

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
THE OLD TESTAMENT



RIGHT
IN THEIR
OWN EYES

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
JUDGES

GEORGE M. SCHWAB

**The Gospel According to
the Old Testament**



A series of studies on the lives
of Old Testament characters, written for
laypeople and pastors, and designed to
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,
and preaching of the Old Testament

TREMPER LONGMAN III

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RIGHT
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OWN EYES

The Gospel According to

the Book of Judges

George M. Schwab


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This book is dedicated to Mary, the Achsah of my life.

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FOREWORD



*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*
—Augustine

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

“In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn’t understand. But Moses, the prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out, but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared

in advance in the Old Testament, not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah but by means of the stories of all the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament Series is committed to the proposition that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God, and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. The individual books of the Old Testament exhibit diverse genres, styles, and individual theologies, but tying them all together is the constant foreshadowing of, and pointing forward to, Christ. Believing in the fundamentally Christocentric nature of the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, we offer this series of studies in the Old Testament with the following aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament
- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

To this end, the volumes in this series are written for pastors and laypeople, not scholars.

While such a series could take a number of different shapes, we have decided, in most cases, to focus individual volumes on Old Testament figures—people—rather than books or themes. Some books, of course, will receive major attention in connection with their authors or main characters (e.g., Daniel and Isaiah). Also, certain themes will be emphasized in connection with particular figures.

It is our hope and prayer that this series will revive interest in and study of the Old Testament as readers recognize that the Old Testament points forward to Jesus Christ.

TREMPER LONGMAN III

J. ALAN GROVES

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INTRODUCTION



The book of Judges is about God’s forging for himself a community of worshipers in a time when all people “did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 21:25). This indictment was not about the pagan nations surrounding Israel—it was about Israel itself. Can it be said that we live in such an age today? Think of how the gospel falls on deaf ears around the world; think of all the fallen church leaders you hear about and have personally encountered. How can we believe that God sends his Spirit today and is working out his purposes through us? Think of your own heart—the lust and greed and pride that is there under the surface, ready to undercut your witness and cripple your service to God. Judges explores this issue and puts on display how it is that vain and wayward people, who are endowed with the Spirit, yet accomplish the mission God gives them.

Perhaps the best picture of this phenomenon in Judges is seen in the story of Samson and the lion, found in Judges 14:5–9. Here the Spirit comes upon Samson, for the very first time, forcibly. Samson’s motive is dubious—to marry a Philistine woman. She was, literally, “right in his eyes” (14:7). This phrase connects Samson with the end of Judges, which says that everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Samson signifies all Israel, doing whatever he pleased.

Along the way, he met a roaring lion and the Spirit came upon him in power, enabling him to easily rip the lion apart. (This is odd. Usually the Spirit empowers judges to defeat great armies and to deliver Israel. Why would the Spirit waste his power on something so relatively insignificant? For the answer, stay tuned.) Later, Samson found a swarm of bees in the lion’s carcass, and from its body he scraped honey that pleased him and his parents.

The word translated “carcass” in verse 8 is found in this form elsewhere only in Proverbs and in prophecy—speaking of the fall of nations or the

wicked: “Damascus shall be a *ruin*” (Isa. 17:1). The word always describes the fallen ruin of a nation or of the wicked, and once (Ezek. 32), the fallen nation is called a *lion* of nations. The word *nations* in Ezekiel is *goyim*, which sounds like the rare word in verse 9, glossed the “body” or “carcass” of the lion. So the dead lion is described in language that evokes the wicked, the nations destined for judgment, the heathen Gentiles who are objects of God’s wrath. (For you scholars, see Psalm 110:6 in Hebrew for the same wordplay.)

Consider this also: the word translated “swarm” of bees isn’t the usual word for *swarm*, but rather ‘*edah*, which elsewhere always refers to people. It is translated “assembly,” as in the “assembly of Israel,” or “congregation.” Remember that the Promised Land is the land flowing with milk and *honey*; honey is a divine blessing on the community.

Verse 9 says that Samson “scraped” the honey, using the verb *radah*. Elsewhere, this word always means “to rule, to have dominion,” as in Genesis 1:26: “let them have dominion” over the animals. Samson *scraped* the honey from the carcass? Or Samson *subdued* and *had dominion* over the honey, once he had vanquished the lion. After all, how did Samson get at the honey? Did he borrow netting? He apparently didn’t get stung—he dominated the bees.

So what is the image here? The lion’s carcass invokes the nations that are judged by God and fallen to ruin. The beehive represents the community of faith who dwell within the context of seemingly powerful nations—nations that nevertheless cannot stand before one Spirit-empowered man whom God has set apart as consecrated. Samson, as you know, was consecrated from birth; that’s why he never cut his hair. He was a Nazirite (Judg. 13:5). (*Samson* means “little sun,” or “one who shines like the sun.” When the Spirit flared up, ropes burned off him.) Remember the book of Daniel, and how the aggressive pagan nations that wear out the saints are represented in visions as beasts. Babylon is a lion in Daniel’s vision of chapter 7. And one flesh-and-blood example of persecution in Daniel is a literal lions’ den. Satan prowls around like a lion, seeking someone to devour.

Jesus Christ is the Nazarene, set apart by God, possessing the Spirit without measure, who overthrows the principalities and powers that threaten to devour the congregation of the saints. Under his sovereign rule, the church thrives in the midst of a hostile world and produces good fruit, sweet like

honey, to God.

Samson accomplished the mission that God had planned for him from before his birth. And yet, of all the judges, Samson is the most flawed. He personifies wayward Israel, everyone doing what is right in his own eyes. And in this respect, Samson represents the spiritual reality that you and I experience. What spiritual reality? Only this: that God sends his Spirit into our hearts in such a way that, although we continue to be wayward, and we fail, and we are foolish, and we sleep with the enemy (as Samson literally did), even so God through his Spirit *does accomplish his mission through us*. Unlike Samson, we possess the Spirit our entire lives, and a transformation of character takes place over time as we become more Christlike. (If we don't, there are consequences. Look at how Samson ended up because he despised his calling to be holy.) But meanwhile, we grow in faith and repentance, and God ensures that the mission of the gospel goes forth through us, despite our failings.

All the judges were flawed characters, and these flaws are highlighted in the text, yet every one of them accomplished the mission that God gave them through the Spirit—to save the people of Israel from the consequences of their sin. God was forging a worshiping community in the midst of the nations, and the judges had their role to play in that effort. Even so, today, God will take you, with all your weaknesses, and will accomplish his saving purposes through you. The kingdom will be built. In the words of the apostle Paul:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor. 4:7–9)

Although we sin and fail, God uses us to advance his kingdom. How then shall we live? Paul says that he forgets what lies behind and presses forward to fulfill God's calling, because our commonwealth is in heaven.

And it is from there that we await a Savior, who is the Lord, who will return and change us to be like him. On the last day, we will shine like stars, radiating holy fire like Samsons. This ultimate meaning of Judges will be seen when Jesus does away with all his enemies, and all will be golden honey

for us. And while we await that day, we are fiery lights on a hill, burning lampstands not hidden. The light is our good works and the gospel we profess, which illumines the world, as we produce something sweet. It is the Spirit of God who accomplishes this mission through us. So take heart and press on, forgetting what lies behind.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. The book of Judges shows that God will accomplish his purposes through those with his Spirit. To what ministry has he called you? How has the ministry gone forth despite your sin, or the sin of others?
2. Over what spheres has God given you dominion? How are you doing in those areas? Where do you need improvement?
3. What fruit has sharing your faith with others produced? What about you hinders this mission? What do you plan to do to correct that hindrance?
4. The world cannot stand up to Jesus. Why then are you so shy to go forward in faith?
5. What causes doubts in you? How does the image of Samson and the lion help answer those doubts?

ABBREVIATIONS



BHS Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia

BR Bible Review

CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature

JBQ Jewish Biblical Quarterly

JETS Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society

JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

KJV King James Version

NASB New American Standard Bible

NIV New International Version

NKJV New King James Version

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

RSV Revised Standard Version

SJOT Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament

VT Vetus Testamentum

WTJ Westminster Theological Journal

ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

PART ONE

RIGHT READING



Part 1 of this book treats issues that arise from the fact that *Judges*—a literary work—touches upon real and verifiable history. We will try to provide a reasonable setting for the judges themselves, which inevitably raises matters of interpretation. Part 1 will thus explore how *Judges* was formed and shaped over time, how it wants to be interpreted, and what principles should guide Christians in that effort.

1

JUGGLING JUDGES

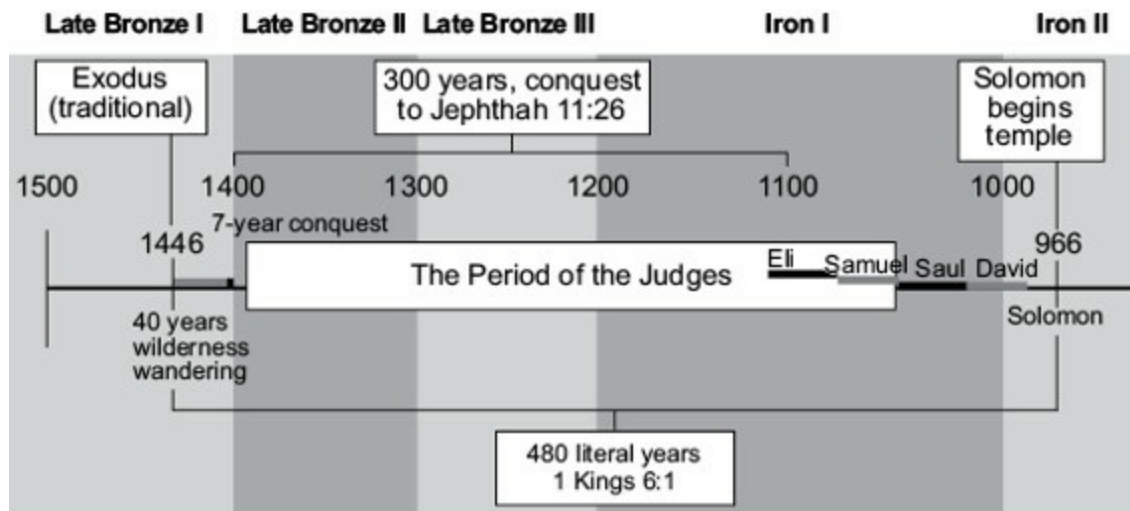


Scholars disagree about how and when various biblical events occurred, such as the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan. The traditional view places the exodus at the mid-fifteenth century, 1446 B.C. This was followed by forty years of wandering and then seven years of conquest, taking us up to the year 1400 B.C. It is at this time that the material culture of Palestine changed from Late Bronze I to Late Bronze II.

WHEN THE JUDGES JUDGED

Solomon began construction of Yahweh's temple in the year 966 B.C. According to 1 Kings 6:1, this was 480 years after the exodus. This exactly fits with the traditional date ($1446 - 966 = 480$). The Merneptah Stele dates to 1230 B.C. and speaks of Israel as a major player in the region. The main wave of Philistines entered Canaan around 1200 B.C., but this group is not an issue in Judges until the time of Samson. Jephthah claimed that he lived three hundred years after the conquest (Judg. 11:26). Solomon began his work in his fourth year. Go back a generation (or forty years) for David, another for Saul, and again for Samuel (the last judge) and Eli, and you are close to Jephthah's time. So by this analysis, the period of the judges was Late Bronze II until Iron I, about 1400–1100 B.C. A little later and we encroach upon the era of 1 Samuel. Of course, if one opted for an exodus late date, this period would be much more compressed. The late-date view reads Jephthah's 300 years as spurious and the 480-year span as a conventionalized number: 12 multiplied by a stylized 40-year generation. This book does not take issue with the early date. Assuming (for the sake of the argument) literal forty-year spans for Eli, Samuel, Saul, and David, the timeline looks like Figure 1.1.

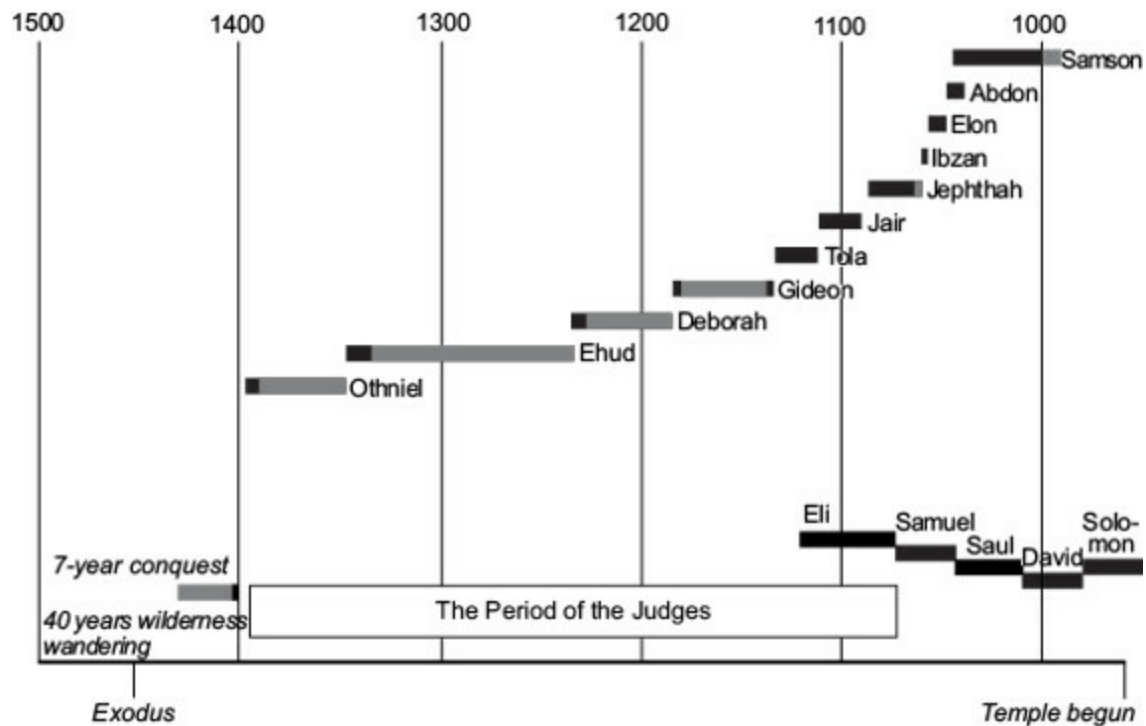
Fig. 1.1. Period Placement



CHRONOLOGY OF THE JUDGES

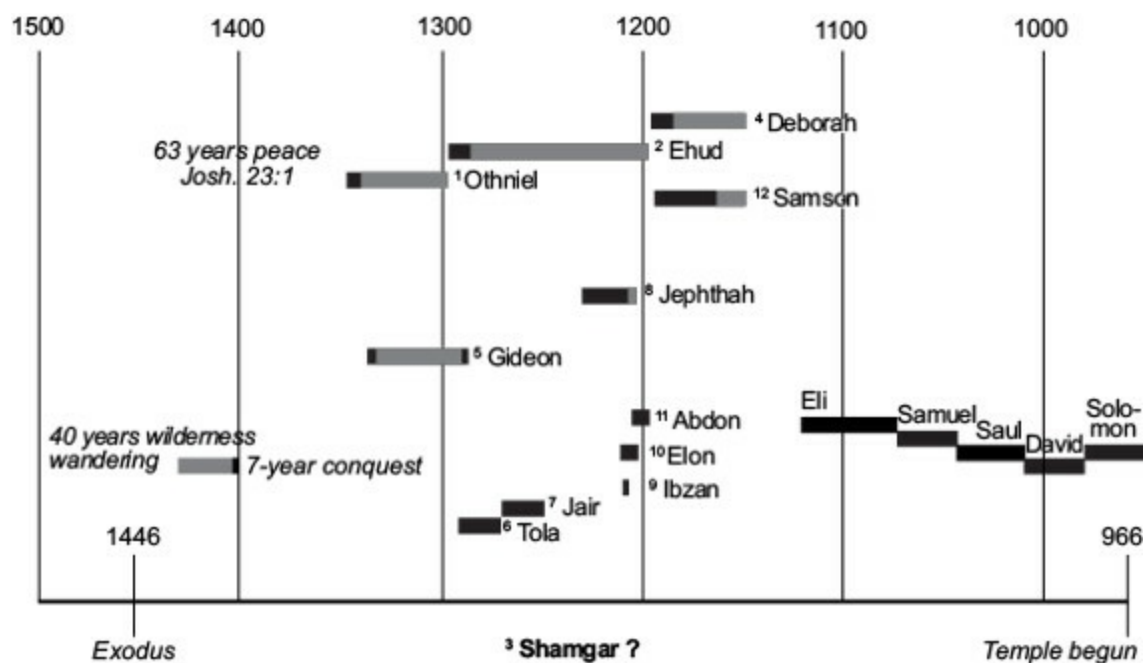
That's the easy part. The hard part is making the tenure of the judges fit into this span of three hundred years plus. The land had peace for forty years after Othniel, the first judge (Judg. 3:11); eighty years after Ehud, the second judge (3:30); another forty after Deborah (5:31); and another forty after Gideon (8:28). With fifty-three years of oppression, this already totals two hundred years. Figure 1.2 is a graph showing them all, and the period of oppression and peace that followed (the bit after Gideon represents Abimelech):

Fig. 1.2. Ordering Ordeal



Well, this is obviously unworkable. Samson is a contemporary of David? Why didn't Samson step up to the plate in the matter of Goliath? And Samuel is supposed to be the last of the judges. By the time one comes to 1 Samuel, this period is supposed to be over; when Saul was anointed as king, the judges were done.

Fig. 1.3. Juggling Judges



So even though the plain reading of the text seems to imply that one judge follows the other in sequence, what “really happened” in history was that the judges overlapped somewhat.

Figure 1.3 (preceding page) is based largely on a recent *JETS* article by Robert Chisholm¹ (Dallas Theological Seminary). The numbers represent the order in which each judge is found in the book of Judges. Chisholm argues that after Deborah, the history rewinds back to the beginning, so that Othniel (#1) parallels Gideon (#5) in history, and at the other end, Deborah is contemporaneous with Samson. In this reading, Jephthah’s words about three hundred years are not to be taken at face value. According to this view, the ordering of the judges in the book should be taken as two parallel sequences.

I prefer to: (1) place Othniel’s judgeship much closer to the conquest (he was a contemporary of Caleb), (2) leave open at least the possibility that Deborah judged during the eclipse of 1131 B.C. (see Judg. 5:20), and (3) allow for Jephthah’s time reference to be factual. Keep in mind also that by Gideon’s time, the exodus was a distant memory (6:13), but Chisholm has Gideon as contemporaneous with Othniel, a participant in the conquest.

The impression Judges gives to the reader is that the judges ruled over all Israel. But once we recognize that the judgeships overlap, their jurisdiction must then have been limited. For example, according to the chart above, during the eighty years of peace that followed Ehud, Jephthah fought the Ammonites and the Ephraimites. During Deborah’s peace, Samson fought Philistine tyranny. One must imagine that Samson’s activities were limited to the southern end of Israel, Deborah’s to the northern. When “the land” or “Israel” is mentioned, the reader should be aware that a localized area might have been the historical situation.

MORE DISCHRONOLOGIZATION

The last five chapters of the book treat two stories. But when did they take place? In Judges 18:30, the idolatrous Levite is named as the grandson of Moses. In Judges 20:28, another priest, Phinehas, is identified as Aaron’s grandson. Both of these stories are then contemporaneous with Othniel, or even earlier. Phinehas actually took part in the wilderness wandering, acting much the same then as in Judges (Num. 25:7–11). So the last two events of Judges want to be read as taking place right at the start of the period.²

Consider the opening chapters. Joshua is dead and gone at first (Judg. 1:1). But Judges 1:10–19 is a story taken right out of the middle of the book of Joshua (15:15–19). There, of course, Joshua is alive. But after that the settlement is described, with which God is not pleased (i.e., not under Joshua’s leadership)—and Joshua is again quite passé. But he pops up again in Judges 2:6–10, alive and kicking. After that, he’s dead again.

The individual stories in Judges are loosely connected to the sequence of events in history. History is one dimension of the book. But there are other concerns that organize the book and sometimes reorder the sequencing. These will be discussed in the following chapters.

THE TWELVE JUDGES

There are twelve judges. Each one is associated with a different tribe of Israel. The exception is the tribe of Levi, which the last five chapters are about. They can be organized according to the table on the next page.

	Judge	Tribe	Oppression and Duration
1	Othniel	Judah	8+40
2	Ehud	Benjamin	18+80
3	Shamgar	Simeon(?)	—
4	Deborah/Barak	Naphtali	20+40
5	Gideon	Manasseh	7+40
6	Tola	Issachar	23
7	Jair	Gad	22
8	Jephthah	Reuben	18+6
9	Ibzan	Asher	7
10	Elon	Zebulun	10
11	Abdon	Ephraim	8
12	Samson	Dan	40+20

To anyone familiar with tribal Israel, one alternative to a strict chronological ordering is immediately apparent: some are grouped geographically. The first three are southern; in fact, Simeon lies in the heart of Judah. They are brothers (by Leah), and thought of as acting as a unit in

Judges 1:3. The next three are also geographically close, Manasseh bordering the other two. Gad and Reuben form a unit east of the Jordan. Asher and Zebulun share a border. So another level of order we discover with the judges is geographical. Jay Williams³ arranged them in a circle, which reveals other associations. For example, the two half-tribes of Joseph (Manasseh and Ephraim) are diametrically opposite. If one starts with Samson in such an unbroken circle and works one's way around, the first half are the judges associated with multiples of 40 in their peacetime numbers (20, 40, 80), while the second half are not this way. Many such associations affect how the story is told—it is not rigorously chronological. For example, the Spirit comes upon four judges—one from each quadrant. Of course, this is not how a modern-day history book would read. Thus, one should not read Judges as if it were merely a chronicle of historical facts.

But the real answer to why the book does not follow a purely historical sequence is found in its various interests, which are expressed for us in a highly literary and artistic form. It was theologically important to begin with Othniel; it was important to have Ehud next. The two stories at the end need to be at the end because of what the book wants to convey to you, the reader, beyond simply “what happened.”

The very fact that exactly twelve judges are on display already reveals an agenda. These judges were picked partially because they represent the twelve tribes, and not necessarily in every case because they were historically important. Perhaps some of the minor judges, such as Elon (who gets two verses), are there to help round out the desired number twelve. How far does this concept go? In what other ways are the stories formatted by other considerations? To these matters we now turn.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. The book of Judges rearranged historical sequences for various reasons. Do you think this enhances the book or diminishes it? Now that you know this, what are your expectations when reading it?
2. Much in the story of Samson and the lion pointed beyond itself to spiritual truths. Why is this preferable to simply telling “what happened”?
3. Do you hunger and thirst for reasons that explain why the material is thus rearranged? Try to express the rearrangement issue in your own words.

2

SIGNIFICATIVE STYLIZATION



We have seen that the book of Judges is complex in its organization. Twelve leaders are treated from the twelve tribes. They are loosely arranged by chronology, but also by geography. Events that historically happened at the beginning of the period are placed at the end. Sometimes judgeships overlapped, and despite their limited jurisdiction the reader is left with the impression that judges ruled over all Israel.

What other techniques did the author use to help highlight the point he was making? How has the record been transformed from bare fact to purposeful high art? Below are a number of observations that help characterize Judges as a theology book using stylized history as illustration.

NAMES AND TIMES

Sometimes in Judges one encounters a personality whose name seems to be symbolic. For example, Judge Othniel's opponent was Cushan-rishathaim (Judg. 3:8). *Rishathaim* literally means "double-evil one." Was this what people called him to his face? Was it an Israelite smear? Or is it a symbolic epithet of the author's design?

Another curious name is *Eglon*, king of Moab (3:12). *Eglon* means "little calf" and is feminine. The language of his assassination borrows many terms from ritual sacrifice, symbolically treating the king as a slaughtered beast. His name is part of that literary pattern. Did the author choose that appellation to help make his point? Gideon pursued to their death two men, whose names mean "sacrificial victim" and "protection refused" (8:5), who are thereby "type-cast in the role of the hunted."¹

Of course, it is very possible that these were their real names. *Deborah* is known from the period, as is *Barak*, *Jael*, and *Shamgar*. "Both in the Bible

and everywhere else these names disappear after the tenth century B.C.”² Such names show that Judges is *not* a collection of fictional stories invented much later in time. But sometimes, the names’ meanings suggest a deeper intent than simply reciting facts. Note the playful pun in 5:12, “Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake! Awake! *Deber* a song!” The author is having fun with her name.

A good example of a name with possible theological significance is Micah’s. When the reader first meets him, his name is Hebrew is *Mikayahu*, i.e., “Who is like Yahweh.” But once he has made illegal religious items in Judges 17:5, his name changes to *Mikah*. *Yahweh* has been subtracted from his name by the author. The name change signifies the author’s attitude toward Micah: the true worship of Yahweh was nullified by his counterfeit. Obviously, the actual Micah didn’t suffer a name change; this is symbolism. Gideon (whose name means “cutter”) is given a new, theological name (*Jerubbaal*, meaning “he contests Baal”) after he “cuts” down Baal’s altar (6:32). The careful reader should pay attention as well to when a character in Judges is not given a name at all. This omission can also serve a purpose.

Other details may have symbolic value as well. This is particularly true of some time references in Judges, such as 40, twice 40, half 40. Outside Judges there are 40 years in the wilderness, 40 years of Eli, 40 of Saul, 40 of David, and 40 of Solomon. Could some of these 40s be schematic, a numerical representation of an indefinite period? Moses’ life is divided into three 40s: his time in Egypt, Midian, and the wilderness.

In Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, in the chapter on biblical inerrancy, he notes that a big round number such as 8,000 doesn’t have to be understood as *exactly* 8,000, but could be used for 8,001, 8,002 . . . or even 8,242 (Grudem’s actual example). In Grudem’s words, “the limits of truthfulness would depend on the degree of precision implied by the speaker and expected by his original hearers.”³ Grudem relativizes the number to authorial intent and audience expectation. But what if the ancient audience were far more tolerant of numerical inexactitude than we are? How wildly off can an inerrant figure be?

We live in an age of precision. We expect numbers to be as exact as possible. If they are not, today we might call that an error. But even today, sometimes we can make reference to a number that is far off the mark, and

yet conveys something real. A protest march was planned for Washington, D.C., for which it was hoped that a million men would attend. According to the National Park Service, less than half that number attended. Even those who accept the Service's contested figure continue to refer to the event as the "Million Man March." Could something similar be happening with some of the numbers in Judges?

In antiquity, numbers were far less exacting. And sometimes numbers did not convey quantity at all, but were purely symbolic. Jesus said that a man cleansed of a demon who remains unrepentant becomes a haven for "seven other" demons (Matt. 12:45). Did Jesus mean "seven"? Or was his point simply that the reprobate's spiritual state would substantially worsen? No literal amount was meant. Seven is a symbolic number, a rhetorical flourish.

Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C.; Cyrus allowed the Israelites to rebuild in 539 B.C.: a period of forty-seven years. Yet Jeremiah's prophecy predicts seventy years of exile (Jer. 25:11). When Gabriel interpreted this prophecy for Daniel, he made it *more* symbolic, seventy *sevens* of years, which would extend into the far future and the completion of redemption (Dan. 9:24). The 777 years of good Lamech parallels the vengeful seventy sevens of evil Lamech—is it figurative (Gen. 4:24; 5:31)? Genesis 2:4 relates that the heavens and earth were made in one day, right after describing seven. It took over a century for Jonah's prophecy, "Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be no more" (Jonah 3:4), to be fulfilled. Figurative durations should come as no surprise to Christians, who have always known that the "three days and three nights" that Jesus gave us from Jonah and other places (Matt. 12:40) is a *formulaic* way of speaking—literally, he was crucified late Friday afternoon and rose before dawn on Sunday.

So in the book of Judges, the reader should be attuned to some possible reshaping or formatting of the time references. Is the seven years of suffering under the Midianites literal, or symbolic (Judg. 6:1)? Is the 3,000 on Dagon's temple a literal or a symbolic figure (16:27)? Why did the Spirit come upon the judges seven times in the book? Note: the verbs *saved* and *judged* each occur twenty-one times.

DEEPER ANALYSIS

Recognizing techniques of dischronologization, symbolic naming, emblematic numbers, and so on opens up the book for analysis. But more

serious issues are involved in the formatting of the Judges narratives. Recognizing these is essential to understanding the purpose for which the book was written, and the theological agenda of the author. For example, there is a reason that the death scene of the evil king Abimelech (Judg. 9:53–55) reads like Saul’s death scene (1 Sam. 31:4, 9).

Below is an example of how one event was formatted to read like another event, almost as if the same event were repeated twice. Anyone who reads Judges 19–21 will see how parallel it is to Genesis 19. These accounts have been purposely cast to look alike, so that the reader will make the obvious connection between them. Of all the details that the historian might have used, he picked the ones that made the stories parallel. Here are some points of comparison:

	Gen. 19	Judg. 19–21
Two men arrive at the city at night.	1	19:13–15
A sojourner invites them home, urging them from the city square. They eat and drink in his home.	2–3	19:16–21
Base fellows accost the house. The host cries, “Brothers, do not do this evil!” Two women are offered in place of the male guests. The citizens continue to agitate at the door.	4–11	19:22–25
In the morning, there is a lack of response to the call, “Arise! Get going!” A decision is made to destroy the evildoers.	12–17	19:26–20:10
A request is made to limit the extent of reprisal.	18–23	20:11–13
Yahweh orchestrates the ruin of the city. A great cloud of smoke rises up.	24–28	20:14–48
Through wine and dubious means, a people-group is perpetuated despite the destruction.	29–38	21:1–25

Here Israel, and especially the tribe of Judah, renders the judgment that in Genesis the heavenly host does against Sodom. The men of Gibeah behave like Sodomites. The event could have been formulated any number of ways, but it is cast *this* way, to make these sorts of points.

Elsewhere, other storytelling features also expose the author’s agenda. For example, take note of Jephthah’s story of chapter 11. It contains a lot of material that one would think would build up to a climactic battle—but the

battle anticlimactically takes place in a single verse (Judg. 11:33). Although the story *seems* to read like a military history, it really isn't interested in the battle at all. In fact, most of the very detailed descriptions of battles in Judges are about Israelite-on-Israelite violence, *not* about what the oppressors did or how they were defeated. This showcases Israel's evil, not the oppressors'.

Consider chapter 4. It is almost exclusively about a battle from the point of view of the men and women engaged in it. God is more or less in the background. The actual fighting is recounted in only one verse (4:15), and the reader is not told what actually happened. Then turn to chapter 5. Exactly the same battle is told again from the perspective of heaven, where the sky and the wind and the rain fight for Israel, even the stars, and the river and earth. Thus, two entirely different perspectives are offered, revealing that behind the relatively ordinary events (chapter 4), a cosmic and divine battle was raging (chapter 5). The battles are more theological and spiritual than military and political. This is one of the truths that the account is constituted to reveal, in this case through a song that poetically celebrates the victory.

It is like John 20:30–31: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.” Of all the things that John could have written about, he chose the ones in his book for a theological reason—to persuade you, the reader, about Jesus. In the same way, in Judges the events are carefully chosen to advance the book's theological purpose, to *persuade* you of something.

HOW FAR DOES THIS REMIX GO?

Beyond shaping the stories, reordering them, and applying symbolic names and numbers, how much further does the book go beyond “what really happened”? Following are some examples of Judges at its most challenging as history, examples that require some effort and imagination to read it the way it wants to be read—as interpreted history.

In chapter 4, Sisera is said to command nine hundred iron chariots. This is a problem in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age. Some think the author just made up the nine hundred iron chariots to make the enemy more frightening. Chariots are useful for speed and agility; *iron chariot* is an oxymoron, like a racing bike made of lead. The actual history might have been that the chariots

had some iron fixtures, such as rivets or rims. In Late Bronze and Early Iron, they might have been perceived as a spectacular and fear-inspiring new technology. But in a later era, they would have been laughably passé. In fact, chariotry-based warfare ceased around this time (one wonders what finally did it in). Iron was indeed available to Sisera, but not yet plentiful. So this account is just barely plausible as history, and would not have been “made up” at a later date, since later it would not have sounded as frightening. But to read it as real history requires stretching our imaginations to devise a scenario wherein it is plausible.

Another problem with Deborah’s judgeship is the city of Kedesh. It is mentioned as being in two locations: way up north of the Sea of Galilee near Hazor, in Naphtali, and south of the Sea by the river Kishon. The text labels the first location “Kedesh of Naphtali” and the second simply “Kedesh.” But what if there were two different cities called Kedesh in the story? After all, Judges has two Mizpahs and two Bethlehems, distinguished by giving tribal identity to one but not the other. So if we postulate two Kedeshes, we have solved that problem.

Jabin king of Hazor (Judg. 4:1–3) is also in Joshua 11:1–11. How can this be? Was *Jabin* a throne name that different Hazor kings used? But in both Joshua and Judges, the enemy that Israel fought before Jabin was Eglon. How do we explain *this*? Does the author of Judges want to recapitulate some of the history of the conquest, to envision the period of judges as a new conquest? The journey of Dan in chapter 18 reads like a recapitulation of the conquest, complete with spying out the land. It actually lampoons the conquest, making the readers’ sympathies lie with the defenseless people that the thieving Danites destroyed.

Another locus of historical challenges is in the Samson narrative. Consider the fact that bees do not hive in rotting carcasses. As far as I know, there is no scientifically documented case of this ever happening. This makes the Samson story look similar to legends from around the world that tell of insects doing extraordinary things. Yet if one considers that the lion was killed in a very hot and dry season, under the sun it might have turned to leather very quickly without putrefying. This explanation makes the story just barely plausible in theory, even though there is not another recorded example of this type of thing ever happening outside the realm of myth.

Consider the account of Samson's death. Three thousand Philistines were on the roof of Dagon's temple when he pulled the pillars around himself and died (Judg. 16:27). The description of the temple with two pillars that a strong man just might be able to pull down is spot-on accurate according to what we know of Philistine temples. But the largest such temple ever unearthed (from a later era when they were larger) had a sanctuary of about fifty feet by twenty-eight feet. Three thousand people could not fit on a roof of this size. The Old Greek translation records that only seven hundred were on the roof. Was there a Hebrew scroll that said only seven hundred (notice the possibly symbolic 7×100)? Philo (first century) said there were forty thousand on the roof (another symbol, $40 \times 1,000$?). Judges' number of three thousand may be a representative number and not a literal one, meaning simply "a whole lot of people."

Just one more selected example will suffice to demonstrate that Judges is sometimes challenging as history. The book ends with an event at the city of Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin. This city had been positively identified by archaeologists as being the mound known as Tell-el-Fûl. Since that identification, the mound has been reexamined and is now believed to have not existed until the time of King Saul. Some critics now suggest that the last chapters of Judges didn't happen during the period of the judges at all, but are a fictionalized version of something from Saul's time. Alternatively, one may uphold the story's historicity with the hypothesis that the archaeologists simply got it wrong, and the ancient city of Gibeah lies under the modern city of Jeba.

DRAWING SOME CONCLUSIONS

Take note of what must happen to preserve Judges' history in these difficult cases. When Judges is in tension with nature (the bees in the carcass), with history (recapitulation of Joshua), with archaeology (Gibeah), and with what is possible (three thousand on the roof), we must engage in creative rethinking, giving it the benefit of the doubt. We invent a city of the same name, we imagine a way to have iron chariots, we dispute archaeological conclusions, we speculate about insects. But at the same time we must be flexible in how we read, allowing the author to creatively modulate the story.

