Canaan (Gen 12:6f.) and Jacob purchased a parcel of ground from the local inhabitants (Gen 33:18-20).

9. The expression "*before God*" suggests, but does not require, that the ark had been brought from Shiloh for this solemn service.

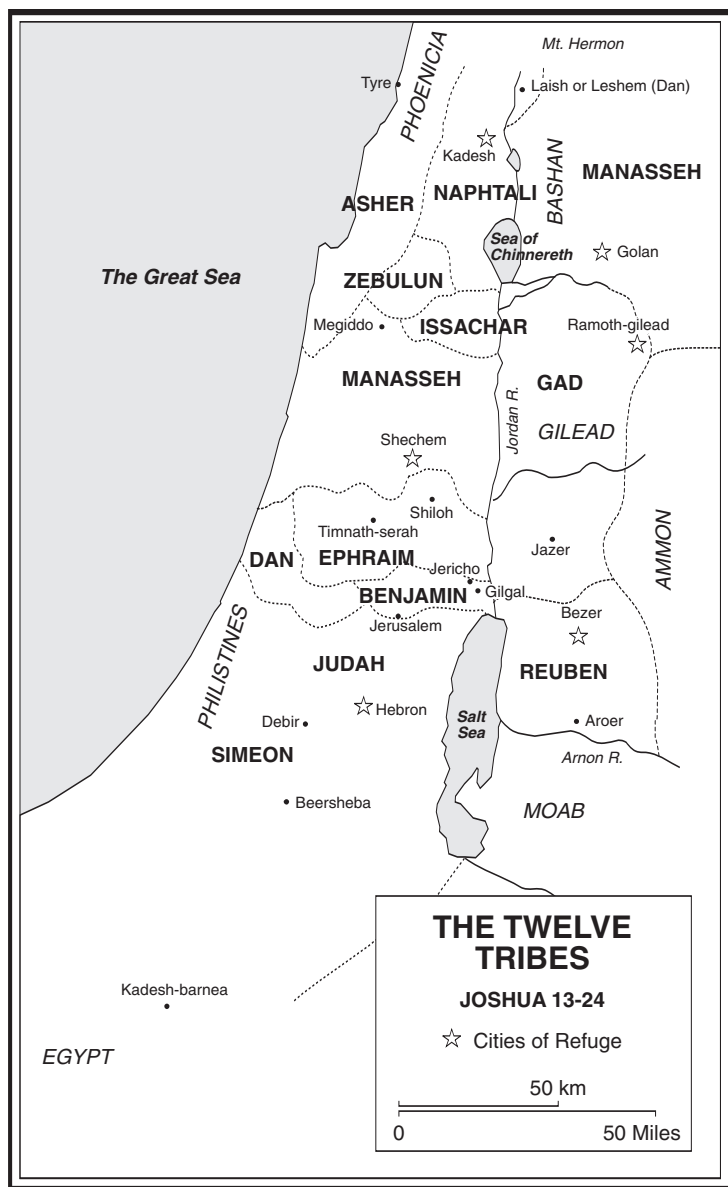
10. Here Joshua reveals that Israel's forefathers "*beyond the river*" in Mesopotamia had served other gods. The language is not clear as to whether Abraham himself was involved in this idolatry before God called him. Most likely he was.

11. The hornet (*tsir'ah*) is difficult to identify. Is a plague of insects intended? Others have taken the "*hornet*" to be a symbol for the stinging, paralyzing fear which seized the Canaanites before the arrival of Israel (cf. 2:9; 5:1). Garstang thought that the reference is to Palestinian campaigns of certain Pharaohs one of whose symbol was a bee or hornet.

12. The fact that Israel was serving idols in Egypt at the time of the Exodus is also emphasized by Ezekiel (20:7; 23:3,8).

13. God's jealousy is his zeal for the maintenance of his honor. This zeal can be shown in acts of punishment against those who have violated his holiness or in acts of vindication on behalf of his people who have been wronged by unbelievers (cf. Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 5:9).

14. The text does not record how this command was actually carried out. Some believe that Joshua is speaking of idolatry of the heart. Others think he is referring to the idols of the pagan nations living in the land.





## The Roots and Fruits of Apostasy

### Judges 1:1-3:4

Judges is a book about apostasy. The opening paragraphs of the book trace the roots of that apostasy to the failures of the tribes to carry out the orders of God in their dealings with the Canaanites. At the same time these paragraphs sketch in broad outline some of the bitter fruits which apostasy produced for Israel.

Actually the introductory paragraphs of the Book of Judges constitute two separate, but partially parallel, introductions to the book. The first (1:1-2:6) is an historical epilogue to the Conquest period. The second (2:7-3:4) is a prophetic prologue to the period of the Judges. The first is more reportorial, the second, analytical.

### **A REQUEST FOR GUIDANCE**

#### **Judges 1:1-2**

The Book of Judges begins on a positive note. The death of Joshua about 1387 BC triggered a renewed interest in driving the

Canaanites from the land. The Israelites, however, were hesitant to begin the program without some direction from the Lord. So the “*sons of Israel*” in the person of their leaders assembled to “*inquire of the Lord*.” They wished to know which tribe should initiate the hostilities with the Canaanites. Doubtless they approached Eleazar the high priest. Through the priestly oracle—the Urim and Thummim<sup>1</sup>—Eleazar would have been able to answer their question. So far as the record goes this is the first time the Israelites asked advice from the Lord in this way.

Why the tribes felt they needed to have one tribe lead out in the tribal conquest is not stated. Perhaps there was a doubt whether the Lord would continue to drive out the Canaanites now that Joshua was gone from the scene. One tribe would “test the waters” for the others. The success of that tribe would signal all the others to launch their own campaigns. In spite of the uncertainties in the opening verses of Judges, two positive developments were triggered by Joshua’s death: (1) interest in tribal conquest was rekindled; and (2) the tribal leaders were concerned to seek God’s direction about the campaign.

The response of the Lord indicated that the tribes were right to renew the conquest and right to seek his will. The Lord indicated that Judah should go up first against the Canaanites. The Lord assured this tribe that he would give the land into their hand (1:1-2).

## **SUBSTANTIAL PROGRESS IN THE SOUTH**

### **Judges 1:3-21**

Judah invited the tribe of Simeon to “*come up*” to the Judean hill country to fight the Canaanites. Judah pledged to return the favor and subsequently aid the Simeonites in their territory. This was all together appropriate since the territory of Simeon was entirely within the territory of Judah (1:3). The allied tribes first attacked Bezek, then Jerusalem and other cities in the hill country, and finally the Negev and the coastal areas.

#### **A. At Bezek (Judg 1:4-7).**

First objective in the Judah-Simeon campaign was Bezek, the loca-



tion of which is uncertain. The Canaanite king Adoni-bezek (“Lord of Bezek”) was able to field an army of ten thousand, a considerable force for this small city state. Nonetheless, Yahweh gave his combined force of Canaanites and Perizzites into the hands of the two Israelite tribes. The king fled the scene; but he was pursued and apprehended. In just vengeance for his cruel reign of terror in the area the Israelites cut off his thumbs and big toes (1:4-6).

Adoni-bezek recognized the justice of what had befallen him. He himself had maimed seventy other kings over the years by cutting off their thumbs and toes. He had further humiliated his victims by making them gather scraps under his table like a pack of wild dogs. This cruel and proud king finally got a dose of his own medicine. Adoni-bezek was taken to Jerusalem where he subsequently died (1:7).

### **B. At Jerusalem and Hebron (Judg 1:8-10).**

Technically Jerusalem was not part of the tribal inheritance of Judah. The city, however, was right on the border with Benjamin. Therefore, the Judahites, perhaps in concert with the Benjaminites, captured Jerusalem, put its inhabitants to the sword, and then burned the city (1:8).

Judah next undertook a campaign against Hebron, formerly known as Kiriath-arba (1:10). The author of the Book of Joshua was concerned to emphasize the individual role of Caleb in this campaign (15:13f.). The writer here sees it as an illustration of tribal success. Both accounts are true. Caleb certainly did not defeat the Anakim there single-handedly. In 1:20 Judges gives Caleb due credit for what was accomplished at Hebron (1:9-10).

### **C. At Debir (Judg 1:11-15).**

Likewise Judges considers the conquest of Kiriath-sepher (“Book-town”), later called Debir, as a tribal victory. Yet Othniel was the hero of the battle. He had been challenged to undertake the campaign out of romantic considerations. Caleb had promised to give his daughter to the man who could capture the city. Othniel, Caleb’s younger brother, won the prize, presumably not without the acquiescence of Achsah. Uncle-niece marriages were not one of the forbidden categories of marriage under the law of Moses (1:11-12). This account

serves to set the stage for the judgeship of Othniel in chapter 3. The man was already a military hero in Israel before he was called to be Israel's first Judge.

The author of Judges appreciated the pluck of the women of Israel. Achsah is the first woman to appear in the book. She was not merely chattel, a possession gained by bloody fighting. She was a shrewd, determined, and farsighted woman. When Achsah "*came to him*" in marriage she persuaded her husband to request a field in addition to the city of Debir itself. She is the one who immediately pressed the request, with or without the permission of her husband. She pointed out to her father that a town in the Negev needed a water supply. So Caleb gave his daughter a "*blessing*" or wedding gift of two springs near Debir (1:14-15).

Aside from the author's interest in portraying women in a positive light, what might have been the purpose for the inclusion of this rather private and inconsequential event in Holy Scripture? This is a question which may not be conclusively answered. Certainly at the least it illustrates the principle, "Ask and you shall receive."

#### **D. Other Campaigns (Judg 1:16-18).**

The success of Judah in the Negev is indicated by the fact that the Kenites left the region of Jericho ("*city of palms*") and went to live among the Judahites in the wilderness area south of Arad (1:16). The Kenites were a Midianite tribe skilled in working with metals. Moses' in-laws were Kenites. Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, had apparently accepted Moses' offer to accompany the Israelites to the Promised Land (cf. Num 10:29).

The Judah-Simeon coalition next undertook the conquest of Zephath, a city allotted to Simeon. The city was "*utterly destroyed*" and thus was given the name Hormah ("*Destruction*").<sup>2</sup> Some twenty years earlier the Israelites had done the same thing to the cities of this region (cf. Num 21:1-3).<sup>3</sup>

In the Mediterranean coastal area the Judahites were able to take the Philistine cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron and surrounding territories. Unfortunately these cities did not remain under Israelite possession for very long.

**E. Status Report on the South (Judg 1:19-21).**

Whatever success Judah had in clearing the hill country of Canaanites was due to the presence of Yahweh. The Judahites, however, did not fare well against the inhabitants of the lowlands to the west because they had “*iron chariots*” (1:19). Why was Yahweh unable to help them in the lowlands? The problem was that (1) Judah did not press the initial advantage in the lowlands; and (2) failed to settle the areas which had been conquered.

Benjamin did even worse. They did not follow up on the initial Judahite victory over Jerusalem. The Jebusites returned, and the Benjaminites made no effort to drive them out. At the time the Book of Judges was written the Jebusites were still living “*with the sons of Benjamin*” in Jerusalem (1:21).

**UNEVEN PROGRESS IN THE NORTH****Judges 1:22-36**

The author now paints a picture of the progressive failure of the northern tribes to dispossess the Canaanites. The campaigns start well enough, but then tribal efforts slack off. Finally the Canaanites got the upper hand in one area and forced the relocation of the tribe of Dan.

**A. Initial Success (Judg 1:22-26).**

The house of Joseph (the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh) followed the example of Judah and launched a campaign to clean the Canaanites out of their territory. Bethel, which was initially conquered by Joshua (Josh 12:16), was their first target. “*The Lord was with them*” in this effort. Spies spotted a man coming out of the city. They requested that he show them “*the entrance*” of the place.

City entrances in this period had various configurations ranging from very simple to extremely complex zigzag affairs. To storm the entrance without having some advance knowledge of its construction would mean needless death to many soldiers. Like Rahab, the Bethelite apparently was sympathetic to the Israelite cause. Upon a promise of kind treatment from the attackers, the man diagramed the entrance to the city.<sup>4</sup> Bethel was subsequently smitten with the sword, i.e., put

to the ban. The informer, however, was released. Unlike Rahab, this unnamed man chose not to join the people of God. He moved north outside of Canaan to the land of the Hittites. There he built a city which he named Luz after the original name of Bethel.

### **B. Failures of the Joseph Tribes (Judg 1:27-29).**

Manasseh had been assigned certain cities from the tribes of Issachar and Asher (Josh 17:11). Four of these towns were in the Esdraelon valley, and one was on the coast. Manasseh *“did not”* take possession of these cities. They could have, but they did not. If fear was the initial reason for inaction, it did not continue to be a factor. The problem was not tribal strength, for at some point *“Israel became strong.”* Still the Canaanites were not driven from the land. They were only put to forced labor. One can only speculate as to the possible reasons for Manasseh’s failure (1:27-28).

The Ephraimites made the same mistake as their brethren the Manassehites by not driving out the inhabitants of Gezer. Again, the text does not say that Ephraim *could not* drive out the enemy. They simply left this strategic city in Canaanites hands (1:29).

### **C. Failures of the Other Tribes (Judg 1:30-36).**

Zebulun left two cities in the hands of the Canaanites. Zebulun was strong enough, however, to subject the Canaanites to forced labor (1:30). Asher and Naphtali *“lived among the Canaanites.”* This language suggests that at some point these tribes were actually at the mercy of the natives who lived in their territories. In the case of Dan, the Amorites forced a retreat back into the hill country of Ephraim. The Danites never were able to gain the upper hand (1:31-36).

And so the litany of failure concludes. Seven times in these verses the sad words appear: *“did not drive out.”* Certainly there were good reasons to have carried out God’s initial orders to drive the Canaanites from this land. Some of the sites left in Canaanite hands were geographically strategic. The danger from Canaanite enclaves, however, was fundamentally spiritual, not military or economic. Tolerant would lead to association and that to accommodation. Yahweh would come to be regarded as just another deity, one among many, that needed appeasement from time to time. Here in Judges 1 are

the roots of the apostasy so prevalent later in the book: failure to obey the primary command of God to expel the Canaanites.

From the standpoint of the author of Judges—a true preacher—the record of tribal activity in the north was one of dismal failure. The text, however, acknowledges that the Israelites did come eventually to dominate their Canaanite neighbors militarily and economically. Four times (vv. 28,30,33,35) he stresses that the Canaanites were put to forced labor. Thus the accusation here is not that Israel could not because of lack of faith drive out the Canaanites. Rather the charge is that Israel *deliberately disobeyed* the commandment of God. Israel *chose* to live side by side with Canaanites. Thus the text suggests that success may be measured by many yardsticks. Judged physically, Israel's occupation of Canaan was a success. Judged spiritually, Israel had miserably failed.

## A DIVINE REBUKE AND WARNING

### Judges 2:1-6

When the tribal efforts to expel the Canaanites ceased, the angel of Yahweh, whose directives launched the Conquest at Jericho (cf. Josh 5:13-15), appeared again. His message now was one of rebuke and warning.

#### A. The Appearance (Judg 2:1a).

The terminology “*angel of Yahweh*” is never used of a human messenger or prophet in the historical books.<sup>5</sup> The angel of Yahweh is a theophany, a visible manifestation of Yahweh. This appearance should be dated sometime between the death of the faithful elders who outlived Joshua c. 1380 BC and the rise of the first foreign oppressor c. 1367 BC.

The angel of Yahweh “*went up*” from Gilgal in the Jordan valley to Bochim. The location of Bochim is unknown, but apparently some prominent place in the hill country is meant. Since the passage indicates that the place received the name Bochim (“Weepers”) from what transpired in this passage, the site must have been known by another name before this event. Since the text indicates that the “angel” spoke to “*all Israel*” some place of national assembly must

be intended. Two places appear possibilities: Shechem where Joshua led Israel in covenant renewal, and Shiloh where the tabernacle was located.<sup>6</sup>

Why does the text speak of going up from “Gilgal”? The “angel” did not physically follow a road from the one site to the other. The text only means to say that the same divine personage who issued the initial battle plan at Gilgal now appeared at Bochim. At Gilgal the reproach of God’s people had been rolled away. There the covenant feast and covenant sign had been renewed after thirty-eight years of suspension. At Gilgal Israel learned the power of obedient faith; at Bochim the dismay of disobedience. Thus the phrase “from Gilgal to Bochim” expresses the decline of Israel from spiritually lofty heights to the pit of spiritual despair.<sup>7</sup>

### **B. The Message (Judg 2:1b-3).**

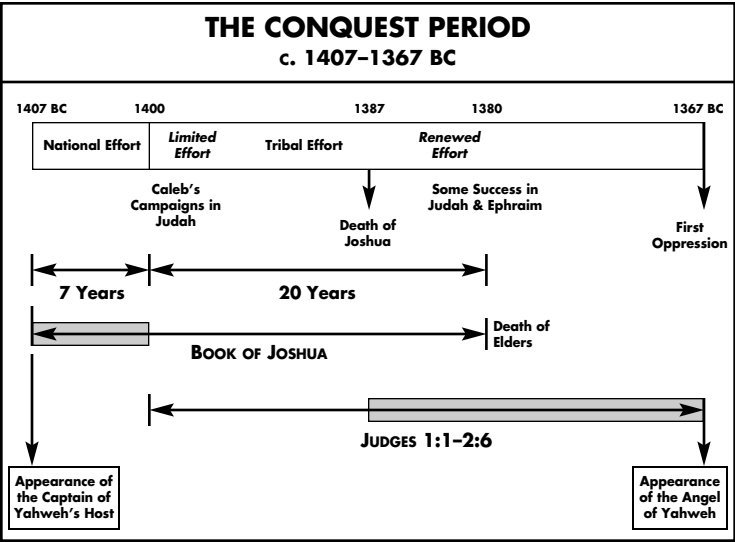
The “angel” did not introduce his speech with a messenger formula (“*thus says Yahweh*”) because the “angel” is Yahweh. What he said is something that only Yahweh could say. The message began with a reminder of three things. First, the “angel” reminded Israel of his gracious acts, how he had brought them out of Egypt; how he had brought them into the land which he had sworn to give to their fathers. Thus he is the God of dramatic power and faithful promise. Second, he reminded Israel of his gracious commitment. Yahweh had promised never to break the covenant with Israel. Third, he reminded Israel of covenant obligations. Israel was not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of Canaan. This reminder suggests that formal covenants had been made with the native population promising to spare their lives (cf. Josh 9). Furthermore, Israel was to destroy all Canaanite altars and symbols of worship (2:1b-2a).<sup>8</sup>

Following the reminder, the “angel” brought an accusation against Israel in the form of a direct statement and a question. “*You have not obeyed me.*” Nothing could be more plain and forceful than this terse statement (three words in the Hebrew). The question (“*What is this you have done?*”) is designed to underscore the shocking nature of such flagrant and deliberate disobedience to the Lord (2:2b).

Finally, the “angel” uttered a threat against Israel. It is couched in language previously used by the Lord in the days of Moses (Num

33:55) and in the days of Joshua (Josh 23:13). First, Yahweh threatens not to drive the Canaanites out before Israel. Second, these nations would be like thorns in the side of Israel, i.e., they would oppress them. Third, the Canaanite gods would be snares to entrap and finally destroy Israel. They would be infected by the cancer of Canaanite idolatry. Thus would Israel be ensnared in its own folly (2:3).

Chart No. 14



**C. The Reaction (Judg 2:4-5).**

In reaction to the appearance and message of the angel of Yahweh the people did three things. First, they lifted up their voice and wept. They were not yet so hardened as to be unmoved by the reminder of their spiritual failings. Second, they named the place Bochim ("Weepers"). Third, they sacrificed to the Lord.<sup>9</sup> Yet the text does not indicate that there followed any concerted effort to drive the Canaanites from the land. The tears of Bochim were those of remorse, but not real repentance.

## A PROPHETIC PROLOGUE

### Judges 2:6–3:4

In his first introduction to the Book of Judges (1:1–2:5) the author has concluded the record of the Conquest period. That period which began with such promise had a painful conclusion. Now the author presents a second introduction to the book, one which focuses on what will be emphasized in the chapters to follow. This section is a prophetic explanation—for the author was indeed a prophet—of all the tumult and turmoil of the period of the Judges. In these verses the text speaks of the peril of Israel, the person of God and the power of sin.

The second preface is not a continuation of 1:1–2:5 but rather parallels it. Both units begin with the death of Joshua; both conclude with the divine decision not to drive the Canaanites from the land. Here certain phrases from Joshua 24:28–31 are repeated almost verbatim. The conclusion of the former book has become one of the means by which this author opens his accounts of the various Judges. These verses interpret the stories of the Judges which follow in the book. In particular they reveal what God was doing during the period of the Judges.

#### **A. God's Assessment (Judg 2:6–13).**

The author hints at a number of perils which Israel faced toward the end of the Conquest period. Basically these verses describe how Israel got into the mess she was in during the days of the Judges.

1. *Loss of godly leadership (2:6–9).* The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and the elders who survived Joshua (cf. Josh 24:31) or for about twenty years after Joshua dismissed them to their individual tribal areas. This does not mean that they obeyed all that the Lord had commanded. It only means that they had not yet taken up with any of the Canaanite gods.

2. *Lack of experiential knowledge of the Lord (2:10).* Joshua's generation knew by experience the miraculous works of the Lord on behalf of Israel. After the death of Joshua and the elders, however, a new generation arose which had no experiential knowledge of Yahweh or of the mighty work which he had done for Israel. Knowing about the Lord is totally different than knowing the Lord.

3. *Lure of Baalism (2:11).* Israel's spiritual decline came slowly,



almost imperceptibly. Disregard for the command to dislodge the Canaanites led to toleration of their practices and worse. The new generation “*did evil in the sight of Yahweh*” by serving the various types of Baal gods and their female counterparts, the Ashtaroth. Baal was the fertility god worshiped throughout Canaan. Each community had its own version of Baal. This fertility religion with its sacred prostitutes appealed to all the baser instincts of man.

4. *Lapse of historical memory (2:12-13)*. They forsook Yahweh, the God of their fathers “*who had brought them out of the land of Egypt*.” Forsaking Yahweh is depicted as a gross act of ingratitude. Taking up with such gods constituted a rejection of the exclusive claims of Yahweh. Forsaking Yahweh meant regarding him as only one deity among many.

### **B. God's Actions (Judg 2:14-18).**

Davis suggests that the thrust of the second paragraph of this preface is on “the astonishing character” of God. Basically these verses present an overview of three centuries with a view to explaining how God dealt with the apostasy of his people.<sup>10</sup>

1. *Amazing in his anger (2:14-15)*. Already the author has mentioned the fact that the unfaithfulness of Israel “*provoked Yahweh to anger*” (2:12). That thought is now further developed. God’s anger burned against Israel. He “*gave them*” into the hands of “*plunderers*” who robbed them of their material goods. He “*sold them*” into the hands of enemies so that Israel could no longer stand up to them. No matter what direction they turned, the hand of Yahweh was against them just as he had warned them by solemn covenant oath.<sup>11</sup> Israel was severely distressed.

2. *Amazing in his salvation (2:16)*. God did not immediately “write off” Israel at the first sign of apostasy. The distress of Israel called forth further demonstrations of divine grace. He sent “Judges” to deliver them. He “*raised up*” these deliverers, i.e., he called and commissioned them, and then equipped them to successfully carry out their mission.

3. *Amazing in his patience (2:17)*. Israel did not respond to grace any more than to judgment. They did not listen to their Judges. Thus their guilt became all the more pronounced. They “*played the*

*harlot*” with other gods by bowing down to them. The Sinai covenant was like a marriage bond. Therefore, dalliance with other deities constituted spiritual adultery. Israel quickly turned aside from the path of obedience which their fathers had trod apparently even within the lifetime of the various Judges.

4. *Amazing in his pity (2:18)*. In spite of Israel’s disobedience Yahweh would raise up Judges to deliver them. The enemy could not prevail during the days of the Judge. God would give his people blessing and rest. Why did the Lord continue to show this kindness to his fickle people? Because he “*was moved to pity by their groaning*” in the face of their oppression. Even though his people were undeserving and unworthy the Lord had compassion on them during days of hardship.

Nothing God did during those centuries brought anything but temporary correction. Once a godly Judge died the people of Israel would revert to their idolatrous ways. They would act ever more “*corruptly*.” Each generation seemed to get worse. Sin became ingrained. The people refused to abandon their practices or their stubborn (lit., stiff-necked) ways. Thus it would appear that whereas the Judge might hold in check the outward manifestations of idolatry he could not erase the tendency toward this evil from the lives of his people (2:19).

### **C. God’s Anger (Judg 2:20–3:6).**

The structure of Judges 2 needs to be studied carefully. The angel of Yahweh appeared to announce that God would no longer drive out the Canaanites (2:1-5). The rest of the chapter explains in effect the reason for that announcement. The apostasy of Israel provoked the Lord to anger (2:12). His anger “*burned against Israel*” (2:14,20). In the concluding unit of this second introduction to Judges the anger of God is further explained.

In his anger Yahweh issued a sovereign decree. When was this decree issued? At some point after the death of Joshua and before the appearance of the angel of Yahweh. In fact the angel of Yahweh appeared to announce to Israel the decree which God had already determined against them. In other words, Judges 2:20 is a continuation of 2:12. The intervening verses are a prophetic preview of the entire period of the Judges.

God's policy regarding the Canaanite nations had changed. The reason is clearly stated. Israel had (1) transgressed the covenant and (2) disobeyed God. By serving pagan gods they transgressed the covenant (Exod 34:14-16). By tolerating Canaanites in their tribal areas they were disobeying the direct command of God. Israel's unfaithfulness released God from his commitment to destroy the Canaanites before Israel. He would no longer drive out from before them any of the nations which were left in the land when Joshua died. These nations would serve a further end in God's program. They would constitute a test for Israel as to whether or not Israel would walk in the way of Yahweh as their fathers had done (2:20-23).<sup>12</sup> Thus the inhabitants of Canaan were no longer under the ban. They would have a new standing before God as tools which he would use to test the loyalty of Israel.

In concluding his second introduction to the book, the author has appended two notes of clarification. First, he clarifies the particular group of Israelites which God had targeted for the "*testing*." Some Israelites were still on the scene (e.g., Othniel) who had participated in the great war against the Canaanites. The majority, however, had not really experienced the wars of Canaan. The testing applied to this new generation which had no firsthand experience of war. Instead of experiencing "*rest*" they would experience oppression, fear and bloodshed (3:1-2).

Second, the author clarifies the nations by whom the testing would be accomplished. The list of nations here is much like that which appeared in Joshua 13:2-6 at the conclusion of Joshua's military career. These nations included the inhabitants of the coastal plain (Philistines, Canaanites, Sidonians) and the Hivites who lived in the region of the Lebanon mountains. Thus the author listed only nations that lived beyond the reach of Joshua's conquests, not those that had largely been destroyed and survived only as scattered remnants within the conquered territory (3:3).<sup>13</sup>

Third, the author clarifies the intention of the testing. National trouble and war would test each new generation to see if it would choose to obey Yahweh's commandments which had been given through Moses (3:4).

## ENDNOTES

1. On the Urim and Thummim see Exod 28:30 and Num 27:21. In Judg 20:28 the text is explicit about inquiry through the high priest.

2. The Book of Joshua already used the name "Hormah" for this city. See Josh 12:14; 15:30; 19:4. Either this episode in Judg 1:17 took place before Joshua was written, or some later editor of Joshua updated the name of the town in these three places after the event of Judg 1:17.

3. Another possibility is that Num 21:3 was added to the text of Numbers after the Israelite Conquest to document that the wilderness vow had been fulfilled. In that case, Num 21:3 would be describing the same campaign as is here related in Judges 1:17.

4. Another interpretation is that he showed the Israelites some secret entrance to the city.

5. The prophet Haggai is called "messenger (angel) of Yahweh" (Hag 1:13). Malachi calls a priest "the messenger (angel) of Yahweh" (Mal 2:7).

6. From Judg 20:26f. it appears that the ark of the covenant was kept at Bethel for a time. In the light of this passage the identification of Bochim with Bethel (as is actually done in the LXX) is possible.

7. C.J. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Bible Student's Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 259-262.

8. Commands to destroy Canaanite altars and paraphernalia are found in Exod 19:5f.; 23:32f.; 34:12-15; Deut 7:2-6.

9. That they offered sacrifices there suggests, but does not require, that the site of Bochim was Shiloh. Under the law of Moses altars could be constructed at any spot sanctified by God's presence.

10. Dale Ralph Davis, *Such a Great Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 37.

11. By virtue of Yahweh's covenant with Israel the threats contained therein actually had the force of an oath. See Exod 24:1-8; Deut 29:12,21; Josh 24:19-24.

12. Judges 2:23 serves to answer the question why any Canaanites were left in the land at the end of Joshua's campaign. God's intention had been to destroy the Canaanites gradually (Exod 23:29f.). Joshua had fulfilled his role in the master plan, but the tribes had not.

13. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 275.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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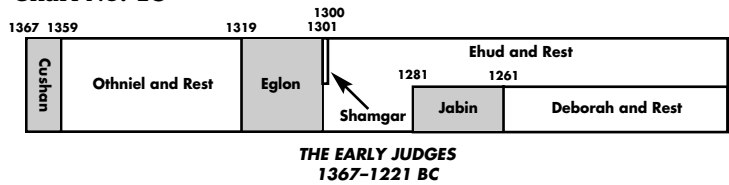
### A Strange Salvation Judges 3:5-5:31

The focus of Judges 3-16 is on the glory of God's salvation.<sup>1</sup> The author has selected several stories of sin, supplication and salvation in order that his readers might appreciate God's salvation even more.

Since God refused to drive out the native population any longer, the Israelites had no alternative except to live among the Canaanites. Thus at the outset of the period of the Judges Israel was living at peace with people who should have been their enemies. Toleration of pagan ways led to accommodation, integration and finally apostasy. Israel's distinct identity was thus compromised. Israelites married Canaanite women and served their gods (3:5-6). The warning from the Angel of Yahweh (2:1-5) obviously went unheeded.

The first four oppressions and deliverances of Israel in the Book of Judges fell roughly within the period 1367-1221 BC. The oppressors during this period were Cushan, Eglon, the Philistines and Jabin. The deliverers were Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar and Deborah. These deliverances arose from unexpected quarters. Thus a certain strangeness characterizes the salvation of God's people.

Chart No. 15



**SALVATION THROUGH AN OLD MAN**  
**Judges 3:7-11**

The account of the first oppression and deliverance sets a literary pattern for those which follow in the Book of Judges. Though Othniel was the tool used by the Lord in this situation, the spotlight is really on God throughout. The text speaks of the anger, grace, action and gift of God.

**A. The Anger of God (Judg 3:7-8).**

The author outlines in three steps the circumstances which led to the first oppression of Israel by an external power. These steps move from the general to the specific. First, Israel “*did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh.*” Second, Israel forgot Yahweh their God, i.e., forgot his claims, his commands, his character, and his mighty acts on behalf of the nation. Third, Israel served the various Baal gods of the Canaanites along with their female counterparts, the Asheroth (3:7).

The apostasy of Israel triggered the anger of Yahweh. His anger is a jealous anger which refuses to let go of his people. He would not allow them to be comfortable in their sin. God “*sold them*” into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim (NIV)—“Aram of the two rivers.”<sup>2</sup> “*Rishathaim*” was a nickname bestowed upon this oppressor by the Israelites. It means “double wicked.” Thus the Israelites called their oppressor “Double trouble from twin rivers.”

The name “Cushan” appears to be Hittite. Cushan may have been a king of the kingdom of Mitanni who was a vassal of the powerful Hittite empire. He was probably attempting to extend his kingdom southward into Canaan. Apparently the entire land of Canaan was subject to him. For eight years (c.1367-1359 BC) Israel “*served*” this

king. Presumably this meant that the Israelites paid tribute to Cushan. Throughout Old Testament history God frequently gave expression to his anger against unfaithfulness by empowering a Gentile ruler against his people.

### **B. The Grace of God (Judg 3:9).**

The Israelites “*cried unto Yahweh.*”<sup>3</sup> God was moved by those tears to raise up for his people a “*deliverer.*” To “*raise up*” means to call, commission and empower a person to do a certain job. In this case, the job was to deliver Israel from the oppression of Cushan. The author has previously introduced this deliverer. He was Othniel (“lion of God”), Caleb’s younger brother. Many years had elapsed since Othniel had established his credentials as a warrior in the capture of Debir. If he were as much as twenty years younger than Caleb he would have been about eighty-six at this point. The “lion of God” was indeed a harmless old lion. Even so, he had the spirit of his more famous brother who at the same age looked for giants to conquer! Othniel was the most prominent representative of that older generation which had witnessed God’s mighty deeds in the conquest of Canaan.

### **C. The Action of God (Judg 3:10).**

God used Othniel for great things. “*The Spirit of Yahweh*” came upon him. By that Spirit he was enabled to “*judge*” Israel. The function of the Judge was to set right what was wrong in the land. In this case, the wrong was the heartless oppression of Cushan. So *judging* Israel eventually meant going to war with Cushan. No details of the crucial battle are recorded. The text simply states that the Lord “*gave*” Cushan the double wicked into the hands of Othniel. The result was that Othniel “*prevailed*” over Cushan.

### **D. The Gift of God (Judg 3:11).**

The land of Israel had “*rest*” for forty years after the expulsion of Cushan. “*Rest*” does not merely mean the absence of war. The term has a more positive side to it. To have “*rest*” means to have peace, happiness and well-being.

The text mentions the death of Othniel after the forty years of rest. This is probably not to be taken to mean that Othniel lived through

that entire forty years. If so he would have been amazingly old—about 125—at the time of his death. Whereas in early Old Testament history some lived to this age and beyond, in this period people were not living such long lives. Surely note would have been taken of the fact had Othniel lived so much beyond the century mark. Most likely, then, the “rest” achieved by Othniel on the battlefield continued long after his death. This rest is probably to be dated about 1359-1319 BC.

### **SALVATION THROUGH A LEFTY** **Judges 3:12-30**

Judges goes into more detail concerning the second oppression and deliverance. The text speaks of the oppressor, the deliverer, the assassination of the oppressor and the victory over his forces.

#### **A. The Oppressor (Judg 3:12-14).**

Israel again began to do evil immediately after the death of Othniel and probably during the forty years of “rest.” Thus even while enjoying the blessing of Yahweh the people again did what was contrary to his will. A new generation had grown up after the oppression by Cushan. They ignored the lessons of their history and turned again to the paths of apostasy which their fathers had trod. At the conclusion of the forty years of “rest” God punished his people a second time by means of a foreign adversary. He “strengthened” Eglon, king of Moab, against Israel (3:12).

Eglon with his allies the Ammonites and Amalekites invaded and defeated Israel in some decisive battle. The forces of the king occupied “*the city of palm trees*” in the general vicinity of old Jericho. From that headquarters Eglon was able to wield authority over the Israelites for eighteen years (3:13-14).

#### **B. The Deliverer (Judg 3:15-16).**

Yahweh was moved again by the agonizing cries which his people directed unto him. The Lord therefore “*raised up*” Israel’s second deliverer. Concerning Ehud the text relates the following. First, he was the son of Gera. What significance may be attached to the mention of his father is not indicated. Second, Ehud was a Benjamite.



Chronologically, the civil war which almost wiped out the tribe of Benjamin (Judg 19-21) probably already had taken place. Ehud would be one generation removed from that time when his tribe had almost become extinct. Because of that bloody civil war "*Benjamite*" must have been in this period a designation of contempt.

What is more, Ehud was left-handed. Left-handedness in the ancient world was considered a stigma. The fact that Ehud was left-handed does not necessarily mean that his right arm was useless. In a right-handed world the left-handed enjoyed certain military advantages.<sup>4</sup> Some who trained to be warriors would have their right hand bound to their side throughout their youth so that they might become skilled in the use of their left hand. Within the tribe of Benjamin at the time of the civil war there were six hundred such warriors (Judg 20:16). Ehud may have been descended from one of them.

Ehud seems to have been designated as leader of the groups which annually carried the tribute to Eglon. Whether or not this was deemed an honor is questionable. Ehud had probably been in or led that delegation several times during the eighteen years of Moabite oppression. He saw clearly what action must be taken if Israel was to be liberated from these oppressors (3:15).

Apparently without telling anyone of his intentions, Ehud fashioned a two-edged sword a cubit (c. 18 inches) in length. This weapon he strapped on his right thigh under his garment. He had observed that the guards always checked the left side of those who sought an audience with the king. They (rightly) assumed that a right-handed man would draw his sword from his left side. Since he was left-handed Ehud thought he would be able to smuggle his weapon into the presence of Eglon. The weapon probably had no crosspiece on it and thus would have been easier to conceal under the long flowing robes (3:16).

### **C. The Assassination (Judg 3:17-22).**

Ehud had the assassination of Eglon carefully planned. First, he presented the tribute to the obese king as he had doubtless done many times before. Then he made sure his companions got safely through the Moabite perimeter in the Jericho region. He went with them as far as the "*idols*" at Gilgal.<sup>5</sup> There he turned back toward

Eglon's headquarters. He was readmitted to the king's presence by announcing that he had "*a secret message*" for the king. Eglon may have thought that Ehud was about to reveal some secret Israelite plan to rebel against him. In any case, it is clear that Eglon trusted Ehud. He ordered all attendants from the room (3:17-19).

In the cool roof chamber of the headquarters building, Ehud approached the king. He explained as he did so that his secret message was from God. Pagan people had no problem embracing many gods. Eglon probably believed that Israel's God Yahweh was to be respected in this land. So he rose, out of respect for the God from whom he believed he would receive a message. At this point Ehud reached for his sword. Before the king could take evasive action or even cry out for help, the sword was buried in his fat belly. Ehud struck the king with such force that even the handle of the razor-sharp blade entered the body of the king. Ehud did not attempt to withdraw the sword. The king's entrails came out around the gaping wound (3:20-22).

Some have voiced great concern over the ethics of Ehud's actions. These points need to be stressed: First, Ehud was raised up by God. His calling as a Judge required him to rid the land of those who were causing oppression. Second, Ehud did not act out of base motives of selfishness or personal vengeance. Third, the Bible does not explicitly nor implicitly condemn Ehud for the course he followed.

#### **D. The Escape (Judg 3:23-26).**

The details of Ehud's escape from the scene of the assassination are not clear. Somehow he was able to lock the doors to the upper room where the king had died. One view is that he used a key taken from the person of the dead king to lock the doors from without. Another view is that he bolted the doors from the inside and then fled through a back door or window, or possibly even through the toilet shaft.<sup>6</sup> It is not clear whether or not the king's servants actually noticed Ehud leave. When they attempted to return to their stations in the upper room, they found the door locked. The locked door plus the odor that must have been generated by the rupture of the king's anal sphincter led the courtiers to conclude that the king was defecating (lit., "covering his feet") in the upper chamber. No doubt Israelites

told this story over the years with a chuckle over the stupidity of the Moabite soldiers (3:23-24).

