

CHAPTER SEVEN

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 Thummim¹—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*").² Some twenty years earlier the Israelites had done the same thing to the cities of this region (cf. Num 21:1-3).³

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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷

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

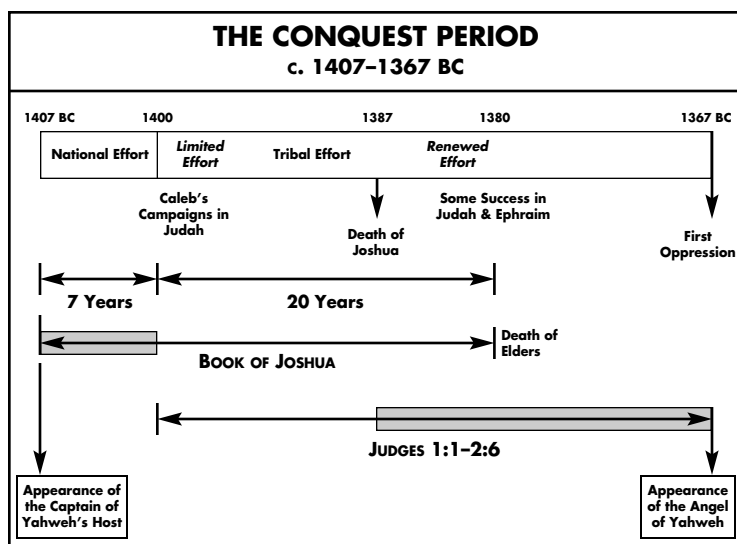
The “angel” did not introduce his speech with a messenger formula (“*thus says Yahweh*”) because the “angel” is Yahweh. What he said is something that only Yahweh could say. The message began with a reminder of three things. First, the “angel” reminded Israel of his gracious acts, how he had brought 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).⁸

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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).¹² 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).¹³

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

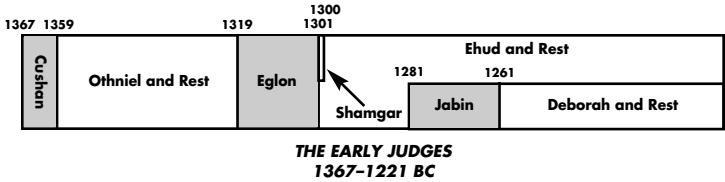
A Strange Salvation Judges 3:5-5:31

The focus of Judges 3-16 is on the glory of God's salvation.¹ 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.”² “*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.*”³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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).⁷

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.⁸ 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)⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.

CHAPTER NINE

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.¹

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.² 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.³ 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 threshing floor. 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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 Ophrah⁶ 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.⁷ 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.

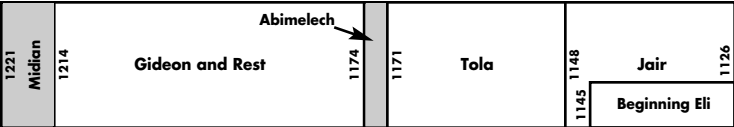
The last days of Gideon were disappointing. His gold shekels were "*fashioned into an ephod.*" An ephod was the upper garment worn by the high priest at the Tabernacle. The ephod described in Exodus 28 and 39 was very ornate and costly. It was woven with gold thread and contained numerous jewels. To 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.⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.

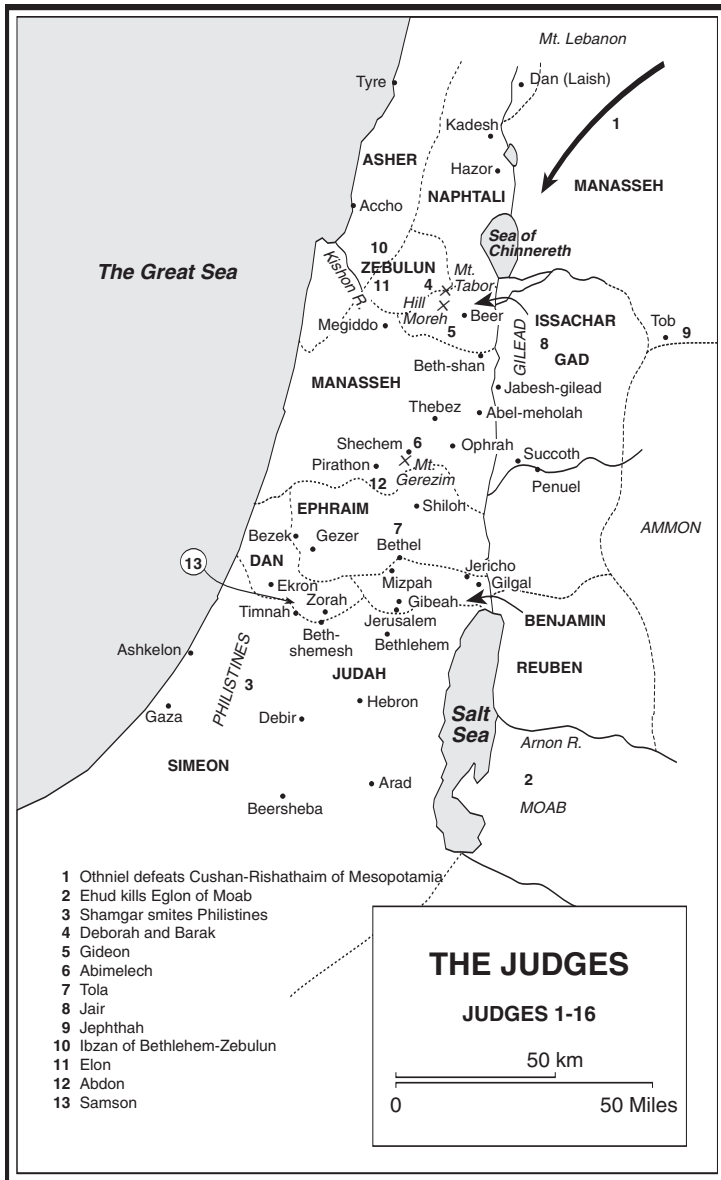
5. The question of the men of Succoth, “*Are their hands in your hands?*” may be asking Gideon to show them the severed hands of the two Midianite chieftains.

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

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 fable¹ 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).²

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.³

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")⁴ 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.⁵ 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."*⁶ 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).⁷

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 Yah-weh*") 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 Chemosh⁸ 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.⁹ 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 commemorate¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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

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.	1105	Samson	1085	Abdon	1081	Samuel	1043
	Eli									

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.¹

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!²

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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶ 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 Dagon⁷ 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.