There are two extremes to avoid. One is to resolve difficulties by giving up

on Judges as history. Many of the critics have done just that, and regard fantastical passages as fiction. This is especially true with the Samson cycle. The other extreme is to be inflexibly literalistic, to straitjacket Judges with an unsuitable hermeneutic. The text wants to be read as factual history, unlike how some critics regard it. But it also has nonhistorical features, contra a literalistic approach. Neither the liberal nor the fundamentalist reads the text the way it wants to be read. The reader should let it be what it is—essentially a theological argument using patterned history as illustration.

We are in a position now to deal with this question: what theological message is the author trying to convey? He has shaped the story—to teach what? That is what the next chapter covers.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Part of learning to read the Bible is recognizing what sort of literature it is, its *genre*. State in your own words the sort of history the book of Judges is, having read through some of the difficulties and their possible solutions.
2. What then should your reading strategy be?
3. Have you read historical narrative, such as Judges, merely to learn “what happened”? As you read, what else should you look for?
4. How is Judges like a factual documentary? How is it like a movie version of events? How is it like a painting rather than a photograph?
5. The next chapter of this book unveils the various theological messages and agendas of Judges. Take a look at *why* Judges is more than a documentary of Late Bronze/Early Iron Age Palestine.

3

AUTHORS' AGENDAS



This is the most important chapter in the book.

Sometimes by noting how the author shaped his work, we can reverse-engineer his theological agenda. For example, why are early events from its history used as climactic finale? Why is Samson portrayed so heroically and larger than life and yet as a failed leader? Why do we start with Othniel as the first judge? The answers to these sorts of questions can reveal the author's intended message.

When the Bible presents a synoptic situation, in which one inerrant text varies from its parallel, we are *forced* to deal with questions of intent and stylization. Consider this carefully:

And the *men of Judah* fought against Jerusalem, and took it, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and set the city on fire. . . . But the *people of Benjamin* did not drive out the Jebusites who dwelt in Jerusalem; so the Jebusites have dwelt with the *people of Benjamin* in Jerusalem to this day.

The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel . . . (Judg. 1:8, 21–22)

What is wrong with this picture? Judah takes Jerusalem, but a few verses later Benjamin must retake it? Judah succeeds, and then Benjamin fails. But compare both of those texts to this one from Joshua:

But the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the *people of Judah* could not drive out; so the Jebusites dwell with the *people of Judah* at Jerusalem to this day.

The allotment of the descendants of Joseph went . . . into the hill country to Bethel. (Josh. 15:63–16:1)

What is wrong with *this* picture? In Judges, Judah succeeds and Benjamin fails, but in Joshua, *Judah* is the tribe who failed. In fact, in Judges 1:19, Judges *excuses* the people of Judah and mitigates their failure into a virtual nonfailure by citing extenuating circumstances. We can now see part of the author's design: he puts the best face on Judah, but is critical of Benjamin. But *why*?

JUDGES AS A PRO-DAVID AND ANTI-SAUL ARGUMENT

Only twice in Judges does Israel ask God for direction. The first is related in Judges 1:1–8, where they ask who should lead in battle, and Yahweh answers, “Judah.” There, Judah renders God's righteous judgments against an offensive city. They catch “the lord of Bezek” and cut off his thumbs and toes—and the king admits that this is a righteous judgment from God (1:7). By cutting off his thumbs, Judah removes his pretense to act as priest (see Ex. 29:20; Lev. 8:23).¹ By desacralizing him, false religion is rejected and David (the priest after the order of Melchizedek, the true sacred King) is anticipated (who is a type of the Lion of the tribe of Judah, binding the strong man so that he cannot dominate the nations with idols and false religion).

The other time that Israel inquires of God is in Judges 20:18, again in strife with an offensive city. Yahweh again answers, “Judah.” Thus Judges opens and closes by showing that when Israel asks God for leadership, the answer is consistently “Judah.” A positive presentation of Judah frames Judges. Judah executes Yahweh's justice, is successful, is blessed. Othniel (the first and ideal judge) is from Judah: nothing negative is recorded of this tribe.

But Benjamin fails from the beginning. And the same story in chapter 20 that lauds Judah presents the Benjaminite city of Gibeah as another Sodom, fit only for judgment. Here is a salient point: *Gibeah was Saul's hometown* (1 Sam. 10:26). Thus, to condemn Gibeah is to condemn Saul and his family. One organizing principle of Judges is to make a case for David against Saul. Thus, an event that historically happened early concludes the whole book—the final and shocking argument for why Israel should eschew a leader from Gibeah. Failure to destroy a city that God has commanded be destroyed is like Saul's failing to kill Agag, which is what cost him the kingdom (1 Sam. 15).

Judges' great middle section, the cycles of twelve judges, demonstrates that the tribes haven't done well in producing good leaders. Their one attempt

at king-making was disastrous. One argument of Judges is that Israel needs leadership of the sort that only Judah has supplied; and the *last* thing they want is a king from Benjamin. Judges' very last verse reads, "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." Judges argues that Israel's problem was the lack of a king. Judges yearns for a king, the right sort of king, a king unlike the leadership the tribes have yet produced. In fact, he must be David. From this insight, Dale Davis suggests that the original book of Judges functioned as an apology for the house of David over against the house of Saul, during the civil war that lasted seven years between David and Saul's son Ish-bosheth.² Saul had been killed by the Philistines and Israel was in crisis. Texts outside Judges show David trying to appeal to the twelve tribes to accept his leadership. Davis argues that part of his political overture to the tribes is preserved in the book of Judges:

What could be a more natural approach than to collect and edit the heroic traditions of *all* of Israel? How better to foster a new nationalism? And yet it could be done in such a way as to intimate that a divided Israel will always be a defeated Israel and that without the proper leadership it will be a doomed Israel.³

Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, and Benjamin especially was in opposition to David, since Ish-bosheth was their candidate. Judges therefore ends by showing what disaster comes to the nation when Benjamin fails to get with the program and resists common sense, the force of history, even Yahweh.

The Philistines were dismantling Israel, and without the nation unified under one leader, all would be lost. The last judge was Samson—whose judgeship was one long anti-Philistine saga. Those Philistines were still the problem throughout Saul's reign, and Saul never decisively defeated them, just as Samson had not. Judges asks in effect: who will pick up the mantle now? The implied answer is: David from Bethlehem of Judah.

DEUTERONOMIC THEMES

Judges has also been long recognized as having particular affinity with the book of Deuteronomy. One theme of Judges is stated in 2:1–6. There, the Angel of the Lord travels from Gilgal to Bochim.⁴ He states one of Judges' most important perspectives: because Israel has failed to keep covenant, it will be tested and take the land only through much adversity. Probably

Deuteronomy most clearly expresses this covenant. Judges is then a sermon on Deuteronomy: lessons drawn from history illustrating Deuteronomic principles. This characteristic unites the parts of Judges into a whole.

Deuteronomy 7:2 commands Israel to drive out the land's native inhabitants. But in Judges 1:3–36 the tribes enslave them instead. Deuteronomy 12:3 commands them to destroy Canaanite places of worship. The Angel specifically cites this passage (Judg. 2:1–6) and finds them wanting. Deuteronomy 6:6–7 commands the Israelites to teach their children about Yahweh. But in Judges 2:7–12, a generation arose who did not know about him. Deuteronomy 7:3–4 commanded them not to intermarry with the Canaanites. Judges 3:5–8 virtually quotes this law and gives it as a reason God was angry—exactly what Deuteronomy says his reaction would be. Consider also Deuteronomy 12:8: “You shall not do according to all that we are doing here this day, every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes.” This is the motto of the last five chapters of Judges, cited three times, and it concludes the whole book.

One aspect of the Mosaic covenant that has particular clarity in Deuteronomy is that of curses for disobedience and blessing for covenant fidelity: punishments and rewards. The program of Judges is to illustrate how the covenant drives history in this way. The author plainly states this cause and effect in Judges 2:13–16:

They forsook Yahweh, and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So Yahweh's anger burned against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them; and he sold them into the power of their enemies round about, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, Yahweh's hand was against them for evil, as Yahweh had warned, and as Yahweh had sworn to them; and they were in sore straits. Then Yahweh raised up judges, who saved them out of the power of those who plundered them.

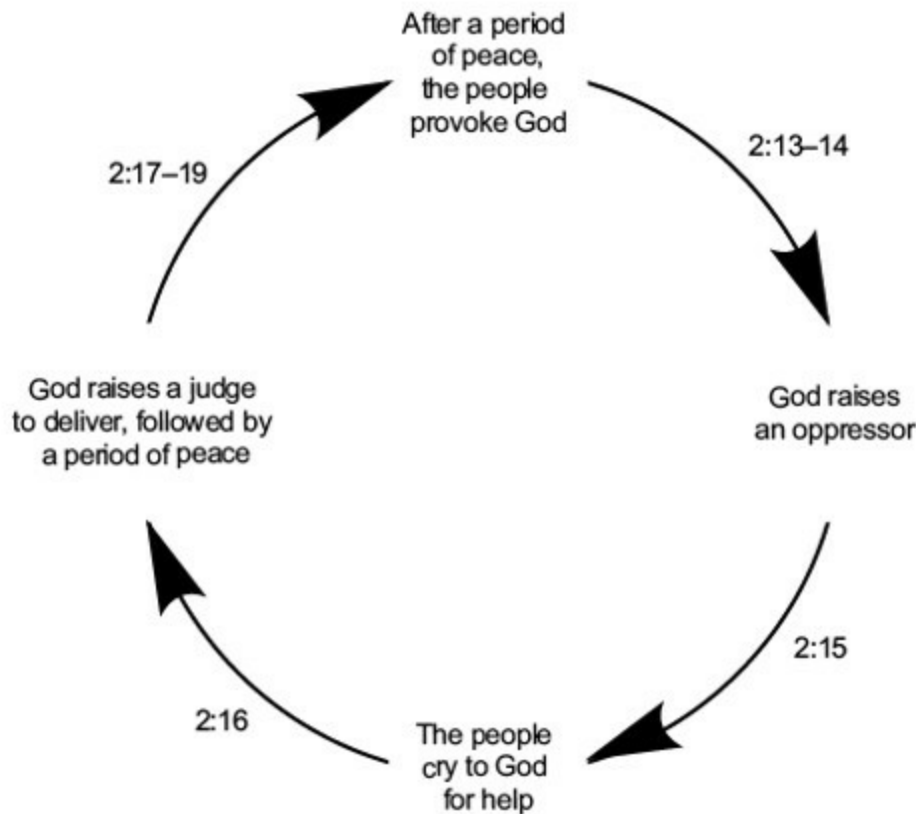
Notice the references to warnings such as Deuteronomy 4:25. But Deuteronomy also says that they will cry out in their distress and return to God, who will then show mercy (Deut. 4:30–31). In Judges, this becomes a repeating cycle. Again, the author plainly states this principle. Read the quote above with what follows below (Judg. 2:17–19):

And yet they did not listen to their judges; for they played the harlot

after other gods and bowed down to them; they soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed Yahweh's commandments, and they did not do so. Whenever Yahweh raised up judges for them, Yahweh was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for Yahweh was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and behaved worse than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them; they did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

The cycles in Judges look like Figure 3.1.

Fig. 3.1. Cycles In Judges

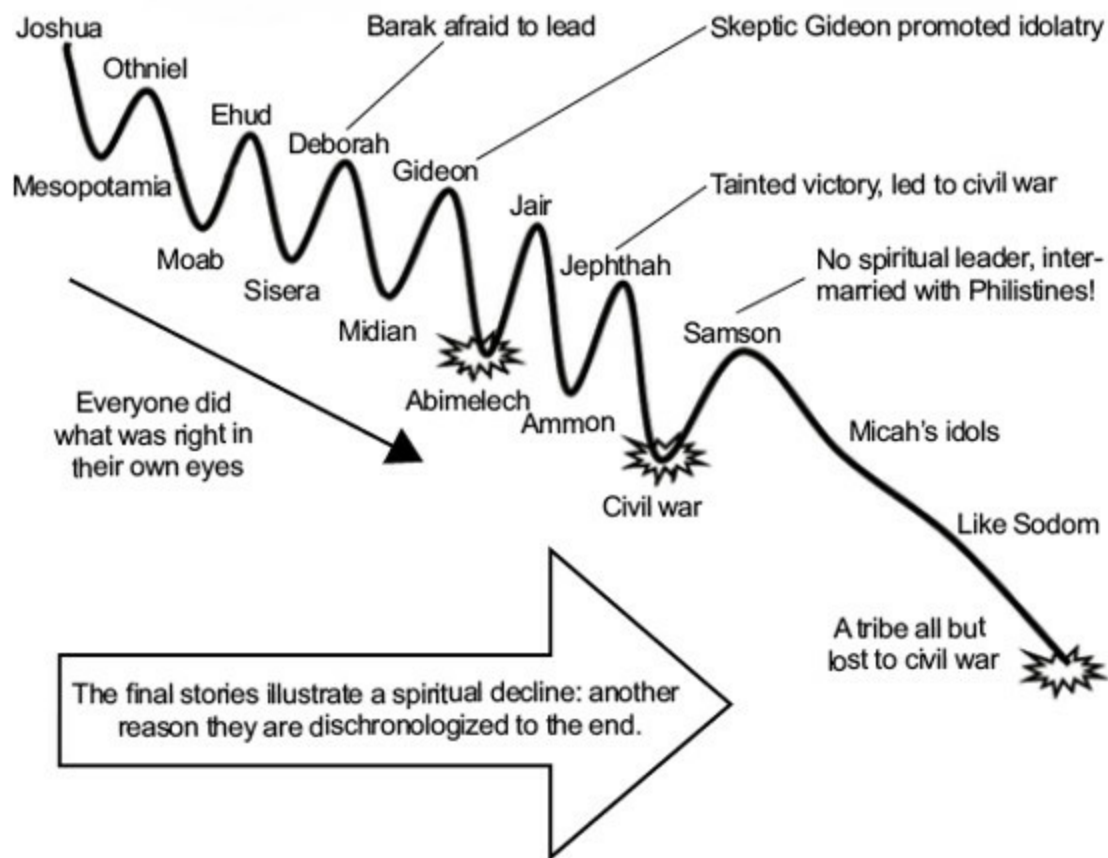


First, the people forsake Yahweh. God then sends, and sometimes empowers, a foreign oppressor to get their attention. They cry out to him by name, and not to their idols. God raises up a judge to deliver them. Having been delivered, they eventually return to their evil ways. The introduction tells us

up front that the various stories cycle through a pattern of disobedience, punishment, repentance, and salvation. So we are intended to see the stories as repeating cycles. Each cycle illustrates in a different way the point of how Israel learned to obey God.

Actually, it is a downward spiral. The cycles don't just repeat; they worsen as time goes on. Gideon's actions made their idolatry worse. Samson didn't cause them to turn to Yahweh at all. There is a trend toward less faith and more evil, culminating with several stories that do not feature a deliverer at all, looking something like this:

Fig. 3.2. Tragic Trajectory



Keep in mind Judges 2:19: in each cycle the people of Israel *behaved worse than their fathers*. Thus, we will look for a progression, an overall narrative that each story advances beyond the repetitions. This is how the covenant, clearly expressed in Deuteronomy, drives the story line.

Thus, we will read Judges with an eye to look for Deuteronomic themes. We will ask questions such as these: How does this text function as a critique

of Solomon? How does it censure Jeroboam and the golden-calf shrines he established in Bethel and Dan? How might it have helped Josiah's reform efforts? And especially, what would this text have meant to the Jews in Babylonian exile?

HOW JUDGES WANTS TO BE READ

Sometimes Judges is frustrating because we expect some sort of moral judgment about this or that event, but all we get is stony silence. "The silence of the priesthood in the book of Judges is deafening."⁵ About Jephthah's killing his daughter? No comment. About how the Levite treated his concubine? Not a word. About Ehud's deception and assassination of Eglon? Nothing to say. About Jael's methods? No opinion. How should we then process what we read? How is unambiguous truth, the ultimate perspective of the author, expressed? How can we read Judges as the Word of God if we don't know what God thinks of these events?⁶

First of all, pay attention to what God says and does throughout. Three times Yahweh's Angel appears and speaks in divine and unsullied discourse the unmitigated truth of God. The reader should pay attention to these rare moments, for they are clear glimpses into what is most important to the author. God also speaks through prophets—this reveals the ultimate perspective of the book. God is credited with giving Israel victory, but God is also said to have been provoked by their idols. God empowers, *and* he delivers from, the oppressor. The Angel judged Israel disobedient, and declared that some nations would remain to test it. The Angel initiated Gideon's judgeship—as it were, converted him. The Angel also announced Samson's special birth. Throughout, Yahweh and his Angel are most concerned that Israel be about the business of becoming a people of God, a covenant community, a faithful nation.⁷ To accomplish this, Yahweh creates conflict between the Israelites and other peoples, his Angel announces his judgments and his plans for salvation, and his Spirit empowers leaders to deliver them. The net result of this cycle was their repentance and fidelity, generation by generation.

There are three divine figures in Judges: Yahweh, his Angel, and his Spirit. Something akin to interpreting in light of what God says and does is also seen in what the judges do when the Spirit of God comes upon them. The judges in this charismatic state fulfill the purposes of God, and thus his purposes can

be more or less clearly discerned.

What then was God's will? Usually the Spirit causes the judge to step out in faith and without fear to lead Israel to victory. *Through a Spirit-endowed leader, things are as they should be in Israel.* Samson and the beehive in the dead lion is a picture of God's agenda in Judges—Spirit-empowered leaders help forge a worshiping community out of dead apostasy.

Gideon asked the Angel where God's miracles that he had done in the past were to be found. Imagine this question on the minds of later Israel, or for the Jews in exile, or afterward when under the heel of Persia. The answer given by Judges is this: all that is needed is one leader who trusts God. This also is a guide for what we are meant to see in the book. *It is messianic.* *Messiah* means "anointed"; *the* Messiah is the leader God raises up, anointed with the Spirit. In a sense, all the judges anticipate the Messiah. This idea dovetails with the agenda of promoting David.

Chapter 4 describes a military conflict, which despite some eyebrow-raising surprises is this-worldly: the weaker army somehow defeats the stronger, and an unlikely assassin kills a general. The agents are all human beings, doing what they do naturally and using ordinary abilities. But in chapter 5 this conflict is reinterpreted with God at the center, revealing that behind the very human story is a supernatural one, moving events toward their divinely appointed conclusion—in a way virtually invisible in chapter 4. In chapter 5, it is a cosmic struggle, the players celestial and elemental, with Yahweh himself marching to victory. The chapter ends, "So perish all your enemies, Yahweh, but your friends are like the sun as he rises in his might." This is a paradigm for Judges' many battles. War is waged not simply against Israel's enemies, but against *God's* enemies. Creation itself participates in his victory, as do his people. Israel can choose to enter the fray and cooperate with Yahweh's heavenly designs. When they do, they are freed from oppression and fear. When they do not, they cower in defeat. All along, it is a heavenly and spiritual conflict. So the ultimate issue is this: Whom will we worship? Whom will we trust? Where is our faith?

For example, chapter 9 is a lengthy chronicle of war between Israelite factions. It seems perfectly mundane. Yet in the end we see that all along a righteous curse was driving events. An invisible moral and spiritual purpose was moving the action forward to its inevitable conclusion. God required the

crime upon the evildoers. Again, the battles were not primarily about political strife, but serve to illustrate the manner in which God rules over the affairs of his people. Thus the reader should seek to find in the account of these battles a higher meaning, pointing to the God who judges.

That last point is another clue about how to interpret Judges. Although the book features those who “judged” Israel, only one named figure is given that title⁸ (by Jephthah)—God himself, the Judge (Judg. 11:27). The point all along is that only God is the real Judge.

Another indication of how to read the book is in what frames the Samson saga, namely, his status as a holy Nazir. The great middle portion of his story seems to ignore this fact—but it is always there in the background, as seen in how he finally meets his demise. His special condition is what underpins his judgeship all along. When Samson forfeits the symbol of his office, his singular bond with Yahweh is broken. The Samson narrative explicitly underscores the overriding importance of respecting the sacred office to which God calls a person. What is true of Samson is true of Israel. Samson sees a girl and wants to marry her because “she is right in my eyes,” using language that applies to all Israel later, “*everyone* did what was right in his own eyes.” And the first example of this naturally follows Samson—about a Levite (another cultic figure like a Nazir) and the tribe of Dan (Samson’s tribe). If Yahweh is to be with the Israelites, they must be holy and pure. Not just ethically, but *ceremonially* as well, self-consciously understanding themselves as a people who belong to Yahweh. At the end of the story of most judges, there is the editorial comment that the people again turned from God to worship idols. The political battles are only the tip of the iceberg—the real conflict is spiritual.

The book ends lamenting the lack of a king. This is another template the book provides. In the absence of a Spirit-endowed leader, and in particular a covenant-keeping king, a sustainable Yahweh-worshipping community cannot emerge. Behind the struggle with opportunistic pagan kings is another, deeper struggle of a religious character.

Let us summarize these hermeneutical principles. The struggles with the nations are foils that reveal Israel’s character: whom the people worshiped, how they behaved. The battles are not primarily about the political conflicts, but about how God forged a worshiping community out of each generation.

The overarching message is that to forge such a community, a Spirit-endowed leader is needed, ultimately a king like David.

OTHER HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The book of Numbers tells how the Israelites failed again and again to trust God, meriting his anger and punishment. First Corinthians 10:11–12 explains that those stories were written as warnings and examples for Christians; God tests our faith and enables the faithful to stand. This way of reading Numbers can be applied to Judges, where God also used adversity to test Israel. Judges is replete with illustrations of the Israelites' behaving badly. In Paul's words, we also, like them, will be tested and will stand if in our hearts we are not infatuated with various sorts of evil. So this is another template we will use in this book. We will ask how Judges presents warnings and examples for modern-day Christians.

Persia conquered Babylon, and Cyrus the Great issued a decree to allow the Jews to return home and rebuild their temple. They did this—and wept at what had been lost. They had become a small community in a large world, with no king, and a temple far inferior to what Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed. During this time, they needed encouragement. They needed to remember that despite the infidelity and sin of (for example) Solomon, during his reign Israel was on the top of the world, gold paved the streets, and everyone knew there was a God in Israel. Their hope was that these days would come again. To that end, the Deuteronomic perspective on their history was not very helpful. They needed a new emphasis, one that was messianic and offered a glorious hope. Thus, the events of 1–2 Kings were rewritten with David and Solomon faultless. A far more glorious past is envisioned in 1–2 Chronicles than what is seen in Samuel and Kings. But unlike 1–2 Kings, we have no alternative retelling of the events of Judges that reflects the later spiritual needs of the newly reconstituted Jewish community. We do, however, have comments from texts during this period that show how Judges—and other historical books—was being read. In the intertestamental period, the heroes were seen as actual heroes, not antiheroes: examples to follow and embodying virtues, *not* part of the problem leading ultimately to God's judgment. Now their positive qualities were highlighted. For example, Sirach 46:11 blesses the judges for their fidelity to God against idols—without any censure at all.

The writer of Hebrews adopts the perspective that Judges preserves examples of how God blesses people who put faith into action and were then able to accomplish great things. Hebrews 11:32 specifically mentions Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, and Samson, each of whom in the context of Judges is not so great an example to follow. Nevertheless, Hebrews cites them as illustrations of what is possible to those with faith. After mentioning how great victories were achieved, the text then seamlessly connects this with later persecutions for the faith—as if taking up arms against an oppressor is a spiritual matter cut from the same cloth as suffering for God’s truth. And the moral is that as they put aside idols and fear and went forward in faith, so we Christians must put aside all sin, persevere, accept the Father’s discipline, and live the way God would have us live. And the long line of ancient saints culminates with Jesus himself, the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). Thus, the “saviors” of the book of Judges in a sense anticipate the one great Savior of the world. We may then ask how Judges anticipates Jesus’ gospel and encourages placing one’s faith in him.

Finally, as occasioned we will see how some texts anticipate the eschaton, the denouement of history, when the cosmic conflict between good and evil reaches its climactic conclusion.

SIX PERSPECTIVES WE WILL CONSIDER

“Every nation has its ‘wild’ period, a time that some would like to forget but that was very important in the development of the people into a nation.”⁹ Think of Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, and Paul Bunyan, but also the villains: Jesse James and Billy the Kid, who flouted the law and became legends of the American West. They are all historical—but are *also* legendary. The showdown at the O.K. Corral certainly happened, but has become increasingly fabulous in the retelling. Some see in the book of Judges a somewhat similar phenomenon. “They are bigger than life, and the exaggerations about their lives and accomplishments set the tone for an era.”¹⁰

One of the considerations of this book will be what these events would have meant in their historical situation. Although the literature describes the events with great relish and zest, we read assuming that the people really lived and events actually happened. This is our first perspective.

The second perspective will be how the text advanced David’s cause while

he was stationed in Hebron during the seven-year civil war with Saul's son Ish-bosheth. Perhaps this is the time when the book became organized in substantially the form it is now.

The third perspective we will consider is how to read it as a sermon on Deuteronomy. What would it have meant during Josiah's reforms? What would it have meant to the exiles?

A fourth perspective is taken from Hebrews 11. What does this text say about Jesus and his gospel? What does it say about faith and trust in God?

A fifth perspective comes from Paul's reading of Numbers in 1 Corinthians 10. How does it speak to the church today? What warnings does it issue?

And finally, how does the text anticipate the final judgment and the glory that will be revealed in us? These are the ways in which the stories will be analyzed in this book.

THE FORMATION OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

I assume that Judges, like most other Old Testament books, was a "work in progress" from the time the events occurred (a wild ride) until the consonantal text hardened sometime before Christ. Alongside the consonantal text was always, of course, the pronunciation of the vowels and some consonants, which were not actually written until the Middle Ages. The book wants to be read as a real history in the sense that the events and people envisaged are authentically presented. Sometimes the book features historical notes, such as "and that is its name until this day." See, for example, Judges 1:21—the Jebusites were still in Jerusalem when that verse was written; thus the verse predates David as king in Jerusalem. It is a real history, but it is *not* a history intended to recount what life was actually like in the period in the sense of who the dominant political figures were, the most important battles, and so on. Instead, we are mostly told about a succession of eccentric heroes and fantastic battles, hardly descriptive of the age.

In turning to the history of the nation of Israel under the Judges, one is surprised initially to discover not one reference to crucial developments involving the major nations of the day, not even to the activities of Egypt. The maelstrom of international politics and military campaigns seems to have bypassed Israel completely. It is as though the history of Israel had turned into a cul-de-sac totally removed from the turbulent

course of world events.¹¹

Some suggest that the collection was originally compiled to gin up support for David against the house of Saul. Benjaminites had ruled Israel more or less successfully for a generation. Their military prowess and competency had to be acknowledged, but their track record also included Saul's poor judgment. Judges pieced together Israel's history in such a way as to argue that it was time for a change and that David might well make a better king than Saul's son.

But Judges no longer reads like a political tract. It is now a religious book, bearing resemblances to Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It is particularly that last affinity that has been deeply explored by twentieth-century scholarship. The northern tribes were overrun by Assyria in the late eighth century and taken into captivity—permanently. Perhaps this situation is referenced in Judges 18:30. Over a century later, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem and took Judah. He burned the temple of Yahweh to the ground and took its vessels and holy objects. Many of the inhabitants were taken captive to Babylon. It was while the Jews were in exile at Babylon that the last events recorded in 1–2 Kings happened. Imagine what 1–2 Kings would have meant to the exiles. Yahweh's temple was in ruins and his people in exile not because Babylon's gods had defeated him, but because his covenant sanctions required it. Far from being weak, God was actually sovereign over Babylon's actions. It is in light of the covenant that is spelled out in Deuteronomy, among other places, that the Jews understood why they were in exile. By reading Deuteronomy (and the rest of the Law) alongside 1–2 Kings, the argument is advanced that God had to either make the curses fall or else let his covenant become a laughingstock. One may well imagine that the book of Judges also helped to make this case. After all, the very first judge is portrayed as fighting off Mesopotamia—the land of Assyria and Babylon.

The Law itself even makes a special guest appearance in 2 Kings 23. King Josiah read it, repented, and purged Israel of every offensive thing. Because of this, judgment was delayed. The idea seems to be that if Josiah's attitude had characterized all of Israel and every king, there would have been no judgment at all. Perhaps part of the makeup of the book of Judges reflects the time of Josiah, since it critiques elements of Israelite religion that Josiah targeted, such as alternative shrines for worship. At some point, the collection

of heroic stories that argued for David against Saul was edited to highlight Deuteronomic themes. Through various stages such as these, our book of Judges was formed.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

There is a lot to reflect on in this chapter.

1. The cycle of sin > oppression > crying to God > salvation is part of Judges. Have you ever taken license when God has blessed you? How have you experienced consequences for doing so? When have you cried out to God for relief from sin's consequences?
2. The tribes mostly exhibit halfhearted obedience. What might such an attitude look like for a Christian?
3. One of Judges' arguments is that we need a king, and the right sort of king. Have you lived autonomously from God, as if there were no King who gives commands? What commands does the Son of David give you that you need to begin to take seriously?
4. Describe someone you know who was on a downward spiral until he or she finally accepted Christ as King.
5. You are endowed with God's Spirit. How then ought you to live? With what mission has he tasked you?
6. Despite appearances, history is ultimately religious and spiritual. How does this fact encourage you in your faith? If it doesn't, why not?

PART TWO

CYCLES OF TWELVE JUDGES



Judges describes in detail six of the twelve judges (a hundred verses for Gideon), but not the other six (Shamgar gets a single verse). The first group are the “major” and the second the “minor” judges. Part 2 treats all the judges; chapter 10 covers the minor ones as a group.

4

A KEEN KENITE



Judges explores something that is rare elsewhere in the Bible, namely, the phenomenon of militaristic leaders who are empowered by the Spirit of Yahweh. Four judges are explicitly said to have experienced this power, starting with Othniel the first judge. What about the others? Consider that Othniel sets the paradigm for the others. Consider also that we know little of the minor judges. So four out of six major judges are explicitly said to have had the Spirit. Deborah was a prophetess, which is a spiritual office. So of all the major judges, only Ehud the Benjaminite lacks reference to the Spirit's work.

Before Judges, Joshua was arguably the only purely military figure whom the Spirit empowered. Others, such as Moses and the seventy elders, were more like prophets. Moses also is a special case, filling the nonrepeatable role of lawgiver. After Judges, the only political leaders explicitly with the Spirit are King Saul and King David, making a total of seven in the Bible. The book of Judges explores what Spirit-empowered leaders look like, how they behave, what sort of leadership they provide. This is an important contribution that Judges makes to the theology of the Bible. This is also one way in which Judges connects with Christ (the word *Christ* means “anointed”)—Judges yearns for a covenant-keeping Savior anointed with the Spirit. Christians today are also anointed (or baptized) with the Spirit as we fulfill God's mission to build his kingdom through proclamation of his gospel with accompanying deeds. Thus, the time of the judges will, in a way almost unique in the Old Testament, have parallels to our own time in how God's mission will be accomplished by the very fallible and wayward people who make up his church.

Joshua parallels the judges before their era, illumining a feature of Judges:

while “judges” are said to “judge” Israel (using the finite verb), they are not actually called *judges*. They are called *saviors*. *Joshua* means “Yahweh saves,” and is the same name as *Jesus*. Each “judge” is actually a “savior,” or “deliverer”—one might say a “Joshua” who saves God’s people from the consequences of their idolatry and sin (Judg. 3:9, 15).

But what does it mean that these saviors “judged” Israel? They certainly were not judiciaries who decided legal matters. No, they were magistrates and warriors. They led in battle as a king would. The first savior in Judges is Othniel, a warrior who took part in the conquest of Canaan under Joshua.

Othniel’s story is told in two parts, beginning with Judges 1:8–15, which took place during the conquest (Josh. 15:15–19). Judah had captured city after city (contrast this string of victories with most other tribes’ sorry performance throughout chapter 1). Caleb offered the hand of his daughter in marriage to whoever took the city of Kiriath-sepher. Caleb’s younger brother rose to the challenge, and so married his niece Achsah. Caleb (whose name means “dog”) was the spy who returned with Joshua and gave a good report, urging the Israelites to enter Canaan. Forty years later they did, under his leadership and Joshua’s. Caleb’s family was instrumental in the conquest.

But Caleb and Othniel were not native Israelites. They were from Midian to the far south. After the exodus, Moses led Israel to Sinai and met up with Jethro the Kenite, priest of Midian. Moses had earlier married his daughter Zipporah. Jethro rejoiced to hear what had happened in Egypt (Ex. 18:5–12). Moses invited Hobab, Jethro’s son, and his family to join with Israel (Num. 10:29–32). Although he declined, some Midianites went along. One of these was Caleb. Caleb is identified with the tribe of Judah in Numbers 34:19, but his pedigree is Kenite (Num. 32:12). Kenites joined forces with Israel in the conquest and settled the land with Israel. They were specifically adopted into the tribe of Judah.

The Kenites were not the only non-Israelite people to become part of Israel. The Gibeonites (a subset of the Hivites, whom God commanded destroyed in Deuteronomy 20:17) tricked Joshua into sparing them, and were allowed to possess four cities in Israel as a servant class (Josh. 9:1–27). So Israel in the south part of Cisjordan was settled by Judah and Simeon, and included diverse groups such as the Kenites and some Hivite cities such as Gibeon. Remember also Uzziah the *Hittite*, who fought holy war for Israel,

Ruth the Moabitess, Rahab of Jericho and her family, and so on. A hodgepodge of various peoples were grafted into the nation of Israel. All of these anticipate the new covenant's being extended to the Gentiles. In this way, Judges looks like the age we live in.

OTHNIEL THE CONQUEROR-HUSBAND

Up until Othniel's story, corporate entities such as Judah and Israel engage the enemy. Now for the first time is named an individual who will take a city for Israel, Othniel the conquest warrior. His work is part of Judah's successes. (David's early capital city Hebron is part of his story.) As a reward, Othniel is given Achsah to marry. This is really a tale of a warrior getting his wife, like the story of David and Michal (1 Sam. 18:20–27). It is the story of a family's origin, the pioneer with his wife by his side, on the frontier, taming the land.

The story shifts to Achsah. She rides to her father, and “dismounts” (a rare verb, *zanach*) her donkey,¹ apparently to ask him for a dowry. She is helping Othniel, then, to extend and improve his territory. Othniel is presented as a conquest-era hero, with a strong woman behind him, a family man related to the famous Caleb. He settles down and begins to build a home and family with a good marriage.

How does this serve as a paradigm for the judges to follow? Compare Othniel with the sordid lifestyles of the later judges. Gideon and his harem . . . Jephthah and his ruin of his only offspring . . . Samson and his women. Compared to what is coming, Othniel presents a positive role model of what a leader should be: participating in holy war, taking the land for God, being about the business of settling the land and building one's house.

OTHNIEL THE IDEAL JUDGE

We see Othniel again in Judges 3:7–11. There the complete schema of 2:15–19 is expressed: Israel provoked God by worshiping Baal and Asheroth > God made them serve Cushan-rishathaim > they cried out to Yahweh > God raised up Othniel to deliver them. Othniel is “the first and only narrative that explicitly uses every part of the schema. Even though every stage of the schema is filled with individual actors, the events are not portrayed in detail and no suspense is generated in the story.”² He is the pattern-setter. His story is (boringly) straightforward and unequivocal. The ethical ambiguity present

in the judges that follow is absent here. His record is unsullied. Othniel simply gets the job done.

Consider also the enemy that Othniel comes up against: Cushan-rishathaim of Mesopotamia. *Rishathaim* means “double-evil.” Mesopotamia later was the bane of Israel’s existence. The Assyrian Empire overran the northern tribes, destroying the nation and dragging them off to permanent captivity. Babylon later destroyed Judah. Assyria and Babylon are the twin evils from Mesopotamia, the superpowers that ultimately ruined Israel and Judah. Despite the grandiose language used to describe other judges’ enemies, Mesopotamia was the *substantial* enemy of Israel’s history. It is *this* evil, the double-sided foe from Mesopotamia, that Othniel effortlessly took out.