The royal guards waited until they became anxious. They then secured the key and opened up the upper room. There they were shocked (*“behold!”*) to find their master lying on the floor dead. Meanwhile Ehud had escaped to Seirah, an otherwise unknown location in the hill country (3:25-26).

### **E. The Victory (Judg 3:27-30).**

Ehud blew the trumpet throughout the hill country of Ephraim. After explaining what he had done, the Israelites followed him back down toward the Jordan. He assured the hastily assembled troops that Yahweh had given their enemies into their hand. The Israelite hosts seized the Jordan fords leading to Moab. None of the enemy was allowed to escape. About ten thousand Moabites were killed in the struggle (3:27-29).

The defeat of the Moabite army at the Jordan eliminated the threat from that quarter for a number of years. *“Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel.”* Consequently that part of the land was undisturbed for eighty years (3:30).<sup>7</sup>

## **SALVATION THROUGH A GENTILE**

### **Judges 3:31**

Only one verse describes the career of Shamgar. The name is not Hebrew. For that reason scholars think he probably was a Gentile. He is called *“the son of Anath.”* Anath was the name of a female goddess of sex and war among the Canaanites. This may be the intended meaning here, but other possible explanations have been proposed.<sup>8</sup> A note in chapter 5 (5:6) suggests that Shamgar was a man of considerable influence for some time. Though little is recorded about him in the Bible he must have been a legend in his own time.

God used Shamgar to deliver Israel from a new threat from the west. Shamgar’s exploits against the Philistines should be dated about 1300 BC or shortly thereafter. Shamgar was able to strike down six hundred Philistines using as his weapon an ox goad, a sharp-pointed stick used to prod oxen. The strangeness of God’s salvation is indicat-

ed by the odd instruments which the deliverers used against the enemy. Ehud used a homemade dagger, Jael a hammer and peg. Now Shamgar is said to have used an ox goad. God can win great victories with whatever is in the hand of a willing servant.

## SALVATION THROUGH A WOMAN

### Judges 4:1-24

The author of Judges appreciated godly women. Already he has given a cameo of Achsah, Caleb's lovely and clever daughter (Judg 1:13-15). In the fourth deliverance account of Judges the author introduces two women totally different in personality and station, but equally committed to the kingdom of God.

#### A. The Need for Salvation (Judg 4:1-3).

The text does not actually relate when Ehud died. Most likely he did not live to the conclusion of the eighty years of "*rest*" which followed his victory over the Moabites. A suggested date would be 1281 BC. In any case, when he died "*the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yahweh.*" Commitment which depends on some external force (e.g., Ehud) is not real commitment. Sin is soberingly repetitious. This apostasy most likely began in the northern tribes where the influence of Ehud's work had been felt the least.

The Lord "*sold them*" into the hand of a Canaanite king named Jabin whose capital was in Hazor. This is not the same Jabin who ruled Hazor in the days of Joshua almost a century and a half earlier (Josh 11:10-13). "*Jabin*" may have been a dynastic title for all the rulers of this city. Perhaps while Israel had been occupied with the oppressions by Cushan and Eglon this Canaanite city had gradually risen to power.

The commander of Jabin's army was Sisera whose military headquarters was in Harosheth-hagoyim (location unknown). The main source of Sisera's power was a unit of nine hundred iron chariots. For twenty years (c. 1281-1261 BC) he was able to dominate northern Israel (4:1-3).

**B. The Tools of Salvation (Judg 4:4-11).**

Deborah differed from all the other Judges who appear in the book in four respects. First, she was a woman, “*the wife of Lappidoth*.” Women in positions of political or spiritual leadership during Old Testament history were rare. Second, unlike the other Judges who began their careers in response to a foreign oppression, Deborah seems to have been active for some time prior to the deliverance from Sisera. She was “*judging Israel at that time*.” Third, Deborah is described as “*a prophetess*.” She received direct revelation from the Lord which enabled her to interpret the past, give direction in the present and announce the future. Fourth, Deborah had a regular spot from which she judged Israel. Under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim Deborah held court. The sons of Israel came there to her for “*judgment*.” Life in the heart of Israelite territory could proceed as usual. Jabin’s influence had not spread much further south than the valley of Esdraelon (4:4-5).

How long Deborah ministered prior to the great deliverance is not stated. At some point she summoned Barak from Kadesh in the tribal area of Naphtali. Kadesh was further north than Hazor. Undoubtedly Deborah was following divine direction when she summoned this man. Barak came from the tribe which had suffered the most under the Canaanite oppression. Deborah shared with him a prophetic revelation which directed him to assemble ten thousand men and march them to Mount Tabor overlooking the valley of Esdraelon. He was to secure his troops from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. God promised to “*draw out*” (lit., pull or drag out) Sisera to the river Kishon which flowed through the valley. He promised to give Sisera into the hand of Barak (4:6-7).

Barak agreed to carry out this divinely ordained mission if Deborah would accompany him. Was Barak showing cowardice? Was his faith wavering in spite of the assurances which Deborah had given? Not necessarily. He may simply have wanted Deborah to be present for the value of her prophetic advice. In any case, Deborah was quite willing to go with Barak. She warned Barak, however, that the honor associated with a victorious campaign would not belong to him. She predicted that the Lord would “*deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman*.” That prediction is fulfilled in an amazing manner later in the chapter (4:8-9).

Encouraged by Deborah's agreement to go to Kadesh with him, Barak raised his army of ten thousand men. These men came from the two tribes most affected by Jabin's oppression, Naphtali and Zebulun. Other tribes, however, contributed to the effort (cf. 5:14). Deborah kept her word and went up to Kadesh with Barak (4:10).

A parenthetical note introduces another aspect of the strangeness of God's salvation. Heber separated himself from the Kenites who had migrated to the southern part of Judah (cf. Judg 1:16). He moved north to the general region of Kadesh. Jael, Heber's wife, will be yet another tool used by God in the deliverance from Sisera. Thus the author of Judges would have his readers reflect on the providence of God which led a family to relocate and thus position itself to be the agent of God's salvation (4:11).

### **C. The Day of Salvation (Judg 4:12-16).**

The movement of ten thousand men from Kadesh to Mount Tabor could not be kept secret, nor did the Israelites wish to keep it so. Sisera heard that this army had positioned itself on Tabor. He therefore massed his nine hundred chariots and supporting infantry. He slowly began to move his forces from his headquarters to the Kishon river in the valley of Esdraelon. Sisera probably thought this show of force would intimidate the Israelites as it had done many times before. The position of the Israelites atop Mount Tabor was a strong one, but they could not stay there forever. As soon as they dared to come into the valley of Esdraelon Sisera aimed to destroy them (4:12-13).

Deborah the prophetess was not intimidated. She urged Barak to launch the attack. She predicted that this day Yahweh would deliver Sisera into the hand of Barak. "*Behold,*" she said cryptically, "*Yahweh has gone out before you.*" His faith strengthened by the words of the prophetess, Barak led the charge down the slopes of Mount Tabor (4:14).

The Lord "*routed*" (lit., threw into confusion)<sup>9</sup> Sisera and his army "*with the edge of the sword*" before Barak. That, however, was not the whole story. Apparently a driving rainstorm made the floor of the valley impossible terrain for the chariot forces (cf. 5:20f.). When Sisera saw that the battle was lost he fled on foot. Meanwhile Barak pursued the chariots and infantry back to their headquarters at

Harosheth-hagoyim. Not one of the enemy troops survived the onslaught by Barak's men (4:15-16).

#### **D. The Completeness of Salvation (Judg 4:17-24).**

While his army fled west, Sisera on foot fled north and east. At Zaananim he came upon the tent of Heber. As he approached, Jael went out to meet him. She invited him to come into her tent. She urged him not to be afraid. Since there was peace between King Jabin and the Kenites, Sisera thought he might find sanctuary within Jael's tent. She then *"covered him with a rug."* The general requested a drink of water. Jael gave him goat's milk instead. Sisera requested that Jael stand in the doorway of the tent to divert possible pursuers (4:17-20).

When Sisera fell asleep, Jael seized the opportunity to strike a blow for freedom. She took a tent peg and hammer. These were items she knew well how to use, for among the desert peoples the pitching of the tent was the work of the women. She cautiously approached the sleeping general. Sisera, however, was so exhausted by his flight that he was fast asleep. Jael drove the tent peg through his temple. The tyrant of the past twenty years was dead. As Barak approached her tent, Jael came out to meet him. She invited him into the tent to see *"the man whom you are seeking."* There Barak saw Sisera lying in a pool of blood with a tent peg in his temple (4:21-22).

With his army totally annihilated it was only a matter of time before King Jabin himself fell before Israel. *"The hand of the sons of Israel pressed heavier and heavier upon Jabin."* Finally he was destroyed, just as Joshua had destroyed the earlier Jabin who had ruled Hazor.

### **SALVATION'S STRANGE SONG**

#### **Judges 5:1-31**

Deliverance from a ruthless adversary demands celebration. Judges 5 is a song sung by Deborah and Barak on the day of the great victory over Sisera. This ancient piece of Hebrew poetry is difficult to translate. Popular English versions of the Bible reflect a wide range of possible renderings of this chapter. Nonetheless, this poem is regarded as one of the masterpieces of world literature.<sup>10</sup>

### **A. The Savior (Judg 5:1-11).**

The poem begins with praise for Yahweh. First, the Lord is praised because the leaders led and the people volunteered to follow them. Without courageous leaders and loyal followers God's work cannot be accomplished (5:2). Second, the poem praises Yahweh for his awesome presence. Yahweh is depicted going out "*from Seir*" or Edom. As he marched forth the ground trembled, the heavens dripped water. At Sinai the mountains quaked at the presence of Yahweh. This same God who with such awesome power appeared at Sinai had now come to the aid of his people against Sisera (5:3-5).

The presence of God among his people was much needed. The situation in Israel had been desperate in the days of Shamgar and Jael.<sup>11</sup> Major highways controlled by the Canaanites in the north and the Philistines in the south were deserted. New gods were being worshiped. Though war threatened their cities, Israel had no courage to take up shield or spear in defense of the land. Forty thousand could have been hurled against Sisera, but no one would fight in those desperate days before Deborah arose.<sup>12</sup> She inspired confidence in the troops. Deborah realized, however, that she would not have been able to gain the victory without the aid of valiant commanders. For them she praised the Lord (5:6-9).

All segments of society are called upon to join the song of joy now that some normalcy had been restored. The ruling class ("*who ride on white donkeys*"), the merchants ("*who travel on the road*") and the shepherds all have reason to celebrate "*the righteous deeds of Yahweh*" (5:10-11).

### **B. The Summons (Judg 5:12-18).**

Next the poem recalls how the people of Israel responded to the appeal to rise up against their enemies. Barak responded first to the challenge to take captives of the enemy. Then those who had survived the twenty years of oppression responded. "*The people of Yahweh came down to me [Deborah] as warriors.*" Leaders from the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (west Manasseh), Zebulun and Issachar joined Deborah for the rebellion. They followed Barak into the valley of Esdraelon (5:12-15a).

Not all the tribes were interested in fighting against Sisera for the



freedom of God's people. The Reubenites had "*great resolves of heart*," i.e., good intentions. They talked about joining the fray. They searched their heart. Finally, however, the Reubenites decided that they were just too busy with their sheep. The Gileadites (the tribes of east Manasseh and Gad) also remained safely on the other side of Jordan. West of Jordan no help was offered by Dan and Asher. These two coastal tribes were caught up in a profitable maritime trade. Those who rest secure while their brothers fight the battle nearby stand condemned by the Lord (5:15b-17).

The unit dealing with "the summons" closes on a positive note. If there were tribes which refused to fight for freedom, there were two in particular which merited special praise. Zebulun was "*a people who despised their lives even to death*." They courageously threw themselves into the struggle without considering the fact that they might lose their lives in the battle. The same was true of Naphtali (5:18).

### **C. The Struggle (Judg 5:19-23).**

The kings of Canaan—those who were allies with Jabin—sent their armies to fight the insurgents. At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo in the valley of Esdraelon the two armies clashed. The Canaanites were not able this time to take plunder. "*The stars fought from heaven*" against Sisera. This is a poetic way of speaking of how the Lord intervened in the battle. A terrific rainstorm caused the normally placid Kishon river to become a raging torrent. The horses mightily struggled to pull their chariots through the morass, but to no avail (5:19-22).

The third unit of the poem closes with a reference to the failure of another group of Israelites to assist in the battle. Through Deborah the "*angel of Yahweh*" put a curse on Meroz "*because they did not come to the help of Yahweh*" in the struggle against the enemy warriors. This city was near to the scene of the battle. Even after the battle had been won these Israelites did not help in the pursuit (5:23).

### **D. The Slaying (Judg 5:24-27).**

The fourth unit of the poem celebrates Jael's contribution to the struggle for freedom. Her blessing stands in sharp contrast to the

curse on Meroz. She is called “*most blessed of women*.” She was an ordinary woman of a tent-dwelling tribe. She normally attended to duties about “*the tent*.” Jael, however, is celebrated for her cleverness, courage and strength. Sisera asked for water which might refresh him. She cleverly gave him milk instead. This hastened his sleep. She took her life in her hand as she approached the sleeping general. She used all of her strength to pound that tent peg through the temple of the sleeping tyrant.

### **E. The Sorrow (Judg 5:29-30).**

While there is jubilation in Israel, Deborah paints a sad picture of the sorrow that filled at least one heart. As a mother Deborah could understand the pain which one woman must be feeling. Every Sisera has a mother, someone who loves him in spite of his cruelty. So Deborah imagines how it must have been that day for Sisera’s mother.

In typical motherly concern Sisera’s mother paced in the palace, looking out the window from time to time to see if she could see any evidence that the troops were returning from the battle. She could not understand the delay that day. Those about her—“*her wise princesses*”—attempted to console her by suggesting various explanations for the inordinate delay. Perhaps the division of the spoil captured from the Israelites was so great that it was taking longer than usual to divide it among the soldiers. Perhaps females had been captured as a result of the battle and the soldiers were having their way with them. In any case, Sisera would return shortly bringing wonderful garments for his mother and others in the palace. Sisera’s mother heard these suggestions, and even convinced herself that they were correct. She repeated them to herself. She knew not that another mother had engineered the defeat of her son on the battlefield. She had no idea that even while she was anticipating sharing the spoils of the battle, her son lay dead at the feet of a humble tent woman (5:28-30).

### **F. The Supplication (Judg 5:31).**

Deborah was not a hard woman. She could appreciate the pain that the death of a Sisera might have on another mother. At the same time Deborah was not guided by feminine sentimentality. She loved the Lord and the people of the Lord more than life itself (5:31a).

The poem concludes with a twofold prayer. First, she prayed “*Thus let all your enemies perish, O Yahweh.*” The prophetess thus regards Sisera as one of the enemies of the Lord. Wicked oppressors frequently respond to no inducement to moderate their ways. They respond only to force. In essence Deborah was praying that God’s kingdom might be established on earth as it is in heaven. She longed for the day when God’s people would enjoy permanent “rest” because the last of their oppressors had been destroyed. Second, Deborah prayed that those who love the Lord might be “*like the rising of the sun in its might.*” God’s people are meant to be a light in this world which dispels the power of darkness (5:31b).

The account of Deborah concludes with a note that the land had rest for forty years (5:31c). The rest can be dated to about 1261-1221 BC.

## ENDNOTES

1. Dale Ralph Davis reached a similar conclusion in *Such a Great Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 47.

2. The NASB rendering “Mesopotamia” is not accurate.

3. The dominant connotation of the Hebrew *za’aq* is desperation. When repentance is included another word is added for clarity. Therefore the cries for help in Judges do not necessarily imply real repentance. See Davis, *Salvation*, p. 50.

4. Baruch Halpern, “The Assassination of Eglon,” *Bible Review* (December 1988): 35.

5. The “*idols*” may refer to the twelve stones erected at Gilgal by Joshua when Israel crossed the Jordan. Goslinga, however, thinks the idols were Moabite, that the Gilgal is not the famous site by that name, but the place mentioned in Josh 15:7 which was southwest of Jericho on the road to Jerusalem. *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Bible Student’s Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 282.

6. For a discussion of the various views and a fascinating presentation of the “toilet” view see Halpern, “Assassination,” pp. 35-41.

7. The eighty years of rest following the Moabite oppression should be dated about 1301-1221 BC. Most likely this period of rest in the south was coterminous with the oppression of Jabin, and the deliverance and rest under Deborah in the north.

8. Some think “Anath” was an abbreviation for the name of a town such as Beth-anat in Galilee (Josh 19:38).

**9.** The same Hebrew word is used in reference to the Egyptians (Exod 14:24f.) and the Amorites (Josh 10:10).

**10.** Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 295.

**11.** The reference in Judg 5:6 has implications for the chronology of the book. A casual reading of the text suggests that Shamgar delivered Israel from the Philistines at least twenty years before Jael slew Sisera. Yet in this poem the two are viewed as contemporaries dealing with the same general set of circumstances.

**12.** Deborah arose “*a mother in Israel*” or “*as a mother in Israel*.” In the first translation Deborah would be claiming that she was in fact a mother. In the second she would be saying that she adopted all Israel as her children and served them with motherly devotion.

## Strength in Weakness

### Judges 6-8

The first four instruments used by Yahweh in the period of the Judges illustrate the strangeness of God's salvation. The fifth—Gideon—illustrates how God demonstrates his strength through human weakness. God delights in using the weak things of this world to confound the wise.

#### **THE NEED FOR SALVATION**

##### **Judges 6:1-6**

At some point during the forty years of rest after the deliverance from Jabin, the Israelites again “*did evil in the sight of Yahweh.*” About 1221 BC the Lord “*gave them*” into the hands of the Midianites for seven years. This desert people were descended from Abraham through his concubine Keturah (Gen 25:2). Because the Midianites were distant relatives of the Israelites this oppression was particularly onerous. Each year at harvest the Midianites, along with their

allies, would sweep in from the desert, cross the Jordan, proceed up the Esdraelon valley, the bread basket of Canaan, and then south through the coastal plain. They confiscated all the grain which they could carry away with them. The Midianites would bring their camels with them in such numbers that an accurate count was impossible. Like a locust plague they would strip the land. The invaders would leave virtually no means of sustenance for the people of Israel or their animals. The Israelites salvaged what they could in mountain caves and dens.

### A PROPHETIC EXPLANATION

#### Judges 6:7-10

These annual incursions brought the Israelites low. They cried to the Lord. The answer to their prayer came in a strange way. God sent a prophet to them. That Israel should understand the present predicament was more important than the immediate deliverance from their oppressors (6:6-8a). God gave them what they really needed, not what they wanted. Understanding a problem may be more important than eliminating the problem. The word of God is the key to such understanding.

The unnamed prophet began with a messenger formula: "*Thus says Yahweh.*" This is a claim that what the prophet was saying was directly spoken by "*the God of Israel.*" First, the Lord reminded his apostate people of his gracious acts in the past. He had brought them out of slavery in Egypt. He had delivered them from the hands of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. Those "*oppressors*" who stood in Israel's path en route to Canaan (e.g., Sihon and Og) were dispossessed before the people of God. The Lord gave to his people the land of all their enemies (6:8b-9).

Second, the prophet stressed the relationship which existed between God and Israel, a relationship which had been initiated by the Lord himself. Often God had declared Israel to be his people. He had bound himself to them by covenant.

Third, the prophet repeated the basic demand of Yahweh's covenant: Israel must not "*fear*" (i.e., worship or serve) the gods of the Amorites in whose land they were dwelling.

Finally, after these various reminders, the Lord through his prophet made this charge: “*You have not obeyed me*” (6:10). The word of the Lord exposes and rebukes human failings. How gracious God is to bring his word of judgment to bear upon the lives of his wayward people!

The text does not indicate directly what effect the preaching of the prophet throughout the land might have had. The purpose of his coming was to bring the nation to repentance and thereby prepare them for the deliverance from Midian. When the prophet had finished his work, the Angel of Yahweh himself appeared in the land.

### **THE CALL OF A DELIVERER** **Judges 6:11-40**

More is known about the call of Gideon than of any of the other Judges. His call involved three types of divine revelation. In the first the Lord appeared directly to Gideon. In the second, God spoke verbally to Gideon. The third revelation involved supernatural deeds of God. These three types of revelations were designed to equip Gideon spiritually and psychologically for the great work he was about to do.

#### **A. A Theophanic Revelation (Judg 6:11-24).**

In a theophany God appeared directly to individuals in the Old Testament period. When he assumed human-like form, the theophany is called the Angel of Yahweh. That Angel who last appeared at Bochim at the conclusion of the Conquest period (Judg 2:1-5), now made his first appearance during the Judges period.<sup>1</sup>

1. *The challenge presented (6:11-16).* The Angel sat down under a well-known oak tree on the property of Joash who was of the Abiezrite clan of the tribe of Manasseh. Joash's son Gideon was nearby beating out wheat in a wine press. By threshing his wheat in this unlikely place Gideon hoped to preserve a portion of the harvest from the Midianites (6:11).

The Angel made himself known to Gideon through an abrupt greeting: “*May Yahweh be with you.*” This was a common greeting in the days of the Judges (cf. Ruth 2:4). The Angel addressed Gideon as “*valiant warrior.*” Gideon was in no mood for pleasantries. He

challenged the assumption that Yahweh would be with any Israelite. If Yahweh were with us—the shift to plural is noteworthy—then *“why has all this happened to us?”* The unstated premise upon which this question rests is that God would not allow such unpleasant circumstances if he were really with his people. He surely could not look askance while his people suffered. He would surely perform some mighty act on their behalf. Where were all the miracles which Yahweh was said to have performed in former generations? Since he had seen no evidence of miraculous intervention, Gideon could only conclude that Yahweh had abandoned his people. He had given them over to the power of Midian (6:12-13).

God answered Gideon’s objections by revealing more of himself to the man. The Angel of Yahweh (who now is identified simply as Yahweh) faced Gideon. Gideon could see that the stranger was not making light of him. He was in dead earnest. Then came the commission: *“Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian.”* The *“strength”* to which the Angel alluded was the power which God supplies to those he calls to do his bidding. The question *“Have I not sent you?”* calls attention to that divine source of power (6:14).

Gideon was beginning to realize that the one with whom he was speaking was no ordinary person. He questioned, not the power of God, but the wisdom of God’s choice: *“How shall I deliver Israel?”* Gideon saw his family as being the least in the tribe of Manasseh. He was the youngest in his family. He was lacking two essential ingredients of leadership: influence and maturity (6:15).

Yahweh bolstered the self-confidence of Gideon by reiterating the words of the greeting with which the conversation had begun. What was first stated as a mild wish now became a solid promise. *“Surely I will be with you.”* God’s presence would enable Gideon to smite the entire Midianite army as though he were smiting only one man (6:16).

2. *The credentials offered (6:17-24).* Gideon wanted proof that it really was the Angel of Yahweh who was speaking to him. He requested a *“sign,”* (i.e., supernatural verification) of the identity of this stranger. Gideon wished to present an offering to the stranger, as Abraham had done so many years before (Gen 18:5-8). Gideon specified no particular miracle. He must have assumed that an



“*offering*” would give the Lord opportunity to show his power in some manner. The Angel agreed to remain until the offering was presented (6:17-18).

Gideon prepared an elaborate meal to present as an offering to his guest—a young goat and a tremendous quantity of unleavened bread.<sup>2</sup> He put the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot and brought it to the Angel who was waiting patiently beneath the oak tree. The Angel directed him to place the goat and the unleavened bread on a rock which became a makeshift altar. The broth he was to pour out, perhaps on the offering. The Angel then put out the end of his staff and touched the offering. Fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the goat and the unleavened bread. At the same time the Angel vanished from his sight (6:19-21).

Gideon now was certain that he had been conversing with the Angel of Yahweh, a manifestation of God himself. He was immediately stuck with fear. “*Alas*” signifies the deepest agony. Gideon apparently felt that to look upon the Angel of Yahweh face to face would mean death. What irony! Gideon needed assurance of Yahweh’s promise (v. 16), but when the assurance came he was intimidated, not emboldened (6:22).

God spoke to him, no doubt in an audible voice. He urged him not to be afraid. He would not die. Gideon immediately built an altar to Yahweh to mark the spot of this manifestation. He named that altar “*Yahweh is Peace*” to celebrate the fact that he had seen the Angel face to face without tasting death. At the time the Book of Judges was written that altar was still present in Ophrah (6:23-24).

### **B. A Verbal Revelation (Judg 6:25-32).**

In the theophanic revelation Yahweh had indicated that he was committed to Gideon. That very night in a verbal revelation Yahweh demanded that Gideon demonstrate his commitment to his God.

1. *Requirements of Gideon’s God (6:25-27).* Gideon was directed to destroy his father’s Baal altar and the Asherah pole beside it. Those who would be leaders of God’s people must first set in order the affairs of their own house. Gideon was then to build an altar to Yahweh “*on top of this stronghold.*” The two altars could not exist side by side. One cannot serve both Yahweh and Baal (6:25).

Gideon was to use the wood of the Asherah pole for kindling. Then he was to offer up to Yahweh the seven-year old bull. The deliberate mention of the bull's age may be an allusion to the fact that Midian had oppressed Israel for seven years. Offering up the bull would then symbolize national rededication after this length of time.<sup>3</sup> Be that as it may, Gideon took ten men of his servants and carried out the instructions of the Lord. Because he anticipated interference from his father's household and the men of the city, he destroyed the Baal altar by night (6:26-27).

2. *Reactions of Gideon's neighbors (6:28-30).* The men of the city discovered the next day that the Baal altar and Asherah had been destroyed. A new altar of the fashion used in Yahweh worship had been constructed. They could tell that the new altar had been used during the night for sacrificial purposes. Diligent inquiry revealed that Gideon was guilty. The town leaders demanded that Gideon be handed over by his father to be executed for the sacrilege.

3. *Response of Gideon's father (6:31-32).* Joash refused, however, to hand over Gideon. He argued in effect that Baal, if he really were a god, could take care of himself. Here Gideon's father seems to be taking a decisive stand against Baal and his worshipers. Growing out of this incident Gideon received the nickname Jerubbaal, "Let Baal Contend against Him" (6:28-32). This passage makes crystal clear that the struggle against foreign oppression and the struggle against foreign gods were inextricably linked.

### **C. Action Revelations (Judg 6:33-40).**

Gideon heard no further from the Lord until the Midianites swept into the land on their annual raid. Then he received a new revelation, not in words, but in actions. These new revelations equipped him for his mission and confirmed him in it.

1. *The equipping revelation (6:33-35).* At the time the Midianites and their allies came up into the valley of Jezreel, the Spirit of God "came upon Gideon" (lit., clothed himself with Gideon). He was empowered to assume leadership. He blew a trumpet in the area of his clan, and the Abiezrites came together to follow Gideon into battle. Messengers were sent throughout the tribe of Manasseh and neighboring tribes. Thousands responded and joined Gideon and his nucleus of Abiezrites (6:33-35).

2. *The confirming revelation (6:36-40).* Gideon still needed reassurance that God would deliver Israel. This is cautious faith, but it certainly is not unbelief. Gideon thus put out his fleece on a threshingfloor. He requested that the fleece be wet the next day, and the ground about it dry. That would prove that the Lord would use Gideon to deliver Israel. The next morning Gideon found the fleece soaking wet. Still he needed reassurance. He put the same fleece out and requested that it remain dry while the ground round about was wet. Since wool has a tendency to absorb moisture, the fleece could only remain dry by supernatural intervention. The next morning the fleece was dry. Gideon was now ready to lead his troops against the Midianites (6:36-40).

The Lord granted both signs to Gideon because his request was not a demand made in unbelief, nor was it an arbitrary test of God's faithfulness.<sup>4</sup> A double sign was appropriate because Gideon would shortly experience a double testing of his faith. God delights in strengthening fragile faith. Far better to admit weakness and ask for strengthening than to go into battle with a cocky faith.

## **THE METHODS OF FAITH**

### **Judges 7:1-18**

The account of the deliverance by Gideon reveals clearly the methods of faith. God delights in teaching his people absolute dependence on him. Hence in this unit the narrator discusses the reduction of Gideon's army, the concessions which God made to Gideon's weakness, and the preparations for the battle.

#### **A. Reduction of the Force (Judg 7:1-8).**

Gideon may have been ready for confrontation with the Midianites, but God was not. Gideon had positioned his troops at the spring of Harod. The Midianites were encamped beneath in the valley of Jezreel. The Lord spoke to Gideon there on the eve of battle. Gideon's army was too large to be an effective tool of God. If the battle were won using such a large force, the Israelites would attribute victory to their own power. God's people have a propensity for

glorifying their own efforts, for stealing the praise that belongs to the Lord (7:1-2).

Gideon was instructed to use the provision of the law of Moses (cf. Deut 20:8) and dismiss all those who were afraid when they looked down upon the Midianite camp. Twenty-two thousand men left the army. Gideon now had but ten thousand men to face the hordes below (7:1-3).

Gideon must have been a bit apprehensive as he saw two-thirds of his troops walk away. Again the Lord declared "*The people are still too many.*" Gideon was directed to bring his remaining forces down to the water so that God might test them there. Only those who passed the water test would be permitted to go with Gideon into battle. At the water Gideon was told to segregate those who lapped water as a dog from those who knelt down to drink. The "lappers" scooped up water in the hand and drank while standing. They refused to break ranks. These numbered three hundred. The 9,700 who knelt down to drink were dismissed. The three hundred men apparently took the provisions of those who left including their trumpets (7:4-8).

The major question regarding the river episode is whether the "lappers" were intrinsically better soldiers than those who knelt to drink. Those who preach on this passage usually affirm that the "lappers" were more vigilant, more disciplined than the others. Commentators are divided on the question. Many feel that God simply used the drinking exercise as a mechanism for further reducing the force to "faith size." Certainly the text is silent about any military superiority of the "lappers" over the "kneelers."

### **B. Concession to Weakness (Judg 7:9-14).**

That night the Lord again spoke to Gideon. If he had the least bit of fear regarding his mission, he was to go to the enemy camp. If he was afraid to go alone, he was authorized to take with him his personal servant Purah. God wanted Gideon to eavesdrop on a conversation in the Midianite camp which would "*strengthen*" his hands, i.e., give him confidence. What a concession to human frailty! God knows how scared circumstances can make his servants.

Gideon did not feign courage. He was not the stereotypical hero with ice water in his veins. He had no concern to maintain his macho

image, not with God at least. He was doubly afraid—afraid to take on the Midianites with three hundred men, and afraid to attempt to penetrate their camp alone. So Gideon took Purah and descended into the valley to one of the outposts of the vast Midianite camp (7:9-12).

When Gideon and his servant got within listening distance of the outpost they heard a strange thing. One Midianite soldier was relating a dream to a companion. A loaf of barley bread was tumbling into the camp of Midian smashing a tent before it. His companion interpreted that dream without a moment's hesitation. Since the Israelites were grain farmers, the barley loaf represented the sword of Gideon. God had given Midian and the camp into the hand of Gideon (7:13-14). From this it is clear that the Midianites had heard of the resistance movement headed by Gideon. They must have heard some rumors about a divine visitor who had dispatched Gideon on this mission. Finally, Gideon would have concluded from what he heard that the rank and file of the Midianite army were terrified at the prospects of having to face the Israelites in battle.

### **C. Preparation for Battle (Judg 7:15-18).**

When he heard the dream in the Midianite camp, Gideon bowed and worshiped God on the spot. Having had his own morale lifted, Gideon returned to his camp and inspired his men with the assurance that Yahweh had given the Midianite camp into their hands.

In preparing his three hundred men for battle, Gideon took advantage of what he had heard in the camp. His plan was to provoke panic within the enemy camp by feigning an all out attack on three sides by three hundred *companies* of men. No thought was ever given to defeating the Midianite camp by force of arms (7:15).

Gideon divided his men into three companies. Each man was equipped with a trumpet, a pitcher and a torch, the light of which was shielded by the pitcher. All were to look to Gideon's company for the cue as to what to do. He would lead his company to the outskirts of the Midianite camp, perhaps to the very spot where he and Purah had been earlier that night. When those who were with Gideon blew their trumpets all the others were to do the same. Then they were to shout the battle cry: "*For Yahweh and for Gideon!*" (7:16-18).

## THE DEFEAT OF MIDIAN

### Judges 7:19-8:28

The account of the defeat of the Midianites is difficult because it is abbreviated and because it contains geographical references which are hard to identify. Therefore the movements of the two forces are not always easy to decipher. Four key developments are clear: (1) the initial rout of the enemy; (2) the involvement of the reserve forces; (3) the pursuit of the Midianites; and (4) the return from the battle.

#### A. The Initial Rout (Judg 7:19-22).

The plan worked to perfection. Gideon's company approached the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch just after the new guards had been posted. At Gideon's signal the three companies blew their trumpets, smashed their pitchers, held their torches high above them, and shouted the battle cry. While the Israelites each stood in their places around the Midianite camp, the enemy began to panic. They thought they were being attacked from all directions by three hundred companies. The Midianites fled down the Jezreel valley toward the Jordan. Later prophets regarded this victory as one of the greatest in the history of Israel (cf. Isa 9:4).

#### B. The Involvement of Reserve Troops (Judg 7:23-8:3).

Once the Midianites were put to flight, Gideon summoned the stand-by army—those men who previously had been dismissed—to take up the pursuit. The Ephraimites, who had no part in the original mobilization, were encouraged to seize the Jordan river crossings, thus thwarting the Midianite escape. Since Ephraim bordered the Jordan this made good sense. The Ephraimites responded in a positive way. They were able to capture two Midianite princes, Oreb and Zeeb. The Ephraimites brought the heads of these two princes to Gideon *across the Jordan*. Gideon and his men had been the first to reach and cross the river in hot pursuit of the enemy (7:24-25).

The Ephraimites were very angry that they had not been included in the original battle against Midian. Perhaps they felt that they were going to miss out on the spoils of war. On the other hand, perhaps the exclusion had wounded the ego of the temperamental

Ephraimites. In any case, Gideon had to deal with this difficulty. He “smoothed their ruffled feathers” by lauding them for the capture and execution of Oreb and Zeeb. Whereas it was true that Gideon and his men had been permitted to reap the harvest, i.e., strike the initial blow, in this case the *gleanings* were more important. Capturing the Midianite princes was more important than anything which Gideon had achieved that night. Furthermore, since God had given the victory to Israel there was no room for boasting by any man. By these wise and disciplined words Gideon put to rest the Ephraimite anger (8:1-3). Sometimes keeping peace in the camp is more of a challenge than chasing the enemy!

### **C. The Pursuit of the Midianites (Judg 8:4-12).**

Gideon and his three hundred continued the pursuit of the Midianites deep into Transjordan. At the Israelite city of Succoth, located where the Jabbok empties into the Jordan, he requested some provisions for the troops. The leaders of Succoth were still cautious. Zebah and Zalmunna, the Midianite kings, had still not been captured.<sup>5</sup> As a city close to the desert Succoth would suffer severely if the Midianites were to be able to successfully counterattack. Prudence—or was it cowardice—demanded that they reject Gideon’s request. They even “taunted” (cf. v. 15) Gideon, i.e., mocked or insulted him. They sided with the enemy and acted like the enemy, so Gideon would treat them like the enemy. He warned the leaders of Succoth that when he returned from the pursuit of the Midianite kings he would “*thrash*” their naked flesh with “*thorns of the wilderness and with briers*” (8:4-7).

At Penuel (NIV Peniel), a bit further east on the Jabbok river, Gideon received a similar response to his request for aid. There he threatened to tear down the tower of the city when he returned (8:8-9).

Zebah and Zalmunna attempted to reassemble what was left of their forces at Karkor. The exact location of Karkor is unknown, but it is thought to have been near Rabbah, the modern Amman, Jordan, far to the southeast of Penuel. Only 15,000 of an original force of 120,000 were still intact. Gideon tracked down these forces. The Midianites were no doubt demoralized. Both the size of their remain-

ing force and the distance from the original battlefield perhaps contributed to lack of military discipline. In any case, Gideon was able to launch another surprise attack. The Midianite army again was routed. Zebah and Zalmunna fled. Gideon, however, was able to capture them (8:10-12).

The final defeat of the Midianites was achieved basically without the enthusiastic support of God's people. The Ephraimites were more concerned about their tribal status than about smashing the enemy. The Transjordan towns of Succoth and Penuel chose neutrality rather than jeopardize their security. Everyone wants to join the victory parade. Few are willing to hazard their lives in the heat of battle. A wise warrior will expect disappointment from God's people. He will, nonetheless, press on to victory.

#### **D. The Return from the Battle (Judg 8:13-26).**

The return from the battle of Karkor was eventful. Gideon had three punishments to mete out. He also had to deal with the exuberance of his victorious troops.

1. *Punishment of two Israelite cities (8:13-17).* Gideon returned to Succoth to make good on the threat he had made before the final battle with Midian. A captured youth revealed the names of the seventy-seven leading men of the city. Gideon showed them the two captured Midianite kings. Then he disciplined the elders of the city with the thorns and briers, i.e., he administered corporal punishment. From there he proceeded to Penuel where he tore down the tower, as he had threatened, and executed the men in the city. Why Penuel received the harsher punishment is not clear. Both towns, however, had been guilty of treason. Both paid the price for failing to come to the aid of their countrymen in a time of national peril.

2. *Execution of the two kings (8:18-21).* After returning to Ophrah<sup>6</sup> Gideon confronted Zebah and Zalmunna with one of their crimes against the Israelites. He reminded them of a massacre which they had ordered at Tabor. There, it turned out, those two kings had killed the blood brothers of Gideon. The implication is that Gideon's brothers had been treacherously murdered under the orders of these two kings rather than killed in fair combat. If only they had showed mercy to his brothers, Gideon would have spared their lives (8:18-19).



Gideon turned to his firstborn son Jether and ordered him to slay the kings. Perhaps the point here was to inflict humiliation upon the kings by having them slain by an inexperienced youth. On the other hand, maybe Gideon was giving Jether a chance to show his manhood. In any case, Jether refused to draw his sword “*because he was still a youth*.” The two kings then requested that Gideon himself wield the sword of execution. He was strong enough to slay them with one blow. Gideon complied with their request. As a trophy of his defeat of Zebah and Zalmunna Gideon took the crescent ornaments which were on the necks of their camels (8:20-21).

3. *Recognition of Gideon (8:22-26)*. The men of Israel were overwhelmed with gratitude for what Gideon had done for the nation. They were willing to make him their ruler on the spot. While they refrain from using the word *king*, they clearly have in mind a hereditary regime. Gideon declined their offer insisting “*Yahweh shall reign over you*.” Gideon, however, did suggest that the troops could show their gratitude by each contributing one earring from his spoil. Since the enemy were “*Ishmaelites*” each had an earring.<sup>7</sup> The earrings had been taken from the corpses of the slain. The weight of the gold contributed to Gideon came to 1,700 shekels (about 43 lbs.). With this contribution plus the other valuable items which were taken from the two Midianite kings, Gideon became a wealthy man.

### **CLOSING NOTE ABOUT GIDEON** **Judges 8:27-35**

Following the victory over Midian the land had rest for forty years (8:28). This is the last time in the Book of Judges that such a declaration is made. The forty years ended about 1174 BC. Thereafter the land seems to have suffered constant war. The gift of “*rest*” would no longer be granted to a people who so many times before had abused it.

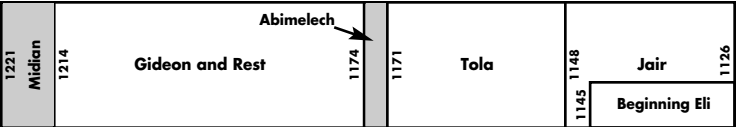
The last days of Gideon were disappointing. His gold shekels were “*fashioned into an ephod*.” An ephod was the upper garment worn by the high priest at the Tabernacle. The ephod described in Exodus 28 and 39 was very ornate and costly. It was woven with gold thread and contained numerous jewels. To what extent Gideon’s ephod

resembled that worn by the high priest cannot be ascertained. Nonetheless, it is clear that to make a proper ephod would require considerable gold.<sup>8</sup> Gideon placed his new ephod in his city of Ophrah (8:27-28).

Perhaps the narrator was pained to recount all the details regarding this ephod. In the Old Testament the ephod with its breastpiece is associated with divine revelation. Several times before the battle Gideon had received direct communication from the Lord. Perhaps the ephod was an attempt to continue to receive divine guidance. Did Gideon himself attempt to function as a priest? Was he attempting to establish an alternative channel of divine communication? Did he feel that the normal means of revelation were not adequate? These are questions which cannot be answered. This much the text does clearly state: “*All Israel played the harlot with it there.*” That ephod became a snare to Gideon and his household (8:27-28). These words suggest that some kind of illegitimate worship centered around the ephod at Ophrah.

Gideon became a religious innovator rather than a reformer bent on bringing Israel back to the old paths. Believers must be careful about ephod-making—of attempting to solicit direction from God in ways which he has not authorized. In Scripture God has already provided all that the believer needs for his growth and direction.

Chart No. 16



THE MIDDLE JUDGES  
1221-1126 BC

Another disappointing fact about Gideon is that he took many wives. He had concubines in various cities. All together Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants (8:29-30). God had warned that Israel’s kings should not multiply wives (cf. Deut 17:17). How much more this would apply to those who were not kings.

A third disappointing fact is related about Gideon. He named the

son of one of his concubines “*Abimelech*” which means “My father is king.”<sup>9</sup> The narrator has introduced this fact to point out the contradiction between what Gideon said about kingship in 8:23 and the way he acted. Gideon, it seems, refused to be a king. Nonetheless, he wanted to live like a king. Like many believers he had a hard time bringing his walk into harmony with his talk. His theology was correct. God alone should be king. His psychology was imperfect. He regarded himself as a king (8:31).

The closing words regarding Gideon’s life remind believers that even the greatest champions of the faith can be brought low by avarice, lust and pride. Gideon died “*at a ripe old age*” (NASB) and was buried in the tomb of his father in Ophrah (8:32).

## ENDNOTES

1. For a discussion of the identity of the Angel of Yahweh see comments on Judg 2:1-5.

2. An ephah of flour would be just short of a bushel.

3. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 328. That God here authorized a sacrifice to be offered by a man who was not descended from Aaron “shows how abnormal things had become in Gideon’s day,” p. 329.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 333.

5. The question of the men of Succoth, “*Are their hands in your hands?*” may be asking Gideon to show them the severed hands of the two Midianite chieftains.

6. The presence of Jether (8:20) at the time of the execution of the two Midianite kings suggests that Gideon and his men had returned to base. That a young boy like Jether would have been among the three hundred chosen men who accompanied Gideon into Transjordan is not likely.

7. In this context “*Ishmaelites*” has lost its ethnic significance. It has the more general meaning of “desert peoples” and thus includes the Midianites. The interplay between Ishmaelites and Midianites is found in Gen 37:25,36.

8. Perhaps some of the gold was used to pay the craftsmen who fashioned the ephod.

9. Literally the text states: “*he appointed his name Abimelech.*” According to Robert Boling, the terminology refers to renaming. See *Judges*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), p. 162.



## CHAPTER TEN

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### Israel's Critical Condition Judges 9-12

The author of the Book of Judges has presented the history of a nation whose spiritual health deteriorated from ill, to seriously ill, to critically ill. In the present unit Israel has reached the third stage in this ugly process. Here the oppressions were more ruthless, the deliverances less dramatic, and the deliverers less noble. Above all, in this unit Israel no longer enjoyed periodic seasons of God-given rest.

#### **ABIMELECH: TRAGIC AMBITION** **Judges 9:1-57**

Gideon's son Abimelech, though of lowly birth (cf. 8:31), had grandiose ambitions. He wanted the kingship which his father had declined. Abimelech was not a Judge. If anything he was an oppressor of Israel. Israel's unfaithfulness was punished, not by some foreign foe, but by internal discord and bloody civil strife. Chapter 9 should not be viewed merely as an appendix to the story of Gideon. The

chapter serves to underscore the political implications of Baal worship. It portrays the terrible decline which set in after Gideon's death. It illustrates how God frequently brings about the demise of wicked men by turning them against one another. It represents another level in the social, moral and spiritual decline of the nation.

### **A. Sinful Ambition Unleashed (Judg 9:1-6).**

Abimelech anticipated that the seventy sons of Gideon would share the rule over Israel after their father was dead. He therefore contacted relatives in his native town of Shechem. He urged them to press the city leaders to recognize him, their own flesh and bone, as their sole ruler. The text offers no evidence that the sons of Gideon had any plan to rule Israel as an oligarchy. Abimelech appears to have been using scare tactics to get what he wanted from the men of Shechem (9:1-2).

The leaders of Shechem were inclined to follow Abimelech because he was related to them through his mother. They even gave him silver from their temple—the house of Baal-berith—to aid him in his bid for power. Abimelech hired some thugs and took them to Ophrah. There he rounded up his brothers and killed them “*on one stone*.” Only one, the youngest of the seventy sons of Gideon, escaped (9:3-5).

Having ruthlessly removed his potential rivals, Abimelech returned to Shechem. There the men of Shechem and all Beth-millo—an independent part of the city of Shechem— assembled for his coronation. The ceremony was held by the oak of the pillar which was in Shechem. This was the very spot where Joshua (cf. Josh 24:26-27) had many years earlier called upon Israel to be faithful to God's covenant (9:6).

### **B. Sinful Ambition Exposed (Judg 9:7-21).**

Jotham, the surviving brother of Abimelech, went to Shechem. From a safe distance on an outcropping of Mount Gerizim he interrupted the coronation with a shout. He then delivered a fable<sup>1</sup> to the men of Shechem that they might realize the stupidity of what they were doing. In the fable the trees were looking for a king. Various noble trees—the olive, fig, the vine—all declined the invitation. Only

the worthless bramble agreed to become king. The bramble even threatened to burn the rest of the forest if they did not anoint him as king (9:7-15). The basic point of the fable is that Abimelech, a man of ruthless temperament, is the least qualified to serve as king. How often God's people are attracted to the leadership of the men least qualified to lead!

Jotham then began to remind the Shechemites of all that Jerubbaal (Gideon) had done for the nation. He had risked his life to deliver the land from Midian. Now the Shechemites had joined a plot to wipe out all of his sons. Was this deed done "*in truth and integrity*"? If so, then a happy relationship should exist between Shechem and their new "king." But if not, then Jotham predicted that the "king" and his subjects would destroy one another. His point is that "a friendship based on ambition, ingratitude, disloyalty, and bloodshed could only have disastrous consequences for both sides" (9:16-20).<sup>2</sup>

Having finished his speech Jotham fled. He took refuge in Beer (location unknown) and remained there because of the danger from the ruthless Abimelech (9:21).

### **C. Sinful Ambition Thwarted (Judg 9:22-29).**

Abimelech claimed to rule all Israel. In truth his "reign" was limited to the region around Shechem. After three years the prophecy of Jotham began to come to pass. God sent "*an evil spirit*" between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. Even the evil spirits are subject to the will of the Creator. What God permits, he is said in the Old Testament to have done. One of the ways God destroys evil men is by turning them against each other. That is exactly what happened in Judges 9. The men of Shechem began to deal "*treacherously*," i.e., to be disloyal, to Abimelech (9:23-24).

The Shechemites set ambushes along the busy road which passed through their city. Merchants and travelers were robbed and abused. Such actions were designed to discredit the "reign" of Abimelech, to make it appear that the new king was totally incapable of maintaining civil order. The sin of murdering the seventy sons of Gideon was now about to be visited on Abimelech. At the same time, the Shechemites would be punished for their supportive role in those murders (9:25).

At this point another ambitious and vain man entered the picture.

Gaal the son of Ebed and his relatives moved into Shechem. He quickly gained the confidence of the men of Shechem who were looking for someone who could protect them from Abimelech. The Shechemites put their trust in Gaal. Now they could openly break with Abimelech (9:26).

When the grape harvest was complete, the town celebrated in a drunken feast in the temple of their god. Emboldened by their drink, the men cursed Abimelech. Gaal in drunken bluster challenged Abimelech to gather his army and come out for a showdown (9:27-29).

### **D. Sinful Ambition Punished (Judg 9:30-57).**

God punished the sinful ambition of Abimelech and simultaneously the wickedness of the citizens of Shechem and their new leader Gaal. The events unfolded in four stages.

1. *Judgment on Gaal (9:30-41).* Abimelech still had at least one loyal friend in the city, Zebul the mayor. Perhaps he had been appointed to his position by Abimelech. Be that as it may, Zebul was enraged at the treasonous talk of Gaal. He sent word to Abimelech “*deceitfully*,” i.e., secretly, apprising him of the situation. Zebul urged Abimelech to bring his army that night and position it about the city. At sunrise he should rush upon Gaal and his supporters (9:30-33).

Abimelech moved that night. He positioned his soldiers in four companies about Shechem. Gaal and his men went out of the city in the morning. Perhaps they were going on a raid, or maybe they were intending to protect the workers in the fields. In any case, Abimelech launched the attack prematurely. Gaal thought he saw something moving down from the mountains. Zebul, stalling for time, convinced Gaal at first that he was seeing only shadows. A few minutes later, however, Gaal realized that he was coming under attack from several directions. Zebul now threw Gaal’s boasts of the previous day back into his face and challenged him to go out and fight Abimelech (9:34-38).

So Gaal, the rebellious leader of Shechem, went out to face Abimelech. The skirmish was no contest. Gaal fled. Most of his supporters were slain. At the same time Zebul drove out all the relatives of Gaal so that they could no longer live in Shechem (9:39-41).



2. *The judgment on Shechem (9:42-45)*. The next day the Shechemites assumed that all was back to normal. Gaal and his supporters were gone. Abimelech appeared to have withdrawn from the area. The people, therefore, left the safety of their walls and went out into the fields to work. Abimelech, however, had not yet vented his anger on the city for tolerating rebellion against him. His troops were strategically placed in three places about the city. One company seized the city gate; the other two attacked the workers in the field. Abimelech waged war the whole day against Shechem. One by one he conquered each quarter of the city. The inhabitants were all slain. The city was razed. Then as a symbolic gesture of eternal desolation, Abimelech sprinkled salt upon the ruins (9:42-45).

3. *Destruction of the temple fortress (9:46-49)*. A number of the leaders of Shechem happened to be in the tower fortress part of the city when Abimelech's attack began. They hurriedly took refuge in the inner chamber of the temple of El-berith. This appears to have been a subterranean chamber. Abimelech took his men to the nearby woods and cut large branches. These were set afire over the entrance to the inner chamber. The thousand men and women who had taken refuge there were either burned alive inside or forced by the smoke to come out and face the swords of Abimelech's men (9:46-49).

4. *The attack on Thebez (9:50-55)*. Abimelech then marched to nearby Thebez about six miles north of Shechem. This city also was in rebellion against him. He easily captured the city itself, but the fortress tower in the center of the city was a different matter. Abimelech attempted to burn the entrance of the tower. A certain woman, however, threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head mortally wounding him. He quickly called for his armorbearer to thrust him through lest it be said that he had been slain by a woman. The armorbearer obliged his master. Thus ended the brief and turbulent career of Israel's first "king." When Abimelech's supporters saw that he was dead, each departed for his home (9:50-55).

### **E. A Prophetic Explanation (Judg 9:56-57).**

The long account of Abimelech ends with a solemn appraisal of what has just been narrated. In the conflict between Abimelech and Shechem God was at work. Abimelech was being punished for the

murder of his brothers. The Shechemites were being punished for “*all their wickedness*” which included blatant idolatry, violence, and support for the ruthless Abimelech. The curse of Jotham, the youngest son of Gideon, came upon the lot of these gangsters (9:56-57).

## **TRAGEDY MITIGATED**

### **Judges 10:1-5**

Two minor Judges followed Abimelech. They are only minor in the sense that the sacred historian has not seen fit to supply any more than the barest of information about them. Here there is no catastrophic oppression, no desperate cry, no divine call of a deliverer. At the same time, no “rest” is mentioned. These were not days of decisive battles but of constant turmoil. The brief notes about Tola and Jair suggest that the glory days of Ehud, Deborah and Gideon were part of Israel’s past.

#### **A. Judgeship of Tola (Judg 10:1-2).**

Not much is known about Tola. His lineage (“*son of Puah, the son of Dodo*”) is cited, perhaps indicating that he came from an outstanding family. He was of the tribe of Issachar, yet he lived in Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. This suggests that his leadership was accepted by this fractious tribe. That he judged Israel for twenty years (c. 1171-1148 BC) suggests that he provided a stable and helpful leadership for the people. Though Abimelech comes between Gideon and Tola, it is reasonable to assume that Tola must have been the divinely ordained successor of Gideon.<sup>3</sup>

The most important thing said about Tola is that he “*arose to save Israel*” after the death of Abimelech. The author seems to have regarded Abimelech as equivalent to an oppressor. The influence of this thug, and his cooperation with the idolaters at Shechem, created an environment throughout the land from which Israel needed deliverance. Tola apparently did what he could to curtail the negative influence which Abimelech had exerted on the nation.

#### **B. Judgeship of Jair (Judg 10:3-5).**

The seventh Judge of Israel was a Gileadite, i.e., he hailed from

the region beyond the Jordan known as Gilead. Presumably that is where he also exercised his judgeship for twenty-two years (c. 1148-1126 BC). Jair had thirty sons which is good evidence that he had multiple wives. Gideon had apparently established a precedent. The sons rode on thirty donkeys which in that age was a mark of importance. Each son administered a city in Gilead. These towns were called Havvoth-jair ("Villages of Jair")<sup>4</sup> even to the day when the Book of Judges was written.

The polygamous marriages and the nepotism of Jair hint at a further degeneration in the concept of judgeship. When Jair died he was buried in Kamon (location unknown).

### **ISRAEL: TRAGIC APOSTASY** **Judges 10:6-16**

From what has been related about the town of Shechem, Abimelech and the Judges who followed him, one can conclude that the unfaithfulness of Israel had reached a new low. That conclusion is confirmed by the author himself who now paints the worst picture yet of the apostasy of the nation. The unit begins with words that have become by this time familiar to the reader of Judges: "*Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yahweh.*" The author then gives a rapid-fire presentation of the accusations against Israel. Not only were they worshipping the Baals and Ashtaroth of the native Canaanites, they were embracing the gods of other peoples as well. From north of Canaan they embraced the gods of Aram and Sidon. From east of Jordan they were attracted to the gods of Moab and Ammon. The gods of the Philistines to the west also attracted them. This plethora of gods caused Israel to "*forget Yahweh.*" This does not mean that they forgot about him. They forgot him in the sense of failing to practice their faith, to walk by his law, to confess his exclusive claims to divinity. Failing to serve the Lord exclusively is forgetting him (10:6).

The degradation of Israel called forth for the first time a double-barreled oppression.<sup>5</sup> West of Jordan the Philistines were the oppressors while east of Jordan (mainly) the Ammonites were the enemy. Israel was "*crushed*" by these two enemies "*that year,*" probably c.

1126 BC. This suggests that the resistance of Israel crumbled in the same year the oppression started.

At some point during the eighteen years the Ammonites trampled Transjordan. They crossed the Jordan to harass the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim. Caught as they were between two mighty enemies, it is no wonder that the author says that *"Israel was greatly distressed."*<sup>6</sup> The author proceeds to discuss first the Ammonite oppression (ch. 11) and then that of the Philistines (chs. 13-16).

Israel cried out unto Yahweh. This time the "cry" is accompanied by a confession of sin which appears here for the first time in the book. The confession admits to the twin sins of (1) having forsaken Yahweh (2) to serve the Baal gods (10:10).

In response to the cry and confession, Yahweh spoke to his people, most likely through a prophet (cf. 6:8-10). His words suggest that the Israelite confession of sin was not completely sincere. In order to make Israel realize the depth of their sin, Yahweh lists several of the times he had rescued them from their enemies, beginning as always with the deliverance from Egypt. Under Joshua he had kept his people from being crushed by massive Amorite armies. The current enemies—the Ammonites and Philistines—had been the oppressors of Israel once before, but Yahweh had delivered his people. The Lord mentioned the deliverances from the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites, none of which are specifically mentioned in the sketchy narrative of the Book of Judges (10:11-12).<sup>7</sup>

In each case of oppression the Israelites had cried unto Yahweh and he had effected their deliverance. In spite of these repeated acts of God's grace the Israelites continued to forsake Yahweh and serve other gods. No more would he deliver them. They should cry to the gods they had chosen to serve. Let those gods deliver Israel out of distress if they could (10:13-14).

Again the children of Israel confessed their sins. They placed themselves in the hands of God, resigned to face whatever fate he deemed appropriate. Yet they pled with him to deliver them from the oppressors. This prayer was accompanied by the removal of the foreign gods from among them. When they began to serve Yahweh, he could no longer endure their misery (10:15-16).

**JEPHTHAH: A TRAGIC FIGURE****Judges 10:17-11:11**

The Ammonites began to press their claims in Transjordan. They brought a host into Gilead and camped there. The Israelites gathered an army to Mizpah to block the Ammonite advance. Faced with a spirited resistance, the Ammonites delayed the attack. Meanwhile, the leaders of the Gileadites found themselves with no one qualified to lead the defense of the land. They were so desperate that they offered to make the general of the army the ruler of all Gilead. The deliverer in this crisis was not raised up by God. Rather he was selected by the leaders of Gilead (10:17-18).

The obvious choice for leadership of the army was Jephthah. He was a valiant warrior; but he had no social standing. He was the son of a harlot. His half-brothers had driven him out of the family so that he would have no part in the family inheritance. Jephthah had fled from his brothers to the land of Tob. There a gang of "*worthless fellows*" gathered about him. Jephthah was virtually an outlaw leader (11:1-3).

Faced with the Ammonite invasion, the elders of Gilead went to Tob to ask Jephthah to lead the army. These elders had sanctioned the expulsion of Jephthah from the land. He made them eat the proverbial humble pie when they came to him with this emergency request (11:4-7).

Jephthah let the elders squirm for a bit. He made them repeat the offer to make him ruler over Gilead if he should defeat the Ammonites. The leadership offer was confirmed by the elders with a solemn oath. Thus reassured, Jephthah returned with the elders. He was made leader of the Gileadites in a solemn ceremony ("*before Yahweh*") there at Mizpah (11:8-11).

**KING OF AMMON: TRAGIC STUBBORNNESS****Judges 11:12-28**

Jephthah was a peace-loving man. He first attempted to settle the dispute with the king of Ammon through negotiation. His messengers inquired of the Ammonite what quarrel he had with Israel that he had brought an army into Israelite territory. The king in his response

accused the Israelites of having taken his land when they came out of Egypt. He was therefore expecting all the territory between the Arnon and Jabbok rivers to be returned to him (11:12-13).

Jephthah then sent a second group of messengers to the king of Ammon. Through them he presented a marvelous defense of the Israelite claim to the territory in Transjordan. First, he offered an argument based on history. When the Israelites emerged from the wilderness back in the days of Moses they did not seek military confrontation with any kings of the area. They circumvented Edom and Moab when they were refused permission to pass through those territories. The Amorites were then controlling the Transjordan territory. Israel requested permission from their king Sihon to pass through that territory. Sihon, however, gathered his armies and fought against Israel. Yahweh gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel. That was how Israel came to possess the land of the Amorites which now the king of Ammon was claiming (11:14-22).

Jephthah next raised a theological argument. Yahweh the God of Israel had driven the Amorites from the land before his people. He had in effect deeded the land to Israel. What right then did the king of Ammon have to claim that territory? The land ruled by the king of Ammon is what Chemosh<sup>8</sup> had given his people (11:23-24).

Jephthah's third argument was based on precedent. Balak the king of Moab never disputed Israel's claim to the Transjordan lands back in the days of Moses (Num 22:6). He never tried to drive them from that land.<sup>9</sup> Nor had any king of Ammon ever disputed the claim to this territory in the three hundred years Israel had lived there (11:25-26).

On the basis of these arguments Jephthah concluded that Israel had not "*sinned*" against Ammon, but rather vice versa. Yahweh, the ultimate Judge, would determine which people had just claim to the land. Jephthah correctly anticipated that the king of Ammon would reject any overtures towards a peaceful settlement of the dispute. The stage was thus set for a military showdown (11:27-28).

### **JEPHTHAH: A TRAGIC VOW** **Judges 11:29-40**

What amazing grace that God would use this man Jephthah to

deliver his people. He was the son of a harlot, rejected by his own family, and the leader of an outlaw band. The account of Jephthah revolves around a vow which he took on the eve of battle.

### **A. Circumstances of the Vow (Judg 11:29-33).**

Though God did not raise up this Judge as he had done in previous deliverances, he did equip him for leadership. This was tantamount to having endorsed the selection of Jephthah by the Gileadites. Under the influence of God's Spirit Jephthah first marched through Gilead and Manasseh (the land north of the Jabbok river). Presumably he was organizing his forces. With his reinforcements he then returned to the camp at Mizpah. Jephthah then seized the initiative and went out to face the Ammonites (11:29).

Before leading his troops into battle Jephthah made a vow to Yahweh, a vow he lived to regret. He pledged that if the Lord would give him a victory over the Ammonites, he would give to Yahweh "*whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return.*" His exact words were "*it shall be Yahweh's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering*" (11:30-31).

Only a modicum of information is presented about the battle with the Ammonites. Jephthah initiated the hostilities "*and Yahweh gave them into his hand.*" He struck them with a very great slaughter all the way back to Ammon. A lengthy pursuit followed the battle. Twenty cities which had been occupied by Ammonites were retaken. The Ammonites were forced to retreat within their own borders (11:32-33).

### **B. Compliance with the Vow (Judg 11:34-40).**

When Jephthah returned to his home at Mizpah his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing in celebration of the victory. She was his only child, the apple of her daddy's eye. He obviously did not expect that she would be the first to come out to meet him. He screamed his agony, and tore his clothes while he explained his vow to her. Jephthah had a lot of faults, but lack of integrity was not one of them. "*I have given my word to Yahweh, and I cannot take it back*" (11:34-35).

Jephthah's daughter heroically accepted her fate. She recognized

that her father could not renege on a vow made in the name of Yahweh. She did request, however, that she be given two months to go to the mountains to mourn her virginity with her companions. Marriage and motherhood, the essence of life for an Israelite girl, would never be hers to experience. Her father was perfectly willing to comply with this last request of his daughter before she became the Lord's (11:36-38).

At the end of two months Jephthah's daughter returned to her father. He *"did with her according to the vow which he had made."* She was given to Yahweh. Then the note is added: *"And she had no relations with a man."* Obviously the writer wished to underscore that this young lady was given to the Lord in a state of virginity. Four days each year the daughters of Israel went (to the tabernacle?) to commemorate<sup>10</sup> the daughter of Jephthah. They recalled the willing sacrifice which she made in order that her father might fulfill his vow (11:39-40).

Jephthah certainly gave his daughter to the Lord. Did he also offer her up as a burnt offering? Scholars are divided. The text does not actually say that she was slain and then immolated. For this reason some scholars have proposed that Jephthah gave up his daughter to a celibate life of service at the tabernacle.<sup>11</sup> At least two passages speak of females who had ministry responsibilities at the tabernacle (Exod 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22).

Human sacrifice was illegal under the law of Moses. A person vowed to God could be redeemed by the payment of a stipulated amount (Lev 27); but obviously in this case no redemption money was paid. The question of human sacrifice here is mute. Good arguments can be made for and against that interpretation of the text. This much is certain: If Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter he sinned in a grievous manner. No vow should be kept if the keeping of that vow involves a greater sin than the breaking of that vow.

### **EPHRAIM: A TRAGIC PRIDE** **Judges 12:1-7**

At some point the Ephraimites had been summoned to send troops to aid in the war against Ammon. They arrived just after the



battle and rebuked Jephthah for having gone into battle without them. In their blustering the Ephraimites threatened to burn down Jephthah's house in retaliation for bruising their egos (12:1).

Jephthah explained that he had summoned the Ephraimites before the battle. He waited as long as he dared, but the Ephraimite contingent never showed up. He therefore was forced to undertake the battle with only the forces he had mustered in Transjordan. Yahweh graciously had given the Gileadites the victory over Ammon. There was no reason for the Ephraimites to be showing hostility toward Jephthah (12:2-3).

The Ephraimites accused the Gileadites of being "*renegades of Ephraim*" (NIV). Perhaps the suggestion is that Gilead, which is situated between the big tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim, was so insignificant that it had no right to go to war on its own. At the least this was an ethnic slur; but it may also have hinted of Ephraimite desires to annex the territory of Gilead. In any case, the Gileadites were threatened by these words. They were willing to go to war against the Ephraimites (12:4).

Jephthah regathered his troops and fought Ephraim. The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan opposite Ephraim. Any individual attempting to cross the Jordan at that point was challenged to pronounce the word "*Shibboleth*." Apparently the Ephraimites could not pronounce the "sh" sound. Chronologically this was the second civil war during the period of the Judges, the third if one counts the Abimelech strife with Shechem. Some 42,000 Ephraimites fell in this civil war (12:5-6).

Jephthah's judgeship was comparatively short. It lasted only six years. When he died he was buried in "*one of the cities of Gilead*." The great victory which he won over the Ammonites was overshadowed by the tragic vow which he made, the tragic stubbornness of the Ammonite king and the tragic civil war which erupted because of the pride of Ephraim (12:7).

### **TRAGEDY MITIGATED** **Judges 12:8-15**

Three minor Judges followed Jephthah. Not much is known about

these men. Certain clues, however, do exist that they represent a further deterioration of the office of Judge. Things may have appeared to be normal on the surface. After Gideon, however, there is no reference to the God-given rest which is mentioned in connection with the earlier Judges. If the chronology adopted for this study is correct, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon were all Judges in their respective tribal areas while the Philistines were oppressing Israel in the south.

### **A. Judgeship of Ibzan (Judg 12:8-10).**

Ibzan was from Bethlehem, but probably not the famous village of that name in Judah. More likely he was from the Bethlehem in Zebulun (cf. Josh 19:15). Ibzan had thirty sons and thirty daughters. Thus he must have been married to several wives. He gave his daughters in marriage to those “*outside*,” and took thirty wives for his sons from those “*outside*.” The reference is probably to intermarriage with non-Israelites. Ibzan may have had an ecumenical spirit, but he was violating one of the most fundamental of God’s laws of separation (12:8-9).

Daughters are mentioned in connection with only Jephthah and Ibzan. Jephthah had but one, and was forced by his foolish vow to surrender her while she was still a virgin. Ibzan had thirty daughters, all married, and thirty married sons as well. The fullness of Ibzan serves to underscore the barrenness of his predecessor in consequence of his vow.<sup>12</sup>

Ibzan’s judgeship was probably limited to Zebulun and tribal areas bordering on Zebulun. After serving seven years Ibzan died. He was buried in his hometown. His judgeship can be dated to about 1105-1098 BC (12:10).

### **B. Judgeship of Elon (Judg 12:11-12).**

Elon from the tribe of Zebulun judged Israel for ten years. That is all that is said about him. Like a lot of church leaders, Elon merely held a title. He did not accomplish anything worth noting during his years of leadership. He was buried at Aijalon (location unknown) in the land of Zebulun. His judgeship can be dated to about 1097-1087 BC. That judgeship was not hereditary is made clear here. Nothing is said about how the office passed to Elon.

### C. Judgeship of Abdon (Judg 12:13-15).

Abdon is called the Pirathonite, i.e., he was from the town of Pirathon in the hill country of Ephraim.<sup>13</sup> During his judgeship no doubt Ephraim regained some of the tribal prestige which had been lost in the humiliating defeat by the Gileadites (12:6). Like Gideon, Ibzan and Jair, Abdon was a polygamist. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode about on seventy donkeys. That would be a symbol of affluence and authority. One senses here a bit of pomp, arrogance and nepotism.

Abdon was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, "*in the hill country of the Amalekites.*" This note suggests that an enclave of the Amalekites had become entrenched in territory belonging to Ephraim. Apparently Abdon had not been very successful in reclaiming this territory for Israel.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps he never even tried. The judgeship of Abdon can be dated to about 1089-1081 BC.

### ENDNOTES

1. The only other example of a fable used in the Bible is found in 2 Kgs 14:9.

2. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 361.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 375.

4. The name Havvoth-jair had already been given to these towns in Gilead by an earlier Jair from the tribe of Manasseh (Num 32:41; Deut 3:12-14). Perhaps that name was renewed in honor of the judgeship of this Jair.

5. In 3:13 the sons of Ammon and Amalek were allies of Eglon of Moab and in 6:3 the Amalekites could come up against Israel with the Midianites; but only here in 10:7 is the Lord said to have sold Israel into the hands of two separate peoples simultaneously.

6. The language "*greatly distressed*" is used only here in the book. This indicates that the author intended the reader to see in each successive oppression something worse than had been experienced previously. Thus the worst oppression of Israel was at the time that the Ammonites crossed the Jordan and pressed the Israelites from the east while at the same time the Philistines were pressing from the west.

7. The reference could be to the times when the Amalekites had joined forces with Moab (3:13) and later Midian (6:3) in attacking Israel. More likely some more recent incursion of the Amalekites is intended. No references are to be found to oppressions by the Sidonians or the Maonites. Perhaps these

were deliverances effected through the instrumentality of the so-called minor judges Tola and Jair.

**8.** Chemosh was actually the god of Moab and Molech was the god of Ammon. Jephthah is subtly suggesting that the Ammonites were legitimately occupying the territory formerly occupied by Moab.

**9.** Balak was nervous about having such a large population on his border. He did attempt to have Israel cursed by Balaam (cf. Num 22).

**10.** The same verb appears in 5:11. It could be translated "celebrate in song, recite." Thus Jephthah's daughter was honored for her courageous act of self-surrender by which she allowed her father to fulfill his vow.

**11.** Barry G. Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading*, JASOT Supplement Series 46 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), p. 161.

**12.** The view that Jephthah's daughter was offered in some kind of celibate service originated with the Jewish rabbi David Kimchi (c. AD 1232). The majority of ancient sources discussing the problem accept the view that Jephthah offered his daughter as a burnt offering.

**13.** Another great Pirathonite of the Bible was Benaiah, one of David's mighty men (2 Sam 23:30).

**14.** Another possibility is that an Amalekite settlement had existed in this area prior to the Israelite invasion.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### The Beginning of Deliverance Judges 13-16

The double oppression by Ammonites and Philistines began about 1126 BC. After eighteen years of misery Jephthah had been able to deliver the Transjordan area from the Ammonites (c. 1108 BC). West of Jordan, however, the oppression continued. All together the Philistines dominated the Israelites for forty years, until about 1085 BC. Thus the last oppression in the Book of Judges is twice as long as the next longest. From this oppression Judges records no deliverance, only a bit of periodic relief through the instrumentality of Samson.

Samson judged Israel for twenty years *during* the Philistine oppression. He was not a military leader like Gideon or Jephthah. He used his own strength to inflict devastating blows upon the oppressors. Samson, however, was never able to free the land from the power of the Philistines. That remained for Samuel, the man of prayer, to accomplish.

**Chart No. 17**

1126	Ammonites and Philistines	1108	Jeph.	Ibzan	Elon	Abdon	1081	Samuel	1043
	Eli	1105	Samson			1085			

## THE LATER JUDGES

### 1126-1043 BC

Though Samson was extraordinary in many ways, he does not appear to have been a zealous servant of the Lord. Nor does the text supply evidence of any close bond between Samson and his countrymen. On the contrary, Samson was very friendly with the Philistines. He seemed particularly attracted to Philistine women. He was a man of impulse who was controlled by sensual desires. Revenge dominated his thinking, even in his prayers.<sup>1</sup>

## GLORIOUS IN HIS BIRTH

### Judges 13:1-25

Whereas other Judges were raised up in times of crisis to deliver God's people, Samson was dedicated to his task before his birth. Of the twenty-three references to the Angel of Yahweh in this book, thirteen are found in the account of Samson's birth. Samson is the only deliverer in the Book of Judges about whose birth anything is related. The birth announcement demonstrated (1) the painstaking steps that Yahweh took to provide his people with a Judge; and (2) that deliverance would only come through a special work of God. God's people were so powerless in themselves, they could only receive that deliverance as a gracious gift from Yahweh.

### A. First Appearance of the Angel (Judg 13:2-7).

Something is missing in the account of Samson. The narrator begins by announcing another apostasy on the part of Israel and the judgment which followed it. He then tells the story of the birth of the man who would be Israel's deliverer. He does not, however, mention any cry to Yahweh, either out of repentance or sheer misery. Sin is

like that. Sin crushes and beats down until a people have no will to change their circumstances however miserable. Yet here the glorious truth stands out that God begins his great work of deliverance even though his people do not have the good sense to cry out to him. Thank God that he does not give help to his people only when they pray!<sup>2</sup>

About a century had elapsed since the Angel of Yahweh appeared to Gideon at a winepress near Ophrah. About 1125 BC the Angel appeared again to the wife of a Danite named Manoah. This woman was barren—a shameful condition in those days. What is more, she is nameless in the text. Nonetheless, Manoah's wife is portrayed as a woman of great faith and calm assurance. She is another of the great feminine faces to appear in the book. This woman underscores the blessed truth that God delights in working through anonymity and powerlessness to accomplish his purpose.

The stranger began by revealing his knowledge of the circumstances in the life of this godly wife. She was barren. That, however, was about to change. She would conceive and give birth to a son. In preparation for the birth of this son the woman was to be careful not to drink any strong drink or eat any unclean thing. The son was to be a Nazirite to God from the womb.<sup>3</sup> God would use this consecrated man to *begin* to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines (13:2-5).

The woman reported the incident to her husband. She described her visitor as “*a man of God.*” This was terminology commonly applied to prophets. Nonetheless, she gave a description of the visitor which made clear to her husband that this man was no ordinary prophet. His appearance was “*like the angel of God, very awesome*” (NASB). Intimidated as she was by this appearance, she had not asked the stranger where he was from. Nor had the stranger volunteered to tell her his name. Then she repeated the instructions and the prophecy which the Angel of Yahweh had given her (13:6-7).

### **B. Second Appearance of the Angel (Judg 13:8-23).**

Manoah believed his wife, but he felt he needed more information regarding the birth of the son. So he prayed that the man of God might come again to teach Manoah and his wife what needed to be

done in regard to the boy. God heard that prayer. Again the Angel appeared to the woman. She ran quickly to inform her husband (13:8-10).

After verifying that this man indeed had visited his wife earlier, Manoah asked the question that was uppermost in his mind. When the prophecy was fulfilled (note that Manoah had no doubt) what would be the rule for the boy's life and work? The Angel responded that the woman should obey all his previous instructions. Those instructions were then repeated in the presence of Manoah. Though God answers the prayers of believers, he also places limits upon their actions. If one is to be used to accomplish anything for God he must follow directions (13:11-14).

Manoah still thought at this point that he was dealing with a prophet of God. Wanting to be hospitable, he offered to prepare a meal for his guest. The Angel said that he would not eat of a meal, but he would wait if Manoah cared to offer a burnt offering to Yahweh. Manoah recognized the clue here. His guest was much more than a prophet. Since he was not a human being, he wanted an offering rather than a meal (13:15-16).

Manoah then inquired as to the name of the Angel. The Angel refused to answer except to say that his name was "wonderful," i.e., beyond comprehension. For this reason Manoah was not to inquire about the name of the guest. While a person may know God, he cannot know God perfectly. Man must learn to be content with those things which God has revealed about himself. The person of God is mysterious beyond human understanding. Those who deal with the things of God on a regular basis must never lose their sense of awe (13:17-18).

Manoah prepared the offering and laid it on the rock which served as an altar. Then Yahweh performed wonders while Manoah and his wife looked on. As the flame began to ascend from the sacrifice, the Angel of Yahweh ascended in the flame and disappeared. The two witnesses fell on their faces to the ground in reverence. Manoah was convinced then of what he probably suspected earlier, namely, that he had been conversing with the Angel of Yahweh. Manoah panicked in the stress of the moment. He believed that he and his wife would die because they had seen God. Mrs. Manoah is portrayed as much more



calm, logical and confident. If God had intended to slay them he would not have (1) accepted the sacrifice, (2) performed wonders, nor (3) revealed good tidings. Here again, as frequently in Judges, the godly wisdom of a woman outshines that of the men surrounding her (13:19-23).

### **C. Birth and Growth of the Child (Judg 13:24-25).**

As predicted, the woman gave birth to a son. She named him Samson which means “sunshine” or perhaps “sunny” for short. His birth meant the dawn of a new day in the house of Manoah and for Israel. The childhood of Samson is passed over in silence. The text simply says that “*the child grew up and Yahweh blessed him.*” As he came into his adult years “*the Spirit of Yahweh*” began to “*stir*” him in “*Mahaneh-dan*” (lit., camp of Dan), a nearby place in Judah. This was the first of many times when Samson received overpowering impulses from the Spirit of God which drove him on and enabled him to perform amazing feats of strength.