When I lecture on Othniel, I show my students a short clip from the 1995 movie *Judge Dredd*, starring Sylvester Stallone. He plays a “street judge” in a futuristic setting where judges police cities. The movie begins with a scene of Stallone’s character, Judge Dredd, shouting to some villains, “Throw down your weapons and prepare to be judged!” After a shootout leaving them dead at his feet, he says with finality, “Court’s adjourned.” I then invite my students to imagine Judge Othniel in this role. Imagine Othniel shouting to King Double-Evil, “Throw down your weapons and prepare to be judged!” Then after he dispatches the double-evil king, he turns to Israel and says with Stallone’s face and voice, “Court’s adjourned.” Now, *that* is a judge!

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

The first judge sets the paradigm. He was married and participated in the conquest, taking out pagan cities. Yahweh raised him as a savior, and the Spirit empowered him to judge Israel. The land then rested for a paradigmatic forty years. Apparently he led all Israel. And his enemy was the later nemesis of Israel. Thus, the tribe of Judah sets the pattern of the way things ought to be: Judah shows how to really *lead*. The name *Othniel* even means “the time of God.” In Judges, the word *time* arguably always refers to times of distress and war. When the hour had come, this judge arose.

The two Othniel narratives and all the material in between may be arranged in a structure as shown:

A Othniel and his clan’s successes 1:11–20

B Tribes’ failures 1:21–36

C Angel's verdict and prophecy 2:1–5 (major break after)

D Passing of the first generation 2:6–10

E The Israelites do evil 2:11–15

F The Lord provides judges 2:16

E' The Israelites do evil 2:17

D' Passing of the judges 2:18–19

C' God's verdict and prophecy 2:20–23 (major break after)

B' Tribes' failures 3:1–6

A' Othniel's success 3:7–11

This structure is called a chiasm, where the first element relates to the last, the second to the second-to-last, and so on. (Note that this is another example of the stylization of history.) Sometimes in such a structure, the central element is important. If that is the case here, then the important element is 2:16, “Yahweh raised judges, who saved them from the hand of plunderers.” This programmatic verse is then the centerpiece of the pattern-setter's story, Othniel.

David is from Judah, of course, and the history of Israel's heroes starts with this tribe. All others that follow are then in Othniel's shadow and can be compared with him. One thing that comes forth clearly is that a leader should be charismatic—he should have the Spirit. The Deuteronomic principle that disobedience leads to punishment and obedience leads to blessing is demonstrated. What is wanted is a leader full of the Spirit, who can go up against evil and be victorious. We need a covenant-keeping military leader who can deliver us from evil.

For Christians, it is not hard to see in Othniel (“time of God”) a type of Christ, who came in God's timing (Gal. 4:4), possessing the Spirit without measure (John 3:34), vanquishing sin, Satan, and death itself. And like him, we also wage spiritual warfare—not against flesh and blood (one way that today's age of grace differs from that of types and shadows), but against the true King Double-Evil, the prince of the powers of this evil age (Eph. 2:2; 6:12). And this conflict will continue until the end of the age, the day of the Lord, the time of God, when the saints' faith will be vindicated and the last

enemy destroyed. Amen; come, Lord Jesus, the Anointed Son of David.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Non-Israelites were grafted into Israel and participated in the conquest of Canaan. Are you a non-Jew? Then you have also been grafted into Israel through Christ and participate in God's work of plundering Satan's kingdom. Describe how you are doing at this task.
2. How do you express gratitude to the Father for extending salvation to you through Christ, even though you are not an Israelite? What difference does this engrafting make in your life?
3. Othniel is the ideal leader, settling down and establishing his family, raising up godly offspring for Yahweh. How do you apply 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 in your own life?
4. How do you engage in spiritual warfare today, against the principalities and powers that resist the gospel?

SOILED SOUTHPAW, ROTUND RULER



After the one and only Judean judge, Othniel, the very next one is a Benjaminite. Othniel's story is quite brief; Ehud's is the first story to be developed in detail (Judg. 3:12–30). But what sort of story is this? Othniel had been a conquest warrior of Caleb's family. How does Ehud measure up?

First, the enemy he faced (Eglon the Moabite) was not as potent as Othniel's enemy. Yahweh actually had to empower Eglon to punish wayward Israel. Eglon ruled the region for eighteen years from the City of Palms,¹ until the people (predictably) cried out to Yahweh for relief. In response, God raised up a savior, Ehud. Note that it is *not* Eglon who did evil, but rather Israel. Both players begin with an *E*, so take care not to confuse them: *Ehud* is the savior, *Eglon* the enemy. (And *Eastwood* is an actor compared with the judge near the end of this chapter.)

Israel entrusted Moab's tribute to *Ehud*, who is called in most translations a "left-handed man" (Judg. 3:15). But the Hebrew text does not use the word *left*; literally, Ehud was "impeded on his right side." This idiom is also used of "seven hundred" men in Judges 20:16. It could refer to ambidextrous combat training that the Benjaminites might have received, learning to fight with either hand. First Chronicles 12:2 makes this skill explicit in reference to Saul's kinsmen (who left him for David). Ehud was an elite soldier, a trained Special Forces operative. The name *Benjamin* means "son of my right hand." Note the irony: the judge from the tribe of the right side was impeded on his right hand. Ehud fashioned a special weapon, a short double-edged sword that he hid beneath his clothing on his right side—available for quick accessibility to his left hand.

Ehud approached the king with Israel's tribute, and at this point the text takes on two levels of meaning. One is the historical account; the other is symbolic. The symbolism is seen in the choice of various specialized words used to describe Eglon's assassination. They are as follows:

1. The king's name, *Eglon*, means "little calf"—a common sacrificial animal. (It is also feminine, "little effeminate calf"? More on this below.) Thus there are "sacrificial undertones in Eglon's name."²
2. The "tribute" that Ehud brought to Eglon is a word used for an "offering" that one would bring to the altar of Yahweh. See Leviticus 2:1–15.
3. Ehud "brought near" this tribute (cf. Lev. 3:3, 7, 9). "To bring near" also describes how a worshiper brings a sacrifice to the altar. An ancient Hebrew would have recognized this at once and perceived the double entendre.³
4. The Hebrew word for Ehud's specially fashioned blade is literally "flame" (Judg. 3:22); nowhere else in Scripture does it mean "blade." Although it is not the usual word for sacrificial fire in the Bible, it is uniquely used in that sense in Judges 13:20. So on one level, Ehud stabs Eglon with his "blade"; on the other level, Ehud treats Eglon like a burnt offering.
5. After the stabbing, the Hebrew word for what oozed from Eglon is *parsidon* (3:22). On one level, this refers to the contents of Eglon's bowels. But it also forms wordplay with a sacrifice's offal (see Lev. 4:11).⁴

On one level, it is the story of an assassination, but the story resonates with the language of animal sacrifice. The sacrificial overtones are the centerpiece of a chiasm that looks like this:

A Ehud passes by the *pesilim* (idols) 3:19a

B Servants of Eglon leave his presence 3:19b

C Eglon arises in his "chamber of happening" 3:20

center ➤ D Eglon is assassinated with sacrificial overtones 3:21–23

C' It is supposed that Eglon is in the "chamber of happening" 3:24

B' Servants of Eglon enter his presence 3:25

A' Ehud escapes by the *pesilim* (idols) 3:26

Why does the assassination read like a sacrifice? One can only speculate. Perhaps Judges means to say that the assassination was really a slaughter, with the implication that the power was always with Israel. Moab was as helpless in Israel's hands as a sacrificial animal is in the hands of the priest.

God commanded Israel to destroy the native inhabitants from the land and to take possession, *and* to make animal sacrifices. Is there is a connection between the two duties? Is killing tyrannical Moabites in the land like offering sacrifice? Is it service to God, an act of worship? It is not, of course, atoning, but it would eliminate a snare and temptation and facilitate the formation of a holy community of faith. In that sense, was holy war as necessary as sin offering? One may continue to speculate as to the implications.

SCATOLOGICAL SCAFFOLDING

Here is the description of the assassination that shows some rare Hebrew words (Judg. 3:20–24):

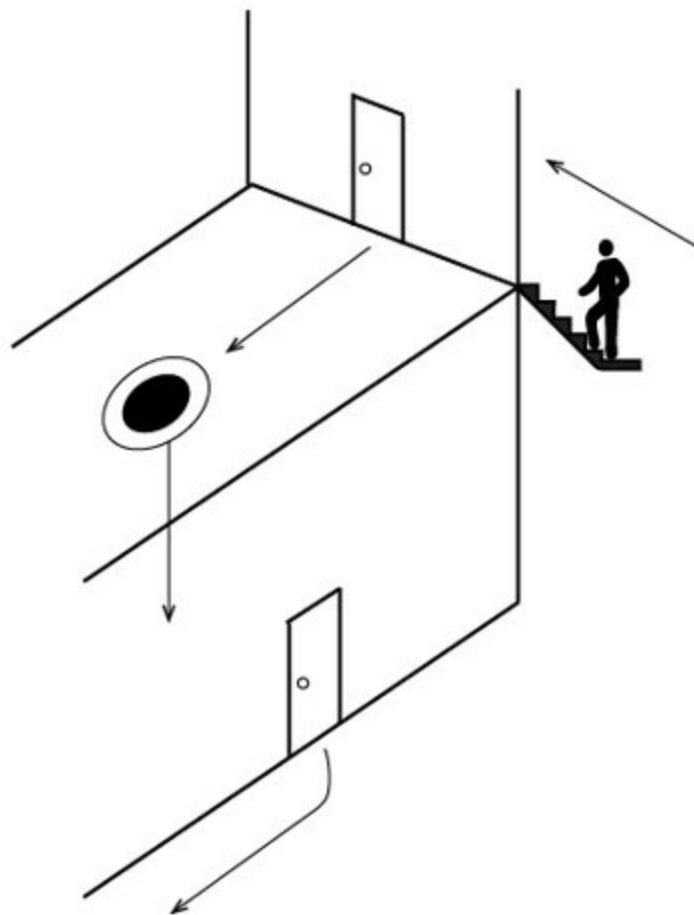
And Ehud came to him, as he was sitting alone in his chamber of *meqerah*. And Ehud said, "I have a word from God for you." And he arose from his throne. And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly; and the *nitszab* also went in after the "flame," and the fat closed over the "flame," for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the *parsidon* came out. Then Ehud went out into the *misderon*, having closed the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them. When he had gone, the servants came; and saw, and behold!—the doors of the upper room were locked. They said, "Surely he is covering his feet in the chamber of *meqerah*."

Four words need some explanation: *meqerah*, *nitszab*, *parsidon*, and *misderon*. The word *nitszab* occurs only here in the Bible, and the context suggests something like the "handle" of Ehud's blade (see above for why the "blade" is called a "flame"). This is the only place in the Bible with the term *meqerah*. If this is a participial form of the verb *qrh*, "to happen," then the "chamber of *meqerah*" is the place where something happens, a euphemistic way of referring to a "men's room" or "restroom"—King Eglon was sitting

on his private commode.⁵ The idiom “covering his feet” refers to moving one’s bowels, and this is what Eglon’s servants thought he was doing in that chamber (Judg. 3:24). But 3:20 says that Eglon was on his “throne.” Here is another double entendre, meant to be humorous—Eglon’s “throne” was his privy chamber. The word *parsidon* (found only here in the Bible) denotes what exited Eglon’s bowels after being stabbed. It probably smelled, which is why Eglon’s servants thought he was defecating. Ehud exited by way of the mysterious *misderon* (3:23), another word found only in this paragraph.

It is suggested that *misderon* refers to the space underneath an upper-room toilet, known from this time period.⁶ It is a janitorial closet that custodians would clean after the king had finished his business. Ehud locked the upper-room door from the inside, and Eglon’s servants did not see him leave—because he exited through the septic tank. Fig. 5.1. illustrates 3:20–25 and takes all of this into consideration.

Fig. 5.1. Ehud’s Escape



And Ehud came to him, as he was sitting alone in the royal commode. And Ehud said, "I have a word from God for you." And he arose from his "throne." And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly; and the handle also went in after the "blade," and the fat closed over the "blade," for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the excrement exited. Then Ehud also exited, through the lower janitorial closet, having closed the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them. When he had gone, the servants came and looked, and behold!—the doors of the upper room were locked. They said, "Surely he is moving his bowels in the royal commode." And they impatiently waited until they were embarrassed; and behold!—he was not opening the doors of the upper room! They took the key and they opened, and behold!—their lord had fallen to the ground, dead.

This is funny! The ancient audience would have been whooping and hollering when this story was told and retold. Along with Ehud's trampling through human waste is the rhetorical flourish "behold! . . . behold!," making it read like some great movement was happening. The way the text refers to Eglon's size and fat seems to portray him as comically obese.⁷ After the assassination, Ehud rallied Israel, they seized control of the Jordan so that Moabites could not support Eglon's troops, and Israel had a great victory that lasted a paradigmatic double forty of years.

THE EFFEMINATE CALF

We are not quite finished identifying how the ancient text ridicules the idolatrous foreign king. It was mentioned above that his name is feminine, raising the expectation that this king is less than virile. In addition to everything stated above is the question why the king would allow an enemy soldier a private audience. Why send one's guards away, even if there is no way out of the room except by passing them?

The sexual theme is carried forward with the thinnest of disguises . . . It is Eglon, the Moabite, who is portrayed as the homosexual, and it is the Benjaminite Ehud who gains the better of him by pretending to offer a homosexual liaison. The sexual imagery is so explicit that it hardly needs amplification.⁸

Ehud girds his sword under his clothing "where the penis might lie. . . . The

sword, moreover, is of a size and shape which would raise in the mind of the audience the image of an exaggerated phallus.”⁹ When orally recited, “one can imagine the narrator specifying the size—‘a *gomed* in length’—in such a way that that phallic allusion could not be missed.”¹⁰ The idea is that Eglon believed Ehud was offering him sex, and therefore he sent away his servants and shut the door. Ehud then proceeded to reach under his clothing—and surprise! Instead of the appendage that Eglon anticipated, a pointed sword was poised to penetrate him. Again one may imagine the hilarious way in which *this* story would have been told.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

The memory of these events was preserved either orally or in some written source. The story from the Late Bronze Age shows the people of Yahweh triumphing over the people of Chemosh. Ehud the Israelite was clever, but Eglon the Moabite was stupid and cowlike (although he did finally “get the point”). Moabite power was always an illusion—overthrowing the Moabites was as easy as sacrificing a heifer. Marc Brettler calls this story “humorous political satire mocking the Moabites,” “typical humor that disparages an outgroup” that portrays Moabites as fat and gullible, and Israel as cleverly superior.¹¹ Eglon’s throne was a potty, and he was taken in by simple deception. Contrasting him is cunning Ehud. Israel is smarter, cleverer, than Moab.

Perhaps at one time this story was preserved for nationalistic and ethnocentric reasons—but now, embedded in the book of Judges, it makes the case that the people of God will triumph in the end if they act, expecting God to bring victory. Remember that the story of the assassination is framed with reference to “idols” (see the chiasm above). This connects the story with the worship of Yahweh over against false and empty gods. We are clever—we are like Ehud. They are clueless—they are like Eglon. Theirs is the sort of ridiculous king who relies on idols and promotes idolatry. The idols stand silently by and let the killing happen. Here is a paradigm in the book of Judges: idols *always* let their foolish worshipers down, and *never* do anything at all (e.g., Samson in the temple of Dagon). If you worship idols, you are in the same class as Eglon the Fat, Stupid, Incontinent, and Sexually Deviant.

As Apology for David

Othniel established what a judge could and should be: a warrior (from

Judah) with no moral or ethical ambiguity. But his story is brief, without rich elaboration such as Ehud's. Why does Judges extensively nuance Ehud? And how does Ehud's story help promote a Davidic kingship over a Saulide one?

The theory is that in the days after Saul's death some form of our book of Judges was published to appeal to the tribes to support David over against Saul's house. The Ehud story was part of this appeal. Ehud was a *Benjaminite* like Saul. His military prowess is affirmed. All Israel knew that Saul had been an effective warrior. The Ehud story affirms the tribe of Benjamin in this respect. The first two judges are from David's tribe (who effortlessly took out Mesopotamia) and Saul's tribe. It is as though the book of Judges said, "Remember Ehud? He was one of you Benjaminites. What gall he had and what risks he took in his day to deliver Israel. You have reason to be proud of one who so worthily represents the hallmarks of your tribe."¹² Thus, this is an olive branch, a political ploy to reach out to the support group of David's opponent. No one disparages Saul's military prowess, Benjamin. Join us! We value your significant contribution.

But along with that, Ehud's story of deliverance evokes laughter. In Scripture, warriors are rarely made ridiculous like this. The bathroom humor makes a fool of Ehud as well as Eglon. In what way does this change how we read his story? Maybe the author wants to deny Ehud gravitas. Perhaps Ehud is not quite in the same class as Othniel. (The name *Ehud* is based on the same root as *Judah*—registering that even Benjaminite success is derivative, requiring Judean support?) There are also ethical questions connected with Ehud's story that tarnish him as a leader, which will be treated below.

Another feature that connects with David is the role of the Moabites. *David is of Moabite descent*. His great-grandmother Ruth was from Moab. Perhaps the book of Ruth was also part of the pro-David argument, and once served as an appendix to Judges. This would make Judges end with a story about Moab. Ruth the Moabite is shown to exhibit covenant fidelity and other fine qualities—she was a positive entry in David's genealogy, not a negative. And through the device of mocking Moabite power in the Ehud narrative, David's political loyalties, which might have been questionable to Israel, were made clear.

Mocking the Idols

The present book of Judges is a religious book, not a political argument.

Note the chiasm above, which is framed by reference to the *pesilim*, the “idols” of Moab. The second commandment specifically forbids making a *pesil* (Deut. 5:8). The death of the idolatrous king is framed with references to his impotent and silent gods. Ehud passed by them on his way in, and again on the way out. Among other things, this story is a statement about idols. “That the King would go to the toilet with the messenger in attendance should have clued them into something amiss, were it not that they were, like their ruler, dumb as a rock.”¹³ The idols are mocked by showing their worshipers as ridiculous. The humor directed at Eglon indirectly indicts his deities.

On the other hand, the text has much to say about Israel’s God. Because Israel did evil, Yahweh strengthened Eglon (Eglon is not called evil). When Israel turned to him, God raised up Ehud. Nothing else is said about God in this story, except that Ehud claimed to have a word from him. We see that God transfers power from one person to another. He forms and shapes Israel into what he wants. God is the sovereign Judge.

The real conflict is spiritual. Pagan nations dominate only when Israel has no faith, and the real issue is the impotency of idols. When God’s people trust him, the enemy evaporates away effortlessly. Think of what this would have meant to a later audience. The text indicts Solomon, who served the gods of Moab and Ammon. This puts Solomon in the same class as Eglon the Ridiculous. The story would have helped Josiah’s reforms by holding up Yahweh as the only true God, illustrating what one zealous for God can and should do. It shows the path that Israel should take to be free of foreign oppressors.

And to the Jews suffering in exile in Babylon, this text was a reminder that political oppression does not mean that Yahweh is inferior to foreign gods. The Jews were oppressed because of the sin of their idolatrous fathers. But if they turned in faith to him, he could and would deliver them, as he did before. It is these sorts of truths that the Jews in Babylon would have appreciated.

Today the church also is subject to an idolatrous culture, albeit largely nonreligious. The idolatries of the West center on autonomy from God and humanistic philosophy. People do what is right in their own eyes without regard for the Word of God. In the context of such a world, the Father forges

a church.

Ehud in the Light of the Gospel

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. (Heb. 11:32–34 NIV)

Ehud is skipped, but he does fit the pattern. He is called a “savior” (Judg. 3:15), and he did save the Jews from oppression by leading them into battle. The Israelites’ easy victory after eighteen years of oppression shows that they had what it took all along. All they had to do was to rise up and fight—the very thing that God had commanded them to do. Faith is the key. All they needed was to obey God’s command. The book of Hebrews connects this spiritual reality with Jesus the pioneer of our faith, who endured the cross and was then glorified. Like him, we are called to resist sin, struggle with it, throw off its oppression, and endure God’s discipline (Heb. 12:1–6). This call is cut from the same covenantal cloth as Israel’s call to put their faith into practice.

This naturally leads to the question: what sins oppress us that we need to throw off through simply doing what God commands? The reader should pause and consider what foolish idolatries he or she might entertain. Do you trust in money for your security? Do you work for the approval of other people rather than God? The implications are legion.

TOWARD THE ESCHATON: A CANONICAL READING

In Judges 3:16, Ehud fashioned a two-edged sword. The word *edge* is from the Hebrew idiom “mouth,” literally a “two-mouthed sword.” Ehud called this, literally, the “word of God” (3:20). The two-mouthed sword connects Ehud’s account with other such swords in the Bible. Psalm 149:6 considers the singing of God’s praises as parallel with holding “two-edged swords.” Proverbs 5:3–4 compares the words of the adulteress with a sharp two-edged sword. In the Bible, “two-edged sword” always signifies speech. “In nearly

exclusive fashion it may be seen to be a metaphor for the potency of speech.”¹⁴ Hebrews 4:12 specifically calls the Word of God sharper than a two-edged sword. The image of a two-edged sword is used in Revelation for Jesus, who is the King of kings come to judge the nations, vindicate his people, and purify his church (Rev. 1:16; 2:12). Thus Eglon, killed by the double-edged word of God, is a picture of the end of time, when the nations will stand before the Judge of all the world. In the end, all of God’s enemies will be defeated and cast into the lake of fire. Ehud the savior (the “Joshua,” the “Jesus”) anticipates this final act of salvation, when Christ judges the world, punishes those who are not his own, and establishes peace on earth forevermore.

In Jeremiah 48:1–47, Moab (the people of Chemosh) is prophesied to be judged with finality in the end. Moab’s defeat by Ehud is a foretaste of this victory—yet part of Moab will in the end be saved, too. The Gentiles who come to salvation are anticipated in Ruth the Moabitess, who has also become part of Jesus’ genealogy.

SPIRITUAL ISSUES FOR TODAY

Here is a trick question: what does the Spirit-empowered judge do? Answer: there isn’t one in this story. Ehud is not said to be empowered by God’s Spirit. This fact casts extra doubt on Ehud’s methods—they are not necessarily reflective of God’s perfect will.

Inspired by Eric Christianson’s 2003 article, when I teach this passage, I introduce Ehud with a clip from Clint Eastwood’s *For a Few Dollars More*.¹⁵ I ask the class to compare Ehud with the gunslinger. In addition to other traits, we find that the biblical text highlights the hero’s violence, *not* the enemy’s. Some moralists and rabbinic tradition argue that Eglon was a pious king who rose to hear God’s word.¹⁶ Christianson mentions another Eastwood movie, *Unforgiven*, in which just before Eastwood’s character murders the sheriff he says, “Deserve’s got nothin’ to do with it.” Is that the moral of Ehud’s story?¹⁷ Has deservingness got nothing to do with it?

How far should we go in imitating Ehud? Is “go and do likewise” appropriate here? Is Ehud justified in his methods? The narrator is silent on the matter. But consider that the Bible contains parallels to Eglon’s assassination. One parallel is 2 Samuel 3:27–28, which shows a despicable act that David denounced. Second Samuel 20:8–10 shows yet another

murder, which Solomon later also denounced as evil (1 Kings 2:32–33). Gregory Wong persuasively argues that this account is modeled on Eglon's. If so, then Ehud's methods could be read as an unconscionable evil, even though God raised him up to deliver Israel.¹⁸ (A Benjaminite judge does what David's loose-cannon general did—a case for moral equivalence?)

Although today we might assume that Christians should not employ these methods, in the history of the church that assumption has not always been clear—for example, during and after the Reformation. Does the Ehud story mean that to summarily dispatch an infamous tyrant is justifiable? Anabaptists argued that Israel's were spiritual wars and are not normative for Christians; Matthew Henry (c. 1700) said that Eglon puts to shame Christians who are irreverent and unwilling to hear the Word of God.¹⁹ (Does this make Eglon a martyr and Ehud a persecutor of the faith? That can't be right.) Ehud judged when the people of Israel did what was right in their own eyes. His story really is about a time much like our own, and we struggle with the same morally ambiguous issues.

If Christians are not supposed to wage spiritual warfare like Ehud, how then should we regard the passage? What do we, as Christians, do with a text such as this? The next chapter addresses this issue.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. The Christian's *duty* is to destroy arguments that are obstacles to faith (2 Cor. 10:3–6). Ehud prepared for his struggle. How have you prepared for yours? What do you plan to do to become better equipped for spiritual battle?
2. What snares and temptations cause you to stumble? How do you plan to minimize their opportunities to influence you? What needs to go so that faith can grow?
3. Ehud apparently had to humble himself to accomplish the task at hand. In what ways are your own dignity and pride keeping you from engaging in the task God has for you?
4. Sometimes the Bible mocks idols. Can you find absurdity in the foolish notions and unbiblical beliefs that you and others sometimes engage in? How silly to live for others' praise, or for money or for pleasure. What do *you* live for?

5. Isn't it true that what seems overwhelmingly scary to us is actually a nothing before God? How has this been true in your life?
6. Ehud's story reflects a time when the people did what was right in their own eyes. In what ways does Ehud's story remind you of life today?

Before you preach or teach it, do an Internet search for "Ehud escape"; consult other sources, too, of course.

DOES GOD COMMAND JIHAD?



The whole account of Eglon's assassination is an ethnic joke against Moabites. But some today argue that "insulting, debasing humor has ceased to be considered funny in the modern world."¹ We are supposed to laugh at the stupid Eglon. We are supposed to laugh at his girth. We are even supposed to laugh at the fact that he may have suffered from a malady of his bowels. Is this the model of the Bible on how to regard one's enemies? Is gloating, taking malicious pleasure at another's misfortune (in a word, *Schadenfreude*), a legitimate expression of faith in God? "Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice, or Yahweh will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him" (Prov. 24:17–18). Is not Judges an example of what Proverbs condemns?

So, contemplated deception and brutal violence constitute the way in which the God of the Bible and the Father of Jesus Christ raises up deliverers for oppressed people, who cry to him? And it is OK to scorn your enemies and make them your laughing stock while reciting the "great deeds of God" to the next generation?²

In Judges there is also the very disturbing phenomenon of God's wanting his people to kill, kill, kill. It is not just that he allows genocidal warfare. It is not just that he commands it. It is more than that. When the Israelites hold back and spare some survivors, Yahweh condemns them for it. God seems more bloodthirsty than Israel. He wants *more* violence, not less. But Jesus says to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek. A Christian may be tempted to ask how Judges can be in our holy book. How can this be the two-edged Word of God?

But the book of Judges was included in the rolls of written traditions of which Jesus said that "scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35) and that the

smallest mark in it will not fail (Matt. 5:18). This is also part and parcel of Jesus' teaching. And the book of Hebrews betrays no tension with Judges at all. To walk away from Judges is to walk away from Jesus' teaching; but to embrace Judges seems to embrace a way of violence contrary to his teaching. How can this paradox be resolved?

LITTLE VIOLENCE AND GREAT VIOLENCE

A theme that runs through both Testaments is that violence is stored up against sinners. Deuteronomy explicitly states that this is one reason God sent Israel to obliterate Canaan—because he was fed up with their evil (Deut. 9:4–5). One Deuteronomic perspective is that through conquest, Israel became God's agent, purging the land of wickedness. The people of Israel imaged what the heavenly host had done to Sodom and Gomorrah; they followed in the footsteps of what God had done to Egypt. Often, the sanctioned violence in the Old Testament can be seen as God's just punishment. This is so even though many innocents, such as children, were caught up in the judgment. Another Deuteronomic principle is that sin has consequences for children and grandchildren (Deut. 5:9). Ethnic cleansing, though, while abhorrent today and utterly at variance with God's will for the church, is but a small violence, a mere pittance compared to the great violence of the New Testament. In the New Testament, sinners are subject to the great violence of being cast into hell for all eternity. While Israel was called to burn down cities with people in them, Jesus Christ comes in bloody garb to render the ultimate sanction (Rev. 19:11–18). In both Testaments, Almighty God brings bloody violence on the heads of those who have offended him with their wickedness. Simply being a human being is enough to warrant this judgment. This idea is typified, for example, in all the citizens of Jericho being subject to the same censure, regardless of age or station in life.

Sometimes the New Testament reads Old Testament violence as symbolic of the end of the world and the final judgment. Jesus considers the flood narrative to be eschatological. After Sodom was destroyed, in Genesis 19:31 Lot's daughter literally says, "There is not a man on earth." Jesus reads this as a picture of the end of the world (Luke 17:26–32). In a similar way, Israel's coming into the Promised Land to purge it from its indigenous inhabitants can also be seen in an eschatological sense. Israel brought down God's judgments upon Canaan. In his covenant with Abraham, God predicts that Israel must sojourn in Egypt to allow time for the Amorites' sin to reach

full measure (Gen. 15:13–16). In other words, the antediluvians, the Sodomites, and the Canaanites all experienced God's judgment ahead of time, the judgment that the whole world still has in store. They are types and shadows of this final day. They perished for their sins, and so will all, eternally, who persist in wickedness and who reject the Savior. God saved eight persons from the flood, three from Sodom, and Rahab's family from Jericho. See to it that you are numbered with them, and not miss your opportunity for salvation when the day of judgment comes. Remember Lot's wife!

WHAT HAS CHANGED

Despite this continuity between the Testaments, there is deep and vast discontinuity as well. Instead of being commissioned to engage in violent acts against flesh-and-blood enemies, Christians identify with those who suffer unjustly by the hands of the violent. Jesus came not as a conqueror or warrior *in the conventional sense*. Rather than throw off the Roman armies, he suffered and died at their hands. Instead of identifying with the Israelites who destroyed Jericho, he identified with those who perished, placing himself under the ban along with them, becoming a curse for them. Christians now follow in his footsteps and willingly submit to persecution. Although wrath is still stored up against sin, since Christ has come this wrath is not the order of the day. The order of the day is grace and forgiveness. Someday this age will end, and the final judgment will come in.

In fact, Christ's death is an eschatological event, the first stroke of the final judgment. The violence that awaits all people was experienced in advance by him. The judgment has begun. Those who belong to him are now baptized in the Spirit—which is the Christian's experience of passing through the fire of judgment. Having done so, the Christian can face the last day with confidence. We eat his body and drink his blood in anticipation.

Who are Christians' enemies today? Not flesh and blood, but spiritual principalities and powers. Sometimes these have human spokesmen, heretics with false teachings, energized by the same spiritual realities that were behind the idols that Israel's enemies served. One way in which a Christian will take Judges and "go and do likewise" is to live an upright life consistent with Christ's calling, preach the gospel against all opposition, announce salvation in Christ and damnation for refusing, and accept the world's persecution if

God so ordains. This is what the violent overthrow of Canaanite cities *means* today.

REINTERPRETING THE WHOLE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

This radical shift in meaning is not limited to passages in which God commands genocide. In fact, almost every aspect of Israel's religion has been redefined by Jesus. Take, for example, Deuteronomy 19:21: "Your eye shall not pity; it shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." Some argue that this commandment was already progressive against a cultural background that sanctioned great excess in vengeance. But Jesus took the matter and framed it entirely differently for the age of grace (Matt. 5:39). He fulfilled the Law by personally keeping it, and also revealing the high ethic by which it must be practiced in this age. And in the end, he will come to enforce it in full (Matt. 16:27).

Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21:21, which commands capital punishment, in his argument to excommunicate an unrepentant man (1 Cor. 5:13). Paul interprets stoning to death as removal from church rolls for contumacy. This sort of transformation is typical of how the New Testament treats the Old. What had been a civil law in Deuteronomy has become a spiritual principle for governing a new community of faith. Deuteronomy 25:4 says, "Do not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain." Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:9–10 that this command *is not really about oxen*, but is about people, and that it now means to pay ministers. (Literalist pastors should forgo their salaries.) People with physical deformities were excluded from full participation in Israel's religion (Lev. 21:17–23). But no Christian today would dream of excluding one from any religious activity simply because he is a dwarf. Regardless of how one may argue for continuity between the New and the Old, regardless of how one may find the gospel hidden there, the simple fact remains that there is profound *discontinuity* as well.

Hebrews 10:1 calls the Law "but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities." A shadow reveals an outline, a shape, but has no substance. The substance that casts the shadow in the Old Testament is what is revealed concerning Christ in the New. The specific application of this idea in Hebrews 10 concerns the system of animal sacrifices. Hebrews argues that killing animals did not actually atone for sin.

The priests who obeyed the Law by offering them day after day were *not* making the penitent right before God. Eating unclean foods that violated the purity laws, according to Jesus, did *not* make one *actually* unclean before God (Matt. 15:11). In fact, the dietary symbol of separation was revoked when “unclean” peoples were allowed in the church (Acts 10:15). Deuteronomy 22:10 forbids yoking ox and ass together; today this means not marrying an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14). For Christians, it is not about unclean foods, or oxen, or stoning, or animal sacrifices, or retributive justice. The same sort of transformation must take place when appropriating the concept of holy war in the book of Judges.

OLD AND NEW WINESKINS

It should be obvious by now that the problem of God’s promoting racial extermination in Joshua and Judges is only part of the larger problem of how to appropriate the whole of the religion of the Old Testament. Virtually every aspect must be transformed in some way. One example is in the way in which Jael is celebrated in Judges 5:24. Deborah and Barak call her “most blessed among women” because she savagely murdered a man in his sleep. Another woman in Jewish tradition who is given this title is Judith because she beheaded a man in his sleep (Judith 13:18). The only other woman in sacred literature who is called “most blessed among women” is Mary in Luke 1:42. It has been argued that Luke co-opted language that, to anyone familiar with Judges or Judith, would be recognized as having a violent background. Luke took this language and shockingly used it to telegraph that blessedness in the new covenant looks very different. Mary is blessed for hearing and believing the word of God, and for her role as participating in God’s new work of salvation in bringing peace on earth. Her blessedness also includes empathy with the sufferings of Christ (Luke 2:35). In other words, what constitutes blessedness *now* is very differently conceived compared to *then*.³ Language that reveled in violence has become a celebration of peace.

Salvation is redefined now as deliverance from Satan, sin, and death. In Judges, salvation is deliverance from Eglon the Moabite, Cushan Double-Evil of Mesopotamia, and so on. These enemies should be understood by a Christian as types or shadows of the real enemies unveiled in the New Testament. Jesus is a warrior, too—not against human enemies, but spiritual. He captured diabolical forces and vanquished supernatural foes (Eph. 4:8; Col. 2:13–15). It is to these forces that Eglon points.

Consider Psalm 69. This psalm of David wishes terrible suffering on enemies (Ps. 69:22–28). Many Christians consider this attitude unworthy of the Christian faith, an example of David’s heart and not God’s. Yet the New Testament cites this psalm twenty-two times and applies it to Christ. It refers to Jesus’ critics (John 15:25), cleansing the temple (John 2:17), the crucifixion (Ps. 69:21), the Jews’ rejecting their Messiah (Rom. 11:9–10), and woes in store for the religious leaders who reject him (Luke 13:35). Peter even applies it to Judas (Acts 1:20). Ultimately it refers to those who are thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). So the psalm that revels in *Schadenfreude* is appropriated in the New Testament and applied to Christ, his church, and the final judgment.

Joshua’s leadership in subjugating Canaan is symbolic of those who rest in God through Christ (Heb. 4:8). And the bodies of the Israelites who fell in the desert symbolize those who hear the gospel and do not believe (Heb. 3:17–19). This is the sort of transformation that must take place as we read the book of Judges.

So Christians’ weapons are spiritual. We put on the armor of God, which consists of truth, the gospel of peace, the Word of God, and so on. Ehud used a literal sword. But we use Scripture to topple spiritual strongholds. And Christ is coming with his own double-edged sword to judge the world in the eschaton, the end of time.