## **WEAK IN HIS JUDGMENT**

### **Judges 14:1-20**

The key word in Judges 14 is the verb *yarad* (“to go down”). The chapter focuses on several trips—the exact number is unclear—which Samson made into Philistine territory. Each of these journeys centers around a secret stated or implied in the text.<sup>4</sup>

### **A. The Attraction Trip (Judg 14:1-4).**

First, Samson “*went down*” to nearby Timnah. The reason for his trip is not stated. There Samson saw a Philistine woman who attracted him. He returned to his home and requested that his parents arrange a marriage with this woman. Samson’s parents tried to dissuade him. Could he not find a suitable mate among the Israelite women? Physical attraction, however, prevailed over wisdom and parental objection. “*Get her for me,*” Samson said, “*for she looks good to me!*” The lust of the flesh is a foundation of sand upon which to build the temple of marriage (14:1-3).

The first secret in Judges 14 belonged to God. Neither Samson

himself nor his parents realized that God's providence was at work. God was seeking an occasion to inflict upon the Philistines blows of judgment. Israel as a whole was too crushed to fight for liberty. Through the personal grievance of Samson God would bring devastation and death upon the oppressors. The marriage to the Philistine woman was the first step in stirring up Samson to anger against the enemies of God's people. While the readers of Judges 14 know God's secret, the main characters in the chapter do not (14:4).

### **B. The Arrangement Trip (Judg 14:5-7).**

The second trip down to Timnah was for the purpose of making marriage arrangements. Samson's parents accompanied him, for they would be involved in the marriage negotiations customary in that time. On this trip Samson turned aside into some vineyards. There he was attacked by a young lion. For the first time "*the Spirit of Yahweh*" came mightily upon him. He tore the lion with his bare hands as one might tear a kid. Now Samson had a secret. He did not tell his parents what he had done perhaps because touching something dead would be a violation of his Nazirite vow. Here for the first time Samson had occasion to test his own strength (14:5-6).

The marriage negotiations and "courtship," such as it was, went well. After talking with the woman, Samson still found himself attracted to this Philistine (14:7).

### **C. The Celebration Trip (Judg 14:8-18).**

When Samson returned to take his bride, he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion he had slain on the earlier trip. There he found a swarm of bees and honey. He scooped up the honey in his hands and ate it as he walked along. When he caught up to his parents he gave them some as well, but he did not tell them where he had secured the honey. Again Samson had a secret, and his parents were in the dark (14:8-9).

Following the custom of the time, Samson gave a marriage feast. Apparently his father helped in the arrangements. The family of his bride brought together thirty companions to be a part of the week-long celebration, a *mishteh* or drinking feast. In eating honey from the carcass of the lion Samson had violated the Nazirite rule about

touching something that was dead. Now he appears to have violated the rule against drinking the fruit of the vine. In sports metaphor, this was strike two against Samson.<sup>5</sup>

To impress the snobbish friends of his bride, Samson proposed a challenge to his Philistine guests. He would propound a riddle. If the guests could solve the riddle during the seven days of the feast Samson promised to give to them thirty changes of garments including underwear. If, however, they were unable to solve the riddle then each of them would provide for him a similar change of garments. The Philistines agreed to the challenge not believing that any Israelite hillbilly could outwit the sophisticated men from the plains. So Samson put forth a two-line rhyming riddle: *“Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet”* (14:10-14).

By the third day the Philistines still had not solved the riddle. On the fourth day they approached Samson’s bride. If she did not coax the answer from him before the seventh day, they threatened to burn her and her father’s house. They did not intend to be financially disadvantaged because they had agreed to attend a wedding feast honoring her husband (14:15).

Samson’s wife turned on the tears at this point. She accused Samson of hating her, of not trusting her with his secret. Samson responded that he had not told his parents the riddle, so why would he tell her, a woman he hardly knew even though she was his wife. The woman, however, continued to plead for Samson to tell her the riddle. On the seventh day the pressure became so intense that Samson gave in. She went immediately and told the wedding guests (14:16-17).

Before sunset on the seventh day the Philistines explained the riddle. What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion? Samson knew immediately that they had secured this answer from his wife. He spoke another poetic couplet as he stormed out of the place: *“If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle”* (14:18).

### **D. The Vengeance Trip (Judg 14:19-20).**

For the second time the Spirit of Yahweh came mightily upon Samson. Empowered by God’s Spirit, Samson began to fulfill his destiny. Samson went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty Philistines. He

took the garments from these men back to Timnah and threw them down in front of those who had solved his riddle. This was the beginning of deliverance from the Philistine oppression. Yahweh's secret (v. 4) was starting to be revealed. The Lord does not always sanitize his deliverances. They are often messy. Bloodshed is often the only means of breaking the yoke of tyrants.

With his anger still burning over the Philistine conniving, Samson *went up* to this father's house. Even as he was at home trying to regain his composure, actions were being taken in Timnah which would trigger round two in the pummeling of the Philistines. While he was away, Samson's wife was given in marriage to "*his friend*," i.e., his best man, who also was a Philistine (14:19-20).

### **MIGHTY IN HIS VENGEANCE**

#### **Judges 15:1-20**

Judges 15 contains three examples of the kind of blows which Samson was able to inflict against the Philistines during his twenty year career. Each Philistine provocation was met with swift and devastating vengeance. The chapter concludes with Samson at the point of death, crying out to God for deliverance.

#### **A. First Provocation and Response (Judg 15:1-6a).**

After a time Samson's anger cooled. During wheat harvest, a time of great celebration, he visited his wife in Timnah with a young goat. He was thereby proposing a reconciliation feast. The woman was still living in her father's house even though she had been given in marriage to a Philistine. Her father prevented Samson from entering his wife's room. He explained that he thought Samson had deserted his wife for good, and that he therefore had given the woman to Samson's best man. The desperate father tried to assuage the anger of Samson by offering to him his younger daughter. The father considered her even more beautiful than her older sister. Apparently Samson did not agree. As he again left that house in anger Samson shouted for all to hear that he now had a right to get even with the Philistines for what they had done to him (15:1-3).

Samson then rounded up three hundred foxes (or jackals). By twos

he tied the tails of the foxes to a burning torch. The terrified animals drug the torches hither and yon through the grainfields and vineyards of Philistia. A good portion of the crop was totally destroyed (15:4-6a).

### **B. Second Provocation and Response (Judg 15:6b-8).**

The Philistines soon ascertained the name of the culprit who burned their fields and the reason he had created this devastation. Unable immediately to get their hands on Samson, a group of angry Philistines went to Timnah and torched Samson's wife and her father (15:6b).

The death of his wife at Philistine hands caused Samson to launch another vendetta against the enemies of God's people. Details of the confrontation have been omitted. The text simply states that Samson struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter. Then he went down to live in a cave at the rock of Etam. Perhaps he was still grieving over the death of his wife. Perhaps he had grown weary of the slaughter (15:7-8).

### **C. Third Provocation and Response (Judg 15:9-17).**

At this point the Philistines launched a mass attack against Israel with the prime objective being the capture and death of Samson. The men of Judah wished no hostilities with the Philistines. They were perplexed by this incursion. When they learned that the objective of the invasion was the binding of Samson, the men of Judah, cowards that they were, agreed to hand him over to them (15:9-10).

Three thousand men of Judah went down to the cave where Samson was holed up. With two biting questions they challenged his wisdom and love for his countrymen. Was Samson so stupid that he did not know that the Philistines were rulers over Israel? Why would he provoke these enemies and thus trigger an invasion by them? Samson responded that he was living by the iron rule: As they have done to me, so I have done to them. Samson does not seem to have grasped the significance of his role as Israel's deliverer. He was motivated strictly by personal revenge. Samson made no effort to mobilize the Israelites for a decisive battle against the Philistines. That was not his style. Perhaps he knew that, given the attitude of his people, military resistance would be impossible to organize (15:11).

Samson agreed to surrender peacefully to his countrymen if they

would swear not to kill him. The Judahites agreed only to bind him and hand him over to the Philistines. They must have known that a fate worse than death awaited Samson should the Philistines get their hands on him. Nonetheless, they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock at Etam (15:12-13).

The Philistines shouted triumphantly as they saw Samson being led into their camp at Lehi. Then, however, for the third time the Spirit of Yahweh came mightily upon Samson. He snapped the ropes that bound him as if they were charred flax. He grabbed a fresh donkey's jawbone from the ground. Using that as his weapon he was able to slay a thousand Philistines. Some think this feat was accomplished with the help of the Judahites who were emboldened by his actions. In any case the remainder of the Philistine force fled in panic back to their own territory. Samson celebrated his victory with a poetic verse. He then named the spot Ramath-lehi, i.e., the high place of the jawbone (15:14-17).

#### **D. A Personal Crisis (Judg 15:18-20).**

The heat of battle, which must have lasted the better part of the day, had taken a physical toll on Samson. He was very thirsty, yet there was no source of water immediately available. For the first time the narrator mentions that Samson sought the Lord. His prayer recognized the fact that God had given the victory over the Philistines through him. Yet now he was in danger of dying from thirst. If that should happen his body would fall into the hands of the uncircumcised Philistines for mutilation (15:18).

The Lord heard that prayer. God "*split the hollow place*" that was in Lehi so that water came forth. The fresh water revived Samson. He named the spot where God provided the water "*En-hakkore*" ("spring of the caller"). That spring was still producing water in the days that the Book of Judges was written.

### **PITIFUL IN HIS DOWNFALL** **Judges 16:1-31**

Judges 16 sketches the pitiful details of the downfall of Samson. Chapters 14-15 contain three references to the overpowering of

Samson by the Spirit of God. No such reference appears in chapter 16. The author seems to be placing in juxtaposition two contrasting portraits of Samson, the first with the Spirit (chs. 14-15), and the second without the Spirit. Here Samson is self-sufficient and out of control. The chapter begins with Samson's head on a harlot's pillow; it concludes with his hands on a god's pillars. The tragedy unfolds in four stages. Samson was (1) cornered at Gaza, (2) entrapped in Sorek, (3) bound in a prison, and (4) mocked in a temple.

### **A. Cornered at Gaza (Judg 16:1-3).**

For some unexplained reason Samson journeyed to the Philistine city of Gaza. There he met a harlot and went in to her. When the men of Gaza heard that Samson had come to their city they surrounded the harlot's house. They intended at first light of day to slay their Israelite nemesis (16:1-2).

Somehow Samson learned that his enemies were prepared to ambush him in the morning. At midnight he slipped out of the house and passed the sentries. He went down to the city gates which had been bolted shut for the night. He ripped the doors of the gate off their hinges. Along with the posts and bars of the gate, Samson carried the doors on his shoulders to the top of a hill near Hebron. Thus in the heartland of Judah Samson left tangible evidence of his latest humiliating blow against the Philistines (16:3).

### **B. Entrapped at Sorek (Judg 16:4-20).**

Samson could not resist Philistine women. Even after his fiasco at Timnah, and his near escape from the house of the harlot in Gaza, Samson became involved with yet another Philistine woman, the infamous Delilah.<sup>6</sup> Tradition says that she was the younger sister who had been spurned by Samson a few years earlier. Samson "loved" Delilah. He never suspected for a moment that she would bring about his downfall (16:4).

The Philistine lords took note of the attraction which Samson had for Delilah. Each promised to pay the vixen eleven hundred pieces of silver if she could discover the secret of Samson's strength. Their intention was to overpower Samson, and then afflict him (16:5). Revenge is a motive devoid of scruples. These Philistines would stop at nothing.

To his credit Samson resisted the feminine wiles of Delilah for a time. He lied to her three times about the secret of his strength. Had he been as tough mentally as he was physically Samson would have refused to discuss the matter with her. He seemed to sense that she could not be trusted, but he could not resist her charms. He first told Delilah that if he should be bound with seven fresh cords he would be as weak as other men. Next Samson told Delilah that if he were bound with new ropes he would lose his supernatural strength. In both cases when the woman aroused Samson with the shout that the Philistines were upon him, he snapped the restraints as if they were mere thread (16:6-12).

Even when it became obvious that Delilah was laying a trap for him, Samson still was unable to resist her seduction. He walked into her temptations with open eyes. Delilah increased the pressure, and Samson told a third lie. If one were to weave the seven locks of his hair into the web of the loom and fasten it with a pin he would become weak like other men. Delilah's cry brought Samson to his feet. He pulled out the pin which tied his hair to the loom. Still the secret of his strength was intact (16:13-14).

Delilah continued to press Samson on a daily basis to reveal to her the secret of his strength. The man's soul "*was annoyed to death*" (NASB). Finally he told her that he had been Nazirite to God from birth. The secret of his strength was in his unshorn hair which was the outward symbol of that Nazirite vow. Delilah could sense that her man had now revealed the truth. She summoned the Philistine lords and received her wages of betrayal. Then she put Samson to sleep on her lap. A servant came in and cut the seven locks of his hair. When she aroused him, Samson again jumped to his feet. He thought that he would "*shake himself free*" from any attackers as on previous occasions. "*But he did not know that Yahweh had departed from him*" (16:15-20).

### **C. Bound in a Prison (Judg 16:21-22).**

The Philistines seized Samson with little resistance. They gouged out his eyes to render him permanently harmless. He was then taken to Gaza, bound with bronze chains. There he was made to serve as a grain grinder, a job normally performed by oxen. It involved pushing a



large round grinding stone in a circle over stalks of grain. How humiliating! Even as he performed this exhausting labor, however, his hair was beginning to grow back. This the Philistines failed to notice. Of course there was nothing magical about Samson's hair. His strength came from the Spirit of God. Yet the hair was the symbol of his strength. The sincere repentance which grew in the sightless darkness of the mill chamber positioned Samson for one last heroic act in the drama of redemption (16:21-22).

#### **D. Mocked in a Temple (Judg 16:23-30).**

The lords of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon<sup>7</sup> their god. Little did they realize that they were setting the stage for the greatest feat of Samson. The assembly was filled with joy. When they saw Samson the people praised Dagon for delivering Samson into their hands. When they were in "*high spirits*" the crowd demanded that Samson be brought forth into the temple to amuse them. For a time they entertained themselves by playing a cruel game of blind man's bluff with the helpless Israelite (16:23-25).

Three thousand jeering Philistine men and women joined their leaders in heaping their abuse upon the once formidable enemy. They were sitting on a balcony overlooking a courtyard where Samson was being tormented. When Samson sensed that he was standing near the main pillars of the structure, a plan formed within his mind. He asked the lad who was leading him by the hand to let him lean against the great pillars upon which the house rested (16:26-27).

In his desperation Samson cried out to the Lord. He asked for one last infusion of divine strength that he might be avenged of the Philistines for the loss of his two eyes. He then braced himself between the two main pillars, with his right hand on the one and the left hand on the other. After praying that he might die with the Philistines, Samson pushed with all his might against the pillars. The author seems to delight in the irony that he who was brought into that building as an entertainer literally brought the house down upon the revelers. In this final act of defiance, Samson slew more of the Philistines than he had slain during his lifetime. At the same time, this final blow wiped out the entire leadership of the Philistine people (16:28-30).

At the conclusion of chs. 14-15 Samson was at the point of death after the slaughter of the thousand. He cried out to Yahweh, and the Lord intervened with a miraculous supply of water. The climax of chapter 16 is likewise the prayer of Samson. He asked God for vindication and for death. Both requests were granted. Surely the author is stressing the principle that man's extremity is God's opportunity. Prayer is the key that brings to bear on desperate circumstances the powerful resources of heaven. One cannot escape the conclusion that if the Lord hears the prayers of a backslidden philanderer like Samson, he will surely hear the fervent prayer of a righteous man.

### **E. Epilogue (Judg 16:31).**

Samson's family came down to Gaza to retrieve the lifeless body of Israel's great hero. They buried him in the tomb of his father Manoah. Samson had judged Israel for twenty years, roughly 1105-1085 BC.

In retrospect one might ask how God could choose to use an unfaithful and immoral man like Samson. Here is a man who violated his vows and abused his gifts. Samson's physical prowess was not matched by his moral strength. Who can explain the sovereign choices of the Almighty? The tools which God employed during the entire period of the Judges are certainly not those who might be selected as leaders of God's people today. In Samson's defense only this can be said. He would fight when no one else would. He knew who the enemy was, and he inflicted countless blows against them.

## **ENDNOTES**

1. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 404.
2. Dale Ralph Davis, *Such a Great Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 160.
3. The ordinary Nazirite vow was voluntary and temporary. In the case of Samson, God ordered a permanent Nazirite separation from birth.
4. On the structure of Judges 14 see Davis, *ibid.*, pp. 169-70. Davis is correct in emphasizing "secrets" as the motif of this chapter. It is all about what people do not know.
5. The text does not actually say that Samson imbibed at the feast, but it would be hard to imagine that he did not.
6. The text does not explicitly identify Delilah as a Philistine. She may have been an Israelite woman who sold out to the enemy.

**7.** The Philistines had another temple for Dagon in Ashdod (1 Sam 5:2). Outside the Bible, worship of Dagon is attested at Ebla, Mari, and Ugarit. In some Ugaritic texts he is referred to as the father of Baal.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

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### The Moral Mess Judges 17-21

Chapters 17-21 constitute an appendix to the Book of Judges. The materials here are not in chronological order. As a matter of fact, certain indications in the text suggest that these episodes happened within a few years of the death of Joshua, even before the invasion of the land by Cushan (3:8). These chapters have been included in the book in order to illustrate the apostasy, lawlessness, immorality, disunity and legalism which characterized most of the 324 years of the period of the Judges.

#### **APOSTASY ILLUSTRATED** **Judges 17:1-13**

In chapter 17 the author of Judges illustrates what chronologically must have been the first blatant indulgence in idolatry during the period of the Judges (cf. Judg 2:11-23). The account revolves around an Ephraimite named Micah and his relationship to his mother, his shrine and a certain Levite.

### **A. Micah and His Mother (Judg 17:1-3).**

Micah, which means “Who is like Yahweh,” had stolen eleven hundred pieces of silver<sup>1</sup> from his mother. Without realizing that her son was the thief, the mother pronounced a curse on the one who stole her money. When the renegade son returned the silver his mother sought to reverse the curse with a blessing. She then dedicated the money to Yahweh “*for her son.*” By this action she was probably attempting to remove the dangers which were associated with the initial curse.

The mother apparently thought she would be performing an act of devotion by providing “*a graven image and a molten image*”<sup>2</sup> to assist in the worship of Yahweh. This is the technical language of Deuteronomy 27:15 where a curse is pronounced against anyone who would make such an object. Thus again the author is pressing home his consecrated sarcasm. Micah’s mother was attempting to negate a human curse by bringing her son under a divine curse! (17:1-3).

### **B. Micah and His Shrine (Judg 17:4-6).**

Two hundred shekels of the silver were given to a silversmith who fashioned the desired images. These images were kept in the house of Micah in the hill country of Ephraim. That a man with the orthodox name Micah would be cited as the first after the entry into Canaan to represent the invisible God by means of cultic objects is an irony the author surely intends his readers to note (17:4).

Little by little Micah’s illegal worship expanded. He built a shrine for his gods. He made an ephod, an upper garment worn by those in priestly service. He constructed “*household idols*” (*teraphim*) in addition to the images constructed with his mother’s silver. To preside over his shrine Micah consecrated one of his sons as priest. The author of Judges explains that this idolatrous cancer was tolerated because “*there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.*” The right kind of king would have been loyal to the covenant. He would have squelched this incipient idolatry (17:4-6).

### **C. Micah and His Levite (Judg 17:7-13).**

An itinerant Levite provided Micah the opportunity to add to the prestige of his idolatrous shrine. This young man from Bethlehem

Judah<sup>3</sup> was traveling through Ephraim when he happened to spend the night at Micah's house. When Micah learned that this Levite was attached to no particular sanctuary, he offered him employment. Micah agreed to pay the young man ten silver pieces per year, furnish him with a new suit of clothes, and provide his maintenance if the Levite would be "*a father*," i.e., spiritual advisor, "*and a priest*" at his shrine (17:7-10).

The Levite sinned when he accepted the offer to be Micah's priest. He lived in Micah's house. As time went on this sacerdotal employee was treated more like a son. Micah was overjoyed with his good fortune at having secured a man from the priestly tribe to serve at his idolatrous shrine. He actually thought Yahweh would smile upon him and bring him prosperity now that a Levite officiated at all the worship activities in his house (17:11-13).

For Micah worship was private business. He wanted to do his own thing. He bought into the philosophy that as long as one is sincere strict compliance to God's word was not necessary. Though he did not totally abandon Yahweh, he borrowed worship forms from his pagan neighbors to "enrich" his own approach to God. Though modern man may not make a graven image, he still displays much of the same attitude about worship which guided Micah down a dead end street. Biblical worship is God-centered, not man-centered. To please God must be the ultimate obsession of the worshiper. God cannot be pleased when his specific commands about worship are either violated or ignored.

## **LAWLESSNESS ILLUSTRATED**

### **Judges 18:1-31**

The account of the illicit worship in the hill country of Ephraim is continued in chapter 18 but with a new element. The chapter illustrates the lawlessness which was prevalent in Israel during the decades prior to the monarchy. The action centers about certain families in the tribe of Dan.

#### **A. A Spy Mission (Judg 18:1-10).**

To this point in time—shortly after the death of Joshua—the Dan-

ites had not been able to control their original allotment. So the tribal elders dispatched five men to search for a location which might be suitable for a tribal inheritance (18:1-2).

1. *The spies at Micah's house (18:1-6)*. Apparently the spies turned aside at the house of Micah because they recognized, even at a distance, the voice of the Levite. They seem to have been most surprised to encounter him there in the hill country of Ephraim. When the Levite explained that he was now serving as Micah's priest, the Danites requested that he inquire of God<sup>4</sup> as to the success of their mission. The Levite assured them that *Yahweh* approved of the way they were going (18:3-6).

2. *The spies at Laish (18:7-10)*. The five Danites proceeded on northward to the town of Laish (Leshem in Josh 19:47) north of the Sea of Galilee. This was a Phoenician city loosely associated with Sidon. Because of the considerable distance from Sidon, Laish was basically independent. It had no strong army to protect it (18:7).

The five spies reported back to their brethren what they had found. The tribe made the decision immediately to move against Laish. This spacious region of abundance would easily fall into the hands of these fierce fighters (18:8-10).

### **B. A Tribal Migration (Judg 18:11-26).**

Six hundred armed Danites set out with their families toward Laish. En route they passed through the hill country of Ephraim (18:11-13).

1. *The Danite theft (18:14-20)*. As the Danites approached the house of Micah, the five spies told their brethren about the religious paraphernalia which was there. The armed men determined that they would take these objects with them to Laish, and they would invite the Levite to go with them as well (18:14).

Backed by the small army, the five spies entered into the shrine. They gathered up the images and ephod. They offered the Levite the position of "*father and priest*" to the Danites. Much better, they argued, to be the priest of a tribe than the priest of one man. The Levite was overjoyed with this "call" to a larger pulpit. He himself supervised the theft of the religious objects. Then he joined the group for the march to Laish (18:15-20).



The religious decline of the nation is clearly illustrated in this passage. Contrary to the design of the law of Moses, Israelites had developed a strong desire for local shrines. They apparently believed that the mere possession of sacred objects guaranteed success in their ventures. Character counted for nothing in religious figures if they could demonstrate some measure of genealogical legitimacy. In these new attitudes the influence of Canaanite paganism is in evidence.

2. *Micah's confrontation with the Danites (18:21-26)*. The Danites anticipated some violent response when Micah learned of the theft of his religious objects and the pirating of his personal clergyman. They arranged their column so that the little ones and valuables were in front. The six hundred armed men acted as a rear guard. As expected, Micah assembled the men of the community, and they overtook the Danites. Micah, however, accused them of having taken his gods and his priest. In these verses the author underscores the folly of idolatry. A god that can be carried off is a non-god. The author has made Micah, the first idolater of the settlement period, to testify to the ultimate stupidity of idolatry (18:21-24).

The Danites, unable to refute the accusation, responded belligerently. Micah had best keep his complaints to himself or he and the men with him would be attacked by "*hot-tempered*" (NIV) or "*fierce*" (NASB) men. The Danites apparently held to the philosophy that "might makes right." Micah realized that he and his ill-equipped force were no match for the Danites, and so he turned back to his own house. Thus Micah who had stolen from his mother was now repaid by a theft of that which he revered. The author wishes his readers to note that the sanctuary at Dan had its origin in a double theft (18:24-26).

### **C. A Capture (Judg 18:27-29).**

Following the confrontation with Micah, the Danites and their new priest continued their migration to Laish. They struck the quiet town with the edge of the sword, and burned down the place. The remoteness of the town made rescue by the city of Sidon impossible. Why the city was put to the torch is not clear. Perhaps they were motivated by some superstitious fear that they might be harassed by the guardian spirit of the dwellings.<sup>5</sup> In any case, after totally destroying the place, the Danites rebuilt Laish and named the place Dan after

their tribal ancestor (18:27-29). This town became the northernmost settlement of the children of Israel in the land of Canaan.

Did the Danites have the right to attack Laish? The city was within the boundaries of the Promised Land. Certainly Israelites would have had the right to conquer the place. Laish, however, was within the tribal limits of Naphtali. The Danites were acting in a cowardly way by failure to press the attack within their own allotment. The peaceful inhabitants of Laish were no military challenge to the Danites. Furthermore, the Danites did not follow the general principle of Deuteronomy 20:10-15 by first offering peace to the inhabitants of the place.

The author depicts the Danites in the worst possible light. They stole what belonged to another man. They had as their spiritual head a priest who could be bought. They pounced on a defenseless city. They established a shrine which was the rival of the house of Yahweh at Shiloh.

#### **D. A Cult (Judg 18:30-31).**

The Danites established their own religious shrine in the newly built city. They installed therein the graven image which they had confiscated from Micah back in the hill country of Ephraim. The wandering Levite who was consecrated to be the priest of that shrine is at last identified. His name was Jonathan. He was a grandson or great-grandson<sup>6</sup> of Moses.<sup>7</sup> This fact provides a chronological framework for the first appendix to Judges. The involvement of Moses' grandson (or great-grandson) would date the Danite migration shortly after the death of Joshua (18:30a).

The prestigious Levitical family continued to serve at the illegal and idolatrous shrine until "*the captivity of the land.*" The reference is probably not to the Assyrian captivity of Israel which did not begin until about 745 BC. Most likely the reference is to the Philistine captivity of the land, when the ark of God was captured and Shiloh was destroyed (1 Sam 4-5). A date of 1080 BC probably would not be far off.<sup>8</sup> This explanation of the "*captivity of the land*" fits well with the note with which the first appendix to Judges closes. Micah's graven image continued to be worshiped "*all the time that the house of God (i.e., tabernacle) was at Shiloh.*" The point seems to be that the

idolatrous shrine in Dan was a rival of the legitimate worship center in Shiloh until the latter was destroyed (18:30b-31).

## **IMMORALITY ILLUSTRATED**

### **Judges 19:1-30**

Judges 19 illustrates a third dimension of the moral mess which characterized the years immediately following the death of Joshua. Again a Levite is involved, and he is portrayed in a less than favorable light. The account opens with the reminder that “*in those days Israel had no king*” (19:1). This note seems intended to link chronologically the events of the two previous chapters to those about to be narrated. At the same time the author intends to warn his readers that he is about to relate shocking events, events which would never have transpired had there been a strong, god-fearing king in those days.

#### **A. A Trip to Bethlehem (Judg 19:1-9).**

The Levite, who lived in the remote part of Ephraim’s hill country, had taken a concubine<sup>9</sup> from Bethlehem in Judah. She, however, had “*played the harlot*” (*zanah*) against him. She deserted her husband and returned to the house of her father.<sup>10</sup> After four months of painful separation the Levite set out for Bethlehem with a servant and a pair of donkeys. He went after his concubine to “*speak tenderly*” (lit., speak upon her heart) in order to persuade her to return with him to their home. He must have mended the relationship, for she brought him into her father’s house. The Levite’s father-in-law was glad to see his daughter’s husband. For three days the men feasted. The overly gracious father-in-law persuaded the Levite to spend a fourth day and night in Bethlehem. Not until afternoon of the fifth day was the Levite able to depart for his home in Ephraim (19:3-9).

#### **B. A Stopover in Gibeah (Judg 19:10-21).**

By the time the travelers had gone six miles or so it was late in the afternoon. The Levite’s servant proposed that his master turn aside for the night into the Jebusite city of Jebus (Jerusalem). The Levite, however, refused to lodge in a city occupied by “*foreigners*.” He was determined to press on for Gibeah or Ramah (19:10-13).

By the time the threesome reached Gibeah the sun had already set. They entered the city and sat down in the public square. Normally citizens would provide lodging for weary travelers. Gibeah, however, was most inhospitable. Finally an old man, who was an Ephraimite living in Gibeah, came in from the field. When he learned that the Levite was an Ephraimite, he was most cordial. The Levite assured the old man that he would provide the food for himself, his concubine, servant and donkeys. He would not be a burden. The old man, however, insisted that the travelers come into his home and accept his provisions. The Levite quickly accepted the invitation (19:14-21).

### **C. An Attack by the Gibeahites (Judg 19:22-26).**

The joyous evening meal was interrupted by a pounding on the door. The men of the city, certain “*sons of Belial*” (worthless fellows), had surrounded the house. They demanded that the old man surrender the Levite to them that they might “*know*” (i.e., have carnal relations with) him. This unnatural lust (cf. Rom 1:27) shows how corrupt the men of Gibeah had become. The old man pled with his neighbors not to contemplate such “*foolishness*” (*nebhalah*).<sup>11</sup> To dramatize the magnitude of the sin of homosexual rape, the old man offered to surrender to the mob his own virgin daughter and the concubine of his guest. The mob could ravish these women and do with them as they pleased if only they would cease attempting to rape the Levite (19:22-24).

The moral perversity of the Benjamites was only matched by the moral insensitivity of the old man. He regarded a heterosexual rape even of a virgin, as bad as that might be, as far less of a crime than a homosexual rape. Granted, under the code of the east, he had a responsibility to protect his guest from danger. The end, however, does not justify the means. That the men in this account have a very low estimation of the value of women is rather clear. One should remember, however, that the very purpose of this story is to illustrate the disgusting immorality which was sweeping the land in the days just after the death of Joshua. Certainly biblical *teaching* does not support the notion that the rape of a woman is a lesser offense than the rape of a man, or that heterosexual immorality is less serious than homosexual immorality.

The Levite was as morally perverse and insensitive as the old man and the mob. When he saw that the mob would not listen to the old man, he seized his concubine and shoved her out the door. Accepting this sacrifice to their perverted lust, the men of Gibeah showed no further interest in the old man or his guest. They raped the woman and abused her all night long. At the approach of dawn they released her. She staggered to the door of the house, and fell. There she breathed her last breath (19:25-26).

#### **D. Reaction to the Atrocity (Judg 19:27-30).**

Early in the morning the Levite arose to continue his journey. He saw the crumpled body of his concubine at the doorway. When she did not respond to his cold command to arise, the Levite realized that she was dead. He placed her on his donkey and continued on toward the hill country of Ephraim. At his house the Levite took a knife and dismembered the corpse. The man had as little respect for his spouse in death as he had had for her in life. He sent the pieces of her body throughout the territory of Israel. The entire nation was shocked at the sordid tale of the sin of the Benjamites. Nothing like that had ever happened in Israel since the day that the children of Israel had come up from Egypt (19:27-30).

The crime at Gibeah illustrates the depths of the moral depravity into which many of the Israelites quickly had fallen after the death of Joshua and the elders of his generation. Hosea regarded this outrageous sin as the standard by which to measure all other depraved acts (9:9); he saw in this narrative the initial act of apostasy after Israel entered Canaan (10:9). This chapter, taken together with the one which follows, however, also illustrates the divine law of sowing and reaping. The woman who played the harlot died by being sexually abused. The Levite who sacrificed his spouse to save his honor lost her altogether. The men of Gibeah, along with thousands in their tribe who condoned their actions, died in a war of retribution.

### **DISUNITY ILLUSTRATED** **Judges 20:1-48**

The moral perversity of the men of Gibeah set in motion a chain

of events which drove a wedge between the tribes. The internecine bloodshed which was narrowly averted in the days of Joshua (cf. Josh 22) became a bloody reality shortly after his death.

### **A. The Assembly (Judg 20:1-10).**

From Dan to Beersheba and from Gilead as well the sons of Israel assembled “*as one man*” at Mizpah. The tribal chiefs took their stand in the assembly of the people. Some 400,000 swordsmen were present. The author is much impressed with the unity of the tribes, for three times he states that they gathered “*as one man*.” Yet one tribe—Benjamin—was not represented. By failing to appear the Benjamites were signaling that they were siding with the men of Gibeah. So the unity of Israel here is directed against one of their own tribes. Three times the author seems to lament the tragedy of the whole situation by noting that the united tribes and the Benjamites were “*brothers*” (20:1-3a).<sup>12</sup>

The assembly requested from the Levite a firsthand report of what had happened that night in Gibeah. The Levite rehearsed the dreadful details of the event, being careful to place his own despicable conduct in the best possible light. He alleged that the men of Gibeah intended to kill him. Though the narrative of the previous chapter does not state this explicitly, the Levite is probably not exaggerating when he states that his life was in jeopardy. His gruesome butchery of the woman’s corpse was justified by the magnitude of the sin committed against her by the Benjamites. They had committed “*a lewd and disgraceful act*” in Israel (20:3b-6). The word “*lewd*” (*zimmah*) denotes a sin so vile that the perpetrator must be “*cut off*” from the nation (cf. Lev 18:17,29). The word translated “*shameful act*” (*nebhalah*) is the same term used by the old man when he appealed to the men of Gibeah to abandon their sinful course (cf. 19:23).

The shocking dismemberment of the corpse had accomplished exactly what it was intended to accomplish, namely, the massing of the national assembly. Now the Levite called upon those assembled to give advice and counsel regarding the incident (20:7).

Those assembled pledged not to return to their homes until a military campaign had been launched against Benjamin. Following the holy war traditions, they cast lots to set aside ten percent of their

number to serve as a quartermaster corps to provide food for the army. The others marched against Gibeah of Benjamin (20:8-10).

### **B. The Positions (Judg 20:11-17).**

Messengers were dispatched throughout the tribe of Benjamin to demand the surrender of the “*sons of Belial*” in Gibeah. Only the death of those rapists and murderers could remove the wicked blot from Israel. The Benjamites refused to join the national effort to punish the atrocity at Gibeah. On the contrary, an army of 26,000 swordsmen rushed to Gibeah to bolster the defense of the town. Among the Benjamite defenders were 700 left-handed slingers who could sling a stone at a hair and not miss (20:11-16). By taking the side of their tribesmen the Benjamites came to share the guilt of the murderers. They too came under the ban which had been imposed on Gibeah.

The united tribes numbered their swordsmen at 400,000. This constituted an advantage of almost fifteen to one. That this vast army did not immediately crush the Benjamites and in fact suffered heavy casualties at their hands suggests that Yahweh was punishing the united tribes as well as Benjamin in this account (20:17).

### **C. The Battles (Judg 20:18-35).**

Over the next several days the united tribes clashed with the Benjamites three times. In the first two battles Benjamin was victorious. In the third clash the united tribes virtually wiped out the Benjamites.

1. *The first attack against Gibeah (20:17-21).* Representatives of the eleven tribes went to Bethel to seek by priestly oracle direction concerning the war with Benjamin. The text makes no mention of any request for divine wisdom or even divine help for that matter. Nor is there any record of offerings being brought in worship. Their only question was, Which tribe would lead the campaign against Benjamin? The same question was asked in reference to the warfare against the Canaanites in Judges 1:1. The response there and here is that Judah should lead the tribes into battle. The next day as the men of Israel approached Gibeah, the Benjamites came out to meet their attackers. Some 22,000 men of Israel became casualties in the first clash of the war (20:17-21).

2. *The second attack against Gibeah (20:22-25)*. The united tribes were discouraged by their heavy losses, but they were not yet ready to relinquish the effort to punish the lawless Benjamites. Again they arrayed themselves for battle in the same position which they had held on the previous day. Representatives of the eleven tribes again “*went up before Yahweh*” (at Bethel?). Until evening time they wept and inquired of the Lord. Should they renew hostilities with Benjamin? Their tears were not those of real repentance. They were attempting to coerce Yahweh to be sympathetic to their cause. The priestly oracle directed them to resume the attack. The oracle, however, offered no assurance of victory (20:22-23).

The results of the second battle were similar to those of the first clash. The Benjamites again came out against the united tribes and cut down 18,000 swordsmen. Thus far Israel had received the favor of divine guidance but not divine aid in the battle itself. Yet the significance of this should not be overlooked. In spite of all that was wrong in Israel, that people still had access to divine guidance through the high priest.<sup>13</sup> This Benjamin did not have (20:24-25).

3. *The third attack against Gibeah (20:26-35)*. In the two disastrous defeats the Israelites had learned that victory would not come through their military might, but only through empowerment by the Spirit of God. They dared not go forward with their campaign against Benjamin until they were assured that the Lord would give them victory. So all of the people went up to Bethel to inquire of the Lord. Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, stood before the ark and ministered there. The Israelites fasted and wept, and offered various sacrifices before the Lord. They again asked if they should go up against Benjamin. This time, however, they add the words “*or not.*” They were now willing to break off the attack if that be the will of Yahweh. No longer were they presuming that their plan to punish Benjamin was within the will of God. Again the priestly oracle directed the united tribes to attack Gibeah a third time. This time victory was assured (20:26-28).

A new strategy was employed by the united tribes in the third attack against Gibeah. They set men in ambush around the city with the obvious intention of catching the Benjamites in a pincher movement. The main body began the attack, then feigned retreat. The



Benjamites, overconfident because of their previous victories, began to pursue the retreating men of Israel. The maneuver worked. The Benjamites were lured out into the open where they were attacked from three directions. The battle was fierce. The Benjamites did not suspect that their army was about to be decimated (20:29-35).

#### **D. The Victory (Judg 20:36-46).**

Having given a thumbnail sketch of the third clash, the author now explains how that victory was possible. One contingent of the ambushment rushed the city itself. When they saw the smoke rising from Gibeah, the Benjamites lost their will to fight. They attempted to flee toward the wilderness. The battle, however, overtook them. The Lord struck the Benjamites before Israel (20:36-43).

The Benjamite casualties in that third day of battle were staggering. The total is said to be 25,100 swordsmen (v. 35).<sup>14</sup> (20:44-46). A band of 600 Benjamites made it to the rock of Rimmon where they remained for four months. Having crushed the army of Benjamin, the united tribes turned back against the territory of Benjamin. The non-combatants were struck with the edge of the sword, the cattle were destroyed and the cities burned. The entire tribe was under the ban of total destruction since it had taken the side of the men of Gibeah (20:47-48).

### **LEGALISM ILLUSTRATED**

#### **Judges 21:1-25**

In their shock over the behavior of the Benjamites, the men of Israel had taken a rash vow before the war. They had sworn in solemn oath that they would not give their daughters in marriage to Benjamites. Now they realized that an entire tribe was about to be lost. The leaders of Israel consequently devised a scheme whereby they could technically keep the terms of their sacred oath, and at the same time provide wives for the surviving Benjamites. In this kind of hypocritical legal fiction the Israelites became skilled with the passing of years. The scribes of Jesus' day were experts in knowing how to keep the letter of the law while at the same time breaking the spirit of that law.

**A. Virgins of Jabesh (Judg 21:1-14).**

The prospect of losing one of the tribes entirely was a matter of great concern. Again the people went to Bethel where they expressed their grief all day before the Lord. In their zeal to punish the atrocity of Gibeah they had entered into a rash vow. Now they bemoaned the consequences of their own stupidity. Sacrifices were offered in an attempt to move the Lord to heal the breach in their nation (21:1-4).

After a day of lamentation and worship, a potential solution occurred to some of the leaders. When the national assembly had been called to Mizpah (20:1-11), another oath had been taken. This oath obligated them to put to death soldiers who failed to assemble before the Lord. A roll call of the army indicated that no contingent from Jabesh-gilead had aided in the war against Benjamin (21:5-9).

The assembly determined to put Jabesh-gilead under the ban. A contingent of twelve thousand men was dispatched with orders to put to death the inhabitants of the place. Thus human logic determined to resort to massacre of their countrymen in order to undo the results of the massacre of other countrymen. Only the young virgins were to be spared. Since virgins wore distinctive clothing in ancient cultures, they easily would be identified by the attacking forces. The original oath, however, must either have applied only to the men of military age, or to the entire population of towns which sent no support to the war effort. The sparing of the virgins was completely arbitrary. The desperate effort here was to undo the effects of one rash vow by the selective implementation of another (21:10-11).

Four hundred virgins were found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead. These girls were brought back to Shiloh, the site of the tabernacle. Then a peace offering was sent to the six hundred Benjamites at the rock of Rimmon. They left their stronghold in the wilderness, came to Shiloh, and claimed as brides the four hundred virgins from Jabesh. Still, however, two hundred of the Benjamites did not have wives (21:12-14).

**B. Daughters of Shiloh (Judg 21:15-25).**

More wives were needed. Another solution occurred to some of the rulers. Though not as violent, it was equally bizarre. During the annual feast at Shiloh the Benjamites who still needed wives were to

conceal themselves in the vineyards. When the daughters of Shiloh came out to join in the dancing, the Benjamites were to rush forth from the vineyards and seize wives for themselves. Should fathers or brothers complain to the leaders, they would be assured that they were innocent of any violation of the oath. They had not actually *given* their daughters or sisters to the Benjamites. No one seems to have cared that a festival of the Lord was being used for this chicanery (21:15-22).

The Benjamites did as they were told. Each single man captured one of the dancing daughters of Shiloh and carried her off, caveman style, to be his wife. A more despicable desecration of marriage can hardly be imagined. The Benjamites then returned to their tribal inheritance with their new brides to rebuild and occupy their towns. The national assembly of the eleven tribes, having served its purpose, also dissolved. The men of Israel returned to the territories of their respective tribes and clans. The narrative concludes with a final reminder of how such unpleasant episodes could have taken place. There was no central government during the days of the Judges. Everybody simply did what he thought was right (21:23-25).

Judges 21 is ambiguous. It contains a record of consistency and inconsistency. The punishment of Jabesh-gilead was justified, but was needlessly severe. That Israel was concerned to honor an oath to God is commendable, but to do so by trampling on the rights of the Shiloh girls and their families was perverse. God's grace even shines through the clouds of this chapter. Old Sodom was completely destroyed in Genesis 19. In New Sodom—Benjamin—a remnant of six hundred was spared.<sup>15</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. NIV margin states that 1100 silver shekels would weigh 28 lbs. Goslinga, however, gives the weight as 40 lbs.

2. The term *pesel* usually denotes an image that is carved from wood or stone. The term *massekhah* always denotes a cast idol. Did the woman have two idols made? The Hebrew verb in verse 4 is singular and this argues against the notion of two separate idols. Probably the combination *pesel-massekhah* denotes a single idol with two distinct parts. Cf. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 457, n.8.

3. Bethlehem was not a Levitical city. The text says literally that the Levite “*lived as a sojourner*” there. This may have been because his assigned city was not yet in Israelite hands.

4. That the Danites used the general name *’Elohim* rather than the covenant name *Yahweh* suggests that they did not regard Micah’s shrine as a legitimate sanctuary of Israel’s God.

5. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 469.

6. According to 1 Chr 23:16 Gershom’s son was Shebuel. Jonathan may have been the son of Shebuel, hence a great-grandson of Moses. Skipping a generation is not uncommon in Old Testament genealogy.

7. Apparently the Hebrew text originally read “*Moses*” in Judges 18:30. Later scribes could not accept the fact that a grandson of Moses would have agreed to serve as priest at an idolatrous shrine. They assumed that the original reading was *Manasseh* rather than *Moses*. The difference between the two names in the Hebrew text is a single consonant. In some Hebrew manuscripts the scribes have “restored” the missing letter by inserting above the line of writing a small letter *nun* at the appropriate place.

8. A divine judgment on Shiloh is alluded to in Ps 78:60; and Jer 7:12,14; 26:6,9. Presumably these references refer to what happened to Shiloh just after the death of Eli. Limited habitation of the site, however, must have continued after 1080 BC (1 Kgs 11:29; Jer 41:5).

9. A concubine was a wife of secondary rank who did not enjoy the economic protection provided by the *mohar*. A *mohar* was a substantial sum of money left on deposit with the father of a bride which provided for the woman in the event of premature death or desertion by her husband.

10. It is not clear whether the author meant to say that leaving the Levite constituted committing harlotry, or whether the concubine played the harlot and then left her husband.

11. *Nebalah* is rendered “*disgraceful thing*” (NIV) and “*act of folly*” (NASB). The word is used of shameful acts of sexual immorality such as rape (Gen 34:7) and incest (2 Sam 13:12).

12. The united tribes and the Benjamites are called “*brothers*” in 20:13,23,28. On the tragic disunity of Israel in this account, see Davis, *Salvation*, p. 218f.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

14. The exact count of casualties on the third day of battle is said to be 25,100 (v. 35). This is rounded off to 25,000 in v. 46. The number of Benjamite casualties added to the 600 survivors falls 1,000 short of the figure given for the Benjamite forces at the beginning of the war. The text is silent about any Benjamite casualties in the first two clashes. The 1,000 unaccounted for in the casualty figures from the third clash may have been lost in the first two clashes.

15. Davis, *Salvation*, p. 226.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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# A Point of Light in a Dark Night

## Ruth 1-4

The setting for the Book of Ruth is the period when the Judges ruled Israel.<sup>1</sup> No specific Judge, however, is named. Jewish tradition suggested the Judge was Ibzan (1105-1098 BC). Modern scholars are more likely to suggest Jair (1148-1126 BC). The book was originally a kind of third appendix to the Book of Judges. The author apparently wished to illustrate that even though the days of the Judges were morally and religiously dark, yet some within Israel were faithful to God and to his law.

### **A SAD HOMECOMING**

#### **Faith Encompassed by Tragedy**

#### **Ruth 1:1-22**

The focus in chapter 1 is on the family of Elimelech (“My God is King”) an “Ephrathite”<sup>2</sup> from Bethlehem Judah. Elimelech’s wife Naomi (“Pleasant”) is one of two leading characters in the book. Her

sons Mahlon (“Sickness”) and Chilion (“Vanishing”) may have been given their names because of the sad plight of the nation during the dark days of the Judges.

### **A. Leaving Bethlehem (Ruth 1:1-5).**

The land of Judah experienced a famine. Although famines were common in the days of the Patriarchs some eight hundred years earlier (cf. Gen 12:10; 26:1; 43:1), this is the first recorded famine encountered by Israel since entering the land of Canaan.

Elimelech decided to move his family to the land of Moab east of the Dead Sea to wait out the famine. Because of this decision Elimelech is vilified in rabbinical exegesis as an arrogant and evil man. His death in Moab is viewed by the rabbis as just punishment for having left the Promised Land. Naomi “*was left*” (lit., she remained) with her two sons in the land of Moab (1:1-3). Again rabbinical exegesis sees Naomi here as defying the divine warning of the death of her husband by choosing to remain on foreign soil. Nothing in the text, however, suggests that Elimelech sinned by moving his family to Moab. Nothing suggests that his death was anything more than coincidental with his abiding in that foreign land. The passage does suggest, however, that godly people do experience unexpected tragedies, and sometimes in rapid succession.

After the death of Elimelech, the two sons took Moabite wives. They thus, in the eyes of Jewish commentators, sinned more grievously than their father. If this passage is intended to be a protest against religious intermarriage it certainly is a mild one. That the women converted to the worship of the Living God before the marriages is not inconceivable. Technically, the marriage to Moabite women was not illegal. The law only forbade Moabite *males* from joining the assembly of the Lord (cf. Deut 23:3).

For about ten years the Israelite men and their wives Orpah and Ruth lived in Moab. They had apparently given up all thought of returning to Bethlehem. The widow Naomi remained with her sons. In those days a widow was almost totally dependent upon her sons for support. As fate would have it, however, Naomi was shortly left destitute. Her two sons both died (1:4-5).

**B. Contemplating Return (Ruth 1:6-18).**

Through travelers Naomi learned that conditions in Judah had improved. Yahweh had “*visited his people*,” i.e., had intervened on their behalf, to provide food. Naomi considered her chances of surviving without a male provider to be greater in her native land than in Moab. Following eastern customs, her two daughters-in-law accompanied her for some distance on the road to Judah (1:6-7).

One of the unusual features of the Book of Ruth is that fifty-five of the eighty-five verses in the book are dialogue. At some point along the road Naomi urged her two daughters-in-law each to return to her mother’s house.<sup>3</sup> She then pronounced a blessing upon them in the name of Yahweh. She prayed that the Lord would be as kind to these two Moabite women as they had been kind to their dead husbands and to Naomi. She further prayed that Yahweh would help each to find “*a resting place*” each in the house of her husband. The term “*resting place*” (*menuchah*) carries the meaning of both peace and happiness.<sup>4</sup> The term summarizes all the qualities of an ideal marriage in which a godly woman can find strength, security, material wellbeing and love. Naomi then kissed Orpah and Ruth. At this point the three could restrain their emotions no longer. They lifted up their voices and wept (1:8-9).

The young women expressed determination to accompany Naomi all the way to Bethlehem. Naomi, however, insisted that they go back to their country. She could not provide husbands for them in any reasonable length of time. Knowing that she must be deprived of the companionship of the two fine daughters-in-law made Naomi’s burden even harder to bear. She had lost both her husband and sons to death. Now she was about to lose the last dear ones she had on earth through separation. All of this misfortune Naomi attributed to the actions of Yahweh. This frank and logical analysis of the situation caused the women again to burst into tears. Orpah yielded to Naomi’s logic and submitted to her directions. She kissed her mother-in-law and departed for her home. Ruth, however, “*clung*” to Naomi and refused to leave (1:10-14).

After some time passed, Naomi began to urge Ruth to follow the example of her sister-in-law. Orpah had returned to her people and “*to her gods*.” If the women had embraced Yahweh when they mar-

ried the Israelite men, Naomi knew that it would be impossible for Orpah to remain faithful to the Lord while surrounded by Moabite idolatry. Orpah's gods would doubtless include the god Chemosh who demanded child sacrifice from his devotees. Perhaps Naomi's words to Ruth should not so much be interpreted as a directive but as an invitation to declare her complete allegiance to Yahweh (1:15).

Ruth could not bear the thought of returning to the heathen environment in which she had grown up. If she had not fully repudiated the gods of Moab before, Ruth does so at this point. She would hear no more of Naomi's urging to return to Moab. On the contrary, Ruth committed herself for better or worse to Naomi, Naomi's people, and Naomi's God. She did not even desire to return to her native Moab for burial. Nothing but death would separate her from Naomi. This commitment she sealed by a self-malediction or curse in which she used the name of Yahweh: *"Thus may Yahweh do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me."*<sup>5</sup> The use of Yahweh's name exclusively in this oath again suggests a complete conversion on Ruth's part (1:16-17).

When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go on to Bethlehem with her, she ceased urging her to return to Moab (1:18).

### **C. Returning to Bethlehem (Ruth 1:19-22).**

The entire village of Bethlehem was astir when Naomi and Ruth arrived. The sight of two women traveling alone toward the city was unusual. As they drew near the women of Bethlehem thought they recognized Naomi, and inquired if the traveler was she. Naomi responded: *"Do not call me Naomi (i.e., "Pleasant") but call me Mara (i.e., "Bitter")."* By this Naomi signaled that the decade in Moab had taken its toll in more ways than one (1:19).

Naomi blamed her misfortune on the Lord. Shaddai, the Almighty,<sup>6</sup> had afflicted her, or so she thought. When she had left Bethlehem she had been living a full life. She had a fine husband and two fine sons. Yahweh, however, had brought her back empty. By bringing this misfortune upon her Yahweh had witnessed against Naomi, i.e., had shown her to be a terrible sinner undeserving of his blessing. Instead of using his power to protect this woman, Shaddai had turned his power against her (1:20-21).



If Naomi referred to the permissive will of the Lord, her theology was impeccable. Her words, however, seem to blame all her misfortune directly on the Lord. God may have permitted her misfortune. To deny this would be to deny the omnipotence of God. That God initiated or directly caused Naomi all the pain she had experienced is never suggested in the text. Here is an example of that theology which so often rears its ugly head, namely, that calamity in one's life means that one is being punished for some sin. This theology is decisively laid to rest in the Book of Job.

The dialogue between Naomi and the women of Bethlehem underscores dramatically the theme of the first chapter of the book, namely, the terrible ordeal of Naomi. The narrative of the homecoming concludes by emphasizing (1) the loneliness of the return—only the two women without their loved ones; (2) the sacrifice of the return—Ruth was a Moabitess who was forsaking all for her commitment to Yahweh's people; (3) the wisdom of the return—they came from Moab, a land where Chemosh was honored, to Bethlehem Judah in the Promised Land; and (4) the time of the return—at the beginning of the barley harvest. In April the barley crop ripened and was ready for harvest (1:22).

### **A PROVIDENTIAL MEETING**

#### **Faith in Everyday Circumstances**

#### **Ruth 2:1-23**

Chapter 2 begins with the introduction of the third leading character of the book. Boaz is described as (1) an acquaintance (NASB margin) of Elimelech; (2) a man of great wealth; and (3) a member of the family of Elimelech. The exact relationship between Elimelech and Boaz is left unclear. The rabbinical thesis that Boaz was a cousin of the dead man is without foundation. Another tradition would make Boaz Naomi's nephew by marriage.

#### **A. Polite Requests (Ruth 2:2-7).**

Ruth was an industrious woman. She was not afraid to work. She politely requested permission from her mother-in-law to go out into the fields where the barley was being harvested. Perhaps there she

could find a friendly landowner who would allow her to follow behind the harvesters picking up the stalks which they might leave lying on the ground. Mosaic law stipulated that the gleanings of the field were to be left for the poor, for strangers and for widows and orphans.<sup>7</sup> Either this custom prevailed also in Moab, or Ruth had learned of it from local women, perhaps as she drew water at the public well. In any case, Naomi granted permission for Ruth to proceed with her plan (2:2).

At some point in her forays into the harvest fields Ruth happened upon the field of a wealthy farmer named Boaz. Providence must have brought her to that place because Boaz was from the same tribe as Elimelech (2:3).

That Boaz was a godly man is stressed from the moment he is introduced in the account. When he came out from Bethlehem to inspect the harvest, he greeted his reapers in the name of Yahweh. They responded in kind. Where both labor and management share the same faith in the Lord, peace and satisfaction will reign supreme (2:4).

Noticing Ruth walking behind the reapers, Boaz inquired of the foreman who this might be. The foreman introduced Ruth as “*the Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab*” (NASB). She had requested permission to glean after the reapers in the field, and the foreman had granted that request. Ruth had been hard at work in the field since early morning, except for a brief respite in the hut which was used by the reapers for rest and refreshment (2:5-7).

### **B. Gracious Offer (Ruth 2:8-13).**

Boaz addressed Ruth in a most courteous manner. Since he was considerably older than the Moabitess, he calls her “*my daughter.*” He invited her to join the women who were working for him. Ruth could follow them from field to field during the harvest. Boaz had given strict orders to his male servants not to touch or in any way hinder the efforts of Ruth. He further invited Ruth to help herself from the water jars which the servants might draw from some nearby well (2:8-9).

Ruth was overwhelmed by this display of kindness by the Israelite.

In typical Oriental exaggerated respect, she bowed her face to the ground. She could not help but ask why she, a foreigner, should have found favor in his sight. Boaz explained that he had heard of all that Ruth had done for her mother-in-law after the death of her husband. Boaz had been particularly impressed by Ruth's willingness to leave her mother and father and the land of her birth to stay with Naomi in a strange land (2:10-11).

Boaz then pronounced a blessing on Ruth in the name of Yahweh. He prayed that the Lord might continue to bless the work of Ruth, that he might provide for her "*a full reward*" (BV) for all she had done. The Gentile had sought refuge under the "*wings*" of Yahweh, and therefore was entitled to his blessing. The language here is obviously metaphorical. Perhaps the reference is to the wings of the cherubim which were spread out over the ark of the covenant in the Tabernacle. In any case, the language here definitely confirms what was suggested in the previous chapter, namely, that Ruth had given her heart to the Lord (2:12).

Ruth responded to this spiritual blessing with gratitude and humility. She did not consider herself equal to any one of Boaz's maidservants. Nonetheless, the farmer had bestowed favor upon her. This "*comforted*" or touched the heart of Ruth (2:13).

### **C. Generous Provision (Ruth 2:14-17).**

At mealtime Boaz again was gracious to Ruth. He invited her to come and eat with the reapers. The meal of bread, with a special dip, and roasted grain was typical of that region. Ruth had more than enough to eat. As she arose to resume her labor, Boaz issued three orders to his servants. First, Ruth was now to be allowed to glean among the tied sheaves which the harvesters placed upright on the ground. Here the grains were more numerous. In addition, the servants were told to "*drop some heads for her on purpose*" (BV).<sup>8</sup> Finally, no servant was to rebuke Ruth as she gleaned.

Ruth continued to glean in Boaz's field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned. The kernels of grain were knocked loose from the stalk with a stick. The Moabitess was able to carry home that day an ephah<sup>9</sup> of barley, enough to last the two widows for a number of weeks.

### **D. Grateful Acknowledgment (Ruth 2:18-23).**

Ruth returned to the city with the fruit of her labor. She shared with Naomi what remained of the bountiful lunch which Boaz had provided for her in the field. Naomi was amazed at the good fortune of her daughter-in-law. She pronounced a blessing on the benefactor, and then inquired as to his name. When she learned that it was Boaz, she again pronounced a blessing. Boaz, as it turned out, was a close relative, a kinsman-redeemer (*go'el*), in the family of Elimelech (2:18-20). In the Old Testament social structure the kinsman-redeemer had three responsibilities: (1) He had the right to recover forfeited property of a kinsman (Lev 25:25). (2) If one had fallen into slavery, the kinsman-redeemer was to purchase his freedom (Lev 25:47-49). (3) Should a brother die leaving no male heir, the kinsman-redeemer was to marry the widow to raise up seed in the name of the dead relative (Deut 25:5-10; Gen 38:8-10). Some think the kinsman-redeemer also had the responsibility to avenge the murder of a family member (Num 35:19).

With great excitement Ruth informed Naomi that Boaz had invited her to stay with his servants until the harvest was finished. Naomi was very pleased with this news. She knew that righteous Boaz would not allow any harm to come to the young widow while she worked in his fields (2:21-22).

For the next several weeks Ruth stayed close by the maids of Boaz in order to glean. When the barley harvest was complete she continued in this relationship into the wheat harvest as well. All the while she continued to live with her mother-in-law (2:23).

## **A DRAMATIC PROPOSAL**

### **Faith Taking Initiative**

#### **Ruth 3:1-18**

Ruth 3 begins and ends with dialogue between Ruth and Naomi. These dialogue scenes introduce and evaluate the major scene of the chapter which depicts a late night meeting between Ruth and Boaz at the threshingfloor.

### **A. Introductory Dialogue (Ruth 3:1-5).**

The introductory dialogue between Ruth and Naomi is essential to

a correct perspective of the principal scene which follows. While Ruth took the initiative in chapter 2, here it is Naomi who proposes a bold move. Ruth only acts in this chapter on orders from Naomi. On her part, Naomi appears to be compelled by what she considers her moral obligation to seek for her daughter-in-law “a *resting place*,” i.e., marriage (3:1). Ruth did not belong in the fields with the hired hands. A woman of her worth deserved to be the queen of a home. Naomi recognized that when a godly woman marries a godly man, and both are committed to building their home upon divine principles, matrimony is a “*rest*” as much as anything on earth can be so called. Only in such a situation could Ruth “*prosper*” (BV), i.e., fulfill the deepest longings of her soul.

Naomi knew that Boaz would be winnowing barley on the threshing floor that night. He would then sleep there to protect his crop from thieves. Naomi directed Ruth to bathe, anoint herself with fragrant oils, and put on her best clothes. Ruth should go down to the threshingfloor. She should conceal herself until after Boaz had finished his evening meal. After the man had gone to sleep, Ruth should uncover his feet and lie down there. Boaz then would tell her what she was to do (3:2-4).

Naomi’s directions and Ruth’s willingness to comply (3:5) therewith must be judged by the standards of the times in which those women lived. On her part, Naomi had confidence in the good behavior and resolute chastity of her daughter-in-law. She knew that Boaz was a deeply religious man who would recognize immediately that he was being nudged ever so gently to perform his duty to his dead kinsman by marrying Ruth. On her part, Ruth trusted her mother-in-law’s judgment and knowledge of local customs. She believed she was fulfilling a duty of love to her dead husband by approaching Boaz to remind him of his kinsman obligations.

### **B. A Marriage Proposal (Ruth 3:6-15).**

Ruth did exactly as Naomi had directed. After his meal Boaz’s “*heart was merry*.” From the shadows Ruth watched him lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she quietly approached him, uncovered his feet, and lay down (3:6-7).

At midnight Boaz was startled to feel something soft and warm at

his feet. He instinctively bent forward and discovered Ruth. In the dark he did not recognize her. Ruth identified herself. She then asked that he “*spread*” his “*wing*” over her since he was a kinsman-redeemer. The reference here is to the placing of the corner of the garment over a maiden as a token of marriage (3:8-9).

Boaz responded to the marriage proposal with a blessing on Ruth. Her desire to marry a kinsman of her dead husband was commendable, especially since Boaz was considerably older than Ruth.<sup>10</sup> Boaz urged Ruth not to fear. The Moabitess had the reputation of being a virtuous woman. He would be glad to do as she suggested. A problem, however, did exist. Whereas Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer, there was another who was closer than he. This anonymous relative first would have to relinquish his legal rights to “*redeem*” Ruth. If this nearer kinsman was unwilling to perform the function of the kinsman-redeemer, then Boaz assured Ruth by oath that he would do it (3:10-13).

Boaz invited Ruth to remain with him on the threshing floor that night. Concern for Ruth’s reputation caused both to arise before sunrise. Boaz urged Ruth not to let it generally be known that she had been to the threshing floor. As an added precaution, Boaz measured out to Ruth six measures of barley<sup>11</sup> and laid it on her, i.e., put it on her head. If someone should spot her that morning it would appear that she had merely gotten an early start on the day’s work by transporting this sizable allotment of grain from the threshing floor to her quarters. Ruth then departed for the city (3:14-15).<sup>12</sup>

### **C. Concluding Dialogue (Ruth 3:16-18).**

When Ruth approached the house, Naomi inquired, “*Who are you, my daughter?*” The early morning darkness may have obscured the identity of Ruth. More likely, however, Naomi’s question meant: Are you one dishonored by rejection or one protected as a wife? She wanted to know if the plan had worked! Ruth then told her mother-in-law all that had taken place. The generous gift of the barley signaled Boaz’s favorable disposition toward the two women. Naomi counseled Ruth to be patient. She was confident that Boaz would not rest until he had settled the matter with the nearer kinsman (3:16-18).

## A SIGNIFICANT MARRIAGE

### Faith Finding Rest

#### Ruth 4:1-22

In the early morning Boaz went to the city gate. In ancient cities the gate complex was the center of social life. Legal judgments were rendered there. Before Boaz was able to function as the kinsman-redeemer of Naomi and Ruth, a legal proceeding was required.

#### A. A Legal Proceeding (Ruth 4:1-12).

When the nearer kinsman passed by, Boaz called him to turn aside and sit down. At the same time Boaz asked ten of the elders of the city to sit down to witness the proceedings (4:1-2). The nearer kinsman is called “friend” (*peloni almoni*). Probably the author of Judges deliberately has suppressed his name to spare him embarrassment for refusing to perform his family duty.<sup>13</sup> Apparently the right of the *go’el* was exercised according to an order of kinship priority which is found in Leviticus 25:49. The order is: the paternal uncle, his son, then other relatives.

Boaz formally notified the closest kinsman that Naomi had to put her husband’s property up for sale. The closest kinsman had the right of purchase. Boaz hints that he might be willing to purchase the property, but he has no legal right to do so. The closest kinsman was quite willing to make the purchase. Apparently he thought that the property belonged solely to Naomi, and that his duty would end with the purchase of the field from her. When he learned, however, that the transaction would include marriage with Ruth, he withdrew. He felt that marriage to Ruth would in some way jeopardize his own inheritance (4:3-6).

Transfer of the legal rights of the *go’el* was symbolized by the removal of a sandal. Presumably it was the closest relative who gave the sandal to Boaz in the presence of the witnesses.<sup>14</sup> Boaz then acknowledged before the witnesses and “all the people” that he had acquired (*qanah*) from Naomi all which once had belonged to her husband and sons. In addition, Boaz proudly claimed that he had also acquired (*qanah*) Ruth as his wife. The legal terminology is the same with regard to the acquisition of the property and the wife. There,

however, the similarity ended. Boaz clearly distinguishes between the acquisition of the property and the marriage to Ruth. In biblical teaching a wife is never regarded as property, but as a full partner in the sacred task of building a home. Apparently the ceremony had attracted many of the townspeople of Bethlehem. They would be most happy to see the plight of the two impoverished women alleviated by the legal intervention of the wealthy Boaz (4:7-10a).

Unlike the closer kinsman, Boaz announced before the witnesses that he would be most happy to perform the responsibility of the Levirate marriage to raise up a descendant for Mahlon. All the people in the gate responded to Boaz's announcement with the proper legal formula: "*We are witnesses.*" Then they spontaneously pronounced a blessing first on Ruth, then on Boaz. They prayed that Yahweh would make her as fruitful as Rachel and Leah from whom the whole house of Israel sprang. Regarding Boaz the people prayed for wealth and fame. They prayed that his household might be like that of Perez the son of Judah (Gen 38). Why Perez? Probably because he was the offspring of Levirate marriage similar to that of Ruth and Boaz (4:10b-12). Perez was the progenitor of one of the clans of the tribe of Judah (Num 26:21).

### **B. A Joyous Blessing (Ruth 4:13-17).**

True to his public commitment, Boaz "*took,*" i.e., married, Ruth. He "*went in unto her,*" i.e., had sexual relations with her, that he might fulfill the responsibilities of a Levirate husband. Not long after the marriage the Lord "*gave her conception.*" She who had not been able to conceive by her young husband Mahlon, was enabled by God to conceive by the much older Boaz (4:13).

One of the themes of the Book of Ruth is the bitterness of Naomi. She left Bethlehem "*full,*" i.e., finding fulfillment in her family. She returned to Bethlehem "*empty,*" i.e., having lost both her husband and sons (1:21). With the birth of a grandson, however, she experiences anew the satisfaction and security afforded by male offspring. The women of Bethlehem blessed the Lord in joyous praise. The newborn son would assume the responsibilities of the nearest kinsman toward both his mother and grandmother. The women pray that he may become a famous man in Israel. They pray that he may be to



Naomi a “*restorer of life*,” i.e., one who gave new meaning to living. The women also pray that the child would one day sustain Naomi in her old age (4:14-15a). The fear of every woman in Israel was to grow old without a male provider.

The women of Bethlehem considered Naomi blessed, not only because of the newborn child, but because she had a daughter-in-law who loved her “*more than seven sons*.” A mother of many sons in the Old Testament world was a happy mother. As long as she had no descendant, Naomi was so bitter that she could not really appreciate the blessing which Ruth represented in her life. Now that the stigma of childlessness had been removed, Naomi could come to appreciate how blessed she really was. Her life was indeed “*full*” of God’s blessing (4:15b).

Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap. She became his “*nurse*” (*’omeneth*), i.e., she raised the child. The action here appears to be some kind of formal ceremony in which guardianship of the child was assumed. The child hereafter would be recognized as the son of Naomi as well as the son of Ruth. Certainly the neighbor women recognized this to be the case. They even were given the honor of naming the lad. They chose the name Obed, one who serves. Obed became the father of Jesse, and the grandfather of David (4:16-17).

### **C. A Concluding Genealogy (Ruth 4:18-22).**

The concluding genealogy indicates the purpose and meaning of the entire Book of Ruth. The author aims to demonstrate that David came from solid Israelite stock even though he had Moabite blood in his veins.

## **ENDNOTES**

1. Literally the Hebrew reads: “*in the days of the judging of the Judges*.” Here the verb has the generic sense of exercising power. Hence the rendering of the NASB is “*in the days when the judges governed*.”

2. Ephrath was the ancient name for Bethlehem Judah.

3. Since Ruth’s father was still living (2:11), the reference to “*mother’s house*” is puzzling. Jewish commentators suggest it is because “a proselyte has no legal father.” Others have suggested that females lived in the mother’s tent. Still others have pointed out that among the ancient Arabs a trace of

matriarchal organization can be documented in which the tent was actually the property of the wife.

4. The term “*resting place*” is used in the OT of a camping place for the ark and people of God (Num 10:33); the Promised Land (Deut 12:9; 1 Kgs 8:56; Ps 95:11) and of Zion as the residence of Yahweh (Ps 132:8,14). Any place God dwells is a resting place for his people. The term also has a military significance meaning a place free of strife (e.g., Judg 20:43).

5. The idea behind this curse or oath formula is this: May the Lord do to me such and such unmentionable deed, and may he repeat it an unspecified number of times if I go back on this commitment. In English this is equivalent to saying, I swear I will never go back on this commitment.

6. Shaddai, as a divine title, is used forty-eight times in the OT. Seven times it is preceded by *’el* (God). The exact meaning of the term is disputed. The LXX thought the word meant “all powerful” and most English versions have followed this lead. Recent scholarship suggests that Shaddai means “mountain.” Hence El Shaddai would mean “God of the Mountain.” This name for God seems to emphasize the power of God as it is channeled into the lives of individuals. The name is frequently linked with God’s promise of progeny to the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

7. See Lev 19:9,10; 23:22; and Deut 24:19-22.

8. Literally, “*pull out for her from the bundles*” (*tsebhathim*). The Hebrew word appears only here and is to be distinguished from the tied sheaves of the preceding verse. These “*bundles*” were the quantity of grain the harvester could hold in his left hand when he was cutting with the sickle.

9. The exact size of the ephah is unknown. Some commentators give 40 liters as the capacity of an ephah. That would make it a bit larger than a bushel. Others, however, think the ephah had a capacity of only 22 liters, a bit over half a bushel.

10. In Jewish tradition Boaz was only a nephew of Elimelech whereas the nearer kinsman was a brother. Furthermore, the tradition is that Boaz was an octogenarian.

11. The measure is not stated in the text. Certainly the ephah is not intended. The Jewish Targum suggests the measure was the *se’ah* (one-third of an *ephah*), but even this measured by six likely would be too heavy for a woman to carry any great distance. Most likely the measure was the *omer* (one-tenth of an *ephah*).

12. The standard Hebrew text reads “*he* went to the city.” Most English versions, however, read the verb as a feminine. Jewish Midrash explains the masculine by suggesting that Boaz accompanied Ruth to the city.

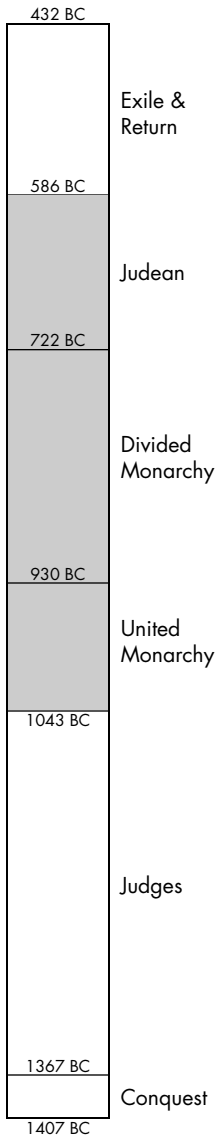
13. In the other two places (1 Sam 21:3; 2 Kgs 6:8) where the term *peloni almoni* appears in the Old Testament a name has been omitted deliberately.

14. The Targum (ancient Aramaic paraphrase of Ruth) favors the view that the purchaser—Boaz—was the one who removed his sandal.

PART TWO

THE

MONARCHY PERIOD



**PART TWO**  
**THE MONARCHY**  
**1043-586 BC**

**Sources:**

**1 & 2 Samuel**  
**1 & 2 Kings**  
**1 & 2 Chronicles**

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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# The Monarchy Books An Introduction

Originally the six monarchy historical books—the two Samuels, the two Kings, and the two Chronicles—were but three books. The division of the original works came when these books were translated into the Septuagint (Greek) version late in the third century BC. The Hebrew language of the biblical period did not write symbols for vowel sounds in words. When the Hebrew was translated into the Greek language the vowel letters virtually doubled the size of the scroll. Hence to make the use of the scroll more manageable, the material in each case was somewhat arbitrarily divided into two separate scrolls.

### **THE BOOKS OF SAMUEL** **Birth and Expansion of the Kingdom**

With regard to the names of the ninth and tenth books of the Old Testament, two ancient traditions can be documented among the Jews. The Talmud (AD 500), representing a much older tradition,

regarded this historical material as one book called “Samuel.” Hebrew manuscripts continued to treat Samuel as one book until printed editions of the Hebrew Bible began to appear. The division into two books was first introduced into the Hebrew Bible edited by Daniel Bomberg in AD 1517.

In the Greek and Latin the original book of Samuel appears as two separate books as noted above. Christian Greek manuscripts of the Old Testament (c. AD 350) designate these two books as 1 & 2 Kingdoms. This tradition was followed in Jerome’s Latin Vulgate. In later Vulgate tradition “Kingdoms” was shortened to “Kings.” Older English versions combined both traditions in the headings of these books, e.g. in the King James version, “The First Book of Samuel otherwise called the First Book of Kings.” Most English versions of the twentieth century have opted to follow exclusively the Samuel tradition for these books.

### **A. Background.**

The “sea peoples,” as they are called in nonbiblical sources, settled en masse in the coastal region of Palestine about 1200 BC. About 1126 BC they began to extend their influence into the lowlands and mountains where they clashed with the Israelites. The chariots and weaponry of this powerful people intimidated the Israelites for forty years (Judg 13:1). Samson vented his personal vengeance against the Philistines for the twenty years of his judgeship (1105-1085 BC).

Eli’s ineffective judgeship of forty years (1 Sam 4:18) paralleled the forty years of Philistine oppression. During those years of Samson’s exploits and Eli’s decline, a young lad was growing to manhood at the tabernacle in Shiloh. His name was Samuel. The opening chapters of 1 Samuel give the details of his birth and boyhood, his call to prophetic office, and his moral and spiritual influence on Israel.

The name of Samuel came to be attached to the ninth and tenth books of the Old Testament primarily because of the prominent role this prophet played in this period. He was the last of the Judges and the first of a new line of prophets. Samuel was the instrument through whom God founded the monarchy in Israel. He anointed Saul and David, the first two kings. In the career of David the influence of Samuel lived on long after his death in 1 Samuel 25:1.

**B. Circumstances of Writing.**

The Book of Samuel is anonymous. The Jewish tradition that Samuel was the author seems untenable in view of the fact that the history is continued far beyond his death in 1 Samuel 25:1. Jewish tradition is most likely correct, however, in regarding the author of the book as a prophet.

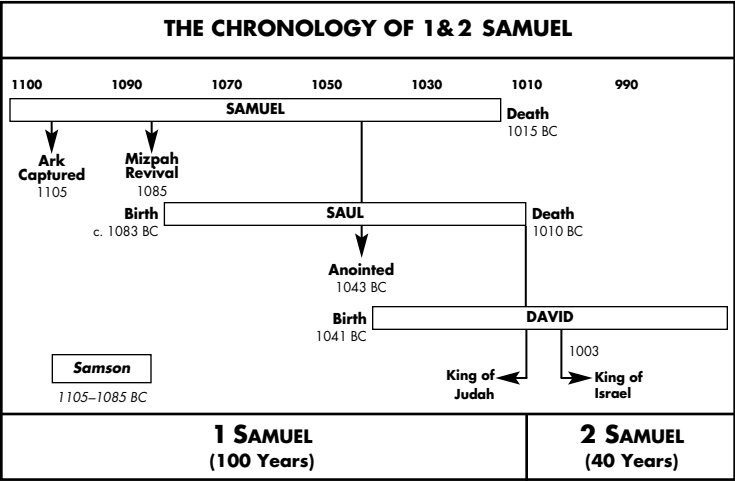
The fact that the death of David is not recorded in Samuel suggests that the book was written before he died. Because of the length of time covered in Samuel no one person could have been a contemporary of all the events. Hence the author guided by the Holy Spirit must have used some sources. According to 1 Chronicles 29:29 the acts of King David, from first to last, were written “in the chronicles of Samuel the seer, in the chronicles of Nathan the prophet, and in the chronicles of Gad the seer.” The “chronicles” written by these three prophets probably constituted the sources from which the author drew his material.<sup>1</sup>

The immediate purpose of the Book of Samuel was to narrate the circumstances surrounding the founding of the monarchy in Israel. 1 Samuel relates the birth of the monarchy. 2 Samuel narrates the expansion of the kingdom of Israel into an important world power. An appropriate caption for the two books of Samuel would be “The Birth and Expansion of the Kingdom.” The ultimate purpose of the books was to reveal the divine origin of the messianic house of David, i.e., the family through whom the Messiah would one day come (2 Sam 7:12f.).

**C. Chronology of the Books.**

Combined, the books of 1 & 2 Samuel cover about 140 years. The opening event, the birth of Samuel, can be assigned to the year 1110 BC. The closing event, the death of David, probably occurred in 971 BC. Breaking this down according to the two books, 1 Samuel covers about a century, and 2 Samuel about forty years. Chart 18 depicts the chronological relationship between the major leaders and events in the books.