THE REST OF THE STORY

The interpretation above provides a prism through which we may regard the Old Testament and read it with benefit. But it leaves the sensitive reader with nagging doubt that there must be more. In the opening paragraphs of this chapter, the Ehud cycle was characterized as an exercise in *Schadenfreude*. More than a mere conversion from literal to symbolic must take place to vindicate this approach. There is such a thing as progressive revelation whereby God does not reveal everything about himself all at once, but in stages over time, culminating in Christ. Thus, in any given era, God’s expectations of his people look different from those in another era. Today we approach and understand God very differently than Abraham, Moses, or David did. What we see in the Old Testament is God’s “meeting people where they are,” accommodating his relationship to the culture and time of the people, rather than suddenly revealing everything all at once.

We can see this accommodation in one obvious way in the very language of the Old Testament. This not only includes the vocabulary and syntax, but is also idiomatic, retaining many cultural practices and artifacts. God's Word is written in Israelite culture every bit as much as it is written with Israelite ink on Israelite scrolls in the Israelite language.

Moses permitted divorce (Deut. 24:1), but Jesus said that the reason was God's accommodating of himself to the people's "hardness of heart" (Mark 10:5). Thus, again, this cultural artifact proved to be an inadequate norm for the kingdom. The patriarchs had more than one wife (not to mention later kings' harems). Polygamy was the order of the day at one time, but in the church is rejected (1 Tim. 3:2). God no longer tolerates this ancient practice. Yet he once not only tolerated it, but incorporated it into his plan to build up the house of Israel. God previously did more than just condescend to permit polygamy; he actively *used* it to generate the twelve tribes. He worked within it to accomplish his purposes, even though the practice was finally declared unworthy.

God not only permitted genocide, but incorporated the practice into his plan and purposes to shape and mold Israel into a community of faith in the midst of the world. God accommodated himself to the thinking and practices of an ancient culture, and condescended to communicate with people in terms they understood. He took their culture and co-opted it for his revelatory purposes. Even when Israel took marching orders from God at the beginning of the conquest of Canaan, the divine Angel would not say that he was on Israel's side (Josh. 5:14). More were the purposes of God than imagined by Israel (Deut. 29:29). *Schadenfreude* can also be incorporated into a larger narrative that tells the story of salvation, without ultimately being normative for Christians today.

Before Sinai, God did not relate to Israel on the basis of written or stated law (although moral standards were always operative). Later, even though the Israelites rejected God as their King because they wanted to be like the other nations, God acquiesced to their evil request for a political king (1 Sam. 8:4–9). He incorporated their faithlessness into the very way he related to Israel, and it is through the line of kings that Christ came.

After Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and took the Jews captive, God spoke through Ezekiel and announced that they must now relate to God

differently. For example, in the Law, consequences of sin continue for several generations (Deut. 5:9), but according to Ezekiel, a new situation has new spiritual priorities, and souls now stand before God on the basis of their own behavior (Ezek. 18:19–20).

What then should a Christian do with this information? Perhaps learn a little humility. It is clear to us how far God had to stoop to enter into a covenant with a people like this, but do we stop to think that perhaps, in his sight, we are not much better? How far must he stoop to accommodate the modern church? Put another way, if God can raise up Ehud to deliver his people, how much more should he be able to accomplish his will through us. Here is where the writer of Hebrews finds the connection with no tension: the Jews acted on what they knew in faith, and so do we. Unlike them, however, we know so much more of the Father, and must act accordingly (Heb. 11:31–12:4).

ISRAEL AS A POLITICAL ENTITY

Another part of the problem is that God constituted ancient Israel not only as a spiritual community, but also as a political entity. As such, Israel fully participated in every military and territorial aspect of national existence. God chose to produce a people of God in the midst of a hostile world. For such a community of faith to grow, their land needed defending. The text explicitly says that allowing other peoples to coexist would be a corrupting influence, hampering the emergence of a Yahwist community (Judg. 2:1–3). Israel was both spiritually and politically constituted; thus, it punished unclean states ritually as well as physically. Israel's invasion had elements of both holy war (under the auspices of the true God over against false gods) and just war (punishing wickedness). Modern-day Christians may serve in a state that might engage in just war, but never holy war. Today, holy war includes preaching the gospel, teaching the truth, engaging in fasting and prayer, practicing church discipline, and suffering persecution.

It is argued above that the New Testament “spiritualizes” the Mosaic law, turning capital-punishment statutes into a basis for church discipline. But when Christians pledge themselves to the service of a state—not a church—they are faced with similar occasions for violence that ancient Israel faced. In this way, Judges is not unlike our own age. During World War II, some cities, such as Paris and Manila, were not defended, and so they were

declared “open,” meaning that they should not be pulverized, whereas Leningrad and Berlin were not so regarded. During the Gulf War, the allied forces continued to bomb Iraq until it surrendered. Right or wrong, this is how just war is done, even today, even by Christians. There is at least some moral equivalence between the actions of ancient Israel and projection of power today, especially when we believe this or that modern war is justifiable.

But unlike today’s situation, the way in which territory was expanded in antiquity was to move in and kill everyone who was there. In this respect, Israel was cut from the same cloth as the other nations. Israel was both a spiritual community and a political state. Even though God adopted the ancient practice of territorial expansion and used it for his purposes, part of Judges’ violence connects more with the modern-day state than with Jesus’ church. Jesus said to Pilate, “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world” (John 18:36).

CONCLUSION

A number of perspectives have been offered in this chapter. The conquest can be seen as eschatological, foreshadowing the final judgment and eternal damnation of the wicked. One must also recognize that God accommodated himself to the culture, and interwove his purposes even with aspects later rejected as not fit for the kingdom (i.e., polygamy). This makes the violence of the ancient world appear to be a cultural “given” that God co-opted for revelatory purposes.

But Jesus came and suffered and died like Israel’s victims. This, then, changes the equation, and ushers in the age of grace, within which the way is open for salvation to those who beforehand were unclean and lost. So today, the order of the day is to read the text symbolically, being really about *spiritual* warfare, rather than political and military. But even today, when Christians align themselves with a country, they can and do engage in warfare and violence, ideally to resist the wicked in the here and now.

Each of these approaches helps to shed light on a difficult problem. But when all is said and done, the fact remains that there is great tension between Judges’ morality and the ethics of Christ’s church. The paradox remains between God’s condemning Israel for not killing enough and God’s desiring

all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). A *satisfying* resolution of this tension is elusive—and will continue to be so until the second coming, when Christ will resolve it for us, and show us the final meaning of the book of Judges. Amen; come, Lord Jesus.

FOR FURTHER READING

1. When do you engage in *Schadenfreude*? What are some ways that you can feed your enemy when hungry and give drink when thirsty?
2. Do you live your life as if Jesus were really returning to judge? How would you spend your time differently if you took that truth more seriously?
3. Try this exercise. In the Law, find verses that regulate treatment of animals. For example, chapters 22–25 of Deuteronomy have a number of these. Consider what principles might be implied about how to treat people. Notice how these regulations are intertwined with ethical and moral laws.
4. How do you sympathize with those who suffer unjustly? What plan do you have to do something about it?
5. Who are the enemies of the faith? How do we wage war against these enemies? What weapons do we use? What is your plan to hone and sharpen these weapons?
6. In what ways might God accommodate himself to us? How do you think the ideal Christian society would be different from ours?
7. What must a Christian consider when taking up arms for a nation? How do you navigate your dual roles as a member of Christ's kingdom and a citizen of the state?

THE SISSY, THE SISTERS, AND SISERA



The Deborah cycle consists of two halves, chapters 4 and 5 of Judges, which together form a complete picture. (We will leave Shamgar for later, although he is mentioned in Judges 5:6.) Chapter 4 recounts events in almost entirely human and natural terms, the second in supernatural and extraordinary terms. This is a clue to how to interpret every event in Judges: what seems mundane and secular is in fact religious and spiritual. The spiritual situation, though frequently invisible, *drives* the natural events forward. We will treat the first chapter in three parts: introduction to the story, what happened in the battle, and finally how the commander's misfortune mounted.

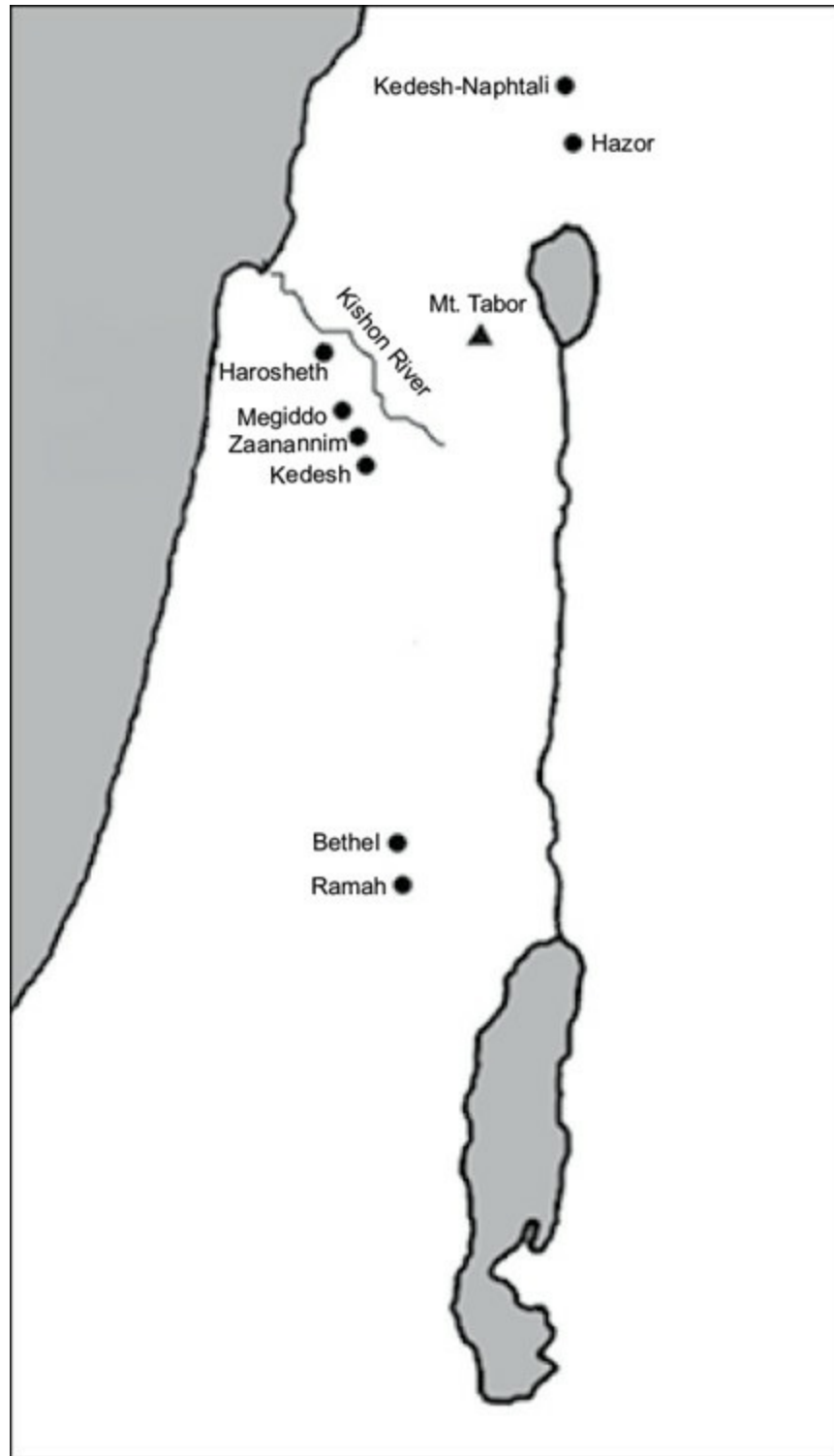
JUDGING JABIN—JUDGES 4:1–11

True to the expected pattern, Israel yet again turns from Yahweh to evil. This time God responds by leaving the people in the power of Jabin of Canaan, who ruled from Hazor, for half of forty years. His general Sisera had nine hundred iron chariots—an overwhelming military force. The major place names for the story are shown on the map below. Sisera is based in Harosheth, near the Kishon River. There are two cities of Kedesh, one up north in Naphtali, and the other also in the Kidron Valley by the river. Jabin's stronghold of Hazor is near Barak's city of Kedesh-Naphtali. Deborah lived between Bethel and Ramah, in the mountainous region of Ephraim. We will trace the action in a moment.

Deborah is introduced as a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth. Lappidoth, whose name means “torches” or “lamps” (see Judg. 15:5), does not actually have anything to do with the story; Deborah seems quite independent. It has been suggested that “woman of *lappidoth*” means that she was an ardent,

spirited woman.¹ She was literally “judging Israel” (4:4). But what was it that Deborah was actually doing? Although English translations read as though she was a judicial magistrate who decided legal cases, in fact the Hebrew of 4:5 reads this way: “the sons of Israel went up to her for the judgment.” This “suggests that a particular issue was at stake, not a series of cases or a routine fulfillment of professional duties.”² What issue? The answer is found in what preceded and followed. The Israelites were oppressed > they went to her for the judgment > she called for Barak to deliver them. “The context makes it clear what that issue is: the oppression of Israel at the hands of Jabin and the Canaanites.”³ Israel went to the prophetess to hear God’s word. *Deborah* means “bee,” but it also sounds like the Hebrew for “word,” *deber*. *Deborah* presented the *deber* of God.

In response to Israel’s seeking Yahweh’s will, Deborah called for Barak. The Hebrew is better represented as *Baraq*, which means “lightning.”⁴ Fire and lightning unite to save Israel. Through the prophetess God gave marching orders to Barak: gather ten thousand soldiers on Mount Tabor. God promised to hand over Sisera with his nine hundred chariots at the Kishon River. This might not have seemed like a very good battle plan. Mount Tabor looks like an overturned bowl. If Sisera’s nine hundred iron chariots managed to surround the hill with all of Barak’s forces on it, there would be no escape and Israel would have lost ten thousand.



Barak did not argue *per se*, but he did ask for insurance. He would trust God's *deber* only if the prophetess would actually be there with him. For this sissy behavior, Deborah prophesied that the honor of destroying Sisera would go to a woman. No doubt Barak (and the first-time reader) assumed that this

meant Judge Deborah. They all met up in Kedesh near Zaanannim and the river. Then they apparently moved north again to Mount Tabor. This was God's ploy to lure out Sisera.

One more player is introduced in Judges 4:11: Heber the Kenite. He lived near the action at Zaanannim. Perhaps Heber was in the employ of King Jabin, a mercenary chieftain who kept a vital trade route open for him.⁵ But he was a Kenite, like Othniel and Caleb. The text even identifies his pedigree in relation to Moses' family. We have a man of dubious loyalty, perhaps regarded as disreputable by his own family. "By allying himself with the king of Hazor as a mercenary, Heber was in effect betraying his own kin and coreligionists."⁶

BEE'S LIGHTNING—JUDGES 4:12–16

As stated above, Mount Tabor was indefensible against Sisera's forces. Sisera took advantage of the opportunity, and his nine hundred iron chariots began speeding along the Kishon River toward Tabor, no doubt hoping to surround it and trap Barak. But Deborah declared to Barak that the tables would be turned and Sisera's forces would be destroyed. Barak's ten thousand foot soldiers left the death trap of the hill and headed for the river to meet Sisera's invincible force of advanced metallurgical design. If the text were actually a military history, the reader might expect a spectacular slaughter to come next—ten thousand mere footmen against Sisera's oncoming storm of death-dealing technology.

But what we get is a complete anticlimax. All the buildup in the story is dispelled in a mere eight words (in Hebrew): "Yahweh confused Sisera and every chariot; Barak put the whole army to the sword" (Judg. 4:15a). What? How about the chariots? What happened? How did God "confuse" them? Something big must have happened, something unexpected—but we are not told what. The text simply isn't interested in the battle itself. (Typically, Judges reserves the play-by-play for intramural violence.)

At this point, the reader must assume that somehow Barak's men won against all expectation—because they trusted the word of God. Deborah announces the victory, and Israel wins the day. Here is an interesting note: it says that Sisera fled on foot. Why would a man with a chariot have to run on foot? Judges makes the reader wait for the answer.

Except for Deborah's song of chapter 5, she is now done. Although she is called a judge, in her sixteen verses all she actually does is prophesy. She directs the battle plan and announces victory beforehand. Hebrews 11:32 and 1 Samuel 12:11 mention Barak, but not her. God isn't said to have "raised" her up. She isn't called a "savior," but a "mother" (Judg. 5:7).

Think of Deborah as doing what the Angel of the Lord does in the Gideon cycle next.⁷ Daniel Block finds these parallels between the Angel with Gideon, and Deborah with Barak: (1) she called Barak; (2) she gave him a task; (3) he protested; and (4) she reassured him with a sign (she joined him). Her judgeship consisted in her role as prophetess, and together with Barak she saved Israel. If she is a bee, then her sting is the lightning of Barak.

GOAT'S MILK—JUDGES 4:17–24

The assassination of Sisera is similar to the assassination of Eglon in that both accounts use rare words that require special attention. Below is the text with these words highlighted.

And Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with/by the *semikah*. Then he said to her, "Let me drink a little water; for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and she let him drink. And she covered him. And he said to her, "Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, 'Is any man here?' say, 'No.' " But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent stake, and took a hammer in her hand, and went in to him secretly and she thrust the stake into his *raqqah*. She *zanach*-ed into the ground, as he was sleeping and exhausted. So he died. (Judg. 4:18–21)

Raqqah is rare. Traditionally it has been translated "temple." But as a verb, it means "to spit" (Lev. 15:8), and *roq* means "spittle" (Job 7:19). It is the part of a pomegranate (perhaps when ripe and split open like a smile) that reminds the lover of his beloved's face in the Song of Songs (Song 4:3). Taking all this into consideration, it has been suggested that *raqqah* here means "mouth."⁸ Thus Jael rammed a shaft through Sisera's oral cavity into the back of his throat. The text says that Sisera was "sleeping *and exhausted*." The Hebrew word for "exhausted" occurs only five times in the Bible, always with the sense of being worn out. One would normally expect the verbs in reverse order, "he was worn out, so he slept." Although the verbs are in the

opposite order, that is still the sense, and it should be translated along these lines: “He slept, having been fagged.”

Note also the verb *zanach*. In the Bible it is found in only one other context, which is also in Judges. A woman *dismounted* from her beast of burden (Judg. 1:14). This word also describes Jael’s action. It is here that the translations are not consistent. The NIV reads that Achsah “*got off* her donkey,” but that Jael “*drove* the [tent] peg through his temple into the ground.” The KJV says that Achsah “*lighted* from off her ass” and that Jael “*smote* the nail into his temples.” But what if the same word is used because Achsah and Jael *both* dismounted to the ground? Jael then would have been astride Sisera when she penetrated his orifice. As Eglon was mocked by being compared with a sacrificial calf, now Sisera is mocked by being compared with Achsah’s donkey.

Jael and Sisera: A Canonical/Traditional Reading

Note that before Jael *zanach*-ed to the ground, she “thrust the stake” into Sisera’s head. The verb *thrust* and the noun *peg*, *stake* are found together again later in Judges, again wielded by a woman who seeks and finally accomplishes a great man’s downfall while he sleeps. There, the noun is glossed “pin.” Delilah “thrust” the “pin” into Samson’s head to destroy him while he slept (Judg. 16:14). Finally, as he slept between her legs, she did ruin him (16:19). The book of Judges wants the reader to draw a connection between Jael and Sisera, and Samson and Delilah. After Jael, Delilah is the only named woman in Judges. In what other ways are the two dominatrixes alike?

The name *Jael* means “mountain goat,” a word built from the verb “to go up,” which in Genesis 31:10, 12, and 49:4 (twice) has the sense of “mated” or “copulated.” The verb is used for human incest and mating animals, and forms a wordplay (as a masculine verb) with the name *Jael*.⁹

The Talmud preserves interpretative traditions dating back into antiquity, in some cases possibly even to the time of Christ. There, in Tractates *Nazir* and *Yebamoth*, Rabbi Jonathan claims that Sisera and Jael had sex seven times; this is how Jews understood the story throughout the Middle Ages. To find libidinous passion in Jael’s tent is nothing new. Rabbi Jonathan understands the phrase that Sisera “bowed between her knees” in the sense of “copulated” (Judg. 5:27).

Another indication of how this passage was understood in antiquity may be seen in the apocryphal book of Judith. Judith arguably draws upon our story and retells it. Judith mocks the pagan general, portraying him as stupid in regard to sex. He put himself foolishly in harm's way because he was enamored of Judith (Judith 12:16). The text emphasizes Judith's beauty, as well as her preparation to be as alluring as possible. She got Holofernes drunk, he passed out, and she lopped off his head. She said, "It was my face that tricked him to his destruction" (13:16). The story makes it clear that Judith's honor was intact, but Judges makes no attempt to preserve Jael's reputation. Judith and Holofernes reads like a cleaned-up version of Jael and Sisera, but it retains sexual tension. (At her door, when Jael told Sisera, "Fear not!," did she mean the pursuers, or her husband? She went out, got him, and brought him to her tent, assuring him that it was safe. Compare with the adulteress of Proverbs 7:10–23. See also Proverbs 9:15–16.) Sisera asked for water; she gave him milk. She gave him what she pleased, not what he had asked for. How far did this go?

There is one other rare word to explain, which occurs only here in the whole Bible: *semikah*. One must make an educated guess. Is it something Jael used to cover Sisera, like a blanket or a rug? Keep in mind that she was a Bedouin in a small tent. If her tent were searched, would enemy soldiers not check under that big trembling lump in the corner? Perhaps *semikah* means something else entirely. Pamela Reis notes that as a verb (*samak*) the word means "to lean upon, to rest one's weight upon." Reis argues that this is just what Jael did, twice: she covered him by climbing on top—she put her weight on him, in the "female superior position."¹⁰ Thus Jael was positioned as the man. Perhaps this is why, in Hebrew, when Sisera asks Jael to "stand" by the tent door, the verb is inflected *masculine*, as if he were addressing a man. A Freudian slip? Or the narrator's clue? A translation along the lines of Reis's reading might look something like this:

And Jael propositioned Sisera, saying, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she mounted him, sitting on him. After, he said to her, "Let me drink a little water; for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and she let him drink. Again she mounted him. And he said to her, "Stand at the door of the tent, and if anyone comes and asks you, 'Is any man here?' say, 'No.' " But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent stake, and took a hammer

in her hand, and went in to him secretly and she thrust the stake into his mouth. She dismounted to the ground. He was fast asleep and sexually spent—thus he died. (Judg. 4:18–21)

Sisera is compared with a beast of burden that Jael dismounted, and she “unmans” him—she feminizes him—not only in her position during intercourse, but also in that she penetrated his aperture. He even addresses her as if she were a man. And in a final indignity visited upon him by the author, Sisera is made to say, “Hey, Jael! If anyone asks, ‘Is there a *man* here,’ tell them no!” Why not? Because there wasn’t a man there. Not a *real* man. Just a sissy! (Imagine the Israelites rolling in the aisles laughing whenever *this* story was told!)

Imagine how she positions herself for the kill. Reis observes that mountain goats are known for climbing, and envisions Jael climbing up a third time with a mallet in one hand and a stake in the other. When she was up there and about to strike, if he had opened his eyes, she could have quickly put her hands behind her back and said, “Hey, honey, care for number three?” This is why the verbs are out of order: he was sleeping, for she had worn him out.¹¹ Like Judith’s Holofernes, Delilah’s Samson, and Proverbs’ young man (chapter 7), Sisera was stupid for sex, and it cost him his life.

Although some may puzzle over Jael’s morality, we should not be too quick to judge her. The result of her actions was prophesied by Deborah (Judg. 4:9). What Jael accomplished was part of God’s plan all along to deal with Jabin’s oppression of Israel. And her extraordinary performance earned her the title “Most Blessed among Women!” (5:24). Unlike evildoers whom God used for a good purpose (such as Joseph’s brothers), the sacred text treats her as a Judith-like heroine. Chapter 4 ends with Jabin destroyed, in no small part due to Jael’s assistance. Although God is credited, Israel accomplishes it (see 4:24). The chapter is almost entirely focused on human agency, and *not* on what God actually did. (Chapter 5 gives the rest of the story.)

Sisera and Eglon

Sisera is mocked in the story as Eglon had been. The two assassinations frame the defeat of Israel’s enemies Moab and Canaan. Sisera is treated as a beast of burden that Jael dismounted. This is reminiscent of how Adonibezek was earlier dehumanized (Judg. 1:6). Sisera was stupid for sex as

Holofernes was with Judith. Foreigners, then, are foolish and gullible and driven by their base instincts. Merely being killed by a woman is shameful (see 9:54). The text also despises the collaborator Heber through his wife Jael's behavior. So those whose loyalty is not with Israel are also objects of scorn and mockery.

But in addition to mocking the foreign oppressor, the text is also a critique of leadership in Israel. God directed Barak through a woman, and providentially kept him from the honor of killing Sisera. Thus, the initiative of both elements of the story comes from women, emphasizing that Israel lacked strong male leadership. It also shows that God can use anyone to accomplish his ends. But the text does not tell us what God, apart from human agents, actually did. To that we must now turn.

KISHON, QUAKE, AND CLOUDBURST (OR, COSMIC CHUTZPAH)—JUDGES 5:1–31

Chapter 5 is a theological interpretation of these events that unveils what God did at this battle. This is paradigmatic of all of Judges' battles—behind seemingly mundane accounts of human beings with dubious motivations is a divine purpose moving events forward to a providential end. Now the text unveils what was hidden in chapter 4, what God was doing throughout.

Yahweh's involvement began some time before the actual battle, far south of Israel in the mountains of Edom and Seir (Judg. 5:4–5). God transported much atmospheric moisture from there, just in time to pour it into the Kishon Valley and upstream, causing the river to swell (5:21). God also caused an earthquake, a landslip that might have suddenly released hitherto-contained water, resulting in a flash flood. (Who knows how far back in time *that* was started.) Edom and Seir were nowhere near the battle, but in the perspective of chapter 5, the battle's scope is enlarged to include a much larger area.

How were the chariots defeated near the Kishon River? Through an earthquake and rainstorm, God precisely timed a flash flood for the exact moment when the nine hundred iron chariots would be rushing along the Kidron Valley and the Israelites would be running down to meet them. At that moment, the river rose too fast for Sisera's forces to avoid getting bogged down in the water and mud. While the charioteers tried to free their vehicles, the Israelites came upon them—it was a rout and slaughter. Here the emphasis is on the God of the Storm's fighting for Israel. It is a different way

of viewing what happened—a theological account of the battle. God used the weather as a weapon of war against his enemies.

But it is even bigger than that. In Judges 5:20 the scope of the battle is cosmic; the stars themselves left their courses and fought for Israel. Consider this: in 1131 B.C. there was a total eclipse of the sun near Megiddo, in the early afternoon of September 30. During an eclipse, planets and stars that are not normally observed become visible.¹² The text wants us to imagine all these forces of nature brought to bear at once. The river rose, the chariots were bogged down, and perhaps an unexpected and sudden cover of darkness kept the Canaanites from noting Barak's charge until it was too late.

All Israel needed was to participate in Yahweh's great victory. God had already disabled and immobilized the enemy, leaving Israel to mop up. (Is it a coincidence that *Baraq* means "lightning"? God brought the storm and the quake, with lightning.)

The Haves and the Have-Nots

This brings us to the other point that chapter 5 makes: some Israelites participated, and some did not. Deborah divided Israel into the good ones who put their lives at risk and those who stayed home. The northern tribes, Benjamin, and Manasseh (Machir) are commended. The volunteers, poorly equipped country farmers, willingly put themselves in harm's way. Against all odds, they stepped out in faith and joined the suicide mission because God's prophetess told them to. Thus they shared in the glory of victory and celebration.

But Reuben, Gad, Dan, and Asher stayed home soul-searching and navel-gazing. While they were considering, Yahweh's battle was fought and won. The Angel of the Lord bitterly curses the very obscure city of "Meroz" for failure to join (Judg. 5:23); God fights from heaven, and the Angel of heaven has something to say about those who held back. Not only can God's people participate in his victory; they also are judged and even cursed if they fail to do so. *The reason Jael is called "Most Blessed Woman" is that those who participate in God's victory are blessed—and she was the one woman who took up arms and joined the battle* (5:24). The final verse of Deborah's song could be a theme for the whole of Judges: "Thus let perish all your enemies, O Yahweh! And let those who love him be like the coming out of the sun in his might!" (5:31). God's worshipers are like the sun coming out after a

storm—or an eclipse.

Comparing the Two Accounts

What do we see when we put the two chapters side by side? One is prose, the other poetry. One is historical narrative, the other a victory song in verse. Chapter 4 focuses on human agency, and God is in the background. Chapter 5 focuses on God's actions, and peoples choose whether to be included in them. In chapter 4, Barak was timid; in chapter 5, some tribes were timid. In chapter 4, only two tribes fought; in chapter 5, many more fought. The first gives reasons for the oppression; the latter describes what this oppression was like. The former seems more down-to-earth, while the latter seems larger than life (Jael uses a "magnificent bowl," other Canaanite kings were in the battle, etc.). Each half of the story needs the other. Chapter 5 needs the detailed account so that it has something to bring its perspective to bear upon; chapter 4 is pointless without chapter 5 to give it meaning.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Having gone over the story, we can now discuss its meaning in various stages of redemptive history. If this story was included in a collection by David's apologists during the struggle with Saul's son Ish-bosheth, what would it have meant?

As Apology for David against Saul

In Deborah's song describing the conditions Israel suffered under Jabin, a reader in David's time might have recognized that under the Philistines things were not any better.¹³ Deborah's recitation of Israel's need for salvation was a call for Israel to unite under the leader provided by God. Richard Hess suggests for Judges 5:8, "When God chose new ones," that God selected new fighters for a new situation.¹⁴ Might this be a David-era call for regime change? The battle climaxed with Jael the Kenite's taking Sisera; thus, "the choicest of the spoil was taken by a woman from a clan traditionally associated with Judah."¹⁵ Even in this story about a northern leader, Judah reaches out from the south with the story's *coup de grâce*—the victory depended on David's tribe. It is notable that Deborah does not rebuke the people of Judah, even though they were not there; they get a pass from the prophet of God. Jael did their work.¹⁶

Consider the song as an appeal for tribal unity during the contest between

the two houses of Saul and David. Deborah rebukes tribes for musing and holding back, refusing to join the league against a common foe. Is this a call for some to get off the fence and join David?

Interestingly, Psalm 83:10 claims that Sisera died at En-dor (near Megiddo by the Kishon River). Is this where Saul consulted the witch before he died (1 Sam. 28:7)?¹⁷ Is Sisera also a tacit reminder of how reckless Saul became in the end, which led to his terrible death—another argument as to why new leadership is needed?

What Did It Mean in Light of Deuteronomy?

Deborah's song seems cut from the same cloth as the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 33. These are the only two songs like this in the Bible. Both begin with God's spectacular appearance, coming from the far south, and both comment on the individual tribes. Seen against this background, what stands out is how Deborah's song alters Moses' to censor some tribes. This point folds into the larger Deuteronomic narrative of Judges that when the Israelites sinned, they earned the covenant curse. The whole situation was brought about because of their sin, it was *not* the fault of Jabin or Sisera. The lesson here is that when the Jews fail to keep covenant, they can expect oppression and failure.

Perhaps it is along these lines that the text denies Bethel the dignity of housing Deborah. She is said to have lived outside the city (Judg. 4:5). Bethel is where, later during the divided monarchy, Jeroboam would set up a golden calf. It was in Bethel that the Angel of the Lord judged them, causing them to weep and to call it *Bochim*. Perhaps basing Deborah outside Bethel was a way of denying it any legitimacy; a true spokesman for Yahweh did not live there. So for the faithful living during the time of the shrine at Bethel, the text avoids affording Bethel any credibility.

Of course, under the administration of Baal-promoting monarchs such as Ahab and Jezebel, the text shows that Yahweh controls the weather. He is the true God of the storm, not Baal.

At an even later time, during King Josiah's reign, the book of the law was discovered. Huldah the prophetess told the leaders what to do to restore a right relationship with God (2 Kings 22:14). The Deborah cycle would have helped Josiah's reform effort with a historical example of how success and

victory come through worshiping Yahweh and heeding the prophetess. Judges says in effect, “We should listen to the prophetess. Shame on those who don’t.”

During the Babylonian exile, reading this story would remind the Israelites that they were oppressed in the first place because of their evil idolatry. It was never the case that Yahweh was a weaker god than the Canaanites’ gods. In the same way, Yahweh is not weaker than Babylon’s gods, no matter what the present circumstance. Deliverance is found in heeding the word of God and remaining true to him.

What Does It Mean in the Light of Christ?

Hebrews 11:32–34 ignores Deborah and claims that Barak won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight—by faith. Deborah, being a prophetess, perhaps had a direct pipeline to God and thus a supernatural confidence that allowed her to declare victory in advance, regardless of what the battlefield looked like. But Barak had no such confidence, and Hebrews mentions him, and not her, as one who was called to step out in faith to obtain victory. Judges 5:18 even celebrates how Zebulun and Naphtali put themselves in harm’s way in response to God’s word. The writer of Hebrews connects this kind of action with hearing the gospel and believing. Barak won the battle, says Hebrews, and today many hear the gospel, believe, and accomplish that which Sisera and the Canaanites typified—the real war against sin, Satan, and the temptations of the world. When we turn in faith to Jesus, we are exercising the same faith that Deborah called Barak to exercise.

Judges 4–5 does not dwell on the evil that got Israel into trouble in the first place. But some tribes are criticized for refusing to participate in God’s victory. Reuben was playing pipes for the sheep, Gad stayed home, Asher sat still, Dan cared for naught but ships. Hanging back when God is on the move brings censure and even a curse (Judg. 5:23). Hebrews 12:25 says, “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.” Do not miss out on the gospel. If you fail to get on board with what God is doing, you risk forfeiting salvation. You have heard the gospel—now respond in faith. This is what the Deborah cycle *means*.

The divine Angel cursed “Meroz” (Judg. 5:23). Compare this action with Matthew 11:20–24:

Then he began to upbraid the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

The Lord of glory still demands a response of faith. When his people fail to believe, they are judged. Therefore, believe and obey the gospel.

APPLYING THE TEXT TODAY

Note the cosmic struggle in chapter 5 that stands behind the political and military battle of chapter 4. One can view the battle as a test to see which tribes would believe God and which would not. Behind the human drama was a spiritual battle—with the clouds, the mountains, and even the stars themselves as players. “From heaven the stars fought. From their paths they fought against Sisera” (Judg. 5:20). Sisera was not just Israel’s enemy; he was God’s. Compare that with the experience of New Testament believers. According to Ephesians 6:10–17, behind Christians’ struggle with persecutions and temptations is another invisible struggle in the heavenly realms. God promises victory there—one must step up and engage. Christians must actually put on their armor and stand.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the

flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Eph. 6:10–17 NIV)

This is what the Deborah cycle *means*. Engage God's enemies, since he has already secured each victory. "So perish all your enemies, O Yahweh, but those who love you are like the sun coming out in all his might" (Judg. 5:31). This is the book of Judges in a nutshell. The stars fought for Israel. Paul says that Christians shine as stars in the world (Phil. 2:15). Jesus says to "let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Live, then, as worshipers of God. Honor him in your life.