Chart No. 18



D. Contents of the Books.

For the most part the books of Samuel consist of historical narrative. Other literary forms which appear in the books are prayers, songs (e.g., 1 Sam 2; 2 Sam 22,23), and lists (e.g., 2 Sam 21:15-22; 23:8-39).

Childs has done commendable work in analyzing the structure of the books of Samuel.<sup>2</sup> Clearly the introductory formula in 1 Samuel 13:1 marks a major division in this material. The same is true of 2 Samuel 1:1. The division of the original book into two separate books recognized the structural significance of 2 Samuel 1:1. The language of 2 Samuel 21:1 is similar to that which was used in Ruth 1:1 to set off an historical appendix which is dischronological. Based on these indicators, the text of the Samuel books falls into four main divisions.

The first main division (1 Sam 1-12) is focused on the transition to monarchy. The unit begins with the birth of Samuel and ends with his valedictory address. The text clearly indicates two major subdivisions. The first seven chapters focus on the last days of judgeship government. The high priestly Judge Eli is depicted as a failure both in respect to his governance of the worship center, and in respect to his



inability to cope with the Philistine menace. These failures led to the rise of a new type of Judge. In Samuel the roles of prophet and Judge were combined. The climax of this subsection is the victory over the Philistines which Yahweh granted in response to the prayer of Samuel (1 Sam 7).

Chart No. 19

THE BOOKS OF SAMUEL							
1 SAMUEL				2 SAMUEL			
The Birth of the Kingdom				The Expansion of the Kingdom			
Judgeship of Samuel	Kingship of Saul			Kingship of David			
Transition to Monarchy	The Appointment (8-12) & The Dis-appointment (13-14)	S I N	Saul's Kingship Rejected & David's Kingship Anticipated	David under the Blessing (5:12)	S I N	David under the Curse (12:11 ff.)	APPENDIX David in Retrospect & Prospect
Locus: Shiloh 1-7	Locus: Gibeah 8-14	15	Locus: Wilderness 16-31	Locus: Hebron/Jerusalem 1-10	11	Locus: Jerusalem 12-20	21-24
↓ <i>Predictions with messianic implications</i>				↓	↓		
Hannah's Hymn (2:10)				Nathan's Oracle (7:12-16)	David's Last Words (23:5)		

The phrase “and it came to pass when Samuel was old” in 1 Samuel 8:1 clearly marks the beginning of the second subsection of the first main division. Here the focus is on the interaction between Samuel and Saul. Saul was selected by God, anointed privately and publicly by Samuel, and finally, after vindication through military leadership, embraced by the people. Once the people accepted their king, Samuel resigned from his role as Judge. He indicated such by a marvelous farewell address (1 Samuel 12).

The second main division of the material begins in 1 Samuel 13:1. The kingship was now in place. This division, which terminates with the death of Saul in 1 Samuel 31, also has two subdivisions. The account of Saul’s disobedience in 1 Samuel 15 brings to an end a

period in which he received public support and private guidance from Samuel. From Samuel's point of view Saul's reign was a disaster from the outset. God had punished his people for their premature and worldly-motivated request for a king by giving them exactly the kind of king they had requested. After the great sin of 1 Samuel 15, Samuel anointed a king after God's own heart. In the last sixteen chapters of 1 Samuel Saul did everything he could to consolidate his own power and thwart the elevation of David to the throne.

The third main division of material (2 Sam 1–20) focuses on the forty-year reign of David. David's reign, like that of Saul before him, is divided by the author into a "before and after" pattern, with David's great sin with Bathsheba being the watershed event (2 Sam 11). Before the sin David enjoyed God's blessing (cf. 2 Sam 5:12). After the sin David was under a divine curse (cf. 2 Sam 12:11ff.).

The last four chapters of 2 Samuel serve as an appendix to the David narratives. These chapters are carefully crafted to present "a highly reflective, theological interpretation of David's whole career."<sup>3</sup>

### **E. Teaching of the Books.**

Three texts in the Samuel material indicate the main point which the author was attempting to get across. These texts are (1) the song of Hannah (1 Sam 2), (2) the oracle of Nathan (2 Sam 7), and (3) the last words of David (2 Sam 22-23).<sup>4</sup>

In Hannah's song God is central. Hannah praised the character, the strength of God and the ultimate day when God would judge the ends of the earth through his anointed king. The history which unfolds in the Samuel material illustrates the truth of which Hannah sang. Virtually every line of her song finds its counterpart in the pages which follow. The author has placed this poem near the beginning of his work in order to set forth the perspective from which he writes the history of Israel.

The Nathan oracle is the pinnacle of the blessings which God showered on David in 2 Samuel 1–10. Here the general expectations of Hannah are made more specific. The blessings bestowed on David are projected into the distant future. God would bless the "house" of David "forever." Thus David is regarded as the fulfillment of Yahweh's ancient promise to give his people a king. At the same time, he

regarded David as a type of the ultimate Ruler who would sit on God's throne forever. The treatment of Saul's reign and that of David stand in stark contrast. In the same chapter where Saul's reign began, Samuel announced that his kingdom would not endure forever. God was seeking a man "*after his own heart*" to replace Saul. After Saul's great sin (1 Sam 15) the prophet announced that the kingdom would be given "*to your neighbor who is better than you*" (v. 28). Thus the author of the books of Samuel regarded Saul's kingship as a false start. Saul was a king like those who ruled all the surrounding nations. David was God's choice.

The final passage with crucial significance for the message of these books is 2 Samuel 22:1–23:7. This passage contains two separate poetic compositions, the first (2 Sam 22:1–51) coming from the time when Yahweh had delivered David from all his enemies, including Saul (2 Sam 22:1). The second composition comes from the last days of David (2 Sam 23:1). This material has been placed at the conclusion of the books of Samuel for strategic purposes. The thanksgiving hymn in chapter 22 echoes many of the themes articulated in Hannah's praise hymn (1 Sam 2). The poem looks back over the career of David and underscores the grand proposition which is the overriding message of this material, namely, that God rewards the righteous, and brings judgment upon the unrighteous.

The thanksgiving poem concludes with an allusion (2 Sam 22:51) to the Nathan oracle which announced Yahweh's eternal involvement with the house of David. This theme of the eternal duration of the Davidic dynasty is stated even more forcefully in the following poem (2 Sam 23:5). Thus in spite of the terrible sin with Bathsheba and the other shortcomings of David's career, the promise of an enduring house was still valid.

Appearing as they do at the beginning of the material, (roughly) the middle, and at the conclusion, the four poetic compositions cast a messianic shadow over the books of Samuel. One cannot read these passages without concluding that God had great things in store for the house of David: an everlasting covenant, an eternal throne, and a righteous king who ultimately would judge the very ends of the earth. The testimony of the New Testament is that such promises find their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

## **THE BOOKS OF KINGS**

### **Glory and Decline of the Kingdom**

The sixth and seventh books of the Old Testament have been designated by several different titles. Jews sometimes refer to these books by the initial Hebrew words *vehammelech David* (“now King David”). This designation is attested by Origen, the great church father of the third Christian century. The ancient Syriac version contained this cumbersome but very accurate title: “*The Book of the Kings Who Flourished among the Hebrews, Containing also the History of the Prophets Who Flourished in Their Times.*” The Septuagint (Greek) translators dubbed this book *Kingdoms*. In the early Hebrew Bible the book was called *Kings*. English versions have generally adopted the title 1 & 2 Kings, occasionally using as a subtitle 3 & 4 Kingdoms when the books of Samuel were designated 1 & 2 Kingdoms.

#### **A. Background.**

After twenty years or so of glory, David committed a trespass which altered the course of his reign. Because of the Bathsheba incident and the consequent murder of her husband David finished his reign under the cloud of God’s chastisement. His son Absalom led a rebellion which forced David to flee temporarily into Transjordan. No sooner was that rebellion crushed, than another broke out led by a radical Benjamite named Sheba.

As 1 Kings opens, David was “*old and advanced in age*” and suffering from some malady which threatened his life. Unknown to him, his eldest son Adonijah was attempting to launch a coup which would depose David and sweep himself into power.

#### **B. Circumstances of Writing.**

In their present form the books of Kings could not have been written before 560 BC, for that is the date of the last historical incident narrated (2 Kgs 25:27-30). These last four verses may be an appendix to the original book, added perhaps by Ezra. If that is the case, the bulk of the Kings material was probably written shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

The author of Kings is not known for sure. Jewish tradition assigned the book to Jeremiah the prophet.<sup>5</sup> A remarkable affinity exists between the language of Kings and that of the Book of Jeremiah. Even those who deny Jeremianic authorship would concede that the author must have been a pupil of the great prophet.

**C. Chronology of the Books.**

The Book of Kings covers about four centuries of Israel’s history, from just before 971 BC to just after 562 BC. Excluding that material which appears as an appendix at the end of the concluding chapter, Kings covers the story of God’s people from the accession of Solomon to the destruction of Jerusalem. Stating the matter another way, Kings begins (roughly) with the building of the temple and concludes with the burning of that same edifice.

The four centuries reviewed in Kings are clearly divided by the author into three periods: (1) Solomonic kingdom (40 years); (2) sister kingdoms (210 years); and (3) surviving kingdom (136 years). Chart 20 indicates the way in which the author has allocated his material to these three periods.

**Chart No. 20**

THE CHRONOLOGY OF KINGS			
SOLOMON'S KINGDOM	SISTER KINGDOMS		SURVIVING KINGDOM
40 Years	210 Years		136 Years
David to Solomon	In Judah Rehoboam to Ahaz In Israel Jeroboam to Hoshea		Hezekiah to Zedekiah
11 Chapters	28 Chapters		8 Chapters
1 Kings 1-11	1 Kings 12-2 Kings 17	2 Kings 18-25	
971 BC	930	722	586
David's Kingdom Death	Kingdom Divided	Samaria Fell	Jerusalem Destroyed

Kings contains abundant chronological data. Two kinds of figures are given in respect to the various kings. For most kings an absolute

figure of the total number of years of reign is given. The author usually has dated the beginnings of the reigns of the kings of one kingdom in terms of the contemporary ruler in the sister kingdom. From the earliest times devout scholars have been aware of a number of apparent discrepancies within these data.

Basically, the problems in the chronological notations are three in number. First, sometimes the synchronous data disagrees with the absolute regnal years of a monarch which are stated elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Second, the sum of the regnal years for the kings of Israel for a given period sometimes fails to tally with the years of the kings of Judah of the same period.<sup>7</sup> Third, sometimes the chronological data in Kings appears to be at variance with the established chronology of the Mesopotamian powers.<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to the extensive research of Edwin Thiele<sup>9</sup> most of the chronological difficulties in Kings have been resolved satisfactorily. His work is firmly grounded in the computational methods known to have been used by ancient scribes. Coregencies, differences in the way the accession "year" was computed,<sup>10</sup> and different calendars<sup>11</sup> are some of the factors which must be taken into account when dealing with the chronology of Kings.

#### **D. Contents of the Books.**

Kings does not manifest the variety of literary forms which other Old Testament books display. The book is almost entirely written in prose.<sup>12</sup> The two dominant forms are narrative and speech. To a lesser extent one finds lists, chronological notices, obituaries, building specifications and even one bona fide fable (2 Kgs 14:9).

The plan of the books is primarily chronological, although occasionally the material is arranged topically. The topical arrangement is readily apparent in 2 Kings 2:1–8:15 which treats the ministry of Elisha.

One distinctive feature of Kings is not pleasant to the modern reader. The reigns of many of the kings are introduced and concluded with a somewhat stereotyped formula.

Chart No. 21

THE CONTENTS OF KINGS <i>"The Glory and Decline of the Kingdom"</i>				
FIRST KINGS		SECOND KINGS		
Solomonic Kingdom	Sister Kingdoms	Focus on N. Kingdom	Dual Focus	Focus on S. Kingdom
1 King 1-11	4 Kings South 7 Kings North 12-22	3 Kings 1-10	9 Kings N. 8 Kings S. 11-17	8 Kings 18-25
STRENGTH	STRUGGLE			STORM
United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom			Surviving Kingdom

E. Teaching of the Books.

The historians of Israel were prophets. History in their hands had "purpose," i.e., religious aim. Aided by the Holy Spirit, the author of Kings could see the hand of God at work in the period of the monarchy. The lessons which he wished to teach were spiritual, not political. For this reason he focuses on two crisis periods, namely, the reigns of Ahab in the north and Hezekiah in the south. He judges individual kings, not by their political achievements, but by their religious policies.

The building of the temple was of great significance to the author of Kings. This is immediately evident in the amount of space devoted to the construction of this holy edifice and the furnishings thereof. After that sanctuary was dedicated the author viewed all other worship centers (*"high places"*) as illegitimate. For this reason the author condemns the state-controlled Yahweh worship of the northern kingdom. From the day Jeroboam set up his golden calves in Bethel and Dan, the northern dynasties came under divine condemnation.

The author also attacked the infiltration of Baal worship in both kingdoms. Nearly one third of the material in Kings is devoted to the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, who labored mightily against Jezebelian Baalism in the northern kingdom. In miracle after miracle Yahweh demonstrated his superiority to Baal. In this large section of the book chronological and political narration is suppressed. The emphasis is on building up the remnant of the faithful.

Another concern of Kings is the Davidic monarchy. To the author, David was the standard by which all other kings were measured. The glorious promise of 2 Samuel 7—in the words of Keil—is the red thread which runs through the history of the kings from Solomon to the exile. Twenty descendants of David followed him on the throne in Jerusalem. Kings documents how God chastised the rulers of the Davidic dynasty. Yet “*for the sake of David my servant*” God continued to back the royal claims of this dynasty.

The author of Kings viewed the roles of the prophets as crucial in the history of the monarchy. Because of their teaching the people were without excuse in respect to their apostasy. By dwelling on the prophets the author magnifies the guilt of the people. He demonstrates that the destruction of Jerusalem and captivity of God’s people were justified in spite of God’s promise to David.

## **THE BOOKS OF CHRONICLES**

### **Focus on David and his Dynasty**

Jewish rabbis refer to Chronicles as *dibhre hayyamim*, “the affairs of the days.” In the Septuagint (Greek) translation the book was called *Paraleipomenon* (“the things left out”). That name came over into the Latin Vulgate and the Douay, the first Catholic English version which was based on the Vulgate. Jerome (c. AD 400) suggested that Chronicles be called “A Chronicle of the Entire Sacred History.” Modern English versions, whether Catholic or Protestant, employ the name *Chronicles*.

In the modern Hebrew Bible Chronicles is separated from the books of Samuel and Kings and placed in the *Kethubhim* or Writings. As a matter of fact, this book is the final book in the Hebrew Bible. In the Septuagint, however, Chronicles came after Kings, and that is the arrangement which has been followed in the English versions.

#### **A. Background.**

Like the Book of Ruth in the first triad of historical books, Chronicles is a “side-step” or focus book. It does not advance the history, but reiterates the history of the monarchy from a different perspec-



tive. In Chronicles the focus is on the Davidic dynasty. Information regarding the Northern Kingdom is incidental.

**B. Circumstances of Writing.**

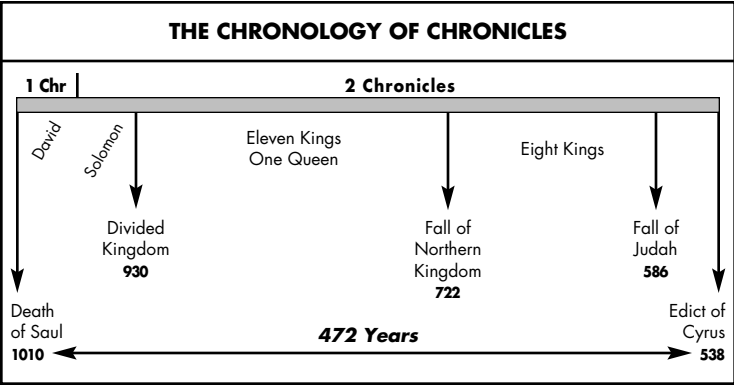
After the captivity was over the remnant in Judah needed to be reminded of their heritage, the covenant, the temple, the dangers of apostasy, and the messianic hope through the Davidic line. The Jews of the post-captivity period needed every encouragement to rebuild their nation. Chronicles is a clear warning to the Jews never again to forsake the temple and the worship of the Living God.

The book then was written in the postexilic period. Chronicles was written from a priestly point of view. A continuity in substance, view-point and style with the Book of Ezra, suggests that the two books were written by the same person. Therefore, the Jewish tradition which assigns Chronicles to Ezra the priest and scribe is probably correct.

**C. Chronology of the Books.**

The genealogies of 1 Chronicles 1–9 stretch back to Adam and creation. Thus it can be said that Chronicles covers the longest period of any of the books of the Bible. Excluding these genealogies the first event narrated in Chronicles is the death of Saul in 1010 BC. The last event in the book is the edict of liberation issued by Cyrus in 538 BC. Thus Chronicles narrates 472 years of the history of God’s people.<sup>13</sup>

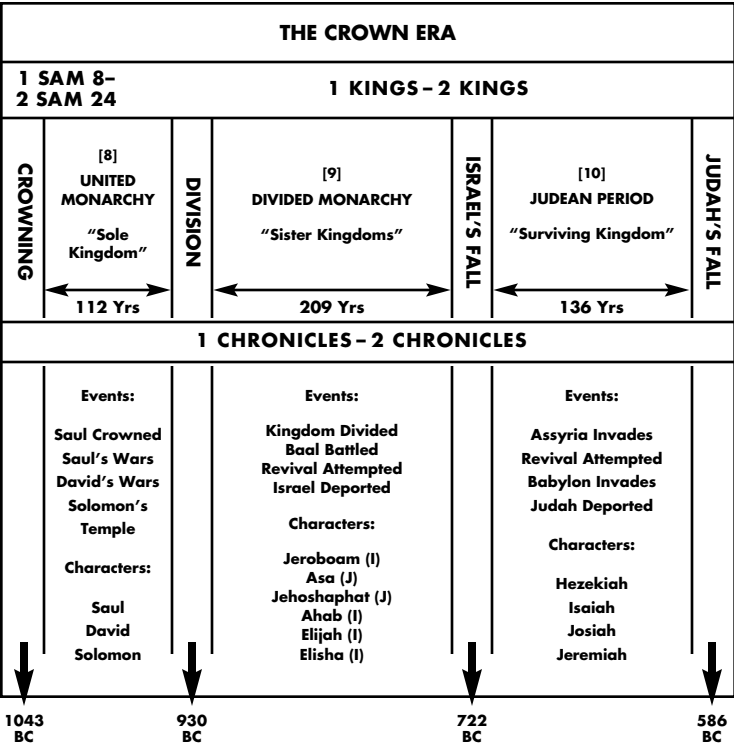
**Chart No. 22**



D. Contents of the Books.

Following a lengthy genealogical preface, Chronicles relates the history of Judah during the monarchy. Twenty chapters are devoted to David's reign, nine chapters to his son Solomon. During the Divided Monarchy period the author only gives notice to the northern kingdoms in situations where that kingdom interacted with Judah.

Chart No. 23



A casual reading of Chronicles suggests it is nothing more than a repetition of the contents of Samuel and Kings. This is familiar terrain. The stories of David, Solomon and their successors fill these pages. About one half of the material in Chronicles is repeated virtually verbatim from the earlier books. This book, however, is not Samuel

and Kings warmed over. A closer examination indicates a number of differences which mark Chronicles as a distinctive work. This book has “a freshness and flavor” about it. When its purposes are understood, it furnishes “rich nourishment for theological thought.”<sup>14</sup> The following chart tabulates those differences.

**Chart No. 24**

<b>PERSPECTIVES ON ISRAEL’S HISTORY</b>	
<b>Samuel-Kings</b>	<b>Chronicles</b>
1. More Biographical 2. More Personal 3. Prophetic Standpoint 4. Focus on Two Kingdoms 5. Emphasis on the Throne 6. Indictment of the Nation 7. Exposing Guilt 8. Chronological Progression 9. Political History	1. More Statistical 2. More Official 3. Priestly Standpoint 4. Focus on Judah Alone 5. Emphasis on the Temple 6. Incitement of the Nation 7. Encouraging Loyalty 8. Review Previous History 9. Religious History

The accuracy of Chronicles has frequently been called into question. The author is accused of exaggerating numbers, especially in regard to opposing armies. In 1 Chronicles 21:5, for example, Israel’s army of 1,100,000 faced Judah’s army of 470,000. The census of Joab a few years earlier gave the numbers of those two armies as 800,000 and 500,000 respectively. While the figures in Chronicles do occasionally seem extraordinarily high, they are not consistently higher than those which appear in Samuel and Kings. In five of seventeen cases of apparent discrepancy the numbers in Chronicles are lower. The differences in these numbers in parallel accounts is due to scribal errors or different methods of reckoning. These matters will be addressed further in the discussion of the individual passages.

Chronicles used as its main source the books of Samuel and Kings.

In addition the author names some twenty-five other sources which he consulted (e.g., 1 Chr 9:1; 2 Chr 27:7). In respect to the accuracy of the Chronicles version of Israel's history, the opinions of critics is mellowing to some degree. Though the author's method of presentation is somewhat homiletical, his story has been found to be accurate wherever it can be checked.<sup>15</sup>

### **E. The Teachings of the Books.**

The purpose of Chronicles is to preserve the record of priestly worship from Saul to Cyrus. The book underscores the essential and central role of worship in the life of God's people. For the author the temple was (1) a symbol of the unity of the nation; (2) a reminder of the nation's high calling as a priestly people; (3) a sign that Yahweh was in the midst of his people; and (4) a standard by which national faithfulness could be measured.<sup>16</sup> Good kings loom large in these books, and good are those who led revivals and restored the temple.

The author of Chronicles lived in the post-monarchy period. The throne was gone, but God still had a purpose for his people. The fall of Babylon and the liberation edict of Cyrus fulfilled the predictions of Isaiah and Jeremiah. In spite of the exile Israel survived as a people. Furthermore, the prophetic promise for the future still remained. Even after the fall of Jerusalem the Davidic line was still intact, and the Messiah was to come from this line. The author was confident that the most glorious days of the Davidic dynasty were still in the future.

### **ENDNOTES**

1. Probably Samuel was the source for most of what appears in 1 Sam 1-24; Gad for 1 Sam 24-2 Sam 5:3; and Nathan for 2 Sam 5:4-1 Kgs 3:28.

2. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 271-77.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

4. Analysis of the teaching of Samuel is based on Childs, *ibid.*, pp. 272-275.

5. Talmud, *Baba Bathra* 14b.

6. For example, Omri is said to begin to reign in the thirty-first year of Asa (1 Kgs 16:23). But the twelve year reign of Omri is said to end in the thirty-eighth year of Asa (1 Kgs 16:29).

7. Jehu of Israel and Athaliah of Judah both began to reign in 841 BC.

The city of Samaria fell to the Assyrians in the sixth year of Hezekiah of Judah (2 Kgs 18:10). The regnal years of the kings of Israel from Jehu to the fall of Samaria tallies 143 years. Yet the regnal years of the kings of Judah from Athaliah to the sixth year of Hezekiah tally 165 years, a discrepancy of 22 years.

**8.** The period from the accession of Jehu to the fall of Samaria in Assyrian chronology is 120 years. This figure is as much as 45 years out of kilter with the figures given in the previous note.

**9.** Edwin Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, revised (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1965); *A Chronology of Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977).

**10.** The ancients had two different systems for counting the remaining months of the calendar year in which a king came to the throne. Sometimes they would call these months an accession year and not compute them as part of the regnal years of the king. At other times those few months were counted as a full year. The practice in Israel and Judah was not consistent over the course of the history of the two kingdoms.

**11.** The northern kingdom of Israel began its civil year in Nisan (in the spring), while the southern kingdom regarded Tishri (in the fall) to be the first month of the year.

**12.** The RSV prints only three passages in poetic verse.

**13.** W.F. Albright argues in favor of the Jewish tradition which sees Ezra as author of the books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. "The Date and Personality of the Chronicler," JBL 40 (1921): 104-124.

**14.** William S. LaSor, David Hubbard, Frederic Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 630.

**15.** J.M. Myers, *1 Chronicles* in vol. 12 of "Anchor Bible" (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. LXIII.

**16.** J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960) II, p. 172.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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### Transition to Monarchy 1 Samuel 1-7

Even before Samson began waging his personal warfare against the Philistines, another kind of Judge was ruling in Shiloh. Eli was the high priest of the nation as well as a Judge. He judged Israel for forty years (1145-1105 BC). He was followed in the judgeship by the prophet Samuel. His long judgeship of over forty years paved the way for the establishment of the monarchy.

In terms of national history, the first seven chapters of 1 Samuel revolve around two major events. The people of God reached their all-time low point when the ark of God was captured in battle. A dying mother made the most telling comment on this disaster when she whispered with her dying breath the name for her new son: "Ichabod," (the glory has departed)! (1 Sam 4:20). Twenty years later a grateful prophet shouted the name "Ebenezer" (stone of help) as he erected a monument to God's grace after Israel smashed the Philistines in battle. Thus Willmington is correct when he captions this unit of the book "From Ichabod to Ebenezer."<sup>1</sup> Samuel assumed leader-

ship when Israel was in the pits of degradation. By bringing the people back to God he restored their national pride, power and purpose.

## DEDICATION OF A CHILD

### 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11

While the conditions in the period of the Judges continued to deteriorate, God was preparing to write the next chapter in the thrilling story of redemption. In the sinful darkness of those days God found a godly woman through whom he would bring a great reformer into the world.

#### **A. Hannah's Plight (1 Sam 1:1-8).**

Elkanah was a Levite who lived in Ramathaim-zophim (Ramah) in the hill country of Ephraim. While basically a godly man, he had taken two wives. The notation that Hannah had no children suggests that her infertility had driven Elkanah to marry a woman (Peninnah) who could produce an heir (1:1-2).

Elkanah would take his family each year to the annual feast at the Shiloh tabernacle some eighteen miles north of Jerusalem. The trips were most painful for Hannah. Her husband showed his greater love for her by giving her an extra portion at the sacrificial meal. Peninnah, however, made life miserable for Hannah, using her fertility to lord it over her rival (cf. Gen 16:4; 30:1-24). Year after year the scene replayed itself. Peninnah would provoke her rival; Hannah would become so emotionally upset that she could not eat. Elkanah attempted to comfort his beloved wife. "*Am I not better than ten sons?*" he would say. While intending to cheer his wife, these words only made this desperate woman feel all the more her emptiness (1:3-8).

#### **B. Hannah's Petition (1 Sam 1:9-19a).**

While at Shiloh on one occasion Hannah finished the ritual meal. Near the entrance to the temple<sup>2</sup> she wept and poured out her heart to "*Yahweh of hosts.*"<sup>3</sup> She approached him reverently as can be seen in her threefold reference to herself as "*handmaid*" of the Lord. She vowed that if the Lord would give her a son, she would dedicate



him all the days of his life as a Nazirite.<sup>4</sup> As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli the high priest, who was sitting by the doorpost of the temple, took note of her. Because Hannah was praying silently and only her lips were moving, Eli thought she was drunk. Tragic it is when a leader of God's people cannot recognize true piety when he sees it (1:9-13).

Since it was his high priestly duty to guard the courts of the sanctuary from desecration, Eli rebuked Hannah. He ordered her to "*put away*" her wine. Hannah replied firmly but politely. She had not been drinking wine. She was not "*a worthless woman*," i.e., a woman without respect for sacred things. Rather she was oppressed in spirit; she was pouring out her heart to the Lord. Eli then dismissed Hannah with a blessing: "*May the God of Israel grant your petition*."<sup>5</sup> Hannah then returned to her meal. Because she was now confident that God would hear her petition, her face was sad no longer (1:14-18).

The eventful trip to Shiloh ended with a final time of worship. Then Elkanah took his family and returned to Ramah (1:19a).

### **C. Hannah's Presentation (1 Sam 1:19b-28).**

Elkanah "*knew*" his wife, i.e., had marital relations with her. The Lord "*remembered*" Hannah, i.e., granted her petition. She conceived and bore a son. Hannah named the child Samuel, "*name of God*." She knew that this baby was truly an answer to prayer (1:19b-20).

At the next annual sacrifice Elkanah was prepared to offer "*his vow*." Unless repudiated by the husband, the vow of a wife became an obligation upon her husband. Hannah elected not to go to the sanctuary until she had weaned the child and could present him to the Lord. Under the Mosaic law a woman was not obligated to attend the annual festivals. Elkanah agreed that this would be the wisest course. He expressed aloud his prayer that the Lord would "*confirm his word*," i.e., Yahweh would bring Hannah's vow to fruition (1:21-23).

Eastern women nursed their babies up to three years. When the child was weaned, Hannah took him and a generous offering to the sanctuary. The family first offered their sacrifice. Then Hannah presented the young boy to Eli. She reminded the priest of the incident some three years earlier when he had mistaken her earnest petition

as drunken gibberish. Since God had answered her prayer, Hannah dedicated the lad to the Lord for as long as he lived. In gratitude Eli bowed in worship (1:24-28).

#### **D. Hannah's Prayer (1 Sam 2:1-11).**

When Hannah presented her son to Eli, she burst forth in a magnificent hymn-prayer inspired by the Holy Spirit. Yahweh is the central figure in this beautiful poem. She began on a most positive note. Hannah identified four sources of joy. First, she rejoiced in the personal deliverance from a life of misery which she had recently experienced (2:1). Second, Hannah rejoiced in the person of God—his holiness, his strength, and his knowledge (2:2-3). He is the Judge who weighs actions. Third, she rejoiced in the government of God (2:4-8). Hannah pointed out that often those who are rich, powerful and blessed are humbled. At the same time those who are poor, weak and dishonorable are suddenly exalted. The Lord “*brings low and exalts.*” Over the long haul life has a way of evening out. Hannah's own experience is a prime example of this principle.

Fourth, Hannah rejoiced in her hope (2:9-10). The righteous are under the watch care of God; the wicked, however, are swallowed up in darkness when God withdraws the light of his grace. At this point Hannah's poem becomes predictive. She announces that ultimately God would (1) judge the whole world, (2) give strength to his king, and (3) exalt the horn or power of his anointed.<sup>6</sup> The context here of universal judgment suggests that the prophecy points to the Coming One, the Messiah.<sup>7</sup>

Following the presentation of Samuel at the tabernacle, Elkanah and his family returned to their home in Ramah. The lad Samuel, however, remained at Shiloh ministering to the Lord under the supervision of Eli the high priest (2:11).

### **DOOM OF ELI'S HOUSE**

#### **1 Samuel 2:12-4:1a**

The narrator draws a stark contrast between the degeneracy of Eli's sons, and the spiritual growth of the young lad Samuel.

**A. The Sins of the Priests (1 Sam 2:12-26).**

The sons of Eli were “*sons of Belial*,” i.e., worthless men. Though they were priests of God, “*they did not know Yahweh*” in the experiential sense. Their brazen disregard for sacred ritual manifested itself in several ways. For example, they sent their servant to fish out of boiling cauldrons the priest’s portion before the Lord had received his portion. Those who insisted that the Lord’s portion should first be burned on the altar were threatened with violence. Thus these priests were treating the offerings of the Lord with contempt (2:12-17).

The boy Samuel was quite a contrast to the sons of Eli. He wore a linen ephod and ministered before the Lord. Each year his mother would make him a little robe and take it to Shiloh. Eli would pronounce a blessing on Hannah for having given Samuel to the Lord. Hannah’s fertility continued. She bore three more sons and two daughters (2:18-21).

When Eli learned that his sons were having sexual relations with the women who served at the tabernacle, he tried to deal with them. He warned them that a sin against God was far more serious than a sin against man. The young men would not listen to the voice of their father. The sacred historian explains their intransigence as due to the fact that Yahweh desired to put them to death. Meanwhile Samuel was maturing and gaining favor with both the Lord and with men (2:22-26).

**B. The Sentence against the Priests (1 Sam 2:27-36).**

An unnamed “*man of God*” or prophet came to Eli with an unpleasant message. He first reminded Eli of the tremendous privilege which was his to be a priest of God. The Lord had revealed himself to Aaron even before the Exodus. He had chosen the family of Aaron for the priestly honor. Eli, however, was responsible for the disrespect which was being shown for God’s sacrifice at Shiloh. The priests at Shiloh were getting fat with the choicest pieces of the sacrificial offerings. Eli had honored his sons more than the Lord. As chief religious officer, he was ultimately responsible for all the evil which was being tolerated at Shiloh (2:27-29).

God indeed had promised the priesthood (“*walk before me*”) to the house of Eli and to Eli’s father’s house (the Aaronides). God, however, will only honor those who honor him. Thus fidelity is the implied

condition attached to every promise God makes. So in the case of Eli, God announced punishment. First, God would “*cut off the strength*” of the priestly house, i.e., the sons of that family would die before honorable old age. Three times in the prophecy this point is stressed. Second, Eli would live to see the distress of God’s dwelling, the tabernacle, i.e., the destruction of the place. Third, the priestly family would lose altar rights. Fourth, as a “*sign*” that the long range aspects of this prophecy would be fulfilled, Eli’s two sons would both die on the same day (2:30-34).

To replace the Aaronide priesthood once it was cut off Yahweh would raise up a faithful priest. This future priest would carry out the will of God perfectly. To acknowledge his faithfulness, Yahweh would build him “*an enduring house*” or family, i.e., an eternal priesthood. Commentators generally conclude that the faithful priest was Samuel or Zadok. Samuel, however, if he was a priest in any sense, certainly did not have an enduring house. The slaughter of the priests at Nob (1 Sam 22:11-23) and Solomon’s banishment of Abiathar, the last representative of the house of Eli, certainly fulfilled a portion of the prophecy made to Eli (cf. 1 Kgs 2:27). The anonymous prophet, however, predicted that the house of Eli’s father (contextually, Aaron) would also be removed from office. Since Zadok was of the family of Aaron (cf. 1 Chr 6:1ff., 50ff.), he certainly did not fulfill that portion of the prophecy. The Aaronide priesthood was not totally removed from priestly office until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The faithful priest, then, was neither Samuel nor Zadok.

Who is the faithful priest of 1 Samuel 2:35? The prophecy is best interpreted messianically. The faithful priest is Jesus, God’s anointed. For him God built an enduring house, the royal priesthood of 1 Peter 2:9. Before the Faithful Priest, a “*house*” or priestly family would “*walk*” or minister.<sup>8</sup> Members of the old Aaronic priesthood would have to bow before God’s anointed, Messiah, if they would occupy a place of priestly service (2:35-36). When many of the Aaronide priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7), this passage found ultimate fulfillment.

### **C. The Call of Samuel (1 Sam 3:1-18).**

During the days when the sanctuary of Yahweh was at Shiloh

prophetic revelations, whether auditory or visionary, were rare. For this reason the narrative goes into some detail about the first revelatory experience of Samuel (3:1).

Aged, blind Eli and the lad Samuel had retired for the night. Only the fading light of the lamp of God from within the Holy Place gave any illumination to the area where Samuel abode. Three times in the darkness Samuel heard the voice of God but mistook it for the voice of Eli. The narrator excuses this mistake by saying that Samuel did not yet know Yahweh experientially, nor had he received any revelation. Three times he rushed to the side of the old man. Finally Eli recognized that God was calling the boy. He instructed his protegee to respond to any further call of his name by saying: "*Speak, O Yahweh, for your servant is listening*" (3:1-9).

Yahweh came to Samuel a fourth time "*and stood and called*" as at other times. The lad was experiencing what theologians call a theophany, a visual and auditory manifestation of the deity. Samuel responded on this occasion as Eli had instructed him (3:10).

What Samuel heard from the Lord was basically what the man of God had told Eli some time earlier. What God was about to do would make the ears of all who heard of it "*tingle*." The family of the old priest would fall under divine judgment because his sons had made themselves contemptible and Eli had failed to rebuke them.<sup>9</sup> The Lord had assured the house of Eli by oath that no sacrifice could atone for the sins they had committed (3:9-14).

Samuel lay down until the morning. He performed his usual chores, all the time trying to avoid a confrontation with Eli. He was afraid of hurting his beloved mentor should he be forced to divulge what he had learned during the night. Finally Eli sent for the lad and put him under a solemn curse if he withheld any part of the revelation. So Samuel told him everything. Eli accepted the disconcerting news with godly resignation. He knew Yahweh had revealed his will to Samuel. He believed that Yahweh would only do what was right. Therefore, he resigned himself to accept the verdict of God (3:15-18).

#### **D. The Fame of Samuel (1 Sam 3:19-4:1a).**

As Samuel grew to physical maturity, Yahweh was with him. The Lord let none of his words "*fall to the ground*," i.e., go unfulfilled.

His fame spread throughout the land, from Dan in the far north, to Beersheba on the edge of the Negev in the south. Because his prophecies were constantly being fulfilled, the people recognized that he was confirmed as a prophet.<sup>10</sup> Yahweh continued to “*appear*” at Shiloh to Samuel. He revealed himself again and again “*by the word of Yahweh.*” What a sharp contrast there is here between the fully accredited Samuel on the one hand, and the very old Eli and his wicked sons on the other.

## DEFEAT OF ISRAEL

### 1 Samuel 4:1b-11

In the days of Eli the Israelites attempted to put an end to Philistine incursions into the land. When these enemies camped at Aphek, the Israelites formed their ranks nearby at Ebenezer about two miles east of Aphek. In the ensuing battle some four thousand<sup>11</sup> Israelites were slain “*in the field.*” These last words suggest that the Israelites had held their ground in spite of the losses (4:1-2).

In the camp that night the Israelites concluded that the Lord had delivered them into the hands of the Philistines because the sacred ark had been left at Shiloh. So they sent to Shiloh for the ark. Hophni and Phinehas accompanied the ark back to the Israelite encampment (4:3-4).

The Israelite army greeted the arrival of the ark with thunderous jubilation. The Philistines soon learned the reason for the shouting, and they became fearful. They recognized the sacred box as guaranteeing the presence of God. These pagans knew the traditions of how the “gods” of the Israelites—the Philistines assumed the Israelites were polytheists—had smitten the mighty Egyptians with plagues. They feared lest now the lowly “*Hebrews*”<sup>12</sup> would gain the advantage over them and make them slaves. Therefore, with desperate determination they urged one another to fight all the harder (4:5-9).

Again the Philistines defeated Israel, this time inflicting over seven times the number of casualties (30,000) experienced in the first engagement. What was worse, the ark was captured, and the two sons of Eli were slain (4:10-11).