If you think that God cannot use you to accomplish his purposes, look at the book of Judges. It depicts a time when everyone did what was right in his own eyes—a time much like today. The biblical heroes then were flawed characters, too. God can use anyone. Yet one must pause, as in the case of Ehud, and ask: Should we go and do likewise? Are Jael's methods legitimate today? Would we call such a woman "blessed" today and celebrate her? Or would we put her in jail, even if she did such a thing in the course of a war? One answer to these questions is seen in the Ephesians quotation above. The history of redemption has moved on, and now the weapons that Christians use befit the battle they engage in, which is spiritual. We can look at the outrageous deeds of Jael, however, and see the sort of thing that went on when there was no king in Israel and all the people did what was right in their own eyes. We can also see that even under those circumstances, God providentially worked out all things for good, to those who love him and are called according to his purposes (Judg. 5:31).

TOWARD THE ESCHATON

What is the ultimate meaning of the story? Isaiah 9:1–7 recalls the humbling of Naphtali and Zebulun, and Gideon's victory in Judges 6–8. Isaiah connects this with the birth of a leader, a child, on whose shoulders the government will rest. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His rule will never end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness, from that time on and forever. This leader will bring peace against the backdrop of Israel's bloody history of struggle and warfare. We await his return, when he will do to his enemies as he had done

to Sisera and Midian. Every battle in Judges points forward to the final victory over sin and Satan. This truth is reiterated in Psalm 83:1–18, where again, what happened to Sisera and what will happen to Midian in the next cycle foreshadow the judgment that will be on all nations.

God's enemies are conceptualized in the New Testament as spiritual forces behind persecutions. All who deny Christ today are also his enemies—but for now, he withholds judgment and extends salvation to them all. But when the day of salvation is over, whoever held back will experience his everlasting curse—which the defeat of Canaan by Barak typifies.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Appearances may be deceiving. How has an overwhelming problem simply gone away when God intervenes?
2. Barak faced what seemed like overwhelming odds, which turned out to be a paper tiger. The book of Hebrews says that this kind of situation is normative for a Christian. See Hebrews 12:1–14. So lift your drooping hands. Pursue godliness and salvation.
3. Israel threw off the oppressor by heeding the word of God. What connection can you make from this to your own life?
4. In regard to Jael, “most blessed among women,” how should a Christian “go and do likewise”? And how not? Are her methods legitimate today? Why or why not?
5. Is Jael an example of everyone doing what was right in her own eyes? If so, why is she celebrated rather than censored?
6. Sisera was stupid for sex. What temptations cause you to lose your head and behave foolishly? What steps can you take to break this cycle?
7. Notice how idolatrous faiths are not respected, but discredited, sometimes through ridiculing their worshipers. What claims of faith out there today rival the gospel? How are these claims ultimately absurd? What sorts of results ensue when their advocates put these faiths into practice?
8. God is on the move—how are you moving with him?
9. Jesus has something to say about those who refuse to enter into his salvation. What will he say about you on the last day?

10. How far in advance did God plan Israel's salvation at the Kishon River?
Have you ever been impatient with God's timing? How did it work out?

11. How do you exercise the faith of Barak?

12. Think of what it was like for the ordinary people, the farmers, who had to leave their families and sacrifice whatever they would produce, in order to join Barak. Deborah celebrates their willingness to do this. To what does such an example call you?

Before you preach or teach about Jael, do an Internet search for "Sisera Talmud seven."

8

MASTERING MIDIAN



The Gideon narrative covers three chapters and has consequences spilling into a fourth. Chapter 6 describes God’s initial dealings with Gideon, a timid, doubting farmer. He learns to trust God in chapter 7, which translates into courage. It is here that one of the premises of this book can be clearly seen: the mission on which God sends Spirit-empowered people will be accomplished, despite their waywardness and sin. In this case, the mission was to rid the land of monsters in the form of human locusts. Unfortunately, in chapter 8, God fades from the picture and Gideon, having acquired power and status, takes Israel back to where it started—idolatry and sin.

GOD GUIDES GUTLESS GIDEON—JUDGES 6:1–40

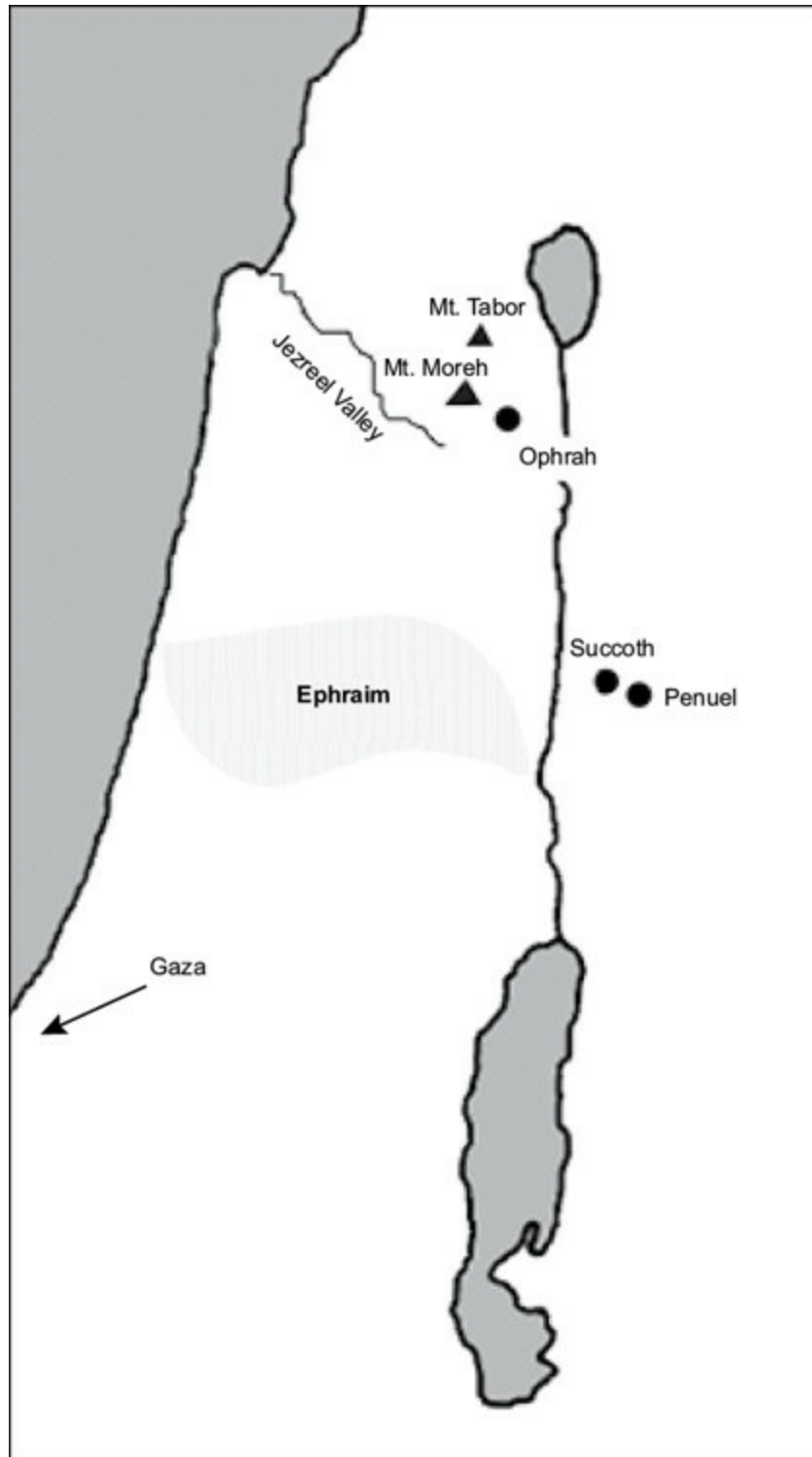
Midian is to the far south of Israel. It is the land from which God brought water to save Israel (chapter 5). Moses’ father-in-law was a priest in Midian, and the Kenites were from there. But in Judges, the Amalekites partnered with Midian to overrun Israel. This partnership lasted a consummate seven years. The Midianites are described as human locusts, devouring everything like a plague—a worse terror than Jabin’s nine hundred iron war machines. First the south blew in life-giving water, and then it blew in locust-men. It was so bad that Israelites were reduced to living in caves and barricading themselves in forts. This was because they once again did evil: in this case, Baal-worship. One cultic center was the house of Gideon’s father, in Ophrah. The relevant places are shown on the map below. The Midianite incursion was from the south, and from across the Jordan River to the east. In fact, the enemy includes the so-called “peoples of the East” (Judg. 6:33).

When the people cried out to Yahweh for relief, he did not immediately raise up a judge. Instead, he sent to them a prophet, who rebuked them for their idolatry. This addition demarcates the Gideon cycle as taking the overall

narrative of Judges further. It is notable that the unnamed prophet addressed Israel in very similar terms as the Angel of the Lord did in 2:1–5. First, this divine messenger brought a covenant lawsuit against Israel. Now, we see a human prophet following in his footsteps. The heavenly envoy sets the pattern for the prophetic word of judgment in all the rest of biblical history. Every subsequent prophet who brings a case against Israel on the basis of law follows the paradigm established in Judges by the Angel.

“Hail, Mighty Warrior”—Judges 6:11–16

After the prophet’s rebuke, the Angel of the Lord arrives on the scene. He finds Gideon threshing wheat in a winepress. To thresh efficiently, one must have a breeze to blow away chaff; a partly submerged winepress is ineffective. We meet Gideon trying it anyway, to avoid being seen by the locust-men. And yet the Angel addresses him as a mighty warrior. Jesus said to Peter, “You are a pebble, but on this bedrock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). A number of such sayings anticipate Peter as a leader after Pentecost (Luke 22:31–32; John 21:15–17; Acts 1:15ff.). Perhaps something similar is meant here: although Gideon is now fearful and shy, he will soon become mighty in war.



But Gideon's reply is to question whether God was with Israel at all: "Where are the wonders our fathers speak of?" (Judg. 6:13). And Yahweh replies this way: "Go in your own strength and save Israel" (6:14). Yes, it is true that the guarantee of success is that Yahweh sends him, and it is also true

that Gideon will soon be empowered with God's Spirit. But in this verse, God makes the case that Gideon already has what is needed to expel this apparently invincible foe.

The heart of evangelical spirituality is the idea that Christians should move in God's strength, not their own. This verse runs contrary to that notion. God says to Gideon that he does *not* need divine aid, that he can do it *himself*. When up against Sisera's chariots, Israel needed God to intervene with rain, quake, and perhaps an eclipse. But now, with an even greater and more destructive foe, Gideon is told that no such help will be needed. Gideon already has all the resources that he needs to throw off Midian. Gideon, in fact, lacks only one thing: faith. Be careful what you wish for. Gideon complains that God has allowed this terrible situation, and God's reply is: "You fix it."

Note also the two modes of revelation in this narrative. Yahweh sends the Angel to Gideon. The Angel speaks on behalf of the One who sent him (Judg. 6:14, 16). Notice that after the Angel disappears, Yahweh continues to speak with Gideon (6:21–23). Later, the Spirit of Yahweh transforms Gideon. Thus Gideon experiences Yahweh in three modalities: in direct discourse, through his messenger, and in his Spirit, who equips him for the mission. The God of Judges is deep and rich, profound and multifaceted. He has much more in common with Christian Trinitarian theology than with the simple monad of modern-day Judaism or Islam.

Gideon and Moses—Judges 6:17–32

Judges 6:17–24 is similar to the call of Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:1–4:16). First, Moses was doing an ordinary agricultural task (for a Midianite) when called. Second, Moses met Yahweh's Angel in fire (the burning bush), as the Angel disappeared in fire (Judg. 6:21). Third, Yahweh was introduced to Moses as the God of his fathers. Fourth, he said that he would deliver Israel from Egypt (Gideon specifically said that this part was hard to believe). Fifth, like Gideon later, Moses was given two signs to convince the people that his message was really from God, and another sign of water (turning water into blood). Sixth, Moses felt inadequate and asked to be excused from this task, prompting God's anger. And seventh, God gave Moses a task to perform.

Given these seven parallels between the call narrative of Moses and the

story of Gideon, it seems that Gideon asked for a sign for the same reason that Moses did: so that Israel might be convinced that it really was God who had spoken with him. Gideon is like Moses, sent by God to deliver his people, accompanied by miraculous signs.

Gideon built an altar to Yahweh at Ophrah, and Judges 6:24 claims that it was still extant. Thus, Gideon's story dates to when the physical altar was still there.

Gideon's mission is to deliver Israel—but before he could destroy the political enemy, the land must be spiritually cleansed. Gideon's first task is to throw down his father's idolatrous altar and to build in its place a proper altar to Yahweh (Judg. 6:25–32). Gideon does this under cover of darkness, fearful of the people. *Gideon* means “hewer, chopper,” perhaps reflecting his action of cutting down Baal's altar. Consequently, he is explicitly given another name, *Jerubbaal*, or “one who contends with Baal.” The root word in the name is *rib*,¹ denoting “to contend.” This is what the prophet had done earlier; he brought a charge against Israel on the basis of the covenant. The prophet, it was argued above, followed in the footsteps of the Lord's Angel in doing this. Now Gideon also images Yahweh by contending with his enemies in opposing pagan worship. Gideon is beginning to look like a messenger of God.

This angers the townspeople, who want to kill him for it. His father argues that if Baal was a god, Baal could stand up for himself. But Gideon's trouble is paradigmatic of the sort of trouble Christians can expect when we, like Gideon, expose the impotence of our culture's gods and claim that in only one Name can people be saved. In such a situation, Christians must value the praise of God rather than men (John 12:43), and fear no human enemy (Prov. 29:25). We must learn, with Gideon, that to trust God is to overcome one's fear of man. Only then can we step out in faith to accomplish our mission: to build God's church and his kingdom, through converting the lost and living out our calling.

Water and Spirit—Judges 6:33–40

The battle is edging closer. The enemy has crossed the Jordan from the east, encamped close to where God defeated Sisera's forces before. In preparation for the conflict, the Spirit of Yahweh literally “clothes” Gideon. The “clothing” motif in Scripture runs deep. Moses descended from the

mountain of God physically glowing with the resplendence of the glory cloud (Ex. 34:35). Perhaps Adam and Eve also had a glory covering; perhaps this was lost when they sinned so that they knew they were naked. Aaron wore the vestments of the high priest, which were beautiful to behold, and brightly reflected light. Perhaps this symbolically recalled unfallen humanity in the garden, the tabernacle itself representing (among other things) Eden (Ex. 28). John borrows language from the description of Aaron's robes to describe Jesus as the glory of God incarnate (Rev. 1:12–16). So Aaron's robes look back to glorious humanity in Eden, and forward to future glorified humanity.

Today, we are called to be clothed in righteous deeds, bright and pure (Rev. 19:8). We are to put on the armor of light (Rom. 13:12), the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:11). We put on the new man, created in the image of God (Eph. 4:24), even the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 13:14). Gideon was clothed with the Spirit, and while clothed, he imaged God in taking dominion, in ruling as God's agent. He became an angel, a messenger, of Yahweh. The Spirit inspired him to call the troops and to lead them to victory. And so it is for us as well. We are clothed with Christ, empowered to fulfill the mission before us.

Even thus anointed, however, Gideon's old personality is still there. Apparently he still needs reassurance. What follows are two miraculous events, each involving dew. This is important, since Israel had been looking to Baal for life-giving rain. Baal's specialty was precipitation, including condensation. One of his daughters was even named *Dewy*. To disgrace Baal, Elijah would declare to Ahab, "There shall be neither *dew* nor rain" (1 Kings 17:1). Gideon's father says, "If Baal is a god, let him contend for himself" (Judg. 6:31). Deborah sang of Yahweh's ruling the storm. Now a final pair of signs clinch Yahweh's power in Baal's sphere: Yahweh is sovereign even over the dew. Gideon can march forward, having been shown that Baal is nothing and Yahweh is everything.

GIDDY GIDEON GETS GUTSY—JUDGES 7:1–25

Gideon has tested God, and now God returns the favor. Under Deborah, Israel had a force of ten thousand foot soldiers against a foe less powerful than Midian. Now, against a numberless enemy who had the whole run of the land, Gideon's army is reduced to a mere three hundred men. God's concern is that Israel would take credit for the victory if he were to allow more. First,

Gideon dismisses the ones who are apprehensive. Unlike before, to hold back from this battle carries no shame. This is a Deuteronomic procedure (Deut. 20:5–8).

The Hebrew of Judges 7:3 uses an unknown verb followed by the very far-removed “Gilead.” Such a word, found only once in the language, might be misspelled. If two letters are reversed, it spells “refined, tested”—exactly the same word for what God does in the next verse. Targum Judges reads it this way. Some also think “Gilead” once read “Gideon.” Thus, the RSV says, “And Gideon tested them.” If this is correct, then Gideon “refined” the first group and Yahweh “refined” the second. So Gideon does what God does; he is again imaging God.

The second testing was in how the men drank at the stream. One group “lapped” and the other “knelt.” Whoever exhibited doglike lapping behavior (actually using hands rather than tongues) was kept. Kneelers were sent home. So the battle would be between canine and locustlike men. Is it a coincidence that *Caleb* means “dog”? Is this a tacit way of saying that those who resemble Judah’s hero are God’s elect?

Gideon’s Turning Point—Judges 7:9–15

Although Gideon has been transformed into a leader, he still doubts the mission. One final sign remains to turn that key. He creeps near the enemy camp, close enough to overhear a conversation between guards. One relates to the other his dream of a rolling barley cake (signifying Gideon—he probably smiled, recognizing God’s poking fun at him for threshing grain in the grape press). The cake rolled into the camp with great force and flattened a tent. The second guard interprets the dream: Gideon will surely destroy Midian. The image of the fallen tent symbolizes the nation of Midian falling (see Amos 9:11). At this, Gideon is finally converted. He worships God then and there, and with full conviction calls on Israel to a sure and certain victory, heedless of the seemingly insurmountable enemy hordes. (This might be a good illustration for a Calvinist. First, Gideon was invested with the Spirit. But he was still seeking and doubting. Sometime after that, he came to a faith that saves.)

What happened? Such a simple dream, to have this great effect on Gideon? The state of affairs was this: *it was a matter of faith for the enemy, too.* Before the battle was fought, Midian was already spiritually defeated. This

realization moves Gideon to faith—he now becomes gutsy. Spiritually Gideon has already won the war.

Moses had sent spies into the Promised Land, and except for Joshua and Caleb, they returned with an evil report. The inhabitants there were giants and made the spies feel like “grasshoppers” (Num. 13:33). The Israelites were already spiritually defeated before any fighting could begin; as a result, they wandered for forty years. But a new generation arose, and when they in turn spied out the land, it was Canaan that was fearful. Under Joshua and Caleb, Canaan was already spiritually defeated before Israel set foot there (Josh. 2:11). Now it is the Midianites who are the grasshoppers, primed and ready to take flight. All Gideon really has to do is to jump up and yell, “Boo!” And he knows it.

The Rout—Judges 7:16–25

Gideon gives trumpets and clay jars to his three hundred troops. Each jar hides a torch within, so their nighttime approach would be stealthy. They move to the edge of the Midianite camp, and then suddenly blow on trumpets and break the jars, making hundreds of torches appear, apparently the vanguard of a great army. Yahweh causes the Midianites to panic and set upon each other. They flee, and as they run, Israelites from all the nearby tribes join in. Ephraim blocks the escape route and kills the generals Oreb and Zeeb. *Oreb* means “raven,” and *Zeeb* means “wolf,” animals that “deserve to be hunted down.”² Trumpets and lamps win the war. The insuperable odds and overwhelmingly superior forces were an illusion after all. *All it took was faith in God to break the spell of oppression.* The chimera of Midian supremacy simply melted away. Then the tribes had only to participate in God’s victory.

Yet one element of the account does not bode well. The battle cry was: “For Yahweh and for Gideon.” Gideon is beginning to morph into a different character. From this point on, it is difficult to tell what motivates Gideon—God’s will and glory, or his own. For the record, however, Yahweh leaves the story at this point, and the responsibility—and blame—is all Gideon’s hereafter.

EPHEMERAL EPHRAIM—JUDGES 8:1–4

God had appointed three hundred guys so that Israel wouldn’t boast—but

that is exactly what the tribe of Ephraim wants to do. Ephraim angrily confronts Gideon for keeping it out of the action. Perhaps the Ephraimites were part of the ten thousand troops that God rejected? Or even worse, perhaps they were part of the previous number who willingly left? Deborah had rebuked some tribes in song, but here there is more than simple criticism; here there is actual strife and confrontation between tribes. Still, it is just talk. No actual violence has taken place between tribes.

Note the role of Ephraim: too little, too late; its people are hotheads, wanting action but not around when courage is needed. Gideon answers their charge with this riddle: “Is not the *‘olelot* of Ephraim better than the *batsir* of Abiezer?” (Judg. 8:2). Abiezer was apparently Gideon’s clan (Josh. 17:2). “Are not your scraps better than my whole vineyard?” Josiah Derby suggests that although on the surface this sounds like a compliment (“the littlest you do is greater than the greatest I do”), in reality Gideon is insulting them (they accomplished little compared to him). “The Ephraimites were a contentious, arrogant tribe,”³ and if allowed to participate they would try to dominate the war effort and ruin it. But Gideon states his riddle as a question, so the thickheaded numbskulls stuck on themselves would misinterpret it as a compliment. The fact that they did shows them to be lacking the “right stuff” to lead.

ZEBAH AND ZALMUNNA—JUDGES 8:4–21

Gideon and his three hundred now pursue two Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, who have escaped across the Jordan and are heading south with fifteen thousand men. He stops by the city of Succoth and asks for food and drink, but they refuse. Gideon threatens reprisal and presses on. The same thing happens at Penuel: “When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower” (Judg. 8:9). “In peace” means “having brought the conflict to an end,” so some translations gloss “in triumph” (e.g., NIV) or “victorious” (e.g., NRSV). The Zebah and Zalmunna narrative can be arranged in a simple chiasm:

A Pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna 8:4–12

B Punishing the towns of Israel 8:13–17

A' Dispatching Zebah and Zalmunna 8:18–21

This arrangement may indicate that the story’s focus is in the middle: the punishment of Israel’s uncooperative towns. Gideon returns to Succoth with

the two Zs in tow, and punishes “seventy-seven” elders with briars and thorns. The word *briars* sounds like *Baraq* (from Judges 4) with an *-on* ending, meaning “little lightning.” Gideon takes the thorns, and here the translations usually read something like the Amplified Version, “and with them he taught the men of Succoth a lesson” (8:16). But the language in Hebrew is haunting: “With thorns . . . he caused the men of Succoth to know.” That is, he made them *know* him.⁴ This is chilling because it connects with the darkest moment in the book—when the men of Gibeah demand to “know” a fellow Israelite (19:22). Gideon’s actions have a nightmarish parallel to that terrible event. Although Gideon’s punishment is not sexual, what he does with those thorns anticipates the violence of Gibeah. And here we have, for the first time in Judges, Israelite-on-Israelite violence. This new development will continue throughout the book in chapter after chapter.

The book of Judges has demeaned previous military commanders: Adonibezek, Eglon, Sisera. This contrasts Gideon’s aborted attempt to humiliate the Zs by having a child kill them—they are *not* successfully mocked; rather, Gideon’s *failure* to humiliate them is showcased. But he *does* humble Succoth and Peniel. There is something just wrong with this picture. The savior that God has raised is harsher with two Israelite towns than two Midianite kings. He finally kills the Zs, and strips “little moons” from their camels (Judg. 8:21).

JUDGING JERUBBAAL—JUDGES 8:22–35

Israel wants to make Gideon into a king, but Gideon has no interest in a dynasty. He rightly says, “Yahweh will rule over you” (Judg. 8:23). In a single verse, Gideon dismisses kingship—but Judges takes five verses to describe what else he does: makes religious paraphernalia that lead Israel astray. He takes Ishmaelite-styled earrings and other items as spoil; with this small fortune he makes an ephod. Yes, only Yahweh is King—but who gets to be his spokesman?

Gideon’s legacy is threefold. First, Midian is permanently subdued, and the land rests for a paradigmatic forty years. Second, he has a harem and “seventy” sons, with one more in Shechem, named Abimelech, “My Father is king.” Finally, Israel forgets him and eventually returns to worship Baal as before. So the Gideon cycle ends as it began, with Israel playing the harlot after Baal.

LOCATING A LESSON WITH LESSER LOCUSTS

What does it all add up to? What is the point of this narrative? We may first guess what it might have meant in the days of David's struggle with Saul's house. The civil war was about who would be king over Israel. With Gideon, the theme of kingship is finally being explicitly explored in Judges. The Gideon cycle makes a number of observations that might have given the Jews food for thought, as they decided whom to follow.

"In terms of the life-setting which has been proposed, Gideon's insistence on Yahweh's kingship would serve as a splendid manifesto of the Davidic intent to fulfill the ideal of kingship, an announcement of the programme under which the new reign would operate."⁵ The ideal king is one who recognizes that Yahweh is the real King of Israel. Of course, Gideon rejected kingship. One model that Judges explores is that Israel could have no king at all. But this leads only to chaos, which becomes clear in part 3, the Levite section.

What does it mean to have a king who acknowledges that Yahweh is the true King of Israel? In 1 Samuel 22:17–19, Saul has Doeg kill eighty-five priests at Nob for their failure to detain David; then he puts the city to the sword, including women and children. This is reminiscent of what Gideon did to Succoth. Gideon killed seventy-seven elders at Succoth, then all the men of Peniel. Is the Gideon account a reminder that Saul slays Israelites in his paranoia and thirst for blood? Would an Israelite have seen the message, "This is also part of Saul's history; do we really want this again, O Israel?"

On the other hand, what about Gideon's laudatory qualities? They focus on his prowess against the oppressor (in David's day, the Philistines). Here is another reminder to Israel: we need a military leader. The Spirit came upon Gideon the reluctant leader, and when thus divinely clothed, he called Israel to battle and they responded. Compare this with Saul's career in 1 Samuel 10:20–11:7. Compare "as one man" in verse 7 with Judges 6:16. Gideon is a reminder of Saul: the good, the bad, and the ugly. But on balance, there is more that condemns Saul than what commends him.

Gideon operated in the power of the Spirit for at least part of his career. Military leaders with the Spirit are rare, but Saul and David are two of them. When one looks at Gideon, sometimes he looks like the earlier Saul and David, achieving victory in the Spirit. But the later Gideon looks more like

the later Saul, less and less clearly doing what Yahweh would have him do.

A Sermon on Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is all about the covenant with Israel, and how Israel will be blessed for being faithful to Yahweh and cursed with various bad things for being unfaithful. The story opens with God's prophet charging Israel with idolatry, and therefore bringing down on it the curses of Deuteronomy, such as Deuteronomy 28:38–42: "You shall carry much seed into the field, and shall gather little in; for the locust shall consume it. . . . All your trees and the fruit of your ground the locust shall possess." The cycle begins and ends with Israel's apostasy, deserving of the covenant sanctions.

Gideon fashions an ephod from crescents, rings, and other items. The ephod is the "symbol of cultic leadership," "traditionally an instrument of the high priest to divine God's will."⁶ Judges describes another ephod, the explicitly idolatrous one made by wayward Micah (Judg. 17:5). Diane Sharon notes that *all* references to an ephod after Aaron's are to evil transgressions against Yahweh, and that the golden calf in Exodus was also made from "rings of gold" (Ex. 32:2–3). Thus Gideon's ephod evokes the golden calf.

Remember that Jeroboam king of Israel also made two golden calves, placing one in Bethel and one in the city of Dan. Perhaps the ending vignette of Gideon is a comment on this cult, that it is a snare, leading Israel into a spiritual trap. During the reforms of Josiah, who cleaned up the cult and condemned alternatives (including Jeroboam's shrine at Bethel), the Gideon text could have helped to persuade Israel that a clean and proper cult of Yahweh secures his blessing.

During the exile in Babylon, the Jews might have found Gideon's story encouraging. Gideon asks what must have been on their minds: Why has Yahweh let this happen? Where are his wonderful deeds? Perhaps they read along with Gideon, "But now Yahweh has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Babylon" (Judg. 6:13). The Gideon cycle is a reminder that Israel had been under terrible oppression before, and that really, it was Yahweh with whom they have to do, not Nebuchadnezzar. Ultimately, Babylon's power is as empty as Midian's had been. (Babylon fell in a single day, and then the captives were allowed to return home.)

Gideon in the Light of the Gospel

God called Gideon, and he acted on his instructions, but Gideon had a hard time believing God. He questioned like a skeptic, and kept asking for signs. Why then does Hebrews 11:32–34 say the following?

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Even though Gideon was another reluctant leader like Barak, Hebrews puts him forward as an example, such that Christians should also, like him, go forth in faith to accomplish all that God has called them to do. The story actually tracks a progression of Gideon's faith, until he finally reached a point where he did accomplish great things. Hebrews looks at the final result, and teaches that Christians should look like Gideon when he stepped out in confidence. The Gideon cycle is about the believer's struggle to believe God when things are bad.

The Spirit of Yahweh clothed Gideon. Thus invested, Gideon sent his own angels ("messengers" [Judg. 6:35]) and gathered Israel. But even so, he wanted to see a sign (the fleece). So the issue continued to be about faith. The question is, will Yahweh disappoint, or can we take him at his word? What shall we do with the Word of God? What shall we do with the calling of God?

If Gideon, with all his flaws and timidity, his weak faith and proclivity to stray, can accomplish God's mission when empowered by the Spirit, what could a genuinely covenant-keeping man, one in whom is no waywardness or sin, accomplish? The imagination boggles. Such a man could do anything, anything at all. Even save the whole world. Judges cries out for this sort of anointed leader. Gideon anticipates the Messiah.

Jesus is the Spirit-endowed leader that God has provided to deliver an undeserving people from sin and death. The gospel is his word that calls for people to believe in him. What shall we do with his gospel? How should we respond to his call? This is what the book of Hebrews sees in the Gideon narrative.

The Midianites were actually less of a threat than they appeared (so the rubric above calls them “lesser locusts”). The Israelites had only to believe God, and that monstrosity would simply evaporate. All their suffering was a result of their unbelief. All they needed was one Spirit-empowered leader. The Angel said, “Go in your own might” (Judg. 6:14). They always had the ability to throw off Midian. Why then blame God? Faith the size of a mustard seed was all they lacked. In the same way, Hebrews calls Christians to throw off every hindrance and follow Jesus the pioneer of our faith (Heb. 12:1–2).

APPLYING THE TEXT TODAY

What does a Spirit-empowered sinner look like? Gideon was a complex character, who exhibited strongly positive and strongly negative qualities. Although he questioned and doubted, and needed signs and reassurances, he obeyed. But he obeyed feebly and under cover of darkness, fearing his neighbors. Hardly an Elijah confronting an Ahab with idolatry. But Gideon did cut down Baal’s altar. Even after the Spirit outfitted him, he asked for signs. He finally “got it,” however, and led with full confidence. He even declared with no fear at all to Succoth that Yahweh would surely deliver the commanders of fifteen thousand Midianites they were pursuing. He didn’t object when God reduced him from twenty-two thousand men to three hundred. He was wise in his diplomacy with Ephraim. But he made an illegal ephod that blurred Israel’s focus on Yahweh’s requirements. Although he did accomplish the mission at hand, in the end Israel was spiritually no better off. Why did he make a religious item? Why did he deal so harshly with Israelite towns? This ambiguity, or two-sided character, makes Gideon look like us. We are baptized with the Spirit and empowered to fulfill the mission at hand—the Great Commission—even while we err, sin, and engage in great folly. And yet, for all our shortcomings, *the success of the mission is guaranteed*.

Not only is Gideon a positive example of faith, but along with Paul’s reading of the wilderness stories, he can be seen as a *warning* as well, a negative example (1 Cor. 10:6). What does the Gideon cycle warn us about? Gideon’s pride led to violence against Israelite towns. When Gideon did this, God disappeared from the narrative. Paul warns against Christians’ biting and devouring one another (Gal. 5:13–15), and James 4:1–4 argues that Christians can be their own worst enemy. God and his Spirit surely do not lead Christians to fight each other. Beware of modern-day practitioners of Gideon’s false religiosity, believing that God is with them even as they

ravage his people.

What about Gideon's use of pagan gold to make a cultic object? Perhaps here is a warning against buying into today's culture. We also live in a time when, religiously speaking, people do what is right in their own eyes. Do we do the equivalent of borrowing pagan gold to build up our religion? How is the gospel diluted through our incorporation of maverick elements?

Once the rout started, Ephraim complained. When God starts moving, there are those who complain that they are left behind and left out, but yet if they were allowed to participate, they would surely undermine the cause. Human nature does not change, despite the great cultural distance. Gideon led Israel in an age not unlike our own. How do we deal with these situations?

Gideon's pride, seen in his punishing Israelite towns, is the opposite side of the coin from his earlier fear of man issues. On the one hand, we are intimidated by people when we should not be, while on the other hand, we trust in ourselves or other people, forgetting the Savior. At first, Yahweh wanted a close personal relationship with Gideon and Israel. But after he delivered them, the people thought it was Gideon's doing and forgot him. Fear of man had become trust in man, the very tendency of the heart that Jeremiah calls deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:5–9).

TOWARD THE ESCHATON

The phrase *eschatological tension* means the tension between having the benefits of salvation in the here and now, while not yet enjoying them in their full, consummate sense. In chapter 5, God had promised the victory, and beforehand had made provision by arranging the earthquake and bringing the rain at the right moment, so that victory was guaranteed. *But the battle hadn't been fought yet.* Barak still had to rally the troops in faith and rush toward the seemingly invincible chariotry. The war was already won, but had not yet been won.

We are already redeemed as Christians—but we await our redemption (Rom. 8:23). In the same verse: we are already adopted as God's children and heirs, yet we still await our adoption. We are already glorified (Rom. 8:30), yet we await our glorification. We are already sanctified (we are saints), yet we still sin; we await the day when we will no longer sin.

Gideon was promised victory in chapter 6, but had not yet fought the

battle. Before the denouement, the people of Israel had to simply trust that God was with them. In the same way, we trust God as we approach the end times. His enemies have already been vanquished. Death has no sting—but we still die. Satan is vanquished—yet he still prowls around like a lion. Sin is rendered powerless—yet we still miss the mark. Gideon’s victory anticipates the end of all things, when all the promises of God find their consummate fulfillment. The enemies of God will be finally defeated. This is the ultimate meaning of the Gideon cycle.

The climax of history is also anticipated in the image of locusts. The book of Joel predicts that the day of Yahweh will have something in common with the experience of a locust plague (Joel 1:2–7; 2:1–5, 28–31). Joel 2 describes the final day as *a human army that resembles a locust plague*. Revelation 9 uses the same imagery: a human army that devours everything and leaves nothing is a picture of how the world will act toward the church and of the overwhelming forces that will be defeated in the end. Thus, the Midianites typify the eschatological enemies of God, and Gideon’s victory anticipates Armageddon.

The Midianites met their demise at the trumpet blast of Gideon. With the blast of the trumpet, fire was suddenly revealed that had previously been hidden. This is a picture of the return of the Lord Jesus. In the end, the Son of Man will send his angels *with a great trumpet* to gather his elect (Matt. 24:31). The *last trumpet* will sound, and God will give his faithful ones victory over the last enemy (1 Cor. 15:50–58). For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and *with the trumpet of God* (1 Thess. 4:16). The day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and all its works will be burned up (2 Peter 3:10–13). When the *seventh trumpet* sounds, the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15). The New Testament uses the trumpet to announce the end of the world, just as Gideon used it to announce the end of Midianite oppression. Therefore, Gideon’s trumpet looks forward to Jesus’ coming to judge the world. The trumpets and torches announce God’s judgment on Midian and, much later, on the whole world, reserved for fire.

Isaiah 3:18–23 lists items lost on the day of Yahweh, including crescents, finery, rings.⁷ In Judges, Gideon strips the Zs of these things. Again, what

happened to them is a picture of what will happen in the great and coming day.

According to Isaiah 9:2–7, what Gideon did to Midian is a backdrop against which God will send the Messiah, one on whose shoulders the government will rest, who will rule forever and forever. The prophet declares that as Gideon broke Midian, so also this King will break every oppressor. Amen; come, Lord Jesus.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. God said to Gideon that he already had all he needed to get the job done. When have you looked to God only to learn that he gives the task back to you, expecting you to do it?
2. When have you blamed God for things that were actually your fault?
3. Have you ever tested God by asking for a sign? How did that work out? Beware—God may turn the tables and test *you*.
4. Gideon imaged God by contending with his enemies. How are Christians called to image Christ? See Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:22–24.
5. Gideon got into trouble with the community when he cut down Baal's shrine. How have you gotten into trouble for standing up for the truth?
6. How have you struggled with the fear of man?
7. With what are you clothed? With the armor of light (Rom. 13:12)?
8. Every Christian has the Spirit, and thus is equipped for the mission at hand. What is your plan for carrying out that mission?
9. God ruled in Baal's sphere of precipitation. What do people trust in rather than God? How does God rule even in those areas?
10. When God gives you a measure of success, how do you handle it? What happens to your attitude of dependency on him?
11. Gideon started out with the Spirit but, as time went on, departed from his calling. This was also true of the Galatians (Gal. 3:3). And the Ephesian church abandoned its first love (Rev. 2:4). How has your faith changed over time? Are you in an upward or a downward phase?
12. In what ways do you, like Gideon, struggle to believe God when things

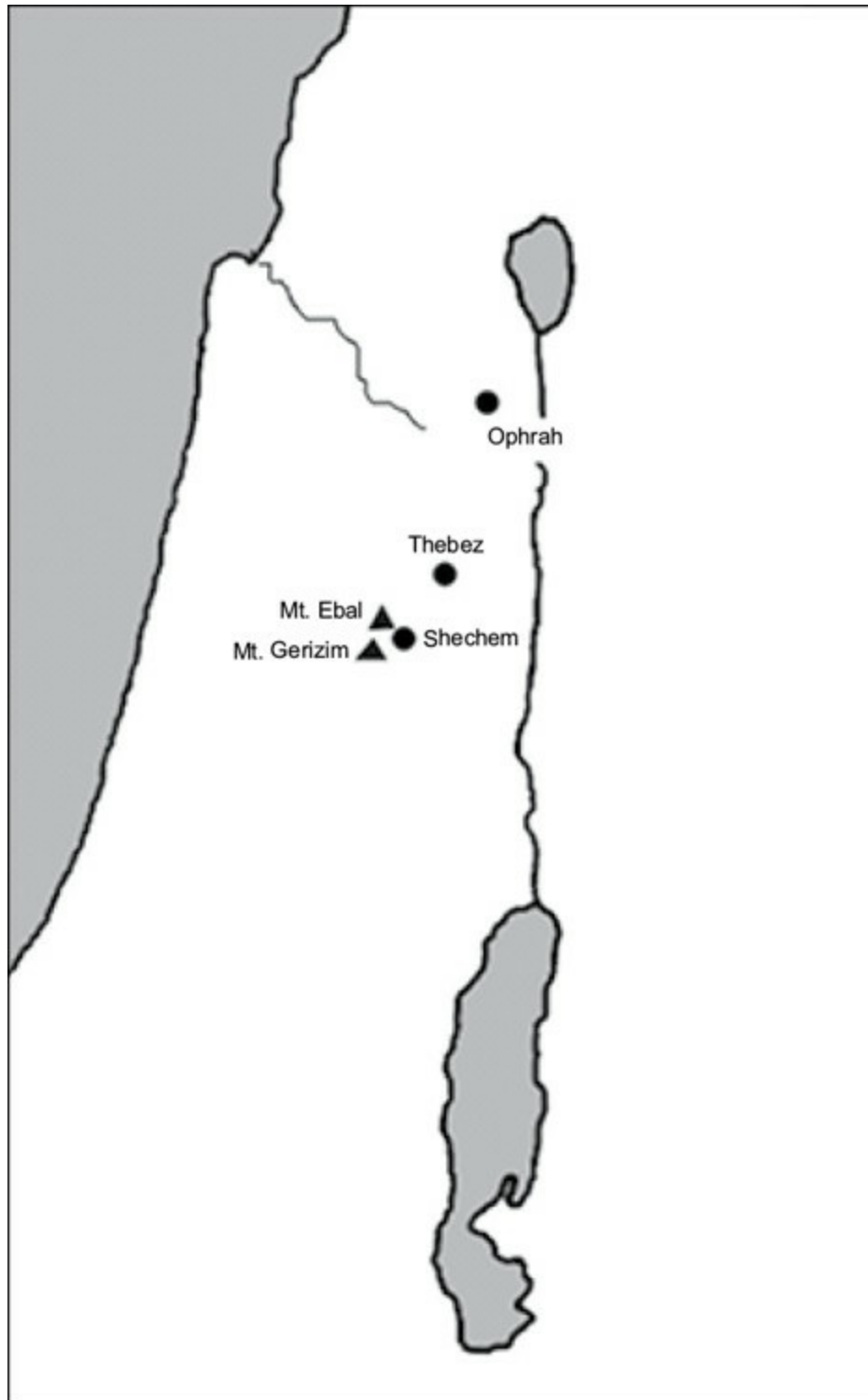
are bad? What promises of God do you struggle with believing?

13. How have you mistreated others in your pride?

ABOMINABLE ABIMELECH

Did Gideon refuse kingship outright, or just a particular style or model of kingship? Consider that after declining a throne, he proceeded to live like a sultan. He gathered much gold, wore purple robes, and owned a harem from which sprang a royal number of sons. The Zs told him that he had a regal bearing (Judg. 8:18). In addition to this, he named his son *Abimelech*, meaning “my father is king.” Although it probably referred to a deity (“my [divine] Father is King”), one wonders whether it also folds into the narrative of Gideon’s kingly *modus vivendi*. In any case, somehow Abimelech gained ambition to become king.

Yahweh is never named in chapter 9. This has theological significance in that God seems to be absent from the story. In the end, however, it is revealed that the seemingly secular chapter was spiritual all along.



GIDEON'S GIDGEE—JUDGES 9:1–21

Gideon's concubine raised Abimelech in Shechem, while Gideon lived at Ophrah. After Gideon's death, Abimelech convinced the Shechemites that he,

“one” man, should rule over them. The shrine of Baal-berith financed him. *Baal-berith* means “lord of the covenant,” perhaps a perverse synchronizing of Baal-worship with the idea of a covenant. Abimelech hired “empty” and “capricious” men as mercenaries. With these fellows, he attacked Ophrah and killed all seventy of his brothers, except Jotham, the youngest, who fled. Abimelech slew his brothers “upon one stone” (Judg. 9:5). This chapter sports a Hebrew motif of the word *head*. Keep that in mind. After the purge, the city of Shechem made Abimelech king. Jotham had escaped. His name derives from *Yahweh* (the *Jo* part) and *tham*, which means “integrity”—thus: “Yahweh is perfect.”

The heart of the chapter is Jotham’s parable, cried from the top (Hebrew, “head”) of Mount Gerizim. The gist of it is this: the trees of the forest with something positive to contribute, which cheer God and man,¹ have no interest in lording it over the others. But the worthless bramble, which brings no joy into the world, having nothing to contribute of value except perhaps shade, becomes king—with a warning and curse of fire. Abimelech is the bramble. (“Take refuge in my shade” [Judg. 9:15] is probably a metaphor for submitting to his military protection; shade might not be the bramble’s actual virtue.) Jotham concludes with this curse: let fire devour Abimelech and those who presently support him (9:20).

Hayyim Angel argues that Gideon’s good and bad sides continue in the persons of Jotham and Abimelech. Jotham embodies the good, faithful, religious Gideon, who wanted no king but God. Abimelech embodies the bloodthirsty, power-hungry, self-serving Gideon.² Yet *Abimelech* is Gideon’s legacy, *not* Jotham, since Jotham only says his piece and flees. What actually happens after that is all Abimelech; Abimelech moves events forward, not Jotham.

WHAT A GAAL—JUDGES 9:22–49

Abimelech “ruled” three years (9:22); the verb for “rule” is related more to “prince” than “king”—does this fact belittle Abimelech’s reign? God sent an “evil spirit” between Abimelech and Shechem because of his fratricide (9:23–24). Shechem ambushed passers-by on the tops (“heads”) of hills, to undermine Abimelech’s rule. A newcomer to the story, Gaal, mouthed off in Shechem, leading the people to curse Abimelech. Gaal claimed that if given the chance, he would lead a revolt against that whippersnapper. (Except

Jotham, everyone in this chapter is an opportunist who conceptualizes kingship as a power grab without any regard for the people, the land, or God.) Zebul the mayor disliked Gaal's bluster, and sent word to Abimelech (who lived elsewhere). Overnight, Abimelech's forces moved toward Shechem.

Abimelech's men were divided into four "companies" (Hebrew, "heads"). Before dawn, that braggart Gaal peered into the darkness from the city gate, and exclaimed to Mayor Zebul, "Men are coming from the heads of the mountains!" Zebul wanted Abimelech to have more time to get into position and so replied in effect, "Nah, your eyes are playing tricks on you." Gaal kept looking and then declared, literally, "One head is coming in by the way of the big tree, appearing!" (9:37). *Appearing* is a word related to conjuring. Gaal meant that in the changing light they seemed to appear out of thin air.³ The jig was up, so Zebul no longer held back. He berated Gaal for his big mouth, and dared him to go out and fight. So Gaal went out with the lords of Shechem to battle, and lost badly. Zebul would not let Gaal or his people take refuge in Shechem, and the following day Gaal's three "heads" (companies) and Abimelech's head fought, finally resulting in Abimelech's turning on the city and burning its citizens alive in a tower, using tree branches as kindling. Thus Jotham's parable was prophetic: fire from Abimelech's branches literally consumed Shechem, the very city that had put him in power in the first place. (Mount Zalmon might be Mount Ebal, as shown on the map.)

WHAT A GAL—JUDGES 9:50–57

This victory seemed to embolden Abimelech, so he decided to try yet another city. He overcame Thebez, and as with Shechem, the citizens fled to a tower. Abimelech again purposed to burn the people alive in it. But this time, literally "one" woman threw a millstone from the tower, and it crushed Abimelech's head. He called for his armor-bearer, a youth, to dispatch him, saving him from the dishonor of being killed by a woman. And that was the end of that.

Note where the motif of "head" is leading. "One who would rule Shechem single-handedly as its head (v. 37), and who to that end killed seventy brothers upon . . . a single stone, in the end is killed by a single woman who drops a mill-stone upon . . . his head."⁴ One woman with one stone ends the bloodthirsty tyrant's rule, which began on one stone.

The chapter ends with a comment about God. God requited Abimelech's

fratricide (also a crime against the brothers' father), and the Shechemites' complicity fell back on their "heads" (9:56–57). This is where the motif of the "head" goes: Abimelech's was crushed and the lords of Shechem were burned alive—according to the curse of Jotham.

I said above that "*Abimelech* is Gideon's legacy, *not* Jotham, since Jotham only says his piece and flees. . . . Abimelech moves events forward, not Jotham." But this is not really true, is it? *It was Jotham's curse that drove the events all along.* God would not allow the evil of Abimelech to stand. Despite the entirely secular character of this long chapter, in the end we see that it was religious and spiritual the whole time. It is a mistake to read this material as if it were really about a petty power struggle. It is about moral and spiritual and religious principles—flowing from the covenant between Israel and God—which govern how events transpire. Israel is just not allowed to have a secular history. God put the bad spirit between Abimelech and Shechem. God punished Shechem and Abimelech for their evil. Even this story is about who the true Judge is.

WHAT CAN WE MAKE OF THIS STORY?

Abimelech is the center of the material treating the twelve judges (Othniel to Samson). This gives it pride of place. But what is its point? Abimelech is no judge or savior in any sense. So why is this long chapter here?

How It Promoted David

The Bible treats the institution of the monarchy in a number of ways, many of which are critical and negative. This is why scholars sometimes speak of an antimonarchic sentiment in ancient Israel, as if the old Israelite spirit eschewed the whole idea of a human king, desiring Yahweh alone to be King. So diverse perspectives in the Old Testament can be observed toward the whole idea of the monarchy.

Israel asked for a human king, says 1 Samuel 8:6–22, since the people rejected God as King. Samuel listed negative aspects to the idea. There was a deep reluctance to trust any human king. In fact, the lion's share of Samuel-Kings delineates how the monarchy failed, revealing ambivalence about the whole institution.

Note how kingship is regarded in Judges 9:7–15. The trees that can actually produce something useful have better things to do than rule others.

Only the bramble (and whether a bramble has much shade to offer is dubious) takes on the mantle as king—and with it, a threat. The bramble is dangerous. It easily catches fire, and it has thorns. This is what government is like. Jotham stands like a prophet confronting Abimelech, as later prophets did to kings—for example, as Samuel did to Saul. This follows with the actual description of what Abimelech’s reign was like. Chapter 9 puts on display exactly what a king can and will do to the population he rules over, as if to say, “Do you really want a king, O Israel? And if so, what sort of king?” This is the central issue of the chapter. Abimelech was Israel’s first dynastic ruler. What does such a hereditary office of political and military power look like? Having raised this issue, one can imagine Israelites asking themselves, “If this is what Saul’s kingship was like, do we want forty more years of the same?” Chapter 9 is, among other things, a reflection on Saul’s administration.

Compare Judges 9:23 with 1 Samuel 16:14. God sent an evil spirit to both Abimelech and Saul. On the other hand, Jotham, like David, is the youngest son of his family. Note also how hauntingly similar Abimelech’s death is to Saul’s (Judg. 9:54; 1 Sam. 31:4). Each ruler requested his young armor-bearer to dispatch him. Each suffered head trauma (Saul’s, posthumously). Each died while engaging in battle. There may even be a reminder that Saul used necromancy to conjure Samuel in Gaal’s soothsaying language of men “appearing” (Judg. 9:37).

Dale Davis argues that the effect of this chapter in a pro-Davidide political tract is to distance David from this characterization of kingship. This style of tyrannical monarchy will not characterize a Davidic throne.⁵ On the other hand, it might have served to remind Israel that Saul’s administration did in fact resemble Abimelech’s. Note as well that this is a civil war featuring Israelite-on-Israelite violence, just like the contest between David and Ish-bosheth. This is a reminder that the violence will not stop if the wrong man is in power.

How Did It Illustrate Deuteronomy?

The end of Deuteronomy ratifies the covenant by laying out lists of how Israel will be blessed for obedience and cursed for disobedience. It is the covenantal curse that drives history onward, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the people being taken into exile. This principle of

a curse driving events forward to final judgment is on display in chapter 9. All along, God would not allow the evil of killing seventy brothers to stand, nor would he allow Shechem to reward Abimelech for it (Judg. 9:56–57). Jotham’s curse drove the events of the chapter until it came down on the Shechemites’ heads.

More material in Judges is devoted to civil war than to war against external enemies. Judges is more interested in Israel behaving badly than in the oppressors that God raised up. God’s righteous judgments always prevail, despite the evil of his people. King Josiah was afraid of the curses of Deuteronomy and wanted to escape them through heartfelt obedience to the law of Moses. The Abimelech account would have reinforced his reform efforts by showing that the curse is operating even while unknown and unseen.

Continuing with a Deuteronomistic perspective, what would this material have meant in the days of King Solomon? Consider Judges 1:28, 30, 33, 35. The word for “forced labor” is *mas*. This is the same word used for what Solomon did to the tribes of Israel in 1 Kings 5:13. Solomon did to Israel what Israel in Judges did to the Canaanites—reduced them to forced labor, treated them like a conquered people. Israel was not happy about this and killed the tax collector at the first sign of weakness (1 Kings 12:18–20). No doubt, Israel would have seen in the Abimelech story a critique of Solomon’s policy.

What would this story have meant to Israel in the days of the divided kingdom? The inhabitants of Shechem made Abimelech king, just as they later made Jeroboam king over Israel in rebellion against the house of David (1 Kings 12). Jeroboam set up golden calves at Bethel and Dan as alternatives to temple-centered worship in Jerusalem. Abimelech drew his money from an alternative cult, Baal-berith (Judg. 9:4). Faithful Israelites in this time would have seen in the Abimelech story much that spoke to their own day—and that condemned the alternative cult and the alternative kingship.

The name *Abimelech* can mean “my Father [God] is King.” But it can also mean “my father [Gideon] is king.” Abimelech “is dominated by a ruthless craving to change his marginal existence. He seeks compensation by aspiring to power and he succeeds in becoming the king of Shechem.”⁶ His name, apparently, went to his head. During and after the Babylonian exile, the Jews

were forced to give up the whole idea of an earthly king, at least until God raised up Messiah. God was their only Father—and *Abimelech*—my *divine* Father is *King*—became their theology. It is this Father that Jesus came to reveal.

Jesus' Divine Father

Jesus came to teach the people of Israel about their divine Father, to whom the name *Abimelech* points. Jesus is his only-begotten Son, who from eternity could *always* say that his divine Father is King. But what sort of King is Jesus?

All power in heaven and earth is his—since he was obedient even at the cost of death on a cross. Jesus' sovereign command of Matthew 28:18–20 is to teach and make disciples, since he has all power in heaven and on earth. This leads us to contemplate what the *Abimelech* passage means today. What sort of leadership ought we to follow? What sort of leaders ought we to be? Should we lead by lording it over our fellow Christians, or by force, or under threat? There is much here to think about by way of application.

But someday judgment will fall on the *Abimelechs* and the “empty men” who follow those like him. Someday the One whose divine Father is King will judge the world. Someday fire will break out against all who live under the curse—and who are unaware that the curse on their sin is driving events forward both in their individual lives and in the whole history of the world.

Not only is Israel denied a secular history, but we and even the world are disallowed one. A covenant curse against sin still drives history forward to its inevitable conclusion. See to it that, like Jotham, you stand in the Father's integrity and denounce sin, rather than being caught up in it. “Save yourselves from this crooked generation” (Acts 2:40). Be baptized, receive the Holy Spirit, and then proclaim the truth like a Spirit-endowed Jotham.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What can we expect from the wrong sort of government? What eventually happens to the people who support the wrong sort of government?
2. What sort of leadership should we look for in the church?
3. Jotham boldly preached the truth at the risk of his own life. What have you risked for the kingdom?

4. You are just not allowed to have a secular history. What do you say to that?
5. What sort of King is Jesus?
6. How do you respond when people cross you? What sorts of things invoke inordinate anger in you? Why is this? What about God do you need to remember?

10

MINOR MAGISTRATES



Six of the judges are called “minor” judges because they are less important in the book. But historically some were much more important than the other judges. This is an example of the literary character of Judges. Take Jair of Gad, for example. He judged Israel for twenty-two years. His family ruled over thirty cities in that time. Thus, he was a major player in the period. But Judges gives him only three verses. Abimelech, who was a flash in the pan by comparison, gets fifty-seven verses. Judges here demonstrates that its stories are *not* meant to depict what life was actually like throughout much of Judges’ era.

Note also the stylization of the narrations. Jair had thirty sons on thirty donkeys ruling thirty cities; Ibzan had thirty sons and thirty daughters; Abdon had thirty sons and forty grandsons riding seventy donkeys. These are arranged in chiasmic fashion as follows:

A Gideon: 70 sons

B Tola: no details

C Jair: 30 sons

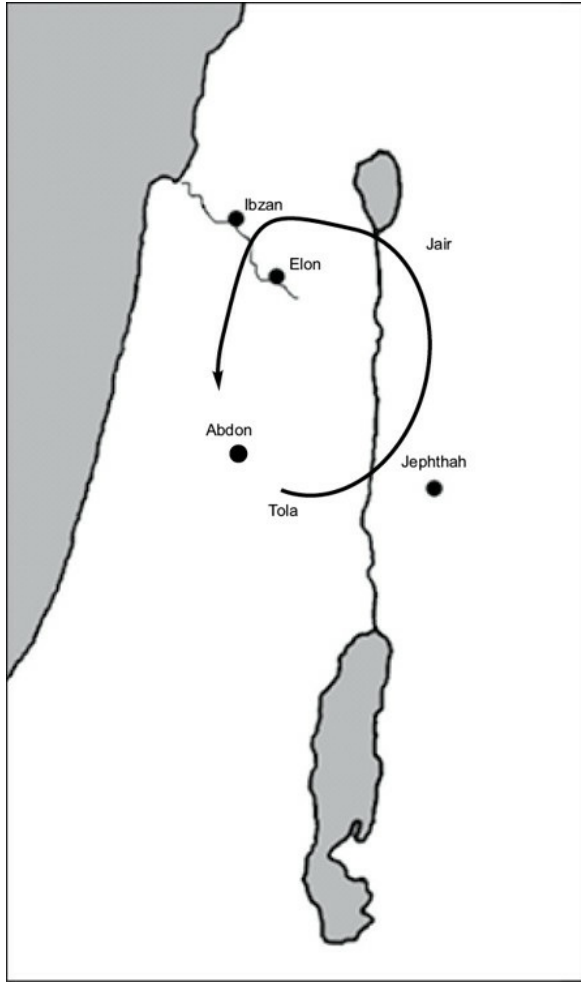
D Jephthah: no offspring

C' Ibzan: 30 sons

B' Elon: no details

A' Abdon: 70 sons/grandsons

In addition to this arrangement, their base of operations roughly traces a circle, as shown in the map below.



Tola of Issachar ruled from the territory of Ephraim (Judg. 10:1–2). Note the account of his death and burial in a named city. In this his record resembles that of a king. Gideon is the first with such a notation, and all judges after him have it as well. All the judges up to and including Gideon have the notation that the land rested a certain number of years. No judge after Gideon has that distinction. Note also that for the number of years reigning, the minor judges do not use round numbers, unlike the others. They are not presented as warriors, but more as magistrates or governors. Of course, political officeholders in this era were also warriors. No doubt they won great battles for Yahweh. But the text gives no data on this point, and gives the impression of peaceful rule.

Jair of Gilead ruled twenty-three years from thirty cities, and was buried in a named city (Judg. 10:3–5). Tola is said to have “arisen” to “save” Israel; Jair gets no such comment. Like Tola, however, he did “judge.” After him came Jephthah of Reuben, who will be treated in the next chapter.

After Jephthah, Ibzan judged seven years (Judg. 12:8–10). He is associated with Bethlehem. This is probably not Bethlehem of Judah, but a Bethlehem in Asher. See the chiasm above for how Ibzan duplicates Jair.

Elon of Zebulun then judged Israel (Judg. 12:11–12). Abdon follows as the last of the minor judges, achieving a perfect score of seventy offspring (12:13–15). He is associated with Ephraim, as Gideon is with Manasseh. Thus, in addition to having the perfect number of progeny to place Gideon and Abdon opposite in the chiasm, they are each from one of the half-tribes of Joseph.

Jephthah of Reuben, the center of the chiasm, is flanked by judges with large families, many offspring. This may be part of an artistic design to underscore the tragedy of Jephthah, whose only daughter never gave birth. One purpose of the minor judges is to frame Jephthah with children.

Note also how the minor judges are outside the stated agenda of the book, the cycle of sin > crying to God > deliverance. Other judges were concerned with war against an oppressor, the sin of Israel that angered Yahweh, and so on. But the minors are about their prestige, burial sites, tribe affiliation. Instead of how many years of oppression they suffered before God raised up the judge, we are told how many years the judge administered. Years of tenure replace years of oppression. And there are no explicit gaps between them, as opposed to the majors. In some cases, the focus is on their large families and dynasties, and the extent of their influence. Their great wealth seems to be showcased. They were not obscure men. Perhaps this is what the life of a judge such as Gideon or Othniel was like after the fighting was over and they settled down. (The minor judges historically may have warred as much as the others did.)

Richard Nelson argues that this situation was a slam against the monarchy—and especially the northern monarchy. The minor judges show that the land was well governed without any king.¹ In other words, the period is portrayed as one of political stability. So who needs a king?

The minor judges thus also serve the purpose of demonstrating that the six major cycles are not the whole story. This takes us back to the author's agenda, and how major events of the period are not mentioned in Judges. Judges is a *stylized* history, a representation of the period with theological purpose. There was stability as well as chaos. The cycles of sin and

oppression were not the whole story.

But why these particular judges? A shallow answer is this: “because that is what happened.” The question concerns the author’s choices: what information to include, its presentation, and so on, shaped according to an agenda beyond this or that particularity in history. Perhaps the reason is very simple: they were included to make the total number of judges twelve, and to have each tribe represented by a judge (except Levi, which gets its own special treatment). There is one minor judge left to discuss: the very obscure Shamgar.

SALIENT SHAMGAR SPECIFICS

Shamgar gets but a single verse, the most minor of the minor judges. He is found between Ehud and Deborah, quite distant from the other minors. “After him was Shamgar son of Anath. And he smote the Philistines, six hundred men, with a *malmad* of the ox. And he also saved Israel” (Judg. 3:31). We are not told how long he worked, where he did his saving, what tribe he was from, or where he was buried. In the list of judges (chapter 1 of this book), he is associated with the tribe of Simeon because that tribe has no other hero and needs one, and because Simeon is a southern tribe susceptible to Philistine incursion.

Shamgar is not a typical Israelite name, and perhaps this judge is from some Canaanite stock. What does this imply? Are there Canaanite traditions incorporated in Judges? Does it shame Israel that a foreigner had to save them? Not any more than Caleb or Othniel do. Shamgar is called the “son of Anath.” Anath is a Canaanite goddess of war, part of the Baal pantheon. Would he have then been a Canaanite warrior who gained the title “son of Anath” and became part of Israel’s tradition? He killed six hundred men, a stylized regiment.

But what sort of weapon did he use? In Judges, there are many unusual weapons: a sawed-off sword, a tent peg, clay jars with torches within.² The *malmad* of the ox is found only once in the entire Bible; it has no other context than this single verse. It might mean “teacher.” Keep in mind that Samson used the jawbone of a donkey to kill one thousand Philistines. In Hebrew, *Samson* is pronounced more like “Shamshon,” which sounds something like “Shamgar.” Both fought Philistines. But the Philistines as a major threat date to late in this period and on to the time of Saul and David.

Some Greek manuscripts of Judges place Shamgar right after Samson; Judges 4:1 ignores him. (But Deborah mentions him as a contemporary in 5:6.) With all these parallels with Samson, perhaps Shamgar used something similar to Samson's jawbone of an ass. Perhaps the *malmad* of the ox is something like its horn. One Greek tradition reads "calves of cattle"—that is, he killed them with the enemy. It is normally understood as an ox goad.

Part of the technique of understanding the Bible is learning what questions to ask. In this case, one may ask how Shamgar, stuck between Ehud and Deborah in a single verse, changes how one reads the book of Judges. Beyond simply separating two major cycles, and beyond showing that there was more going on than Judges says much about, and beyond yet another indication that a foreigner helped to save Israel, there is one other obvious result of having Shamgar placed there in the book—a result that folds neatly into a Davidic redaction. It anticipates a Philistine problem later—which was the hot issue during the civil war between the houses of David and Saul. Shamgar gives the reader an early heads-up to the problem of the Philistines, which is what Judges was really all about in David's day, and explains why the last judge—Samson—deals with them.

David was known for his success at killing Philistines. He went up against Goliath; Saul wouldn't. He was known for slaying tens of thousands of them; Saul, only thousands (1 Sam. 18:7). It is as if the book says that we need someone like Shamgar to lead now, since the Philistines have killed and beheaded Saul. Shamgar is an early reminder of how the book is relevant to the situation current in Israel at the time of the civil war.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. In the Book of Life, what would be written about you? If you were to be summarized in a few verses, what would heaven record?
2. Not everyone has physical offspring, but many have spiritual offspring. Whom have you influenced most for the Lord?
3. Paul urges us to pray for government officials, that we might live quiet and peaceful lives (1 Tim. 2:1–2). Do so!
4. God reached outside of Israel for those who will stand up for him. How is that situation like the gospel? How does that involve you?

JEPHTHAH'S JAUNDICE



The Jephthah cycle begins with a long list of offenses that Israel committed before Yahweh, serving gods of many nations. So God gave them over to the Ammonites (across the Jordan to the east) for eighteen years. The Philistines are also mentioned, but have no role in the Jephthah story. They are another heads-up for what's coming with Samson. This action is in the land of Gilead, the territory of Gad. The Amorites at times also crossed the Jordan to terrorize Ephraim, Benjamin, and Judah.

The story begins with the literal idiom “the people did evil *in the eyes of Yahweh*” (Judg. 10:6). What is important is in whose eyes one acts. In their own eyes, they did what was right (21:25). But what counts in the end is what God decrees is right. Note also in 10:8 that Ammon “crushed” Israel—this word occurs elsewhere only in Exodus 15:6, where Yahweh “shatters” Egypt. The word that describes what God did to Pharaoh is now used for what Ammon did to Israel.

GILEAD'S GUILTY GUILD—JUDGES 10:6–11:11

The people of Israel cry out to God, and he replies by saying that he will not deliver them, that they should cry to the gods they have been serving. They repent, put away their gods, and submit to his will, literally saying, “Do to us what is good in your eyes” (Judg. 10:15). So a religious revival was their response to great suffering. Note also 10:16b, which literally says “and was short his soul with Israel’s toil.” Was God annoyed with their cries? Or was he moved to compassion? The same idiom is found in 16:16: Delilah “shortened Samson’s soul to death.” Samson was sick of it.

Gilead needed a military general to lead their forces against Ammon. It is notable that God does not choose Jephthah, raise him up, and empower him

to deliver Israel. The elders (the “guilty guild”) take it upon themselves to pick a leader. While they are deciding, the reader is introduced to Jephthah. *Gilead* seems to be the name of the region (Gad) and also the name of Jephthah’s father (Judg. 11:1). Perhaps the name of Jephthah’s father is not literal, but a reference to his pedigree. Speaking of his pedigree, Jephthah was a harlot’s son, and had been disinherited. He lived in the land of Tob (whose name means “good”) and collected around himself a band of “empty” fellows—another Abimelech in the making?

Judges 11:4–11 records the negotiations between the elders of Gilead and Jephthah. Two words are important: *ro’sh*, “head,” and *qatsin*, “chief.” Some suggest that *ro’sh* means a governor, while *qatsin* means a temporary military leader. Is this conversation about the degree of power that the elders are willing to give Jephthah? Some argue that it is. First, they merely wanted him to accept the job of *qatsin*, but he didn’t go for it, so they finally offered him the high office of *ro’sh*. But why would they make him both general and governor before any victory was won?

David Marcus argues that the real issue was that Jephthah had been disinherited, and wanted his inheritance restored.¹ Jephthah raised this issue (Judg. 11:7). Translations handle 11:9 like this: “If you *bring me home again* . . . , I will be your head” (RSV); “Suppose you *take me back* . . .” (NIV). The phrase “take me back” is the participle of *shub*, which literally means “if you returning to me.” This might be a reference to restoring his inheritance. In the next verse, they agree to do what he said; they will restore it.

Marcus observes that the literal wording of Judges 11:1, “Jephthah . . . was the son of a harlot, Gilead begat Jephthah,” should be understood in the sense that Gilead legally adopted Jephthah. The verse should then be translated: “Jephthah . . . was the son of a harlot, so Gilead adopted Jephthah.” Gilead adopted his son to legitimize him, since his paternity couldn’t be proved, but after Gilead’s death his brothers legally “annulled an adoption agreement that his father had made in his favor.”²

After all, who knows who his father was? When I come to this point in my teaching, I show the class a picture that I say is of Jephthah’s brothers. They are short and squat, with wide-brimmed hats and dark handlebar mustaches. Then I show the class another picture that I claim is of Jephthah himself. This one is of a tall, well-proportioned Nordic model, a veritable god, with long,

flowing blond hair. I stand back, stroke my chin, and say, “Hmmm. No wonder they annulled the adoption. In fact, a Norwegian did pass through town nine months before Jephthah was born . . .”

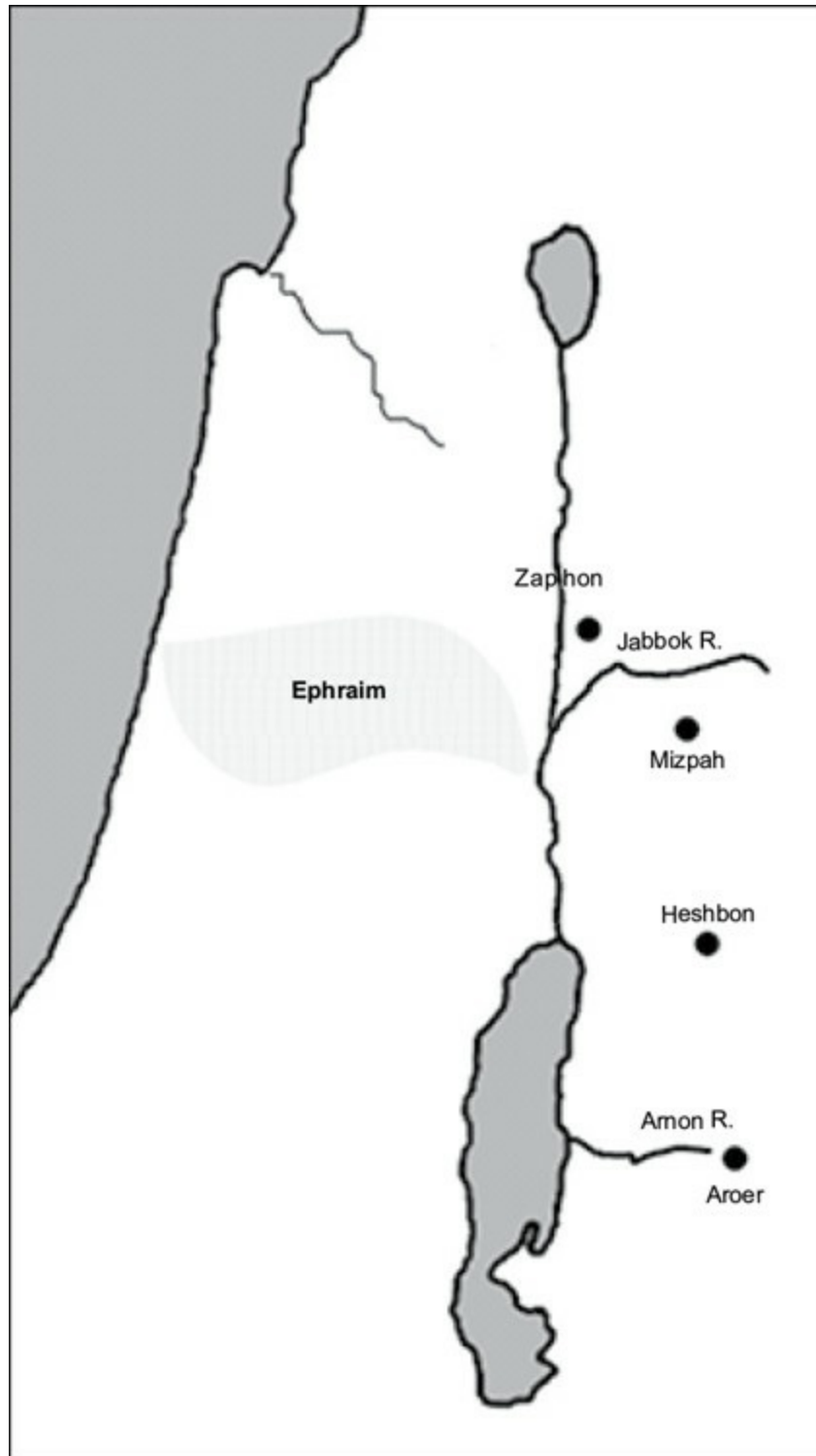
If one accepts this interpretation, then Jephthah parallels all of Israel. The story is about gaining one’s inheritance. Jephthah wants his restored—and Israel wants the land restored to it, too. Both are gaining the land together. Jephthah is personally experiencing what Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Gad are experiencing—being disinherited and then restored.