## **DEATH OF ELI**

### **1 Samuel 4:12-22**

A disheveled messenger brought the grim message to Shiloh from the battlefield some eighteen miles distant. The aged Eli, now ninety-eight, was sitting on a stool beside the road awaiting the results of the battle. He feared for the safety of the ark. When Eli heard the tumultuous outcry of the city, he inquired as to its cause. The messenger ran to the blind old man and blurted out the news with four hammer-like blows: (1) the Israelites had deserted the field; (2) the army had experienced heavy losses; (3) Eli's two sons had been killed; and (4) the ark had been captured. When he heard that the ark had been captured, Eli fainted or experienced a stroke. He fell backward off the stool, falling in such a way that his neck was broken. In this inglorious way the forty year judgeship of Eli came to an end (4:10-18).

The trauma of that day hastened the labor of Phinehas' wife. Through great difficulty she gave birth to a son. The neighbor women tried to calm the terrified woman with the news that she had given birth to a son. She, however, could only think of the great loss which both she and the nation had experienced that day. The high priest was dead. Her husband was dead. Israel had been humiliated by enemies. Worse still, the ark of God had fallen into pagan hands. With her last breath she whispered the name of the baby: *Ichabod* (lit., "glory has gone into captivity"). Ever after the name of this child would recall the day when the ark of God had departed from Israel (4:19-22).

## **DEFEAT OF DAGON**

### **1 Samuel 5:1-12**

Though the Philistines had defeated Israel twice on the field of battle, a confrontation on a different level was about to take place. Israel's God would now show himself superior to the chief god of the Philistines.

The ark of God was deposited in the temple of Dagon in Ashdod (cf. Judg 16:23). In the morning the priests of Dagon discovered that the statue of their god had fallen on its face to the ground before the

ark of God. So the priests set Dagon in his place again. The second morning the priests rose *early*—they must have been concerned for the welfare of their god—to find the statue of their god in the same position, except this time the head and hands of the image had broken off at the threshold of the shrine.<sup>13</sup> Dagon was reduced to a stump without a head for thinking or hands for acting. For that reason no one thereafter would step on the threshold of that temple lest they defile the place where pieces of the statue of Dagon had lain. The main point here is that Yahweh defeated Dagon in his own temple. The memory of that humiliation was perpetuated in this religious superstition for generations (5:1-5).

The hand of Yahweh (i.e., his power) was heavy against any Philistine city where the ark lodged. The Lord “*ravaged*” (NASB) or “*brought devastation on them*” (NIV). The same verb is used for the destruction of vines and fig trees in Hosea 2:12.<sup>14</sup> The Lord smote the men of Ashdod with tumors. Because of the connection of the tumors with rodents (cf. 6:4-5, 17-18), many scholars think that some form of bubonic plague spread throughout the land (5:6-7).<sup>15</sup>

When the Ashdodites complained to the lords of the Philistines, they were directed to take the ark to Gath. Again Yahweh smote the men of the city, both the young and the old, with the tumors. When the ark approached Ekron, the citizens of that place feared for their lives. The deadly plague broke out there just as in Ashdod and Gath earlier. Many died. Those who did not suffer with tumors. The Ekronites were panic stricken. They petitioned the lords of the land to return the ark to Israel. At the same time the agonizing cry of the city “*went up to heaven.*” This narrative underscores the point that Yahweh was master even in Philistine territory (5:8-12).

## DISASTER AT BETH-SHEMESH

### 1 Samuel 6:1-7:2

After seven months of tumult, the Philistines had had enough of the ark. They consulted their diviners as to the proper method of returning the ark to its rightful place in Israel. If the plague was to be removed, the Philistines needed to send a guilt offering along with the ark as reparation to appease the God whose anger had been



unleashed against them. Five golden “*tumors*” would magically grant relief from the terrible disease which plagued the land.<sup>16</sup> They should be accompanied by five golden mice, in the likeness of the mice which ravished the land. By so doing the Philistines would be giving glory to God and thereby making it possible for him to withdraw his hand from them. The diviners urged the lords of the Philistines not to be more hardened of heart than Pharaoh who eventually allowed Israel to depart from his land. Ancient peoples often feared the gods of other peoples, even those of their enemies (6:1-6).

The pagan diviners suggested a method by which the lords of the Philistines could determine whether their national misfortune was simply a natural disaster, or whether it was due to the judgment of God. Two cows were separated from their calves and hitched to a cart, a *new* cart which had not been defiled by secular labor. The ark was placed on the cart. Alongside the ark was a box containing the guilt offering of golden tumors and mice. They then put the cart on the road to the nearest Israelite town of Beth-shemesh. Rather than turn back to their calves, the cows went straight down the road lowing as they went under divine compulsion away from their calves. They turned neither to the right nor to the left. The lords of the Philistines followed the cart to the borders of Beth-shemesh, some ten miles east of Ekron. This guaranteed that no one would tamper in any way with the experiment. The unnatural behavior of the cows convinced them that the disaster which had befallen their land was not mere chance. The hand of Yahweh had smitten the Philistines. Ironically the test proposed by the Philistine diviners only gave Yahweh another opportunity to demonstrate his power (6:7-12).

The farmers of the Levitical village of Beth-shemesh rejoiced when they saw the ark. The cows stopped near a large stone in the field of one named Joshua. The Levites removed the ark and placed it on the large stone. A fire was built with the wood of the cart. The cows were slaughtered and offered to Yahweh as burnt offerings. Other sacrifices apparently were also offered. From a distance the lords of the Philistines looked on as the box containing their guilt offering was opened. There the Israelites found five golden mice and five golden tumors representing the Philistine Pentapolis: Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron. The large stone where the ark had been

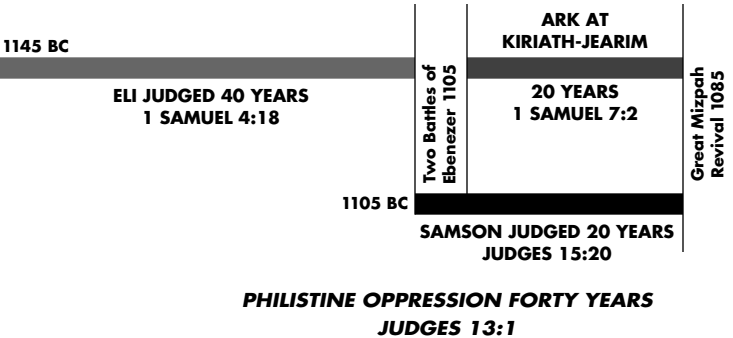
placed became a kind of national monument, a witness to the day the when the ark came home (6:13-18).

At this point the narrative takes a surprising turn. In their exuberance over the return of the ark, the men of Beth-shemesh made a serious mistake. They looked into the ark. Their motives may have been innocent enough. They probably wished to see if the Philistines had removed any of the memorial objects which were contained in the ark. Nonetheless, looking into the ark with profane curiosity was strictly forbidden (cf. Num 4:20). So Yahweh smote the people of the area with a great slaughter. The leaders of Beth-shemesh quickly sent to Kiriath-jearim to ask them to come and take away the ark (6:19-21).

The number of people affected by the plague at Beth-shemesh is in dispute. Actually the Hebrew text contains two numbers side by side, seventy and fifty thousand. NIV chooses the smaller figure, apparently regarding the fifty thousand as a gloss. NASB follows the Septuagint in combining these numbers into one figure, 50,070.<sup>17</sup>

Kiriath-jearim was ten miles northeast of Beth-shemesh and nine miles west of Jerusalem. The men of this village showed great faith and reverence by coming and removing the ark. The sacred chest was housed on the property of Abinadab. Eleazar, the son of Abinadab, was consecrated to care for the ark. For twenty years the Israelites lamented after Yahweh (7:1-2).

Chart No. 25



The ark remained in Kiriath-jearim for several decades. Probably it was not returned to Shiloh because that place had been defiled if not destroyed by the Philistines.<sup>18</sup> As far as the record is concerned the ark disappeared from national life. Even when the tabernacle was reconstructed and located at Nob, the ark remained at Kiriath-jearim. The extent to which the ark played any role in the religious life of Israel cannot be determined. Only after David had established Jerusalem as his capital did the ark surface again as an important object in Israelite worship.

## REVIVAL AND VICTORY

### 1 Samuel 7:3-17

After twenty years of spiritual malaise,<sup>19</sup> Samuel sensed that the time was right for revival. He called upon his people to return to Yahweh with all of their heart. If they would remove the foreign gods including the popular female idols of Ashtaroah, and if they would serve Yahweh alone, the Lord would deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. Samuel's message struck a responsive chord. The Israelites removed the Baals and their female counterparts. They devoted themselves exclusively to Yahweh. Samuel then called for all Israel to assemble at Mizpah where he promised to pray for them (7:3-5).

The Mizpah meeting, some eight miles north of Jerusalem, was one of the great revivals in biblical history. The people fasted that day. To symbolize the surrender of their entire beings, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord.<sup>20</sup> They confessed their sins. They recognized the authority of Samuel by allowing him to "judge" them (7:6).

The lords of the Philistines regarded this show of national unity in Israel as a threat to their hegemony. They came out against Israel in full force. The news of the Philistine approach struck terror in the hearts of the Israelites. They begged Samuel to keep on crying to Yahweh on their behalf that he might save them. Samuel immediately offered up a lamb as a whole burnt offering to Yahweh. The sacrifice was accompanied by earnest petition which Yahweh immediately answered (7:7-9).<sup>21</sup>

As Samuel was offering his sacrifice, the Philistines were forming their battle lines. Yahweh thundered against the attackers with a great thunder. The Philistines were thrown into confusion. They fled before the men of Israel. The Israelites pursued and struck the enemy all the way to Beth-car (7:10-11).

Chart No. 26

THE LIFE OF SAMUEL <i>Proposed Chronology</i>			
EVENT	DATE BC	YEARS	AGE
Birth	1118		
Shiloh Destroyed	1105		13
Ark at Kiriath-Jearim		→ 20 Yrs.	
Mizpah Revival	1085		33
Samuel Judges		→ 42 Yrs.	
Saul Anointed	1043		75
Advisor to Saul		→ 14 Yrs.	
David Anointed	1029		89
Retirement		→ 15 Yrs.	
Death	1014		104

To commemorate the victory over the Philistines Samuel erected a monument between Mizpah and Shen. The stone was named Ebenezer, “stone of help.” That victory marked the beginning of Israelite resurgence. All the days of Samuel the Philistines never again were successful in invading the territory of Israel “*for the hand of Yahweh*” was against them. Cities which had been lost to the Philistines were recovered. The ascendancy of Israel also caused the Amorites who lived within the borders of Israel to cease their hostilities (7:12-14).

Thus, Samuel the man of prayer was able to accomplish what Samson the man of strength could not accomplish. The prophet judged all Israel all the days of his life. His judicial circuit, however, was limited to a relatively small area of central Palestine. He moved about in a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah and back to his home at Ramah. In these places he “*judged*” Israel. At Ramah Samuel built an altar to Yahweh. The text thus hints that Ramah became the center of national worship.

## ENDNOTES

1. Harold Willmington, *Willmington's Survey of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1987), p. 214.

2. The term *doorpost of the temple* (1 Sam 1:9) suggests that some kind of permanent structure had been constructed perhaps to protect the ancient tent of meeting from the elements.

3. The title *Yahweh of hosts* appears here for the first time in the Bible. The title is used ten times in the books of Samuel, and one additional time as *Yahweh God of hosts* (2 Sam 5:10). The name Yahweh contains the Hebrew root which means "to be." Some understand the name to mean "He who exists" or "the Eternal;" others take it to mean "He who causes to exist" or "the Creator." The "*hosts*" may be the armies of Israel, armies of angels, the stars of the heavens, or all of the above. The combination "*Yahweh of hosts*" stresses the supreme authority of Yahweh as well as his omnipotence.

4. Nazirites were bound by three rules. They could not consume any product of the fruit of the vine, touch a corpse, or cut their hair (Num 6).

5. The blessing of Eli could be interpreted as a firm promise if the verb is parsed as an imperfect: "*The God of Israel will grant your request which you have asked of him.*"

6. This is the first use of the term *mashiach* (Messiah) in the Old Testament.

7. For a discussion of the messianic implications of Hannah's prediction see James E. Smith, *What the Bible Says about the Promised Messiah* (Joplin: College Press, 1984), pp. 76-78.

8. That which walks before God's anointed in 1 Sam 2:35 is not the faithful priest, but his "*house*." The latter is the nearest antecedent to the third person masculine pronoun. To "*walk before*" means to serve or minister as in 2:30. Hence, the "*house*" of the Faithful Priest ministers or serves under his scrutiny or supervision. For a detailed discussion of the messianic interpretation of the passage, see Smith, *Promised Messiah*, pp. 78-82.

9. Obviously God did not regard what Eli said to his sons in 2:22-25 as a rebuke, or at least as an effective rebuke. The only rebuke that would have been acceptable would have been to remove the two brothers from the priestly office.

10. No unanimity exists among scholars as to the etymological significance of the term *nabhi'* ("prophet"). In context here, however, the meaning is clear. A prophet is one who received revelation from God and who, on the basis of that revelation, was able accurately to predict the future.

11. P.K. McCarter understands the word '*eleph*', usually translated "thousand," to be a technical name for a military unit of undetermined size. *I Samuel*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 107. If an '*eleph*' consisted of thirty troops, for example, the losses here would be four times thirty or 120 men. While this approach to the battle figures in the

Old Testament is possible in some passages, the methodology is not capable of consistent application.

**12.** The significance of the term "Hebrew" is unclear. Most occurrences are in discourse spoken by or addressed to non-Israelites. Many see in the term a derogatory nuance. The term is consistently ethnic and thus does not refer to foreign mercenaries or outlaws as some have suggested. See M.G. Kline, s.v., "Hebrews," in *New Bible Dictionary*, second ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1982), pp. 466-67.

**13.** Decapitation was the ultimate humiliation inflicted in ancient warfare (1 Sam 17:51; 31:9). Ralph Klein thinks that the hands on the threshold symbolized that Dagon was seeking refuge in his own temple. Thus the loss of head and hands indicates Dagon's utter capitulation to Yahweh. *1 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), p. 50.

**14.** Howard Vos, *1,2 Samuel*, Bible Study Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 28f.

**15.** The bubonic plague is characterized by swellings in the lymph glands especially in the groin and armpit. Other interpretations: boils or abscesses at the anus; sores resulting from dysentery (Josephus); hemorrhoids (Masoretes).

**16.** A general principle among the ancients was that like cured like. At the ancient site of Corinth visitors may view an entire museum gallery full of statuary of diseased body parts sent to the temple of Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing, as offerings.

**17.** In his *Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties*, Gleason Archer argued for the smaller number as the original reading of the passage. He points out that (1) the customary Hebrew word order is not used in expressing the figure 50,070; (2) Josephus (*Ant.* VI.i.4) refers to the loss of life at Beth-shemesh as only seventy, with no mention whatever of the fifty thousand; (3) a few Hebrew manuscripts entirely omit the fifty thousand; and (4) given the size of the village of Beth-shemesh the lower figure is probably the original. No one, however, has given a credible explanation of how the fifty thousand figure crept into the text.

**18.** The Psalmist (Ps 78:60) and Jeremiah allude to the destruction of the sanctuary at Shiloh (Jer 26:6,9). Excavations at Shiloh indicate that the place was destroyed about the middle of the eleventh century BC, during the time of Philistine hegemony over Israel.

**19.** Vos, *1,2 Samuel*, p. 32.

**20.** Pouring out the heart like water is an expression of sorrow in Lam 2:19. The woman of Tekoa regarded water poured on the ground to indicate utter defeat (2 Sam 14:14).

**21.** The role of Samuel as intercessor is emphasized by the notation that *he* cried unto Yahweh rather than that the people cried as is usual in the Book of Judges.

## A King Like All the Nations

### 1 Samuel 8-12

The Mizpah revival and subsequent victory over the Philistines (1 Sam 7) were the highlights of Samuel's long judgeship. These events occurred about 1085 BC. The anointing of Saul took place about 1043 BC. Some four decades are passed over in silence in the text. In 1 Samuel 8 the great prophet appears advanced in years.

#### **ISRAEL'S DEMAND PRESENTED**

##### **1 Samuel 8:1-22**

In his old age Samuel made a tragic mistake. He appointed his two sons, Joel and Abijah, to judgeships in Beersheba some fifty miles southwest of Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Apparently he was trying to make the office of Judge hereditary. Samuel's sons, however, did not walk in the righteous path of their father. Out from under his watchful eye they turned aside after dishonest gain, and took bribes to pervert judgments (8:1-3).

The elders of Israel used Samuel's sons as a pretext for demanding a king. They came to Ramah to request that Samuel appoint for them a king "*like all the nations.*" God had promised to give his people kings (Gen 17:16; 35:11). The law of Moses anticipated the day when Israel would have a king (Deut 17:14-20). Nevertheless, the request offended the prophet. He interpreted it as a rejection of his life and ministry. So Samuel did what all wounded souls should do. He went to the Lord in prayer (8:4-6).

Yahweh instructed Samuel to listen to the voice of the people. They had not rejected the judgeship of Samuel, but the kingship of God (cf. Judg 8:22-23). This was but another example of the spiritual rebellion manifested by Israel ever since God had brought them out of Egypt. While Samuel was to yield to the request for a king, he was first to go on record with a warning of what kingship would mean in Israel (8:7-9).

Samuel spoke all the words of Yahweh to the people. He warned them of five actions which they could expect from their king: (1) conscription for military service (vv. 11-12); (2) seizure of private property (v. 14); (3) the *corvée*, a kind of labor tax (vv. 12,16); (4) impressment of persons into royal service (vv. 13,16); and (5) heavy (ten percent!) taxation (vv. 15,17). Ultimately all Israelites would be servants of the crown. Then, Samuel warned, the people would cry to Yahweh for relief because of the king which they were now demanding. The Lord, however, would not respond to their prayer in that day (8:10-18).

In spite of the very negative portrayal of kingship, the people insisted that a king should rule over them as in surrounding nations. Their king would be a Judge and a leader in battle as well. Samuel repeated all the words of the people to the Lord. Yahweh authorized Samuel to appoint a king for Israel. After assuring the people that they would get their king, Samuel dismissed the assembly to their respective cities (8:19-22).

## **ISRAEL'S REQUEST GRANTED**

### **1 Samuel 9:1-10:27**

Though the people indicated the kind of king they desired, they left the appointment of the candidate up to God's prophet.



**A. Saul Selected (1 Sam 9:1-25).**

The narrator next introduces the man whom God had selected as Israel's first king. First, Saul was from Benjamin, smallest of the tribes. Leaders of the larger tribes would view this selection as a happy compromise designed to eliminate tribal jealousies. Second, he was from a prominent family. This is indicated by the inclusion of a brief genealogical record in the text. Third, Saul's father Kish was "*a mighty man of valor*." The reference is not so much to his physical strength as to the power which comes through wealth or influence. Fourth, Saul had outstanding physical attributes. He was handsome and he was tall, in fact taller than any of the people (9:1-2). The elders desired a king like all the nations. In ancient pictures of royalty the king is usually depicted as taller than any of his subjects.

A curious set of circumstances resulted in the initial contact between Samuel and Saul. Kish had dispatched his son from Gibeah, three miles north of Jerusalem, to search for some lost donkeys.<sup>2</sup> A wide-ranging search through several districts in central Palestine did not locate the lost animals. Saul was ready to give up the search lest his father become anxious over his whereabouts. His servant, however, suggested that Saul consult the local "*man of God*" about the donkeys. This man of God had a reputation for accurate prediction. Saul thought the servant's suggestion was a good one. He pointed out, however, a problem. The provisions were exhausted. There was nothing suitable to serve as the customary offering—an interview fee—to the man of God for his services. Fortunately, the servant had a fourth of a shekel of silver. Since coins were not used until much later in Israel's history, this quarter shekel was a weight. For that amount the man of God<sup>3</sup> would be willing to give prophetic advice. Saul and his servant then set out for nearby Ramah, the city of Samuel (9:3-10).

As they approached the city, the two travelers met some young women going out to draw water. They learned that Samuel was scheduled to officiate at a sacrificial meal that very day. The people were waiting for him to arrive, for they would not begin the festivities without his blessing. The women advised the two men to intercept the prophet on his way to the "*high place*" where only invited guests would be permitted to assemble. As Saul and his servant proceeded

toward the city, they met Samuel on his way up to the “*high place*” (9:11-14).

Yahweh prepared Samuel for his meeting with Saul. The previous day the Lord had revealed (lit., uncovered his ear) that within twenty-four hours he would send to Samuel “*a man from the land of Benjamin*.” This man was to be anointed “*prince*” and be given the commission to save the people from the Philistines. When the prophet saw Saul, Yahweh made the identification even more specific. This was the man who would rule over (lit., keep within bounds) God’s people (9:15-17).

Saul approached Samuel to inquire where the seer lived. Obviously he had never met the prophet before. Samuel identified himself. He then invited Saul to the “*high place*” as his personal guest. Before Saul had an opportunity to mention the problem of the lost donkeys, the prophet assured him that they had been found. Samuel thus demonstrated to Saul his supernatural knowledge. Then he asked two cryptic questions to pique the curiosity of Saul. “*To whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not to you and to all the house of your father?*” The meaning is simple. Saul would be the one who would fulfill the desire of Israel for a king. He was the chosen one. Saul sensed that some great honor was being announced. However, he could not understand why Samuel would speak to him in this manner. He was from Benjamin, the smallest tribe, and even within that tribe his father’s family had little standing (9:18-21).

The communal meal over which Samuel presided that day functioned as an anticipation of a coronation banquet. Saul was treated royally. He was seated in the most honored place at the head of the thirty invited guests. Then a choice portion of meat was set before him. Samuel told him that this portion had been reserved for him since the day this special feast had been announced. Samuel hinted that the whole purpose of the meal was to honor Saul! That night Saul was a guest at Samuel’s home (9:22-25). All of this was designed to prepare Saul for the great announcement to be made the following day.

### **B. Saul Anointed (1 Sam 9:26–10:16).**

Early in the morning, Samuel aroused Saul from his sleep on the

flat roof of the prophet's home. He walked with Saul and his servant to the edge of the city. There the servant was dismissed, so that Samuel might declare the word of God to Saul privately. The prophet then took a flask of oil and poured it on Saul's head, kissed him on the cheek, and explained these actions with a rhetorical question: "*Is it not so that Yahweh has anointed you as a prince over his inheritance?*" The term "*prince*" (*naghid*) in this context probably means something like "crown prince" or "king designate" (9:26-10:1).

Three supernatural signs would confirm that Saul's anointing indeed had been ordained by Yahweh. First, Saul would encounter two men near Rachel's tomb who would report that the donkeys had been found and that Saul's father was worried about his whereabouts. Second, he would meet three men at the oak of Tabor who were on their way to worship at Bethel carrying various items to be offered as sacrifice. One of these strangers would greet Saul, and give him two of the three loaves of bread he was carrying. Third, at the hill of God where a Philistine garrison was stationed Saul would meet a group of prophets coming down from a "*high place*," playing their musical instruments and "*prophesying*."<sup>4</sup> In their presence Saul would be overwhelmed by the Spirit of Yahweh. His whole personality would be changed and he too would join in the vigorous prophetic praise of God. These three signs would assure Saul that God was with him in a special way (10:3-7).

Guided by God, Saul was to do for himself what the occasion required. The reference most likely is to the Philistine menace, for this seems to form the background for the demand for a king (cf. 9:16). One restriction was placed on Saul as he exercised his God-guided military leadership. Before he initiated hostilities against the Philistines, he was to go down to Gilgal in the Jordan valley and wait seven days for Samuel. The prophet intended to do two things: (1) to offer sacrifices; and (2) show Saul what he should do. The campaign to deal with the Philistines must be launched with divine blessing and prophetic guidance (10:8).

As Saul turned to leave Samuel, "*God changed his heart*." The three signs announced by Samuel came about that very day. The Spirit of God rushed upon him thus indicating that Saul was a deliverer like the Judges before him (cf. Judg 11:29; 14:6 etc.). The quiet country

boy became a vigorous public proclaimer of praise to Yahweh, and that right in the shadow of a Philistine garrison (cf. v. 5). People who previously knew Saul were astonished that one so shy would now be drawn to a band of religious enthusiasts. A bystander rebuked the shocked observers by means of the question, “*Who is their father?*” The question suggests that one is not born a prophet. God’s Spirit is what compelled men to join the prophetic band (10:9-13).<sup>5</sup>

When Saul reached home, his uncle questioned him about his long absence. In the light of the context of 1 Samuel this uncle was most likely Abner who later became the general of Israel’s army. Saul briefly rehearsed the events of the past few days, but he did not volunteer information about the matter of the kingdom (10:14-16).

### **C. Saul Presented (1 Sam 10:17-27).**

One may assume that Samuel called for the people to “*gather to Yahweh at Mizpah*” very soon after the private anointing at Ramah. The old prophet opened the assembly with a brief speech in which he reminded the audience of all that God had done for them in the deliverance from Egyptian bondage and oppressions by neighboring nations. By taking the initiative in demanding a king, the people had rejected the God who had delivered them from all their past calamities. Nevertheless, Samuel ordered the people to present themselves before Yahweh by their tribes and clans (10:17-19).

Though the mechanics of the sacred lot in Old Testament times are not known, certainly the process was controlled by Yahweh. In the person of their representatives, all the tribes of Israel one by one drew near to Samuel. Presumably the tribe of Benjamin, descended from the youngest of Jacob’s twelve sons, was last. The lot indicated that Yahweh had chosen this tribe. Then the representatives of the clans of Benjamin drew near to Samuel and the Matrite clan was chosen. At this point the names of all the heads of families within the Matrite clan were perhaps placed on potsherds. By lot Saul the son of Kish was selected. When they looked for Saul, however, he could not be found. Further inquiry of Yahweh through the prophet Samuel revealed that Saul was hiding by the baggage (10:20-22).

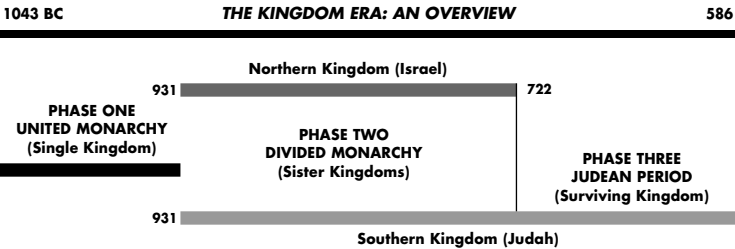
Leaders hastened to bring Saul from his hiding place. When Saul stood among the people he was head and shoulders taller than any of

his countrymen. Physically Saul qualified to be the kind of king Israel wanted. Samuel made sure that the audience understood that the unusual proceedings of that day were Yahweh’s means of making known his selection for Israel’s king.<sup>6</sup> The people ratified the appointment by shouting the traditional “*Long live the king*” (10:23-24).

Samuel then set forth “*the judgment of the kingdom*,” i.e., the constitutional, historical and spiritual basis for the monarchy in Israel. This material was written by the prophet in “*the scroll*.” The reference may be to the scroll of Scripture which Samuel was now expanding.<sup>7</sup> The scroll was then placed “*before Yahweh*,” i.e., in a sacred shrine, perhaps even before the ark of God. This act recognized that the written words of Samuel possessed divine authority like Moses and Joshua before him (10:25).

When Samuel dismissed the people from Mizpah, Saul returned to Gibeah. Some valiant men “*whose hearts God had touched*” went with him. Certain “*sons of Belial*,” i.e., worthless men, mocked the appointment of the timid farmer from Gibeah. They despised him and brought him no gift in token of submission to his authority. Saul wisely refused to take action against his critics. He knew that he would have the opportunity soon enough to prove his mettle (10:26-27).

Chart No. 27



GOD’S CHOICE VINDICATED  
1 Samuel 11:1-15

The test for Saul’s leadership unexpectedly came, not from the Philistines to the west, but from the Ammonites across the Jordan.

Nahash besieged the Israelite outpost of Jabesh in the region of Gilead.<sup>8</sup> Realizing that they had no chance of successfully resisting the siege, the men of Jabesh expressed willingness to become vassals of the Ammonite. Nahash, however, was not willing to settle for this type of submission. He wanted to inflict a humiliating defeat upon this Israelite town. Only if the men of Jabesh would allow Nahash to gouge out their right eyes would he be willing to enter into a covenant with them.<sup>9</sup> He wanted to make Jabesh “a reproach” in all Israel (11:1-2).<sup>10</sup>

When they realized that Nahash was in no mood to negotiate, the elders of Jabesh requested a seven-day reprieve so that they might seek deliverance from other tribes. Nahash was so confident of the political disarray of Israel that he actually granted the request of the elders. Even if other tribes should respond to the plea of Jabesh, Nahash was confident that he would be able to defeat the Israelites (11:3).

The messengers headed straight for Saul’s town of Gibeah. Apparently few, if any, of the trappings of royalty marked the earliest days of the monarchy in Israel. Saul was out working with his oxen in the fields when the messengers arrived. The people of Gibeah lamented loudly when they heard the news from Jabesh.

When Saul learned of the brutal demands of Nahash, “*the Spirit of God*” rushed upon him.<sup>11</sup> As a result he was filled with righteous anger. Whereas in other contexts the blowing of a horn mustered the tribes for a holy war, Saul determined that more dramatic action was necessary. He dismembered a yoke of oxen and sent the pieces throughout the territory of Israel by messengers, perhaps the same messengers who had come from Jabesh. The chunks of meat were to be visual aids to reinforce the first royal edict. If any man failed to report for military duty to follow Saul and Samuel, his oxen would be slaughtered (cf. Judg 19:29-30). Mentioning Samuel’s name in this call to arms indicates the insecurity which Saul felt in his royal rank at this period (11:4-7).

This dramatic action put the fear of Yahweh in the men of Israel. They assembled as one man to Bezek, the town near the Jordan which had been designated as the staging area for the Jabesh operation. There Saul numbered and organized his men. From Judah

30,000 men had responded, and from the other tribes 300,000 (11:8).

The messengers from Jabesh were sent back with the glad news that deliverance was at hand. By the time the sun got hot the next day, the army of Israel would be there to rescue them. The men of Jabesh immediately sent word to Nahash that they would surrender themselves to him the following day and he could then do with them whatever he had determined to do. This report no doubt lulled Nahash into a false sense of security. He most likely took no ordinary military precautions to prevent a surprise attack (11:9-10).

During the night the Israelite forces drew near. Saul organized his troops into three units, probably to facilitate a pincer movement against the enemy.<sup>12</sup> Sometime during the morning watch (2 AM to 6 AM) the attack was launched. The battle turned out to be a slaughter of Ammonites. Only a few stragglers survived (11:11).

The brilliant and decisive defeat of the Ammonites convinced everyone that Saul indeed was the right choice for king. The people came to Samuel—he apparently had accompanied the troops to Jabesh—to urge that those who had vocally opposed Saul’s anointing now be executed. Saul, however, would have none of that. Yahweh had granted deliverance in Israel. This was no day for recrimination, but for celebration. Samuel agreed. Capitalizing on the current enthusiasm, Samuel urged the people to assemble in the ancient shrine of Gilgal to “*renew the kingdom*,” i.e., to give everyone an opportunity to express their support for Saul. So the people went to Gilgal and “*made Saul king*” before Yahweh. Burnt offerings and peace offerings were presented to the Lord. Unlike the Mizpah meeting which ended in mixed opinion about Saul a few months (?) earlier, at the Gilgal assembly Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced together greatly (11:12-15).

## THE EXPLANATION OF ISRAEL’S GUILT

### 1 Samuel 12:1-25

At the Gilgal assembly Samuel delivered his valedictory. In so doing he resigned, in effect, from the office of Judge. The speech is interspersed with responses from the people and the description of a manifestation of God, a theophany.

### **A. A Testimony for Samuel (1 Sam 12:1-5).**

In the prologue to his speech, Samuel elicited from the people an acknowledgement that the integrity of his leadership had not been compromised. First, he mentioned the fact that he had done what they had asked him to do, namely, he had appointed a king for them. Their king was now *“walking before”* them, i.e., installed in office. Second, he refers to himself as *“old and gray,”* perhaps suggesting that it was time for him to step down from his role of political leader. Third, he made reference to his sons who are *“with you.”* Perhaps this was a father’s way of admitting the painful truth that his sons were not in fact worthy of succeeding their father in the office of Judge (cf. 1 Sam 8:3,5). Fourth, he reminds them of his lengthy service to the nation *“from my youth even to this day.”* Samuel had *“walked before”* them, i.e., he had been a public figure his entire life (12:1-2).

Samuel then challenged the audience to bear witness against him if they knew of any situation in which he had abused his power as Judge by taking bribes or defrauding citizens. The assembly unanimously agreed that Samuel had never abused his office in any way. Then Samuel in effect made the people swear before Yahweh and his anointed Saul that they could find no ill-gotten gain in his hand (12:3-5).

### **B. A Testimony for the Lord (1 Sam 12:6-12).**

Samuel devoted a major part of his address to demonstrating the many *“righteous acts”* which Yahweh had performed for his people. When the Israelites cried out in the midst of Egyptian bondage, Yahweh raised up Moses and Aaron to bring them out of the land of oppression. The Lord settled his people in Canaan. When, however, they proved time and again to be unfaithful to him, Yahweh would deliver them into the hands of oppressing nations. In each of those oppressions the people would cry out to Yahweh, confessing their sins and begging for deliverance. The Lord responded by sending Jerubbaal (Gideon), Bedan (Barak?), Jephthah and Samuel to deliver Israel from the hand of their foreign oppressors.

The request for a king had been triggered by the oppression of Nahash the Ammonite.<sup>13</sup> Instead of trusting God to supply deliver-



ance, the people had resolved to find their own solution. They insisted on having a king like all the nations even though the Lord had never failed them insofar as they were faithful to him. Thus history bore testimony that God faithfully had performed the royal office. The request for a king had been premature, unnecessary, and insulting to the Lord (12:6-12).

### **C. A Testimony against Israel (1 Sam 12:13-18).**

Samuel next addressed the present realities. Israel had now formally chosen as king the man God had ordained. Hence “*Yahweh has set a king over you.*” As always, the requirement of Israel was to fear Yahweh, i.e., to serve and obey him. Following the Lord would lead to national blessing. On the other hand, the path of disobedience would bring the hand of Yahweh against them just as it had been against their fathers in times of their spiritual rebellion (12:13-15).

A miraculous sign would be needed to underscore in the minds of the people the gravity of their sin in requesting a king. Samuel called attention to the time of the year. Wheat harvest was in progress. This was the dry season when rain scarcely ever falls in Palestine. Yet Samuel announced that he would call upon Yahweh to send thunder and rain. One wonders if this announcement was greeted with skepticism by the assembly. Be that as it may, when the old prophet prayed, the thunder and rain came that day. Then the people greatly feared Yahweh and his servant Samuel (12:16-18).

### **D. A Final Testimony (1 Sam 12:19-25).**

The ferocious thunderstorm got the message across. The people feared for their lives. They sensed the enormity of their sin against Yahweh. They immediately pled for Samuel to make intercession for them that they might not die. Samuel calmed their fears. Yet he used the occasion to press for future strict and heartfelt obedience to Yahweh. If they ceased to serve Yahweh, they would inevitably follow after “*futile things,*” i.e., idols. Such “*gods*” were of no benefit to any nation since they could not deliver from danger. Yahweh, on the other hand, had chosen Israel as his own people. His divine name (honor, reputation) was bound up in the fate of this nation. Therefore

he would not abandon Israel even though the nation may have committed a grievous sin against him (12:19-22).

Even though he was stepping down as Judge, Samuel did not relinquish his office of prophet. His prophetic responsibilities under the monarchy would be twofold: (1) prayer and (2) instruction. Under no circumstances would Samuel sin against Yahweh by ceasing to pray for Israel. Intercessory prayer was a fundamental attribute of a prophet (cf. Gen 20:7,17). In addition to his prayers for Israel, Samuel would continue to instruct them *"in the good and right way"* (12:23).

Samuel's valedictory concluded with an admonition for Israel to *"fear Yahweh and serve him in truth."* Heartfelt and cheerful obedience were the only proper responses to all the great things which Yahweh had done for his people. On the other hand, if Israel arrogantly insist upon its own way, both the people and their king would be swept away (12:24-25).

## ENDNOTES

1. The reason for the appointment of Samuel's sons is not clear. Nor is it clear why two sons were appointed in one city. Were they a replacement for Samuel? Were they appointed to relieve Samuel of judicial responsibilities at a distant site?

2. Asses or donkeys were the riding animals of prominent people in early Old Testament times. See Judg 5:10; 10:4; 12:14. The loss of these animals would (1) strip the family of one of the insignia of leadership and authority; and (2) be an economic blow.

3. The author of Samuel supplies very crucial information when he notes that those who formerly were called *"seers"* in Israel later were known as *"prophets."* The former term emphasized the visionary aspect of prophetism, the latter the proclamation function.

4. This *"prophesying"* surely was neither prediction nor preaching, but rhythmic chanting to the accompaniment of instrumental music. The connection between *"prophesying"* and instrumental music is again made in 1 Chr 25:1 and 2 Kgs 3:15.

5. The question *"Who is their father?"* has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Some think the sense is that the prophets have no father and hence are a disreputable band with whom Saul should have nothing to do. Others think the term *"father"* refers to the leader and interpreter of the group, namely, Samuel. Hence the thought would be, Why criticize Saul for joining the prophetic band when their *"father"* is none other than Samuel?

**6.** In the books of Samuel and Kings only Saul and David are designated as God's *chosen* or *elect*.

**7.** Joshua wrote the record of the covenant which he had made with Israel "*in the book of the law of God.*" So now Samuel is writing his record for that same book. The material which Samuel wrote on this occasion may have been the nucleus of what today is known as Judges and 1 Sam 1-10.

**8.** According to the LXX, the Nahash incident occurred one month after the first anointing of Saul.

**9.** Josephus (*Ant.* 6.5.1) suggests that the gouging of the right eyes would effectively disarm the Gileadites since in battle the buckler would cover the left eye.

**10.** On the basis of one of the Dead Sea scrolls (4Q Sam<sup>a</sup>) NRSV "restores" material which may have fallen out of the standard text of Samuel in the process of copying. This "missing" text relates how Nahash had been oppressing the Transjordan tribes for some time, gouging out the right eyes of all who fell into his hands. Seven thousand who had escaped from his hand had entered into Jabesh-gilead. About a month after they took refuge there, Nahash came against the city. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. defends this material as part of the original text. *I Samuel*, Vol. 8, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 199f. The argument for regarding this material as part of the original text of Samuel is far from convincing. See also James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 130-132.

**11.** The same language was used of Samson (Judg 14:6,19; 15:14). In 10:6,10 the Spirit turned the timid Saul into a vigorous leader in public worship. In chapter 11 the same Spirit equipped Saul for leadership in a holy war.