AMMO FOR AMMON—JUDGES 11:12–33

Fully empowered by Gilead, if not yet by Yahweh, Jephthah then sent word to the king of Ammon, and the two dialogued through messengers. Ammon laid claim to the land between the Jabbok and Arnon rivers, east of the Jordan. This is basically the tribal allotment of Gad and Reuben. Jephthah then treated the king of Ammon to a history lesson from Numbers 21:21–26, three hundred years before Israel took possession after a battle. Jephthah knew his history well: “So then Yahweh, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that Yahweh our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess” (Judg. 11:23–24). Jephthah calls Yahweh the Judge (11:27), who will decide between them. Here is the only place in the cycles of judges (chapters 3 to 16) where someone is actually called a *judge* (using a substantive participle as a noun). The real Judge decides who possesses what land.

There is a factual error in Jephthah’s speech—he claims that Moab’s god Chemosh is god of the Ammonites, which is patently false; Ammon’s god is Milcom (1 Kings 11:33). Did the historian make a mistake? Was Jephthah that ignorant? Or could the text have misidentified Ammon’s god for a reason? Although the speech reads like an attempt at diplomacy, it is recorded here by Israelites for Israelites, and the historical Jephthah also knew that talk would get him nowhere. It has been suggested that the history lesson was to build up the morale of the Israelite troops, to instill in them a sense of righteous indignation.³ That being the case, perhaps purposely misidentifying their god might be poking fun at Ammon. After all, one false god is as good as another. The bottom line is that it is Yahweh’s land—and he will decide who possesses it, not Chemosh, not Milcom.

The Spirit of Yahweh then came upon Jephthah, and Jephthah rushed from Mizpah to Aroer, and pushed Ammon out of Israelite territory. Again a powerful foe was soundly defeated with little effort. All that was needed was one Spirit-empowered man to lead the people. Take note as well that the actual battle is described, after all the preparation and buildup in the text, in a single verse (Judg. 11:33). This can be compared to what comes later, a fuller, detailed account of Israel-on-Israel violence. The text is not really interested in the evil of the oppressor. It is interested in God's people behaving badly. And it is to this subject that the story now turns.



SHIELAH'S SACRIFICE—JUDGES 11:29–40

While full of the Spirit of God and routing the enemy, Jephthah made a vow to Yahweh: he would offer as burnt offering whatever came out to greet

him when he arrived home victoriously. His actual language looks like this:

And-it-will-be the-one-coming-out whatever/
whoever will-come-out
from-the-doors-of my-house to-meet-me⁴
in-my-returning in-peace from-the-sons-of Ammon
and-it-will-be for-Yahweh.
And-I-will-offer-him/it-up burnt-offering.

The last two lines are salient. Is Jephthah saying that he will give to Yahweh whatever comes from his house, and sacrifice it? If he was referring to an animal, why then did he say “come out to meet me”? This action sounds like a person greeting a returning warrior. What if an unclean animal such as a dog ran out? Or is he saying that he will dedicate to God whoever comes out, and in addition will offer a sacrifice? Perhaps the burnt offering is separate from devoting the one who greets him to God: “And in addition, I will also offer up a burnt offering”? Both opinions have been held throughout history, but most eras prefer the sense that Jephthah did commit manslaughter.⁵ As for the other sense, in what way could someone be devoted to God apart from killing him or her?⁶

Perhaps an answer can be found in what actually happened when Jephthah’s daughter (traditionally named Shielah) joyfully came out to greet him. Her appearance caused Jephthah great distress, and the text says that he did as he had vowed—but it does not actually say that he killed her. What she mourned was her virginity, not her death—and the text leaves her not dead, but childless (Judg. 11:38–39). “As a result of Jephthah’s vow, she did not know any man. The consequence of his vow was that she lived a life of virginity.”⁷ But does this fulfill the vow?

Pamela Reis makes a connection with Leviticus 27:1–8, suggesting that when a slave is given to God, he or she no longer works, but becomes a ward of the household. The Sabbath is holy to God; thus, no work is done. Holy stones are unworked; holy fields are unplowed. Reis suggests that Jephthah expected a slave to come out, costing him about 50 shekels. He threw in an animal sacrifice to boot; “he demonstrates to his men that their chief is not greedy.”⁸ Women’s work is childbearing. Thus, in fulfillment of his vow, his

daughter was his dependent all her life, never marrying to give him grandchildren. Thus his line died with her. Reis supposes this is why she is nameless, because she will never be more than “Jephthah’s daughter.”

On the other hand, Alice Logan notes that in antiquity, human sacrifice was practiced. When a battle was going poorly, kings and nobles were sometimes expected to sacrifice their offspring. Abraham raised no objections when God demanded Isaac. The firstborn is Yahweh’s (Ex. 13:13), but instead of killing them, he took the tribe of Levi (Num. 3:45). Mesha sacrificed his son, causing Israel’s retreat (2 Kings 3). Yahweh responded to Jephthah’s vow with a great victory. Logan also observes that within the lament (Judg. 11:35) is a repeating sound, *kr . . . kr . . . kr*, culminating in Jephthah’s cry, “You are my *Achor!*” This invokes the Valley of Achor, where Achan was killed to reverse Israel’s defeat (Josh. 7:24–26). Perhaps Jephthah’s vow was normal for that time. Jephthah hoped that God would spare his only offspring, but God chose her for sacrifice, by having her greet him. So argues Logan.⁹

Achan in Joshua 7 was killed because he had stolen holy materials from Yahweh. He was punished for this effrontery; Achan made the whole nation suffer (see the story). This is a very different situation from Jephthah’s case. When Jephthah cried, “You are my [Valley of] Achor!,” what did he mean? Perhaps that, unlike Achan, he dare not withhold what is dedicated from God. Of course, this says nothing of the *mode* of dedicating her—perhaps spinsterhood was in fact the fulfillment. As unlikely as this seems, it does explain why “never having known man,” not her death, is the stated issue. As for Yahweh and human sacrifice, even Logan admits that apart from Jephthah’s daughter, “no biblical text unequivocally states that a human being was sacrificed” to him.¹⁰ The customary lament every four years is the author’s way of proving the event’s historicity,¹¹ like pointing to an altar that still stands.

Although a case could be made that in extremity a head of state was expected to offer as sacrifice his own offspring, in Jephthah’s battle against Ammon *there was no such extremity*. The Ammonites are not described in superlative terms, as Sisera’s forces or the Midianites were. Jephthah was full of the Spirit, so it is hard to imagine him fearing the battle’s outcome. This makes his vow all the more inexplicable. Why would he, in the Spirit, make such a vow, as if the battle were in doubt? Was the vow intended to

embolden his troops? Whatever else one might say, it left Jephthah wailing and lamenting in the wake of a great victory. Jephthah had regained his inheritance (and so had Israel). But now, what is the point? With no offspring, Jephthah would lose the land upon his death, to the very family who had disowned him. The vow proved to be superfluous and foolish, costly self-inflicted harm. It is reminiscent of Saul's foolish battlefield vow that would have cost him Jonathan's life if others had not intervened (1 Sam. 14:24, 29, 45–46).¹² Jephthah's vow is against the grain of the story, just as Saul's intrudes on and stymies a great rout:

[The vow] has broken in at the very center to press for divine help that ironically is already Jephthah's through the spirit of the Lord. The making of the vow is truly an act of unfaithfulness. Jephthah desires to bind God rather than embrace the gift of the spirit. What comes to him freely, he seeks to earn and manipulate. The meaning of his words, then, is doubt, not faith; it is control, not courage. To such a vow the deity tellingly makes no reply.¹³

Jephthah means "he opens." Other judges' names had some connection with their stories, but "he opens" seems to not. True, he "opened" his mouth to say the oath—but a different verb is used for this concept. If the author intended a connection, wouldn't the same verb be used? *Door* can also derive from *open*, but again, in this case a different word is used.

This is actually a pattern in Judges. *Gideon* means "chopper," probably because Gideon chopped down Baal's shrine, but in his story a different verb is used for *chop*. *Delilah* means "she weakens," but *weaken* in the Samson cycle uses a different word. *Samson* is related to "sun," but although the sun appears in his story, it is a different word. Again and again Judges avoids giving a textual link to an obvious parallel.¹⁴ Thus, one may go forth in confidence, connecting Jephthah's name with his big mouth and his daughter exiting through his door.

JORDAN JAWING (OR, RIVER WRANGLING)—JUDGES 12:1–7

Ephraim crossed the Jordan to Zaphon. Jephthah had returned there from south across the Jabbok. The Ephraimites angrily confronted the judge. They had objected to Gideon before, but Gideon pacified them with his saying, "Are not your leftovers better than my whole fruitage?" (Judg. 8:2). Here again, they are portrayed as quick-tempered hooligans, willing to menace

Jephthah but nowhere to be found when courage was needed. Jephthah had just delivered them, and they threatened to burn down his house. The Ephraimites in their taunt claimed that even when Jephthah's men went home, they would still be pursued (Judg. 12:4). (Obviously, Jephthah did *not* judge all Israel.) Thus provoked, Jephthah's forces tackled those of Ephraim, and blocked their escape route back across the Jordan (the same way Ephraim had previously blocked Midian's escape). Here yet again, Israel fights Israel.

At this point, the story preserves an attested late Bronze Age dialect shift. The phoneme *sh* had become incorporated into the language east of the Jordan earlier than the more conservative west. Thus, Gad and Reuben said *shibolet*, but across the river they still said *sibbolet*. It is as if the Ephraimites were unable to make the sound, like someone's inability to roll *rrrrr*, or Japanese inability to pronounce *l* (thus *rorripop*). They couldn't fake it, and thus were easily identified and killed. As Gideon turned aside Ephraim's ire with a veiled insult, in the Jephthah cycle the Ephraimites are "portrayed as incompetent nincompoops who cannot even repeat a test-word spoken by the Gileadite guards."¹⁵ *Challenging the leader whom God has raised is ill-considered and self-defeating. Only fools would do so.* Not only should one curb one's tongue at times, one should also be able to speak correctly at other times. The tongue can fail by commission *and* by omission.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

The story of Ephraim can be read as apology for David. Israel was trying to decide between David and Ish-bosheth. David had great success in delivering the nation from the Philistines—Philistines who directly connect with the Jephthah story (Judg. 10:17), as if inviting the reader to see this moral: why fight among yourselves, O Israel, when foreigners subjugate you? Will you be like Ephraim, foolishly biting the hand that feeds you (David), witlessly rejecting the leader whom God provides? The text connects David and Jephthah.

Many parallels can be found. Both were forced into exile, where they attracted a "motley bunch of malcontents."¹⁶ Israel turned to both in desperate need, recognizing that it "was certainly no time to debate the niceties of pedigree."¹⁷ Dale Davis calls Jephthah "an almost exact prototype of David."¹⁸ He argues that Jephthah was an appeal to Gilead, using the people's own hero to commend David. Jephthah lived at Tob; Tob is mentioned only

one other time—when David battled Ammonites (2 Sam. 10:6–8). Tob was apparently an Ammonite city in David’s day.

But Jephthah is more complex than just that analysis. An element in his story connects with Saul—namely, his vow. This reminds the reader of Saul’s vow that nearly cost the life of his son Jonathan (1 Sam. 14:23–30, 43–45). In the heat of battle, Saul connected victory with a vow that inadvertently victimized his own son. This happened immediately before a confrontation between the leader and some troops (*à la* Jephthah and Ephraim). Saul’s victory was spoiled in a manner that also spoiled Jephthah’s. So his denouement reminds one of Saul’s folly and loss of control over his own army, as if to say, “Remember Saul’s flaws: we don’t need another king like that.”

Cheryl Exum also finds connections between Jephthah’s daughter and Saul’s daughter Michal. Michal despised David for his undignified dance, and because of this died childless. “Jephthah’s daughter will know no sexual fulfillment; Michal will have only memory of it.”¹⁹ The positive side of Jephthah looks like David; the negative side reminds one of Saul.

What Did It Mean in Light of Deuteronomy?

Judges can be read from the perspective of family. Othniel has a good family; we see a husband and wife on the frontier, making a life together. The book ends with the Benjaminites’ acquiring wives through dubious means. When a generation arose who did not know Yahweh, this is a failure of the family. Jephthah is framed with minor judges with great issue, highlighting the death of his line.²⁰ A man sacrificing his only offspring would certainly constitute a breakdown of the family. It has been argued that this reveals how Israel had assimilated Canaanite practices and beliefs. Even when possessed by the Spirit of God, Jephthah treated God like one who responds to bribes and tokenism. God responded by fittingly requiring of this judge his child, his future. The vow “clearly reflects Dtr’s most important theological motif: when Israel worships like foreigners, it will act like foreigners.”²¹

Imagine how this story would have been read during Josiah’s reforms. It would have served as a reminder that the land given to Israel is kept on the condition that Israel keep covenant. When the Israelites worshiped foreign gods, God let the Deuteronomic curses fall upon them. This story is also a call for national unity behind the reform effort. Don’t be like Ephraim and

resist God's King.

Jephthah in the Light of Christ

From the earliest rabbinic traditions, everyone involved in Jephthah's story is condemned. Jephthah is condemned for making the vow in the first place. Any high priest could and should have vacated it. The elders did not esteem the Law. Israel was ignorant of God's character. Jephthah then slaughtered forty-two thousand fellow Israelites.²² Surely there was something poisonous, something sinister, about this particular judge.

Why then does the New Testament celebrate Jephthah as a hero of the faith (Heb. 11:32–34)? Did the writer of Hebrews ever read Judges? How can this guy be a positive role model? Does the book of Hebrews make a valid point? What positive virtues can be seen in Jephthah's narrative?

Jephthah pointed to Yahweh, and claimed that he is the true Judge of all—the book of Judges in a nutshell (Judg. 11:27). It is Jephthah who directs the elders to consider Yahweh when discussing war with Ammon (chapter 11). Jephthah points to the true, the real Judge—who James 5:9 says is Jesus, the One standing at the doors, ready to act on behalf of his people.

In fact, the book of James has a unique Christology in the New Testament. In James, not a word is said about Jesus as the One who died on the cross to pay for the sins of his people, or who rose again in power, bringing newness of life. Much of what inspires Christians to worship and rejoice in him is not there in James. Instead, James offers this conceptualization of Jesus: He is the Judge. He is the Lord of glory (James 2:1). He is the Anointed One (“Christ” [1:1]). The true Anointed Judge is Jesus—spoken of by Jephthah on behalf of the book of Judges.

If one accepts the reading that Jephthah's motivation is to regain his inheritance, then the story is a miniature version of the whole book, which is about Israel's regaining its own inheritance. Judges is about appropriating the land by faith. In the same way, Christians appropriate all the promises of God by trusting Jesus with their lives.

What Israel needed to throw off the oppressor was one man endowed with the Spirit. God provided such a savior, yet a hardness had come on part of Israel (Ephraim); those people rejected him and sought to persecute him. Paul argues that this is the case as well with Jesus (Rom. 11:25). A part of Israel is

the enemy of the Judge. One might even say (in a moment of hermeneutical heatedness) that Jephthah, the rejected savior, delivered Israel from her sins at great cost to himself, and thus is a type of Christ.

God adopted Gilead's chosen leader as a legitimate judge and endowed him with the Spirit. God also adopted David and entered into a Father-son relationship with him (2 Sam. 7:14). In fact, every king on David's throne enjoyed such a relationship. David became God's son, was adopted, and in this sense was "begotten" by God. This fact is celebrated in Psalm 2:6–8. This text was quoted by Peter in Acts 13:32–33 in reference to Jesus' resurrection. The resurrection was then Jesus' adoption as the King of Israel, the Son of David. And in him, all Christians are adopted as children of God.

TO WHAT DOES IT CALL CHRISTIANS TODAY?

The moral implications of Jephthah's daughter have bothered Jews and Christians for millennia. This is one of the places where one wishes the narrator would say something. Obviously, Jephthah was distressed by it—but what did God think of it? We are left to think it through on our own. How does one process such behavior by a hero of the faith? (Later, another "good guy" in Judges offered up his virgin daughter to rape and murder.) What are the moral implications of Jephthah's vow? Was he right to keep it, having made it?

Again we can analyze what it means to be empowered by the Spirit of God. In Judges, every time the Spirit works, the judge is empowered to accomplish the mission at hand. In this era, that mission involves delivering Israel from oppression by violent means. The oppression seems entirely political and military in character. But in reality, it is a spiritual matter. Perhaps this is why more space in Judges is given to describe civil wars than foreign. The focus is on the bad behavior of God's people, not on the oppressor. It was in Israel where all the people did what was right in their own eyes. Even the judges led God's people astray and did them harm. And yet the mission succeeded. Ammon was utterly defeated. Each cycle shows yet another enemy going down in flames as Israelites exercise their faith, following a spiritual savior.

It seems that the Ephraimites were looking to the wrong things to define them. We are not told what motivated them, but whatever it was—a share in the plunder, a share in the victory—the way they went about trying to co-opt

Jephthah's ministry was wrongheaded. Although no wood or stone idol was involved, nevertheless a spiritual problem existed that no amount of talk could correct. This is an example of another Deuteronomic principle, the tendency to take credit for what God has done (Deut. 8:10–17): “Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth’ ” (v. 17).

It is doubtful that the Ephraimite confrontation would have happened while Ephraim was suffering Ammonite oppression. But no sooner was the foreign threat neutralized than internal strife ensued. Apparently, people have to have drama. Christians also fight among themselves over matters having as little to do with genuine spirituality as how to pronounce a word.

For about fourteen centuries, the Western church condemned the Coptic for teaching Monophysitism, the claim that Christ has only one nature.²³ The Bible teaches that Christ was one person with *two* natures. Recently, it has been recognized that this condemnation was about semantics: all along what the Coptic Church meant by “one nature” is exactly what in the West was meant by “one person.” For using alternative language, the Coptic Church was reckoned heretical, although its Christology was the same as those who condemned it.

With what litmus tests do we stereotype and judge fellow believers? A particular view on Genesis? On the New Perspective on Paul? The use of particular terms such as *inerrancy*, *justice*, and *inclusion*? Are we being fair to our Christian kin when we identify them with shibboleths? Is it possible that two different words can sometimes mean the same thing? Thinking ourselves orthodox, do we behave like Ephraimites? When this is so, don't we deserve to be shut down as they were?

Paul wrote about how Christians ought to engage in warfare: “For the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4–5). The word *stronghold* here is also used in the Greek Old Testament, to translate various occurrences of *stronghold* in Judges. Abimelech destroyed the “stronghold” of Shechem (Judg. 9:46), burning it with fire. We destroy idolatrous ideas and ignorance with better arguments, the gospel message. We are called to do this; we are the Spirit-filled leaders that God

has raised up to fulfill this mission.

Will the task get done? Yes! There is no question, since we are empowered by the Spirit of God. But this empowerment is no guarantee that Christians will always behave in a way that glorifies God. Christians can say and do foolish things; Christians can forget the true Judge and act contrary to their calling. The revolt of Ephraim is a picture of what the church of God is like: God's people at cross-purposes. The One who inspired Judges wants the church to study the Jephthah narrative, consider, and be wise.

TOWARD THE ESCHATON

The defeat of Ammon is a picture of the end time when all of God's enemies will be defeated by the true Judge, who will separate the sheep from the goats. The king of Ammon demanded to have God's property. Satan vainly demanded to have Jesus' (Luke 22:31). As Jephthah put Ammon to flight, the powers of death will not withstand the church (Matt. 16:18). After the final conflict, God's people will rest in the "land" for eternity. We now face difficulties, persecutions, satanic attacks, an idolatrous culture—but the great King will come on the day of judgment. When judgment day is here, the One that Jephthah and his judgeship anticipates will decide once and for all who has claim to the Promised Land.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Consider that God has adopted you as an heir of eternal life. What difference should this fact make in your life?
2. Jephthah knew his biblical history. This illustrates how a person should be able to discourse the facts of the Bible at any time. What is your plan to learn the facts of Scripture? (You are reading this book, which is one good method.)
3. Jephthah says that all God gives us to possess, we will possess. What part of the world has God given the church? What then is required to possess it? What role will you play in that effort?
4. God is the Judge; he declared Jesus not guilty by raising him from the dead. You are also judged not guilty. What is your response to this gracious judgment?
5. How has your big mouth caused you distress? How has your tongue

undermined God's work through you? What steps will you take to change this pattern?

6. Of course, the Ephraimites' tongues also caught them up, by their not being able to speak a word in season. When have you failed to speak when you should have, and regretted it later? How does this prompt you to be more prepared next time?
7. To what did the Ephraimites look that wrongly defined them? What should their attitude have been? How have you behaved like Ephraim? What does this say about your motivations? What would a changed heart look like?
8. When are Christians at cross-purposes with Christians? Instead of waging war, how should we settle our differences?
9. What shibboleths do you use to distinguish Christians on your side from those on the other side? Is there a better way? What does that better way look like?

12

PHILISTINE FOXES



Samson has pride of place as the last and twelfth judge. Again the people do evil in the eyes of Yahweh. Again what is important is in whose eyes a deed is done. In their own eyes they are always justified, but what matters is how God regards one's actions. In response to their unspecified evil, he gave the Philistines power over Israel for an emblematic forty years. They have now become a serious problem in Judges, mentioned only in passing several times before. This brings the book up to a time contemporaneous with David's political situation; the pressing issue in his early years was the Philistine problem. From the vantage point of Israel's civil war, the Philistines had recently killed Saul, and the people of Israel had no king to lead them against the enemy. The Samson story ends in much the same way, with Israel's savior dead and the nation vulnerable.

MANOAH'S MYSTERY MAN—JUDGES 13:2–25

Manoah, Samson's father, was a Danite. *Dan* means "judge" (see Gen. 49:16). Previous judges and leaders had dubious pedigree, sons of a distant concubine or even a whore. Samson, by contrast, comes from a stable home, and before his conception he was already set apart by God to deliver Israel. One could not ask for a better start. Samson's parents are part of his story. A very special birth, for a very special savior.

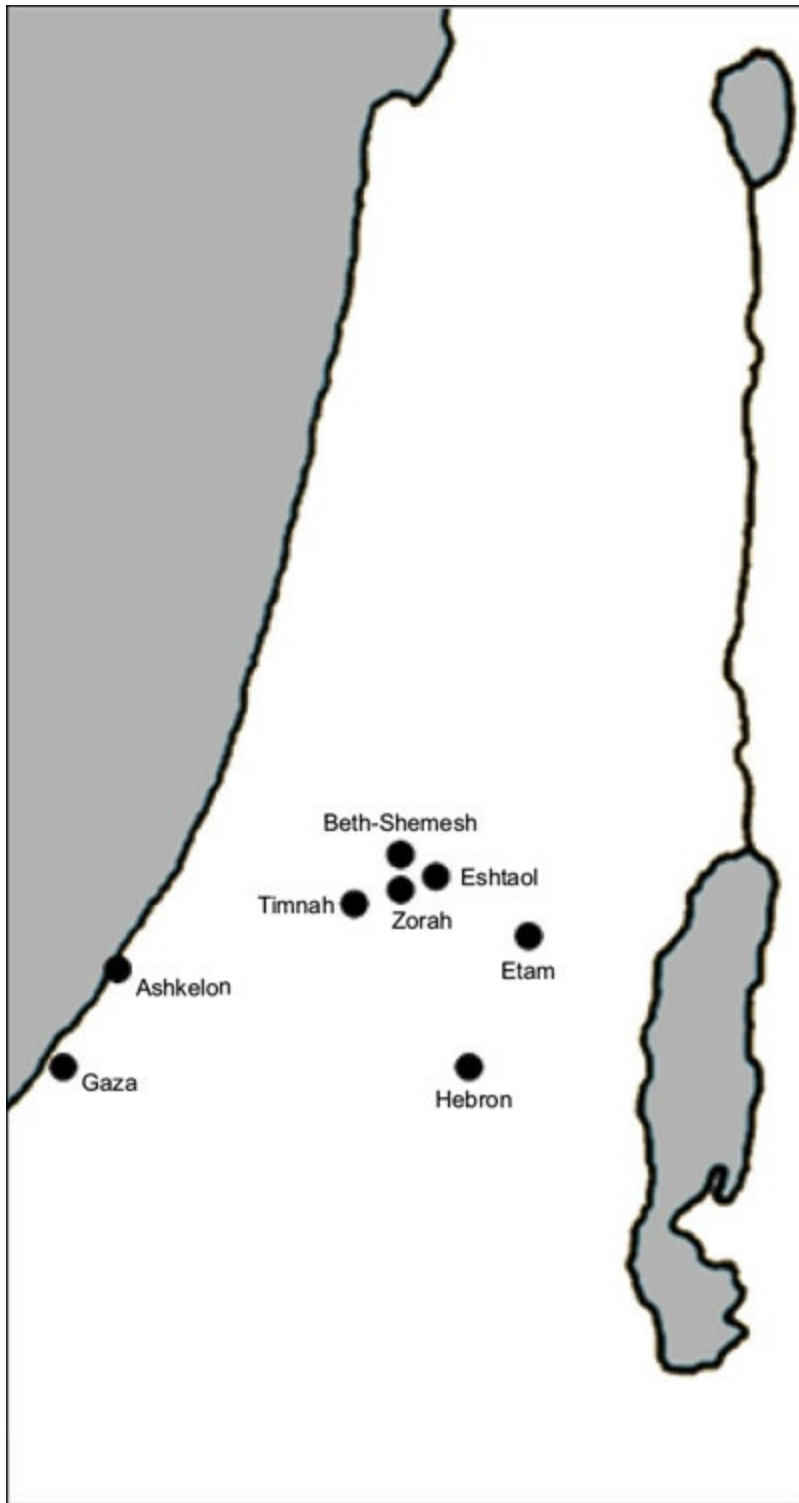
A barren woman's conceiving after a divine announcement is a motif that introduces a hero. Remember barren Hannah, praying before God, until Eli the priest assured her that her prayer had been heard (1 Sam. 1:11). *Samuel* even sounds like *Samson*. The birth accounts of Samuel and Samson both mention a "razor." In John the Baptist's birth announcement, the angel forbids him alcohol (Luke 1:13–15). Jesus' birth was the most special of all, Mary being a virgin. Samson is a Nazirite; Jesus is from Nazareth (Matt.

2:23). Samson is introduced with the motif of the barren woman, visited by an angel, who announces that the unlikely son would be a great hero, specially set apart from the ordinary. She told Manoah of a scary, intimidating man who looked like deity.

The Angel declared that Samson would be born a Nazir. This condition is described in Numbers 6:1–8. Such a man or woman takes a special vow that for a prescribed duration he or she will drink no alcohol, touch no dead thing, and suffer no razor upon the head. Unlike the Nazir, however, Samson takes no oath. He is special from the womb; his mother must also observe the vow's restrictions while she is pregnant. Samson is born in a permanent state of holiness. Judges 13:5, “he will begin to fight . . .,” means that it is Samson who will lead Israel to victory against the Philistines, *not* necessarily that Samson's work will be incomplete (see 10:18).

Manoah prays to Yahweh, and the Angel visits a second time. Manoah asks him, “What is to be the boy's *manner* of life?” (Judg. 13:12). Translations handle this in various ways: “how shall we *order* the child” (KJV); “what is to be the *rule* for the boy's life” (NIV); “what shall be the boy's *mode* of life” (NASB).

The word *manner*, *rule* is literally *judgment*—as in *judge*. “What will be the judgment of the boy?” (see also Judg. 18:7). The judge from the judging tribe lives by a judgment. The Angel does not answer Manoah's question except to say that he has already told his wife. Instead, he tells Manoah the rule for his wife while she is pregnant.



Throughout the encounter, Manoah seems to be a bit slow on the uptake compared to his wife. Manoah did not realize he was dealing with a divine being, even though she had described him thus. Once he realized it, he wrongly concluded that he would die, and again his wife had to explain the

facts of life to him. She is portrayed as wise in discerning spiritual things, as opposed to her blockhead husband. It is she who named the boy *Samson*, meaning “little sun,” “sun child,” “sunshine.” Note on the map that Samson was born near Beth-shemesh, “House of the Sun,” which is between Zorah and Eshtaol (Judg. 13:25).¹

Manoah, unaware to whom he was speaking, asked his name. The Angel replied that his name was *Wonderful*. Manoah then offered a goat to Yahweh the Wonder-Worker—and at that moment, the Angel ascended to heaven in sacrificial fire. Thus Samson is associated from conception with divine, holy fire. Samson would embody God’s wonderful works.

The Spirit came to Samson early in adulthood and began to “stir him” (13:25). This word *stir* is found five times in the Bible, always signifying a troubled spirit. Nebuchadnezzar’s and Pharaoh’s dreams *disturbed* them. The very first thing said about adult Samson is that right from the start, the Spirit of Yahweh *troubled* him, *disquieted* him. He begins with an agitated disposition. Elsewhere this verb is used with reference to the human spirit that is troubled in sleep. Here, it is the divine Spirit perturbing Samson, unsettling his mind—making him into the impulsive personality that we see in what follows.

Note how this story is different from that of each of the other episodic judges. God has been preparing for the Philistine problem for a generation. The cycle of sin > oppression > crying out has broken down. The people do sin and are oppressed, but they have not cried out for relief. Why not? It is because Israel has settled into the new normal: domination under the Philistines. (This idea is personified in Samson’s marriage.) The Israelites are comfortable being oppressed, as before when they were enslaved in Egypt. In fact, the people of Judah later side with their enemy against Samson. So God must stir them up against subjugation. The Spirit of God moves in Samson to make him agitated, dissatisfied. This frame of mind was from God to initiate friction and discontentment between Israel and the Philistines.

KNUCKLEHEAD NUPTIALS

Translations handle Judges 14:2 in various ways, but in Hebrew the first thing out of Samson’s mouth is “WO-MAN!”—literally, “Woman I saw in Timnah from the daughters of the Philistines.” What a way to introduce Samson. Talk about sleeping with the enemy. Samson asked his parents to

acquire the girl for him. Again, translations handle 14:3 in various ways: “for she pleases me well” (RSV); “she’s the right one for me” (NIV); “she looks good to me” (NASB). Literally it says, “She is right in my eyes,” using the language of 17:6; 21:25. Samson is like all of Israel, doing what is right in his own eyes. *His life illustrates what this mind-set looks like.* Like Samson, Israel is supposed to be set apart as holy to Yahweh. Like Israel pursuing foreign deities, Samson pursues Philistine beauties. His parents entirely identify with ethnic Israel and try to dissuade him, but behind the scenes God is moving in Samson to start a conflict. Judges 14:4 can be read: “his parents did not know that *she* was from Yahweh.” God’s Spirit made Samson restless, agitated—and perhaps now we see more clearly what this involved: being attracted to a Philistine girl.

So . . . God is behind Samson’s desire to intermarry with Philistines? This desire started the ball rolling for Israel’s deliverance from Philistine oppression (and the marriage didn’t survive the honeymoon). The Philistines had “dominion”—from the word *mashal* (Judg. 14:4). *Mashal* has another meaning: “wise saying, proverb.” This connects with the very strange nuptials to follow.

On the way, Samson met a lion and killed it, apparently with superhuman strength, and later found bees hiving in it. Perhaps the lion that Samson tore symbolized Philistine oppression that could not stand up to him, and within which lived the community of faith. This story is treated in this book’s introduction. Samson did not tell his parents, or anyone else, about it, and this secret became the basis for his riddle at the wedding. The Spirit had come upon him in part for this very reason—to create the scenario that suggested the riddle, setting the stage for conflict.²

GAMING GARMENTS—JUDGES 14:10–20

Samson prepared a drinking party (the root word for *feast* is *to drink*) at Timnah for the wedding party of thirty men. (A Nazir is not supposed to drink.) There, he “riddled a riddle” (Judg. 14:12), “From the eater went the edible / From the strong went the sweet” (14:14). Much ink has been spilled on the meaning of this riddle. Was it solvable? Perhaps Samson spoke different words than our text records, making a pun and thus a fair (solvable) puzzle.³ Or, since it was a wedding, did it have a sexual referent: love is stronger than a lion and sweeter than honey?⁴ In either case, Samson believed

that the riddle was solvable and was justly angered at their cheating. Or perhaps the whole thing was unfair, like Bilbo's asking Gollum, "What have I got in my pocket?" Bees don't hive in carcasses. Even with wordplay, this riddle might be impossible to guess. The Philistines thought so, and resorted to aggressively threatening Samson's bride with fire and murder.

Much more than the adventured garments was at issue. The Philistines said to Samson's bride, "Have you invited us here to impoverish us?" (Judg. 14:15). Literally, "have you brought us here to possess us"—or "to dispossess us?" The verb occurs twenty-seven times in Judges; it is the common word for Israel's "dispossessing" the native inhabitants (e.g., 1:19; 3:13; 11:21). At issue seems to be more than clothing. A deeper animosity having to do with domination and oppression is at stake.

Here for the first time we see the extent of Samson's weakness for women. She cried and claimed that he didn't love her, until he gave in and told her the solution. Of course, what followed was inevitable. They cheated; he knew it and took vengeance. The Spirit came upon him a second time in power, and he pillaged the Philistine town of Ashkelon, while acquiring for himself the gamed garments.

Samson gained property from the oppressor. Perhaps this was a down payment on more to come, until the people of Israel eventually under David reacquired everything due to them—the whole land. But in the process Samson lost something else: his wife, who was given to another man. Is this a picture of Israel's trade-off: to regain their inheritance, the people must lose the gods they love?

TAIL TALE—JUDGES 15:1–20

Samson had left his wife and gone home in anger, but later he purposed to rejoin her. Samson literally said, "I will go in to my wife in the chamber" (Judg. 15:1)—that is, a sexual motivation. When he discovered that she had been given to another man, he reasoned, "I will be more blameless this time than the Philistines when I do them evil." This is Samson doing what is right in his own eyes. One might gloss, "This time I am justified."

Fire often comes into this fiery character's story. Note that foxes sport bushy red tails like flames. The Hebrew for *fox* has a cognate that means "torch," and in Greek they were called "torch-tails."⁵ During wheat harvest,

Samson tied the tails of three hundred foxes together with live torches and loosed them to burn the Philistines' fields. In retaliation, they put fire to his wife and her parents. Of course, this further inflamed him.

Ablaze with righteous indignation, Samson slaughtered many of them, and then fled. The verb *avenged* in Judges 15:7 does not refer to personal vengeance, but to lawful reprisal. In his mind, anyway, Samson was justified in what he did. Of course, the Philistines did not see it that way, and pursued him into Judah. They told the men of Judah that their intention was to do to Samson as he had done to them. Three thousand of Judah then confronted Samson, who said, "As they did to me, so have I done to them" (15:10–11). This is a good description of what life was like when everyone did what was right in his own eyes: the anti-Golden Rule. Note also how the office of judge has degenerated. Earlier judges got the ball rolling until Israel rose up to throw off the oppressor. Now, no matter what he does, Samson can't get the people to rally. Judah bound him and handed him over to the enemy.

It is here in the narrative that Samson's sunlike aspect comes into play. Samson's bonds melted off his arms like flax in the fire (Judg. 15:14). Things melt when subject to heat; the sun melted manna (Ex. 16:21). Samson is a little sun—turning his ropes to ash when he was hot with the Spirit.

Once Samson ashed his bonds, he took hold of a moist, juicy donkey jawbone (Judg. 15:15). Of course, a Nazir is not supposed to handle anything dead. The word for *donkey* is *chamor*, which can also mean a dry measure that a donkey can carry. Samson sang a little ditty, "With the jawbone *chamor*, *chamor*, *chamors*, with the jawbone *chamor* I smote a thousand men" (15:16). Here again we see his proclivity to play with words. The action took place at Lehi (15:14), and he threw away the jawbone at Ramath-lehi, the "hill of a jawbone" (15:17).