**12.** Gideon (Judg 7:16,20) and Abimelech (Judg 9:43) and even the Philistines (1 Sam 13:17-18) also employed the three-prong military strategy.

**13.** Apparently the attack on Jabesh was only the latest in a series of menacing attacks by Nahash.



## The King Rejected

### 1 Samuel 13-17

Two important pieces of chronological data are missing in 13:1: the age of Saul when he began to reign; and the length of Saul's reign.<sup>1</sup> The English translators have supplied in *italics* figures which represent an intelligent guess. Saul was probably between thirty and forty at the time he was anointed king. The length of his reign was something like thirty-two years. For some reason in the ancient transcription of the text of Samuel these figures dropped out.

The purpose of 1 Samuel 13-17 seems to be to document the deterioration of the reign of Saul. The author speaks of Saul's sinful impatience, foolish zeal, blatant rebellion, and faltering leadership. In three steps the rejection of Saul is made clear. First, Samuel announced that Saul would have no lasting dynasty. Second, Samuel declared that Saul personally had been rejected by the Lord. Third, Samuel went to Bethlehem to anoint that one who would be Saul's replacement in kingship.

## **SAUL'S SINFUL IMPATIENCE**

### **1 Samuel 13:1-23**

Once the reins of government had been turned over to him, Saul devoted himself to the priority of his reign, namely, rescuing his people from the Philistines (cf. 1 Sam 9:16).

#### **A. Beginning of Hostilities (1 Sam 13:2-4).**

How much time elapsed between the defeat of Nahash and the events of 1 Samuel 13 is not stated. Probably Saul would want to capitalize on the zeal which the people manifested for his reign at the reaffirmation ceremony in chapter 12. Be that as it may, at some point Saul began to organize a standing army. As a nucleus he chose for himself 3,000 men. Of these, a thousand stayed with Saul at Michmash, while another thousand under the direct authority of the king were stationed near Bethel. The third thousand was with Saul's son Jonathan at Gibeah of Benjamin. The rest of the people were sent home (13:2).

Hostilities with the Philistines were triggered by the actions of Jonathan. He and his men attacked the Philistine garrison<sup>2</sup> at Geba. Whether Jonathan acted on orders from his father or on his own initiative cannot be determined. In any case, this action made the Israelites odious to the Philistines. Anticipating a retaliatory invasion by the Philistines, Saul had the trumpet blown throughout the land. He alerted the "*Hebrews*," those Israelites and kindred souls who had been mercenaries of the Philistines. Then he summoned the people of Israel to Gilgal (13:3-4).

#### **B. Philistine Invasion (1 Sam 13:5-7).**

The Philistines assembled a massive army to invade Israel: 30,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen,<sup>3</sup> and infantry without number. This force camped at Michmash, Saul's former headquarters. The men of Israel had no will to resist such a vast host. They began to desert, taking refuge in terrain which they thought was inaccessible to the Philistines. Some of the Hebrews even fled across the Jordan. Though Saul and his troops remained in Gilgal, they were trembling at the prospects of having to do battle with the Philistines.

**C. The Assembly at Gilgal (1 Sam 13:8-14).**

Saul waited seven days for Samuel to appear in Gilgal. Each day more of his troops were deserting. Finally Saul ordered burnt offerings and peace offerings to be prepared. He himself seems to have officiated at the sacrifice. Just as Saul finished offering the burnt offering, Samuel appeared. Saul went out to greet him as though nothing were amiss (13:8-10).

Samuel demanded an explanation for Saul's action. The king defended himself with three arguments. First, he blamed his actions on the people. They were scattering, and he needed to do something to boost morale. Second, he blamed Samuel: You (the pronoun is emphatic in the Hebrew) did not appear within the appointed days. Third, he blamed the Philistines. They were assembling at Michmash for an all-out attack on Israel. Saul was convinced that the Philistines would attack him at Gilgal. Offering sacrifices before a holy war was customary. Therefore, the king said: "*I forced myself*" to offer the burnt offering (13:11-12).

Samuel did not bother to answer any of Saul's excuses. He simply stated a twofold assessment of the king's actions. First, Saul had acted foolishly; and second, he had disobeyed the commandment of Yahweh. Had he been obedient, Saul would have been the founder of a long-lived dynasty. Now, however, the divine sentence is that Saul's dynasty would not endure. Yahweh had already sought out for himself "*a man after his own heart.*" This unnamed man would become the ruler of God's people because Saul had not done what the Lord had commanded him (13:13-14).

**D. Saul's Predicament (1 Sam 13:15-23).**

Saul was now in quite a predicament. Samuel deserted him. He had left Gilgal bound for Gibeah of Benjamin. Saul would not have the benefit of prophetic guidance. Then Saul numbered "*the people*" and found only six hundred still with him.<sup>4</sup> With this little band Saul took up defensive positions near Geba of Benjamin. He was helpless to deal with the raiding parties dispatched to the north, to the south and to the west from the Philistine base camp at Michmash. Yet he was determined to defend his own tribal area of Benjamin (13:15-18).

Lack of proper weaponry exacerbated Saul's predicament. The Philistines had removed all the blacksmiths from Israel, thus thwarting

the manufacture of swords and spears. Israelites were forced to travel down to the Philistine plain to get their agricultural implements sharpened. Since the Philistines had a monopoly on the smelting and working of iron, they charged exorbitant prices—two thirds of a shekel—just to sharpen or repair their tools. Such prices made weapons unaffordable to the average Israelite. All of this the author relates so that his readers may understand why it was that only Saul and Jonathan had proper spears and swords on the eve of battle. The rank and file were armed with clubs, slings and perhaps other weapons made of bronze (13:19-22).

The showdown with the Philistine invaders began when the enemy base camp moved south toward the pass of Michmash. The courage of Saul in facing this force with only six hundred underarmed soldiers is to be commended (13:23).

### **SAUL'S FOOLISH ZEAL**

#### **1 Samuel 14:1-52**

Early in his reign Saul decided to challenge the Philistine domination of Israel. The initial effort against this formidable foe was successful almost in spite of Saul. The king here is depicted as pious, though his piety seemed to paralyze rather than energize the effort. Yet through the courageous faith of Jonathan and the awesome power of Yahweh the Philistines were put to flight. In the previous chapter Saul lost the hope of dynastic succession. Here the author portrays the sterling qualities of Jonathan, the man who might have been king.

#### **A. Yahweh's Initial Victory (1 Sam 14:1-15).**

For a time Saul failed to take any action against the Philistines. Once again (cf. 13:3) Jonathan decided to initiate the battle by attacking an outpost guarding the pass between Michmash and Geba. His courageous faith stands out in bold relief against the background of Saul's paralysis. The king had only six hundred men in his encampment on the outskirts of Gibeah. Saul's force was small, yet the high priest was there wearing the ephod and the ark of God was also there (v. 18). Perhaps the author intends to say that Saul's situation was desperate, but not hopeless (14:1-3).



Jonathan attempted to bolster the confidence of his young armor-bearer by reminding him of two things. First, the enemy was “*uncircumcised*.” This was a kind of ethnic slur used to mock the enemy and thus express confidence in victory (cf. 1 Sam 17:26,36). Second, Jonathan stressed that Yahweh is capable of giving victories to the few as well as to the many. Yet Jonathan did not presume that his action automatically would fall within the will of God. “*Perhaps*,” he said to his armorbearer, “*Yahweh will work for us*.” The armorbearer indicated that he would stand with Jonathan no matter what decision he made (14:4-7).

The plan was to cross the valley and reveal themselves to the Philistines who controlled the heights above. If the enemy ordered them to halt they would not ascend the height where the enemy was camped. If the Philistines challenged them to climb up, Jonathan would regard that as a sign that Yahweh would give a victory. Such a challenge would indicate overconfidence, even carelessness on the part of the defenders. Since this fight with the Philistines was a holy war ordered by a prophet (10:8) and consecrated by sacrifices, Jonathan believed that God would make his will clear (14:8-10).

When the Philistines spotted Jonathan and his armorbearer, they assumed that they were “*Hebrews*” coming out of hiding. They therefore challenged the two to climb up to their camp. Jonathan then began to make the precipitous climb confident that the victory was his. When they reached the top Jonathan and his armorbearer slew twenty of the enemy in a very small area.<sup>5</sup> Before the main force of the Philistines could come to the aid of their outpost, a tremendous earthquake began to shake the ground. The enemy was thrown into panic and began to flee back to their homeland (14:11-15).

### **B. Yahweh’s Complete Deliverance (1 Sam 14:16-23).**

Israelite lookouts observed great confusion in the Philistine camp. Saul suspected that some of his men had attacked the enemy. A quick numbering of his troops revealed the absence of Jonathan and his armorbearer. Saul ordered the high priest to bring the ark of God forward. Saul was making inquiry through the priestly oracle about his next move. Before the priest could complete the ritual inquiry,

however, it became obvious that the Philistine camp was engaged in battle. Saul rallied his troops to join the fray (14:16-20a).

As they approached the battlefield Saul witnessed the total confusion of the enemy. The Hebrew mercenaries within the Philistine army had rebelled. The Philistines were in full retreat. News of the rout of the Philistines spread like wildfire. Israelites who had hidden away in the mountains came forth to join the pursuit. The battle spread beyond Beth-aven. So Yahweh delivered Israel that day (14:20b-23).

### **C. Saul's Rash Curse (1 Sam 14:24-46).**

After reporting the glorious victory, the author focuses on a rash curse which nearly turned victory into calamity. Anxious that his men not lose the advantage over the Philistines, Saul placed a curse on anyone who stopped during the day to eat. The well-being of his men was of no concern to Saul "*until I take vengeance on my enemies.*" These words suggest selfishness on Saul's part, even fanatical zeal. He had lost the sense that the Philistines were Yahweh's enemies, and he was fighting Yahweh's battle.<sup>6</sup> Not only did Saul's foolish oath work a hardship on his soldiers; other terrible consequences followed as well.

1. *The violation by Jonathan (14:25-30).* Pursuing the enemy through a forest, the Israelite soldiers spotted an abandoned honeycomb which was oozing wild honey. None of the soldiers dared to touch that tempting treat because they feared the curse of their king. Jonathan, however, knew nothing of the oath. Therefore as he continued the pursuit, he dipped the end of his staff in the honeycomb and put it to his mouth. Immediately "*his eyes brightened,*" i.e., he experienced a sudden surge of energy. When informed about his father's oath Jonathan was discouraged. He called attention to the difference in his energy level and that of the men. An even greater victory over the Philistines would have been possible had Saul not "*troubled the land*" with his foolish oath. Perhaps Jonathan should not have spoken so critically of his father in front of the troops.

2. *The defiled troops (14:31-35).* Another direct result of Saul's curse occurred at the end of the day. The Israelites had chased the Philistines as far as Aijalon some twenty miles west of where the

battle was first joined. The troops now were faint from lack of food. As soon as the sun set, they pounced on the spoil of livestock. The animals were slaughtered on the ground. No provision was made for the proper drainage of blood (cf. Lev 19:26; Deut 12:16). The meat was eaten “*with the blood*,”<sup>7</sup> which was a violation of Mosaic law (14:31-32).

Saul was soon told that his troops were sinning against Yahweh by eating “*with the blood*.” Saul referred to what his men had done as “*treachery*.” He ordered a stone rolled to the spot. Officers circulated among the troops ordering them to bring their livestock to the central stone for slaughter. The stone was considered an altar, the first altar which Saul erected (14:33-35).

3. *The silent oracle (14:36-39)*. After the men had eaten, Saul determined that perhaps it would be a good idea to press the attack against the Philistines into the night. The officers agreed, but the priest (Ahijah) suggested that it might be wise to “*draw near to God*,” i.e., seek an oracle regarding the proposed pursuit. So Saul inquired of God about the matter, but he did not answer him on that day through the Urim and Thummim of the high priest.<sup>8</sup> By this silence Yahweh rebuked the rash piety of Saul in taking the oath in the first place (14:36-37).

Saul realized that there must be sin in the camp. He called upon his officers to investigate and report how the sin occurred. Then Saul took another oath. Even if the guilty party were prince Jonathan, he would still die for having violated the solemn curse of the king. Though it was generally known through the ranks that Jonathan had violated his father’s curse, no one ventured to point the finger of accusation at him (14:37-39).

4. *The jeopardy of Jonathan (14:40-45)*. Since no one would report any violation of the royal curse, Saul would find the guilty party in another manner. He determined to cast lots. The first lot would be between the royal family (Saul and Jonathan) and the troops. The king prayed that the Lord would give a perfect lot. Saul must have been shocked when the lot indicated that the guilt was in the royal family. A second lot was cast between Saul and his son. The lot indicated Jonathan (14:40-42).

Saul then interrogated Jonathan, and the prince confessed to

tasting a little honey during the midst of the battle. Now that Saul had bound himself by an oath to execute the guilty party, Jonathan was fully prepared to accept his fate.<sup>9</sup> Then Saul took a third oath which reinforced the second, that Jonathan would surely die (14:43-44).

At this point the troops intervened. These soldiers gave the credit for the victory over the Philistines to Jonathan. He could only have accomplished what he had accomplished if he had “*worked with God*.” Therefore Jonathan should not die. The troops took an oath that not one hair of Jonathan’s head would fall to the ground.<sup>10</sup> Thus it would appear that the oath of the many took precedence over the oath of the one, even if the one was the king. In this case Saul must have been very relieved that his troops overruled him (14:45).

5. *The end of the battle (14:46)*. Since his troops in effect had mutinied against him, any hopes of further pursuit of the Philistines became impossible. Saul and his men returned home. The Philistines withdrew from Israelite territory. They would return to fight another day.

### **D. Summary of Saul’s Reign (1 Sam 14:47-52).**

The author now interjects a brief summary of other accomplishments of Saul’s reign. Saul was successful in campaigns against Moab and Ammon to the east, Edom to the south, Zobah to the north, and the Philistines to the west. Saul was credited with defeating the Amalekites and other marauding desert tribes who “*plundered*” Israel from time to time (14:47-48). Thus Saul was doing what Israel’s judges had done before him (cf. Judg 2:16).

By his wife Ahinoam<sup>11</sup> Saul had three sons and two daughters.<sup>12</sup> The sons were Jonathan, Ishvi and Malchishua. The daughters were Merab and Michal. The captain of Saul’s army was his uncle<sup>13</sup> Abner (14:49-51).

Chapter 14 closes with one other negative note about the king. Saul’s recruiting policy marked a major shift from the emergency tribal levy which had served Israel to this point. Any men capable of military leadership were pressed into service on the royal staff. Such a policy became necessary because of the uninterrupted nature of the conflict with the Philistines (14:52).

## **SAUL'S BLATANT REBELLION**

### **1 Samuel 15:1-35**

Chapter 15 is devoted completely to events surrounding Saul's war with the Amalekites. Saul's dynasty was rejected in chapter 13. Here the king personally is rejected for disobedience to a direct command of Yahweh. The text supplies no information which would allow one to compute the time interval between chapters 14 and 15.

#### **A. Commission of Saul (1 Sam 15:1-3).**

Yahweh had directed Samuel to anoint Saul as king of Israel. As Yahweh's anointed, Saul had an obligation to listen to what Yahweh said through his prophet Samuel. The Lord had determined to punish Amalek for the obstruction which they had been to Israel at the time of the Exodus (Exod 17:8-16; Deut 25:17-19). Though some four centuries had elapsed, Yahweh had not forgotten the threat which he had made concerning the Amalekites. Since in the intervening centuries Amalek had shown no signs of national repentance,<sup>14</sup> that nation should now be put under the ban, i.e., totally destroyed (Deut 7:2; 20:17). Nothing was to be spared.

#### **B. Disobedience to the Word (1 Sam 15:4-9).**

Saul promptly summoned the people for a holy war against Amalek. Saul numbered his troops at the staging area of Telaim in the Negev of Judah some thirty miles south of Hebron. His large force—200,000 from Israel, and 10,000 from Judah<sup>15</sup>—would be necessary in chasing the Amalekites across the sprawling desert. The point is that Saul had enough forces to carry out his mandate (15:4).

Before going to war against the Amalekites, Saul warned the Kenites to leave the area lest they be caught up in the fighting. The Kenites were old allies of Israel dating back to the days of the Exodus (15:5-6).

While Saul concentrated on "*the city of Amalek*," contingents of his army chased down the Amalekites from Havilah (northwest Arabia) to the borders of Egypt. He executed every Amalekite he could get hands on with one exception. He spared their king Agag.<sup>16</sup> He and his troops were also unwilling to destroy the best of the livestock.

Hence Saul had failed to put Amalek under the ban as ordered. He had, in effect, committed the same sin as Achan had committed during the conquest (15:7-9).

### **C. Confrontation with Samuel (1 Sam 15:10-21).**

By revelation Samuel learned the sad truth about Saul. The king's actions had caused Yahweh to be sorry that he had ever made Saul king. At the outset Saul had been warned that only if he honored God through obedience would he be blessed, and if he did not he would be rejected. Thus Yahweh's change of attitude toward Saul was not a change of purpose. For God to be unchanging in his purpose, he had to now change his attitude toward Saul. Samuel felt great distress over the matter. He cried out all that night in prayer to the Lord (15:10-11).

Early in the morning Samuel set out to find Saul. He learned from travelers that Saul had returned to Carmel, a town seven miles south of Hebron. There Saul had erected a monument to celebrate his victory over Amalek. So much for the modesty of this man before his coronation. From there Saul was proceeding to Gilgal. As Samuel approached, Saul gave him a warm greeting in which he enthusiastically declared that he had carried out the commandment of Yahweh. Either Saul is bluffing, or he is part of that group in every age who think that partial obedience is acceptable to the Lord (15:12-13).

Samuel cut short the blustering of the king. He called attention to the noise being made by the numerous livestock spared by Saul. The king then blamed "*the people*," i.e., his troops, for sparing the best of the animals so that they might offer sacrifices to Yahweh. Saul was making two grave leadership mistakes here. First, he was attempting to shift the blame to others. Even if true these excuses would be tantamount to an admission that Saul had no control over his troops. Second, he attempted to use a religious pretext as an excuse for disobedience. He seems to be arguing that religious sincerity is a valid substitute for obedience to God. Besides this, in the peace offering most of the sacrificial animal was eaten by the worshipers. Had Saul really wished to give those animals to God he would have slain them as ordered in the first place (15:14-15).

"*Stop*" (NIV) Samuel said. Enough of your excuses! Hear what

Yahweh revealed to me last night. Saul agreed to listen. A rhetorical question reminded Saul that Yahweh had elevated him to kingship even when he in his own eyes was unworthy of such honor. He also reminded Saul of the precise words of the recent commission. The Amalekites were sinners. He had been commissioned to fight against them until they were exterminated. Why then, Samuel asked, did Saul commit evil by disobeying the voice of Yahweh? Samuel rejected any distinction between what Saul had done and what the troops had done. He placed total responsibility on the king (15:16-19).

Saul strongly rejected Samuel's accusation that he had disobeyed the Lord. He had spared only Agag. The people had spared the choicest livestock to sacrifice to Yahweh "*your*" God at Gilgal (15:20-21). Saul ignored the fact that the Amalekite livestock had already been devoted to God by being placed under the ban. They therefore could not legitimately be presented to God as sacrifice (Lev 27:29; Deut 13:16).

#### **D. Rejection by the Lord (1 Sam 15:22-31).**

Samuel forcefully rejected Saul's contention that religious intention justifies selective obedience. "*To obey is better than sacrifice.*" No amount of religious ritual can substitute for doing what God commands. To be valid, external religious observance must reflect internal faith and piety. Rebellion and insubordination are sins equivalent in seriousness to divination<sup>17</sup> and idolatry. Conscious disobedience is like idolatry in that one makes an idol out of the human will. The punishment would suit the crime. Saul had rejected the word of Yahweh, therefore "*Yahweh has rejected you from being king!*" (15:22-23).

Samuel's announcement knocked the bluster out of Saul. He now realized the seriousness of what he had done. In humble contrition Saul confessed his transgression in listening to the voice of the people rather than to the words of Yahweh and his prophet. He begged that he might be pardoned, that Samuel might join him in public worship (15:24-25).

Samuel at this point refused to join Saul in worship. The king might interpret his presence as tantamount to forgiveness of the transgression. Saul had been rejected as king and therefore Samuel could not any longer give him public support. With that parting word

Samuel turned to leave. In desperation Saul seized Samuel's robe. This constituted a final act of supplication on his part. The robe tore. The prophet used the torn robe to illustrate his announcement. Yahweh had torn the kingdom out of the hands of Saul and had given that kingdom to someone more worthy of it. Furthermore, Samuel added, "*the Glory of Israel*," i.e., Yahweh, would not lie, nor would he change his mind about the kingdom (15:26-29).

For the second time Saul acknowledged his sin and accepted his fate. He made one last request of the prophet. He asked Samuel to honor him before the elders and people by accompanying him back to Gilgal. This time Saul's request was not accompanied by request for pardon. Since the king would not misunderstand his presence, Samuel followed him back to Gilgal. There Saul worshiped Yahweh, i.e., offered sacrifices to him. Samuel's presence acknowledged that the sinful king retained his office for the time being (15:30-31).

### **E. Execution of Agag (1 Sam 15:32-33).**

After the worship ceremony had concluded, Samuel demanded that Agag be brought to him. Agag came to him "*cheerfully*" (NASB) or "*confidently*" (NIV). The joyous worship celebration had convinced him that his life was no more in danger. Samuel, however, was of a different mind. He first pronounced sentence on the Amalekite. Agag's sword had made many women childless, so now his own mother would be childless. With those words of judgment Samuel hewed Agag to pieces "*before Yahweh*," i.e., before Yahweh's altar, at Gilgal. By slaying Agag, Samuel was executing the death sentence which the Lord had already pronounced against this king and his people.

### **F. Separation from Saul (1 Sam 15:34-35).**

After the episode at Gilgal both Samuel and Saul returned to their respective homes at Ramah and Gibeah. Samuel did not see Saul again in his advisory capacity until the day he died. During Samuel's last days he grieved over Saul. Yahweh also "*regretted that he had made Saul king*," i.e., Yahweh grieved over the tragic fall of Saul as well.



## **SAUL'S ANOINTED RIVAL**

### **1 Samuel 16:1-23**

The text does not indicate how many people knew that Saul had been rejected as king. Perhaps the matter was private, just between Samuel and Saul. When Samuel no longer appeared at the royal court, the people became uneasy. They must have suspected that all was not well between the prophet and the king.

#### **A. Samuel's Trip to Bethlehem (1 Sam 16:1-5).**

Samuel's continued mourning over the downfall of Saul was deemed inappropriate because *Yahweh* had rejected him. The prophet was commanded to take his horn of oil to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem. *Yahweh* had selected a new *king* (not *prince* as in 9:16) from among the sons of Jesse. Samuel feared for his life, and for the life of anyone he might anoint. Furthermore, anointing a new king might trigger a civil war. These considerations explain Samuel's reticence to carry out his instructions (16:1-2a).

*Yahweh* directed Samuel to take with him a heifer to use as a sacrificial animal in Bethlehem. The animal was not a subterfuge, but a means of verifying his sacrificial intentions should he be challenged by Saul's agents. Jesse's family was to be invited to the sacrifice. At that time God would show Samuel what he should do. To anyone who inquired about his trip, Samuel should tell the truth, but not the whole truth. He should tell them he had come to sacrifice. Withholding the whole truth from those who have no right to know it is not unethical (16:2b-3).

So Samuel went to Bethlehem. The distance he traveled according to commentators ranges from 10 to 25 miles depending on which of four locations is identified as the home of Samuel. Since it was unusual for the prophet to be in their area, the elders feared the worst. They undoubtedly knew of the rift between the prophet and the king, and they did not wish to get involved. Samuel indicated that he had come in peace to offer a sacrifice.<sup>18</sup> He told the elders to consecrate themselves for the service. He specifically invited Jesse and his sons (16:4-5).

### **B. David's Anointing (1 Sam 16:6-13).**

Apparently after the public sacrifice, Samuel retired to the house of Jesse to partake of the sacrificial meal. As each of Jesse's sons entered the room for the sacrificial meal, Samuel sized them up. When he saw Jesse's firstborn Eliab he thought surely this was "*Yahweh's anointed*."<sup>19</sup> Yahweh, however, told the prophet not to look on the outward appearance. Yahweh looks on the heart (16:6-7).

All seven of Jesse's sons passed before Samuel but in each case Yahweh rejected the candidate. Through inquiry Samuel learned of an eighth son who had been left to tend the sheep. Samuel directed Jesse to send for his youngest son. The family would not sit down to eat of the fellowship meal until David had been brought in (16:8-9).

David finally arrived. He made a pleasing appearance. He was "*ruddy*,"<sup>20</sup> i.e., with reddish tint of hair and even skin. He had beautiful eyes and handsome features. He had an even more beautiful heart. Samuel was told to anoint this son. This he did "*in the midst of his brothers*." From that day forward the Spirit of Yahweh rushed upon David. After the anointing Samuel departed for Ramah. The next time he would see David, the young man would be in flight from Saul (16:12-13).

### **C. Saul's Deterioration (1 Sam 16:14-23).**

The same equipping Spirit which came upon David, left Saul. He no longer had the resources to administer the kingdom. His own mental health deteriorated. An evil spirit from Yahweh, i.e., permitted by Yahweh, terrorized the man. This may have been a demonic spirit which Yahweh permitted to invade the mind of the king. On the other hand, the evil spirit may have been a psychological state sent on Saul as a divine judgment (16:14).<sup>21</sup>

Saul's servants suggested that soothing music might help alleviate the panic caused by the evil spirit. So Saul authorized his servants to seek out a skilled harp player. Someone immediately thought of David who had a reputation as a skilled musician. David also possessed all the other attributes which Saul prized in his courtiers. He was prudent in speech, handsome, a warrior and "*a mighty man of valor*," i.e., he was from a family of standing (cf. 1 Sam 9:1). By slaying ferocious

wild animals (cf. 17:34-35) David probably got the reputation of being a warrior (16:15-18).

So Saul sent a draft notice to Jesse demanding that David be sent to the royal court. Jesse complied with the king's demand. Along with David Jesse sent a donkey loaded down with gifts for the king (16:19-20).

David began to attend Saul, and the king developed a special affection for him. Eventually David was given the high honor of being named armorbearer to the king. Saul sent a message to Jesse indicating that David would become part of his permanent staff (16:21-22).

David's main function during this period was to play his harp whenever Saul was troubled by the evil spirit. This procedure worked well, for Saul would be refreshed, and the evil spirit would temporarily depart from him (16:23).

## **SAUL'S FALTERING LEADERSHIP**

### **1 Samuel 17:1-58**

An invasion by the Philistines demonstrated that Saul was faltering in his leadership. The Philistines brought with them a giant who single-handedly intimidated the entire army of Israel including King Saul. On the other hand, the Philistine-Israelite standoff in the valley of Elah was David's first opportunity to publicly demonstrate his courage and commitment to Yahweh.

#### **A. The Challenge (1 Sam 17:1-11).**

Periodically the Philistines invaded the territory of Israel. Chapter 17 reports one occasion when they penetrated as far as Socoh, about fourteen miles west of Bethlehem. They camped at Ephes-dammim in the vicinity of Socoh. Saul countered by calling up the army. The Israelites camped on a height overlooking a ravine (the valley of Elah) to block any further advance by the enemy. On the elevation across the valley the Philistines pitched their camp (17:1-3).

Each day a "*champion*" named Goliath would come forth from the Philistine camp to taunt the Israelites. His size was intimidating: six cubits and a span (over nine feet tall).<sup>22</sup> Goliath was a descendant of the tall Anakim race, the remnants of which had settled in the

Philistine plain after the Israelite invasion under Joshua (Josh 11:22). He wore a helmet and shin guards of bronze. His body armor weighed five thousand shekels (125 lbs.). He was armed both with a bronze javelin thrown over his shoulder and a spear. The shaft of that spear was as thick as a weaver's beam (part of a large loom), its head weighed six hundred shekels of iron (15 lbs.). As if that were not enough, the warrior had a shield bearer who walked before him (17:4-7).

When the Israelites drew up in battle formation, Goliath would propose that single combat replace fighting between armies. If some Israelite warrior could kill Goliath, the Philistines agreed to become servants of the Israelites. The opposite would be true if the Philistine should prevail. This daily winner-take-all challenge dismayed and intimidated Saul and all Israel. For forty days the daily challenge continued. Neither army moved during that period (17:8-11).

### **B. The Mission (1 Sam 17:12-19).**

The three older sons of Jesse were part of Saul's army. Evidently David was no longer serving in Saul's court. As the youngest member of the family, David's job was to carry supplies to his brothers in the field. Apparently families were expected to supply provisions to their men in the field. During the standoff at the valley of Elah, Jesse dispatched David with food for his brothers and their commander. He was to check on the welfare of his brothers and bring back "*their pledge*," i.e., some token that would confirm the delivery of the food and the well-being of the brothers (17:12-19).

### **C. The Discussion (1 Sam 17:20-30).**

As David approached the perimeter of the Israelite camp the troops were moving into battle positions shouting the battle cry as they did. The Philistine army across the valley was going through the same exercise. David left his supplies with the quartermaster corps and hastened to the battle line to greet his brothers. While he was there Goliath made his daily appearance. Again the men of Israel "*fled*" from him, i.e., they refused to move forward. David heard the troops talking among themselves of the tremendous rewards which Saul would give to any man who would kill Goliath. The king would

enrich that man, give his daughter to him in marriage, and exempt his father's house from taxation (17:20-25).

David could not believe that no one would take up the challenge of this “*uncircumcised Philistine*.” He grew increasingly interested in the promised reward which he overheard the troops discussing. By questioning several men, David verified the truth of the reward rumor. When Eliab, David's oldest brother, heard these discussions, his anger burned against David. He wrongly rebuked David for abandoning his responsibilities of tending a small flock of sheep. He falsely accused David of having a perverse interest in watching the battle which was about to take place. David's response is typical of younger brothers throughout the centuries: “*Was it not just a question?*” David turned away from Eliab and began to question other men at the front (17:26-30).

#### **D. The Preparation (1 Sam 17:31-40).**

Saul soon heard about the brash young man who showed no fear of the Philistine. David lost none of his confidence in the presence of the king. He even volunteered to fight Goliath. Saul scoffed at this suggestion. Goliath had been trained as a warrior; David was but a youth. David, however, defended his fighting credentials. He had slain a lion and a bear in defense of his sheep. Goliath had taunted the armies of the living God. David therefore was confident that Yahweh would deliver him from the hand of the Philistine just as he had delivered him earlier from the paw of the lion and bear. Saul was convinced. He prayed Yahweh's blessing upon his efforts (17:31-37).

Saul tried to clothe David in his personal armor.<sup>23</sup> David tried on the armor, but felt so uncomfortable that he removed it. Since he had never “*proved*” or “*tested*” this armor in battle, he felt it would be more of a hindrance than a help. Rather he took his shepherd's stick (to help him negotiate his way down the steep ravine) and his sling.<sup>24</sup> As he moved toward Goliath he paused at a wadi (dry stream bed) in the valley and picked up five smooth stones (17:38-40).

#### **E. The Victory (1 Sam 17:41-53).**

Goliath came out to meet his challenger. When he saw that he was a youth and that he had no armor or sword, Goliath cursed David in the names of his gods. He considered it a personal insult that the

Israelites would send an unworthy opponent to fight him. Goliath mocked David's boyish appearance. He tried to verbally intimidate David by threatening to give his flesh to the birds and beasts (17:41-44).

David continued to advance toward Goliath. The giant had never faced such bravado before. David employed his own version of psychological warfare. *"You come at me with a sword, spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of Yahweh of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. This day Yahweh will deliver you into my hands."* David went on to boast that he would decapitate Goliath and give the bodies of the Philistines to the birds and beasts. Through this victory all the earth would know that there was a God in Israel. Those present on the battlefield would come to know that Yahweh does not deliver by sword or spear. *"The battle is Yahweh's, and he will give you into our hands"* (17:45-47).

As Goliath rose and moved ponderously toward him, David began to run right at him. As he did so he loaded his sling and let fly a missile. The stone struck the one place where the giant had no armor. Goliath fell stunned to the ground. David ran forward, took the giant's own sword,<sup>25</sup> slew him, and cut off his head (17:48-51a).

When the Philistines saw that their champion had fallen, they broke ranks and fled. Saul's army pursued them to the very gates of their cities, about seven miles from the valley of Elah. As they returned to their own borders, the Israelites plundered the Philistine camps (17:51b-53).

### **F. The Epilogue (1 Sam 17:54-58).**

Commentators are perplexed about the conversation between Saul and Abner which took place as David was going out to face the Philistine. In the light of the fact that David had served for a time in Saul's court, that Saul loved him, and had even made him the royal armor-bearer, how could it be that neither he nor Abner recognized David? Various solutions have been offered. First, David may have matured considerably during his absence from the court. Second, in his disturbed state Saul may have paid little attention to the features of David as he played his harp. Third, the account of David serving in Saul's court may be chronologically later than the Goliath episode.

Actually the text does not say that Abner and Saul did not recognize David. The identity of David's father is the point at issue. This information would be necessary if Saul were to fulfill his pledge to make the father's house free of tax obligations. When David returned from killing Goliath, Abner brought him before Saul. David still had the Philistine's head in his hand. The king asked David about his father, and David proudly identified Jesse the Bethlehemite as his father (17:55-58).

David took Goliath's head and showed it to the Jebusites and Israelites who jointly occupied Jerusalem<sup>26</sup> as a testimony to the greatness of Israel's God. David put Goliath's weapons in his own tent. Later, however, the sword was deposited in the tabernacle (17:54; cf. 1 Sam 21:9).

## ENDNOTES

1. Josephus (*Ant.* 6:14,9) states that Saul reigned eighteen years before Samuel's death, and twenty-two years afterward, a total of forty years. Paul assigned forty years to the reign of Saul (Acts 13:21), but he may have been including the reign of Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, in this figure.

2. The word commonly translated "*garrison*" (13:3) may also mean resident administrator, or even monument. Whatever it was that Jonathan attacked at Geba the Philistines interpreted his action as rebellion against Philistine hegemony.

3. Some manuscripts give the number of chariots here as 3,000. This would correlate better with the 6,000 "*horsemen*," i.e., charioteers. Two-man chariots are well known in Egypt.

4. The six hundred who remained were of "*the people*" who had assembled at Gilgal at Saul's direction (cf. v. 4). Presumably the three thousand men of Israel whom Saul had chosen (v. 2) were still intact.

5. The slaughter took place in a space equal to about half the distance across an acre field, or 15-20 yards. See Klein, *1 Samuel*, p. 137.

6. In a holy war Israel takes vengeance on their (and Yahweh's) enemies. See Josh 10:13.

7. Others understand the text to say that the troops ate *upon* the blood, i.e., upon bloody ground.

8. The Urim and Thummim were placed in or on the breastpiece of the high priest (Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8). Apparently the one stone(?) represented a positive answer, the other a negative. In a context of judgment, Urim may have indicted "guilty" while Thummim indicated "not guilty."

**9.** Some point to the parallel of Jephthah's daughter (Judg 11:36) who also seemed willing to accept the death sentence resulting from a foolish vow made by her father.

**10.** The text says that the troops "redeemed" (*padah*) Jonathan. This may mean they rescued him by insisting on his release. On the other hand, if the word "redeem" is used in its legal sense some price may have been paid for Jonathan's redemption, either money (Exod 21:30; Num 3:46-51), or an animal substitute (Exod 13:13,15; 34:20). Some modern writers have even proposed that another man died in the place of Jonathan.

**11.** Saul had at least one other wife or concubine, Rizpah (2 Sam 3:7; 21:1-14).

**12.** Elsewhere Ishvi is known as Ish-bosheth (Eshbaal). See 1 Chr 9:49; 2 Sam 2-4. Saul also had a son named Abinadab who probably was born to another wife (1 Sam 31:2; 1 Chr 9:49).

**13.** The "uncle" in 14:50 could have been either Ner or Abner as its antecedent. Whether Abner was Saul's uncle or cousin is unclear. Supporting the first interpretation are 1 Chr 8:33 and 9:39. According to this interpretation Ner has been omitted between Kish and Abiel in 1 Sam 9:1. The second view sees Ner and Kish as brothers, sons of Abiel (1 Chr 9:36). This interpretation requires that one emend the word "son" to "sons" in 1 Sam 14:51.

**14.** The Amalekites had opposed Israel's entrance into Canaan (Num 14:25). They had been implacable enemies during the period of the Judges (Judg 3:13; 6:3). More recently they had been guilty of numerous atrocities (1 Sam 15:33).

**15.** Here again skepticism regarding these large numbers has caused some scholars to propose that the word "thousand" should be understood as a military unit of undetermined size. In this case, Israel would have furnished 200 such units, and Judah ten.

**16.** Why Saul spared Agag is not clear. He may have wished to use him as a trophy of war, or negotiate some kind of deal with him. On the other hand he may have avoided slaying a fellow king out of superstition that a similar fate would befall him.

**17.** Divination is the use of some external object in an attempt to probe the future. It is a practice consistently condemned in Scripture. E.g., Deut 18:10; 2 Kgs 17:17; Jer 14:14; Ezek 13:6 etc.

**18.** Since no central sanctuary existed in these days, public sacrificial services appear to have been conducted in various places.

**19.** Klein (1 Samuel, p. 160) has called attention to the fact that of thirty-four times in which the term "anointed" is used of a royal person, it always appears with the name Yahweh, or a possessive pronoun referring to him.

**20.** The same adjective is used of Esau in Gen 25:25.

**21.** God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem (Judg 9:23). He put a lying spirit into the mouth of the false prophets in the days of Ahab (1 Kgs 22:19-22).



**22.** The LXX reads “four cubits and a span” which would make Goliath 6'9" tall.

**23.** Whether the armor and sword David received were Saul's is not clear. The text may simply be saying that Saul supplied David with his garments (uniform?) and armor.

**24.** A slingstone was held in a pouch with cords attached at opposite ends. The sling was whirled over the head until one end was suddenly released. In the hands of one who was proficient, the sling was a deadly weapon (cf. Judg 20:14-16). Ancient armies had units which specialized in use of the sling.

**25.** The text is not clear whether David used his own sword or the sword of the giant to decapitate him. The result was the same in either case.

**26.** Israelites took up residence in Jerusalem during the days of the conquest under Joshua (Josh 15:63). The tribe of Judah was also able to conquer at least a part of Jerusalem (Judg 1:8). The fortress on Mt. Zion, however, remained in the hands of the Jebusites until it was conquered by David (2 Sam 5:6). It is possible that the text is simply saying that the trophy of Goliath's head eventually came to reside in Jerusalem just as the remains of Saul were moved from Jabesh to the tomb of Kish in Benjamin (2 Sam 21:12-14).