Samson called his victory over a thousand a "great salvation" (Judg. 15:18). This is how he interpreted his own actions; it was not a vendetta born of personal spite. Samson sees himself as a savior. He is alone because no one will join him. This great salvation precedes the comment that he judged Israel for half a stylized generation (15:20). Thus, defeating the Philistines with the jowl was, in fact, delivering Israel from the oppressor. They continue to menace Israel throughout Samson's judgeship, and he is finally betrayed and delivered to them. But the level of subjugation seems to have been

shaved during his administration.

Samson was thirsty, and prayed to God about it (Judg. 15:18). It has been observed that of the judges, only Samson has such a vital and personal relationship with God. God miraculously answered his prayer. What does this mean? Did God approve of what Samson had been doing? Apparently so. He wants his people delivered from oppression, and by Samson's hand. In Judges 15:19, God split open the "hollow place," which is Hebrew for "the molar"—that is, "God split open the molar of the jawbone" (cf. KJV). Here is yet a third wordplay in the Samson saga. Note the time reference: "until this day" (15:19). This speaks to the proximity in time between the event and when it was written down.

As a leader, Samson is quite the failure. His judgeship consists of sporadic moments of impassioned ardor—both for and against the enemy. He will rise up and check their power with his own, but he also loves their women and their cities. Israel sides with the enemy against him. And he seems to despise his office of Nazir, doing everything to profane it except cutting his hair.

GAZA GAZERS—JUDGES 16:1–31

There are three or four separate units in chapter 16, treated below under three rubrics. The action in this section begins and ends in the Philistine coastal city of Gaza.

Gaza Gal—Judges 16:1–3

On the map above, Gaza and Hebron are marked, indicating how far Samson carried the city gate. There are some problems with this text, such as Judges 16:2, "they . . . lay in wait for him all night." That is just when Samson left with the gates. It is suggested that this is a transmission error and that it originally read "all day." That is, they gave up and went home before Samson left. There are other problems, such as how this account comports with gate construction of the period. But as it stands, it is a simple story: Samson fornicated all day, and finally punished the city that allowed enemies to stalk him, the "Gaza gazers." But why is this pericope here? What does it add to the story? How is the sexual exploit of a whore-mongering biblical hero part of the holy Word of God?

One way to answer such questions is to ask how the story would be read differently if the paragraph were not there. That exercise helps to clarify

matters. Another way of putting it is this: what positively does the paragraph contribute to the overall narrative? Some suggestions along these lines follow below.

Up until this point, the reader has been treated to what arguably were the beginnings of Samson's judgeship. The Delilah story is his downfall. What was he doing during those twenty years of judging Israel? These three verses may be an indication of what his tenure as judge looked like.

Without this passage, one might regard Samson as having only two love interests in his life: his tragic wife and Delilah. Adding this little pericope disabuses the reader of that notion. Samson is certainly ruttish; he just can't seem to get enough of those Philistine girls. At the same time, it is clear that there was continuing animosity with the Philistines. They kept laying traps for him, but Samson outwitted them. Thus, the Delilah episode is not an isolated case. We saw how he broke down when his wife cried, so he gave in and told her the secret to his riddle. Love continues to be his weakness. In regard to the fair sex, he never seems to learn.

Apparently, Samson was about the business of keeping the Philistines at bay. This made him the object of their ire. *They knew that they had to subdue him in order to subdue Israel.* His carrying off a part of the gate demonstrates that they had no defense against him; he could do to the city whatever he wanted. Feats of strength such as this apparently characterized his administration as judge. The whole city was helpless when Samson was aroused.

These three verses accomplish one more thing: they introduce the reader to the Philistine city of Gaza. This is where Samson's career is headed.

Samson and Delilah—Judges 16:4–22

Immediately after this sordid tale, verse 4 says, "After this he loved a woman . . ." *Delilah* is built on a duplicating stem from the root *dal*, meaning "poor" or "weak"—thus "she who makes weak," "weakening woman." Her name also sounds like the word for *night*, *lalah*.⁶ See also *Lilith* of Isaiah 34:14 (NRSV), who in ancient myth is a death-dealing night demon in female form. *Samson* means "sun," the bringer of day. Delilah's name looks like "anti-sun." He brings sunshine; she kills it.

They could not subdue Samson as long as he was so powerful. The source

of his muscle was *not* his hair. It was God, who had set him apart as a Nazir from birth. Theoretically, God could have left him at any time, especially after Samson violated his status by acts such as drinking alcohol and touching dead things. But God stayed with Samson as long as the visible symbol of his holy office remained intact—his unshaven head (Num. 6:5). The Philistines knew nothing of this. They each contributed to a Delilah fund, totaling 1,100 pieces of silver, to discover his Achilles' heel.

As their agent, she asked Samson what would make him vulnerable (Judg. 16:5–6). As sinews of freshly slaughtered cattle dry, they contract and squeeze into a very tight hold. Samson told her that if he was thus bound, he would become “like any man” (16:7). Samson is already “like” Israel, in that his motivations are “what is right in his eyes.” Delilah bound him, and then cried, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” The “tendons broke like a thread of flax breaks when it smells the fire” (16:9). Samson burned it off, as if he literally flared up with a prominence of the sun. A similar episode happened again, and again Samson's bonds parted as before. You can't tie up the sun.

After the second time, the reader may begin to question Samson's sanity. Does he not realize what she is up to? Is he that stupid? In a nutshell, yes, he is. When it comes to love, he seems to be completely naive. In this respect he embodies all of Israel, which in an almost nihilistic fashion toys with its own destruction by flirting with baleful gods. No doubt Samson thinks of it as a game: fun, lighthearted banter. He goes merrily along, closer and closer to his destruction, as the Philistines exploit his one actual weakness.

His next tease edged much too close to the truth for comfort; Samson was playing with fire. He told Delilah that it had to do with his hair. If his seven locks were woven together with the warp-threads of a loom, fastened with a pin, he would become like any man. She did so. This is ominous not only because it is very close to his true secret, but also because it echoes Jael's murder of Sisera, who also “thrust” (same verb in Hebrew) a “pin” (same noun in Hebrew) into her lover's head.

The fact that Samson's hair was braided into seven locks has been associated with ancient iconography depicting the sun with seven rays.⁷ If Samson's locks are like the sun's rays, then shaving his head is like removing radiated light and heat from the sun, darkening it, stripping it of its power.

Nevertheless, this is not Samson's argument. His reasoning is that his hair is the symbol of his office, which, once removed, would literally make him a common, not sacred, man. And with the removal, his superhuman power would be lost. God would leave him. And with God would go the Spirit who empowered Samson.

Delilah urged him day after day, until "his soul was vexed to death" (Judg. 16:16). He finally did tell her the truth. She recognized that this time it was different, that this time he "told her all that was in his heart" (16:17). There is an interesting problem in 16:19. The text says literally, "She made him sleep upon her knees. And she called to the man. And she shaved seven locks from his head." To whom did she call? The verb *to shave* is feminine; she shaved him herself. Did a man hand her the razor? Who is this guy, rudely intruding into an otherwise unambiguous text? Jack Sasson suggests that there was no other man. Samson was in a postcoital torpor, and she shouted at *him* to see if he was deeply asleep: "Yo, Samson! SAMSON!!!" When he didn't respond, she took out the razor and shaved him.⁸ Samson's strength "turned aside" from him; he did not realize at first that Yahweh had left him (16:20). His enemies seized him, gouged out his eyes, took him to Gaza, bound him in bronze, and made him grind at the mill.

Jay Williams argues that in the ancient Near East, the sun was thought of as the "eye of the cosmos." For example, 2 Samuel 12:11 is worded as if the sun is looking on from heaven. Putting out Samson's eyes was like darkening the sun.⁹ Blinding him was not so much torture as humiliation; see the comments on the disfigurement of the lord of Bezek (chapter 3 of this book). Many suffered this fate. Manasseh was bound in bronze fetters and taken to Babylon (2 Chron. 33:11). King Zedekiah was also blinded and put to the mill (according to the Old Greek of Jeremiah 52:11). Remember Matthew 24:41, "two women . . . grinding at the mill." Women, slaves, prisoners grind grain. Thus, it was demeaning for Samson to be put to that work.

Doggone Dagon—Judges 16:23–31

Samson's denouement came in the great temple to the Philistine god of agriculture, Dagon. The Philistines praise Dagon for delivering Samson into their power. Translations of Judges 16:24 call him a "ravager" (RSV), or "one who laid waste" (NIV), or "destroyer" (KJV). Literally, it says "one who dried up" the land. This is the same verb as in 16:7–8, bowstrings "which have not

been dried”—in the sun. Their enemy had “dried up” their land as the sun dries bowstrings. Again, Samson is like the sun—in this case, the destructive rays of the sun that parch the earth. Thus, Samson is Dagon’s nemesis, and the Philistines celebrate the victory of the agriculture god over his archenemy Samson.

For the fourth time in the Samson narrative, there is wordplay. This time, it pokes hilarious fun at the Philistines. The Gaza gazers say, “Call Samson that he may make sport for us” (Judg. 16:25). Translations gloss various ways: “entertain us” (NIV); “amuse us” (NASB); “perform for us” (NKJV). The Hebrew verb literally means “laugh”—thus “that he may make us laugh.” But the verb can be enunciated differently, yielding an alternative meaning, “crush.” So the same verse that says, “Bring out Samson that he may make us laugh” *also* says, “Bring out Samson, that he may crush us!”¹⁰

They made him stand between two pillars. Philistine temples had two long, thin pillars of support that a strong man might just be able to move. This makes the story seem archaeologically authentic. But then the realistic ambience is ruined by its reference to three thousand people on the roof. Philistine temples were not nearly that large. The Old Greek says that seven hundred were on the roof, perhaps witnessing to a Hebrew text that had seven hundred, which in turn may have been a symbolic number. Even seventy would be almost too many. Philo claimed that there were forty thousand. Obviously, along the way, a hyperbolic figure figured. Perhaps three thousand is built on a “three” device (e.g., Jair’s thirty sons on thirty asses in thirty cities; Gideon’s three hundred men; Samson’s thirty companions and three hundred foxes; Judah’s three thousand men who bound him).

Note also that there was a lad alongside Samson (Judg. 16:26). This makes his death scene look like that of Abimelech (king for three years), who also spoke to a boy right before he died (9:54).

Once again, Samson seeks “vengeance.” As noted above, the word does not denote personal revenge, but vindication, just punishment. “Thus, Samson acts as the legitimate agent of Yhwh’s punishment.”¹¹ Each time Samson seeks vengeance, he says it will be the last time. This time, it really is. God empowered Samson as long as Samson represented his holy office, as in the end he did once more. In his death, Samson helped to deliver Israel from the Philistines. And thus ends the last judge of Israel.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

It is no coincidence that Samson's death has so much in common with Saul's. Samson was surrounded by Philistine enemies, who sought to make sport of him. Earlier, Samson had prayed to God that he would not die (Judg. 15:18), but this time he prays the opposite. Saul's death is described in 1 Samuel 31:1–13. A very rare word is used (*taqa'*) to describe the Philistines' "hanging" Saul on the wall, and Delilah's "thrusting" the nail into Samson's head. Saul was afraid they would make sport of him. And both had a boy by their side. In Judges 16:26, the lad beside Samson does not do much, and is unnecessary to the story. Perhaps a sidekick was needed for the type scene? Whatever the case, the lad beside him who aids his death echoes Saul. Saul was beheaded, and Samson had his head shaved. Both were empowered by the Spirit. Both resisted Philistine domination. Both "experience a surge of strength and tear the beast apart" (in Saul's case, see 1 Samuel 11:5–7).¹²

"If the Samson complex was beamed to the north as part of the Davidic apology, it would not be difficult for its recipients to recognize in the Samson portrayal a vivid reenactment of what had just occurred before their eyes in Saul."¹³ Dale Davis argues that Saul's life followed the pattern of Samson. Both were physically impressive. God supported Samson throughout his career, but later deserted him when he disregarded holy things (his status as Nazir).

The divine Spirit troubled Samson's mind (Judg. 13:25), as an evil spirit eventually afflicted Saul's (1 Sam. 16:14). Samson was a troubled and tragic leader, who died defending Israel against the Philistines, and left the work unfinished. What we now need is a successor who can lead Israel to victory against them. Samson was strong, he had much to commend him, but he was also deeply flawed. Consider this, O Israel, when choosing your next leader!

The one tribe singled out who absolutely would not follow Samson was Judah. Samson failed to inspire Judah to engage the battle (Judg. 15:9–11). This is a call for the supporters of Ish-bosheth: choose a leader that Judah will follow.

Another aspect of the Samson narrative that would have helped to promote David is the way in which the Philistines are mocked. Over and over again, Samson outwits them and effortlessly makes sport of them. And in the end, "one grunt from the entertainer of the day buries the whole witnessing crowd

under one heap of holy rubble.”¹⁴ This sort of anti-Philistine propaganda would have indicated to the northern tribes that David was on their side, and not in bed with the Philistines.

How Does It Function as a Sermon on Deuteronomy?

Samson personified all of Israel. He was set apart as holy from birth. But there is “sharp dissonance between what Samson is and how he behaves.”¹⁵ Barry Webb observes that Samson does everything a Nazir should not: touches carcasses of lion and ass, imbibes alcohol, and finally cuts his hair. Samson seemed to have wanted to be like other men. Israel was supposed to be holy, too, but also wanted to be like the other nations. Samson’s repeatedly chasing after foreign women is analogous to the Israelites’ chasing their gods. But always, in his extremity, when he cried out to Yahweh, he was answered. In the Samson saga, it is not Israel who cries to God when burdened—it is Samson.

Of course, the narrative also illustrates Deuteronomy’s polemic against intermarriage. Nothing good comes from intermarriage. The foreign girl destroyed Samson. Never forget: foreigners are the enemy. Spiritually, they are all Delilahs. Make no covenants with them. Samson also failed to raise up children for the Lord, as God’s people are supposed to do—and thus died a failure. What a contrast to the first judge, Othniel. Othniel’s wife was his incentive to drive out the enemy (Judg. 1:12); Samson wanted to cohabit with the enemy.

Yahweh’s own reputation was bound up with Samson’s fate (Judg. 16:23–24). He couldn’t let his judge be mocked in the name of Dagon. In the end, even though Samson died in exile, the manner of his death showed that Dagon is no god. Just because Israel is subjugated under the Philistines does not mean that Yahweh is weak. This story would have encouraged the exiles suffering under Babylonian gods.

How the Samson Saga Serves the Savior’s Story

Once again Hebrews 11:32–34 can be brought to bear on the narrative:

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of

the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Again, one's first reaction might be: "Has the writer of Hebrews ever read the book?" Judges treats Samson's escapades, from vandalizing wheat fields to whoremongering to amusing himself with puns about mass slaughter. The man was intemperate, immature, motivated by anything and everything except reverence for his holy office. So how can the writer of Hebrews have a point that Samson is a positive role model for a life of faith? Or how can Samson's faith look like a Christian's?

First of all, through everything, Samson did have a relationship with God. Again, of all the judges, he was the only one with such an intimate relationship. He cried out when in personal need, and God answered; this was also true in his death scene. All along he knew and believed that his power was founded on his status as a holy man of God. He also conceptualized his successes against the oppressor as God's divine work of delivering Israel. Hebrews connects this with hearing and believing the gospel, as we also, by faith in Jesus, accomplish God's will. To Hebrews, the Samson saga is *about* the gospel of Christ.

Samson, the twelfth judge, is the final Spirit-endowed leader who anticipates and typifies the coming Christ. Jesus is the One who destroys the spiritual strongholds of this world. He brings out of the spiritually dead world something sweet for God, a community of faith.

His birth is announced beforehand by an angel. His conception is miraculous. He is rejected by his own people. Its leaders bind him and hand him over to their pagan overlords (16:13). His saving work is consummated in his death, a death in which he brings down Dagon and lays the foundation for a deliverance to be more fully manifested in the future. In other words, here, in this most unlikely figure, we see, possibly more clearly than anywhere else in the Old Testament, the shape of things to come.¹⁶

Samson was a Nazirite like Jesus. The Spirit was with him throughout his adult life. And Jesus, as he was about to die, also prayed to the God who had forsaken him.¹⁷

Here once more we are treated to a Spirit-endowed leader, who can

accomplish anything at all when God is with him. Samson shows, more than any previous judge, that a man with the Spirit can be larger than life, can be stronger, can be whatever he needs to be, if God has called him. This points to Saul's early years as the king of Israel effectively waging holy war against the uncircumcised. It points beyond Saul to David, on whom the Spirit rested when Samuel anointed him. This anointed king greatly extended Israel's boundaries, brought the ark to Jerusalem, and led Israel in worship with song. But it also points well beyond David to David's Anointed Son, the Christ, who in the Spirit could accomplish all of God's will, in a miraculous way well beyond anything attributed to Samson, and whose death saved the whole world from satanic tyranny.

WHAT DOES THE SAMSON SAGA MEAN TODAY?

A Spirit-filled and Spirit-anointed person can be larger than life, can be whatever is needed, since God calls such a one. This is where the bar is placed for Christians. In the Spirit, they can rise to any occasion, accomplish any task, resist any temptation, risk any loss, for the glory of God in Christ and his gospel. The Spirit-filled Christians in the book of Acts are such examples. And we build on the foundation they laid. Samson the "little sun" blazed with the Spirit, and we are like fires, too, lamps set on a hill that cannot be hidden (Matt. 5:15–16). We shine like stars (Phil. 2:15). Our light is our good deeds and our holding fast to the Word of life. This is where Christians should be. This is where they have been. This is what is needed today. And as the gates of Gaza could not stand before Samson, so the gates of hell will not withstand the church (Matt. 16:18).

But like the judges of old, our weak and wayward personalities are still there. Samson, like all of Israel, seemed to desire to be "like any other man." Do Christians also flirt with this desire? "If we are saints by divine calling we cannot be 'as other men,' and should not want to be. A reluctant saint is a tragic saint, now as then."¹⁸ Webb quotes 1 Peter 2:9–11:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.

Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the

passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul.

Like Samson, Christians are called to be different. Israel did not get to have a secular history. Neither did Samson. And neither do we. So although the Spirit-filled Samson is a type or picture for Christians in one sense, in another sense (the 1 Corinthians 10 sense), the selfish and contrary Samson is an example of how *not* to be.

Put on display in our text is what life is like when all the people—and the leaders—do what is right in their own eyes, but not what is right in God's. Our text puts on display rationalizing out-of-control retaliation born of personal offense and vendetta—even though in Samson's specific (unrepeatable) situation it also served the larger purposes of God to free his people. Samson burned down the enemy's fields and killed the enemy's people. Jesus told us to turn the other cheek and to forgive the enemy. This calls for reflection. What does our text say about seeking personal vengeance? Do you succumb to this temptation? What should you do about it?

What does our text say about being motivated by lust with disregard for family and divine calling? Where did this motivation take Samson? How comfortable are you with various forms of sexual license? Are you disregarding your holy calling for cheap pleasures as well? What are you going to do about it? "Samson . . . keeps doing the same thing, and in this, he is quite laughable. True, he encounters obstacles and suffers temporary setbacks, but we see over and over again that Samson bounces back, and we come to expect it."¹⁹ This is a challenge to Christians: Do you keep failing in the same way? What folly of yours should you wise up to?

"Neither Yhwh, nor the narrator, nor any of the characters censures Samson for any of his actions."²⁰ In Samson's case, moral judgment is seen in how events play out. His inappropriate lifestyle and folly inevitably led him to be bound, blinded, enslaved. A Christian who lives in a manner incongruous with Christ's calling also risks evil consequences. God may not say anything now, but eventually you will be called to account. And this introduces the last phase of meaning in the Samson saga—the eschaton.

TOWARD THE ESCHATON

Samson made a riddle that the Philistines could not solve. The riddle of the

world is this: What is life about? What is the meaning of life? Samson gives the (cosmic) answer: it is about God's forming something sweet and desirable from something that seemed strong, but is spiritually dead. On the last day, when all eyes will see him, all will know the answer to the riddle of life. This is when the image of a Spirit-endowed Judge ripping the beast will be understood in its final sense.

In Daniel 7 arise great beasts who are kings of great empires, who wage war against the saints. The fourth beast tramples down the whole earth. But the judgment seat will decree the end, and the kingdoms of this world will be cast into the lake of fire. In Revelation also, there are beasts that represent world powers. A beast with a mouth like a lion rises out of the sea, energized by Satan (Rev. 13:2). It blasphemes God and makes war on the saints—and the world worships it. But in the midst of this, the saints stay pure and worship God. The beast is destroyed and thrown into the lake of fire. The beast is a motif that represents the eschatological world power, destined for judgment and hellfire.

On the day of judgment, Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats, and will send the goats into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels—the devil who now prowls around like a lion, seeking someone to devour. The world will perish by fire—as Samson's fire again and again flared against the enemies of God.

Jesus comes to baptize with the Spirit and with fire (Matt. 3:11). He spoke of the unexpected day when the master returns and the servants must give account, saying, "I came to cast fire upon the earth" (Luke 12:49). Samson burned fields of wheat, but Jesus will immerse the whole world in Spirit and fire, judging it and finding it wanting. Every false god, such as Dagon, will be revealed as worthless and no longer celebrated in the universe. The true and living God will be worshiped by his people forever and ever.

And the entire world will be made holy. Samson's hair grew back for the day on which Dagon and his worshipers were judged. Samson's restored status as Nazir envisions the day when everything will be cleansed and sanctified, such that even the cooking pots and vessels for ordinary use will be set apart as holy for God (Zech. 14:20). There will be no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty is the temple, and the holy God will dwell with his people—all will be Nazir, set apart, holy.

Jesus is described in this way: “In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength” (Rev. 1:16). He is the true *Samson*, the One who shines like the sun. In the New Jerusalem, there will be no sun, since “they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:4–5). Amen; come, Lord Jesus.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Samson is analogous to a believer raised in a Christian home. Does that describe you? What sins do you take lightly? What are you going to do about changing that attitude?
2. Do you know a family in which the wife is more spiritually sensitive than the husband? What do you think about that situation?
3. How has the Spirit stirred in you?
4. Have you accepted a sub-Christian existence as your norm? What oppressive thing do you need help in overcoming?
5. Do you do what is right in your own eyes? Or do you live to do what is right in other people’s eyes? Give examples of how you have turned from such a way of life to seek what is right in God’s eyes.
6. How has God moved in history to stir up the church from complacency?
7. How do you respond when you feel slighted? Do you justify your bad behavior by others’ prior bad behavior? What does such a response get you?
8. Samson was stupid for sex. What allurements and temptations make you forget your holy calling and cause you to stumble? What comes of this? What folly do you repeat, again and again? What steps will you take to halt this pattern?
9. Even though God will accomplish his purposes through a Spirit-endowed person, sin still has consequences. What consequences of sin have you experienced? What have you learned as a result?
10. Who is the real God of agriculture? Who then should you trust for your

daily bread? If so, why are you sometimes anxious that your needs won't be met?

11. What does the Samson saga teach about being unequally yoked?
12. In what ways do you desire to be like the world?
13. Where does God set the bar for you, as a person endowed with the Spirit?
In what ways are you a lamp on a hill, blazing with light?

PART THREE

LEVITE LEVERAGE



The cycles of twelve judges are now over, but the book is not quite finished. There are two epilogues, balancing the double introduction of chapters 1 and 2.

The first epilogue seems to pick up the story right after Samson. The action begins with Dan and treats Danites. Involved are 1,100 pieces of silver, which is what Delilah was paid, seemingly continuing with the fate of that money. But the Philistines are absent, as if the narrative treats a different time. This different time is made explicit well into the narrative. The first epilogue actually treats the beginning of the conquest of Canaan, and recounts how part of Dan settled to the north of Israel.

Both of the stories feature the one tribe hitherto absent from Judges: Levi. The career of one Levite is part of the first story; another's adventure, the second. Both stories also feature Bethlehem, the city of David. If the book of Ruth once served as appendix to Judges, then together they form the "Bethlehem trilogy."

These stories share another feature in common that also sets them apart from the remainder of Judges: the thrice-repeated refrain that there was no king and that everyone was a law unto himself. Apparently, these accounts are the final argument of the book for why a covenant-keeping king such as David was needed.

DAN'S DIRTY DEALINGS



MICAH'S MOM'S MONEY—JUDGES 17:1–18:1A

English versions name the character in Judges 17:1 “Micah,” but in Hebrew at first it is “Mikayahu.” This is formed from the elements *mi ka yahu*, meaning “who is-like Yahweh?” In other words, Yahweh is incomparable; there is no one like him. His mother had 1,100 pieces of silver. It has been suggested that she was none other than Delilah.¹ But the story eventually turns a different direction. Mikayahu confessed to her that he had taken her money, since he wanted to avoid the curse she pronounced on the thief. She took some of this cursed silver and had an idol (Hebrew, *pesel*) made of it.

In verse 5, when he created an alternative cult around the silver idol, the author changed Mikayahu’s name. Now and for the rest of the story it is “Micah,” *Yahweh* having been subtracted out of his original name. This proprietor of idolatrous religion should not bear the divine name, so the narrator secularized it. Obviously, in “real life” it stayed the same. The author profanes the man whose silver is pseudo-sanctified. Micah’s “shrine” is literally *Beth-’elohim*, “house of gods.” This is truly a family affair. Mom donated the silver, Micah provided the sanctuary, and his son became the priest. In just the first few verses, many Deuteronomic commandments have already been violated, such as stealing, using God’s name in vain, having no other gods, honoring one’s father and mother, observing no alternative cult, including no unaccredited priests (Deut 12:4–7), and making a graven image. The narrator in Judges 17:6 inputs a relatively rare notation of what he thinks of the whole affair so far. The comment is that when everyone does what is right in his own eyes, and there is no king (who knows better) to set things right, this is the sort of thing that goes on. The narrator does not leave this situation uncommented like so much else in Judges. Deuteronomy 12:8 reads,

“You shall not do according to all that we are doing here this day, every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes.”

Imagine writing Judges 17:6 after the time of Solomon, or the later monarchy. To blame the lack of a king for covenant infidelity would have seemed naive. Yet Judges is patently aware of the world and its failings. Consider Abimelech. Obviously, any old king will not do. What was lacking in Israel was the right sort of king, a king who would lead the people aright, a king like David.

The scene shifts in Judges 17:7 to an unnamed Levite who lived in the City of David, Bethlehem of Judah. (The tribal affiliation distinguishes this Bethlehem from the other one in 12:8–10.) He left there, and sought his fortune in the hills of Ephraim. Micah, who had made his son priest a few verses earlier, now offered the job to this Levite, saying, “Be to me a father and a priest” (17:10). But then the text says that this Levite became like a son to Micah (17:11). Wanting a patriarch, Micah gets a dependent. Here is the first switch: that for which Micah idolatrously hoped resulted in exactly the opposite.

Micah now believed that Yahweh was truly with him. He knew that God liked Levites. Now that he had acquired one to minister at *Beth-’elohim*, Yahweh, he was sure, could not fail to be pleased with him and bless him. At this point, the narrator again interjects the comment that there was no king (Judg. 18:1a). This is short for the whole sentence already expressed (17:6). Without a covenant-keeping king, the people do what seems good to them. The scene is about to shift once again, and in a way that reveals just how confidence in idols ultimately proves to be empty and paper-thin.

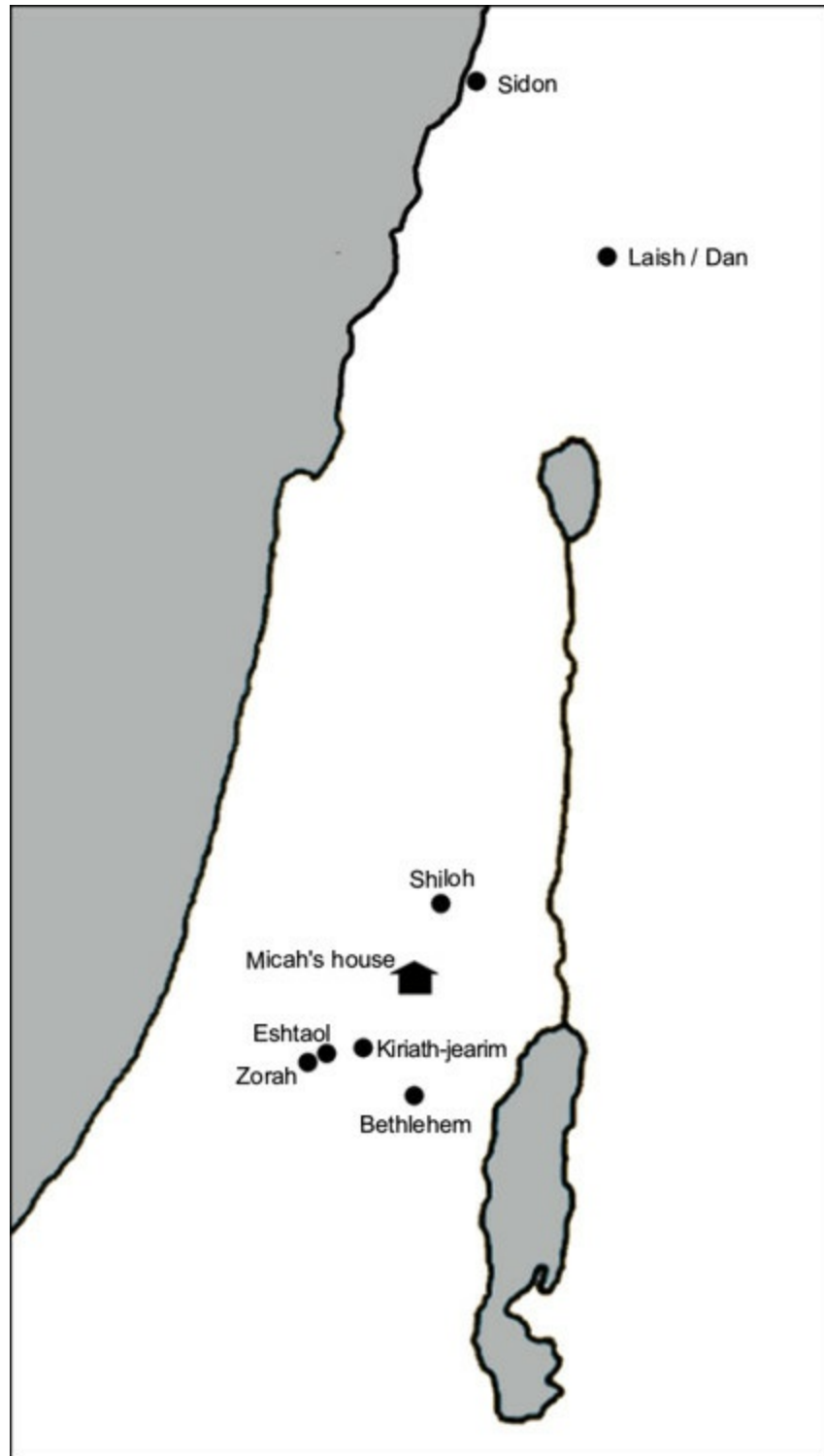
FIVE SPIES AND SIX HUNDRED GUYS— JUDGES 18:1B–16

Judges 18:1b notes that at the time the story happened, the tribe of Dan had not yet settled into a territory. What follows is an anti-conquest account, a parody of the conquest under Joshua. The invading Israelite tribe members are depicted as thieves, bullies, and opportunists. They could not handle a really difficult assignment, so they fell upon a peaceful and vulnerable city instead. In fact, the reader sympathizes with the non-Israelite victims. The Danites sent five men “from their borders/coasts, men [who were] sons of valor” (18:2). They are sent to spy out the land. On the map, note how both

the Levite and the five Danites traversed north to find Micah's house.

The fact that they departed from Eshtaol and Zorah connects with the Samson narrative (Judg. 16:31). Apparently, at the time of this story, that area was not yet secured. When they arrived at Micah's residence, they recognized the young man's "voice." Perhaps this refers to a southern accent.² The Levite performed as intermediary for them, and encouraged them to continue on their journey in Yahweh's name, without actually promising success.

The five guys traveled from Micah's house way up north to the city of Laish, reasonably close to Sidon, peaceful, secure—literally, "and was not shaming a word/matter in the land a possessor of restraint," meaning that "there was no one speaking with any authority in the land, no one possessing control."³ So the Danites happened upon a peaceful, isolated community with no clear military leadership, "lacking nothing that is in the earth, and possessing wealth" (Judg. 18:7). They returned south to their brethren, saying more or less literally, "You motionless ones, do not be like a slug" (18:9). Only six hundred responded to the call; apparently, the rest stayed behind. (Historically, they rejoin the story later.)



The Danites went first to Kiriath-jearim in Judah. Note the historical referent: the place was called the “encampment of Dan to this day” (Judg. 18:12). This was written when that toponym was known. It is also a connection to the Samson narrative; another place by the same name appears

in 13:25.

The six-hundred-plus-five Danites left Kiriath-jearim and journeyed north to Micah's house. The six hundred guys waited outside, and the five spies entered Micah's establishment and were polite to the young priest.

PILFERING *PESELS*—JUDGES 18:17–31

While the priest was talking with the six hundred armed and warlike guys, the five spies robbed Micah. They made off with his idols, his priest, and his valuables. They left, a miniature tribe complete with children and cattle. The young Levite was happy to join them and be their priest. He was now truly set for life.

Micah and some others discovered what had happened, and chased after the Danites. Micah finally caught up with those in the rear, and the conversation went something like this:

“What’s wrong with you, Micah? What’s your problem?”

“What’s my *problem*? How can you even ask me that? You took my gods and my priest!”

“Keep it down! Look, we sympathize; we really do, but let’s keep this between you and us. Some of the guys up front are not nearly as nice as we are, and you could get hurt if they hear you complaining.”

“But what is left for *me*?”

That last line is the important one, “What is left for me?” Once his religious items were stolen, Micah had nothing left. He suddenly went from being set to having nothing. This is idolatry in a nutshell.

Of course, no one looks very good in this story. The Danites are bullying thieves, willing to threaten and steal from fellow Israelites as well as from unsuspecting and defenseless non-Israelites. They traveled to Laish, conquered it, and renamed it *Dan*. It became the northernmost point of Israel.

The story is winding down, but there are still a few surprises. In Judges 18:30, they set up a *pesel* in Dan, and the name of the Levite who left Bethlehem to serve a silver idol is finally revealed: he is Moses’ grandson. Of course, *son* could mean “descendant.” But the Levite’s father is Gershom, Moses’ son. This connection with the lawgiver is shocking. Up until this

point, Judges has led the reader to believe that the story was more or less a continuation of the Samson narrative, with Danites, 1,100 pieces of silver, the same cities, and so on. It is jarring to discover that what almost seemed like a continuation of the Samson narrative is actually a flashback to the conquest. So Judges is ending where it began, with overlap to Joshua. The fate of the Danites who stayed behind is now clear. They did not fade from history, but became the community of Danites, from whose stock later came Samson.

In any event, Israel—or at least Micah’s shrine and the city of Dan—has been idolatrous from the beginning of its settlement. These two localities have special significance in this respect, discussed below. The Danites’ shrine competed with Yahweh’s proper cult, the tabernacle at Shiloh, until the captivity (18:30–31). “Captivity” probably refers to the Assyrians’ terminating the northern kingdom in the second half of the eighth century, several centuries after the events of this story. This time reference shows that after the captivity, Judges was still being edited. The fact that the tabernacle is anachronistically called the “house of God” makes the present redaction seem exilic or postexilic.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Yahweh is not an actor in this drama. His name appears only on the lips of idolaters who establish alternative, and offensive, centers of worship. Nevertheless, the narrative can be analyzed along the lines of the judges, starting with what it meant as apology for David.

What It Meant as Apology for David

Here is a story explicitly depicting Bethlehem, the City of David, hospitable to sojourners. The Levite who left there to find adventure in the wild northern hills finally served an idolatrous altar. He would have done better to stay in Bethlehem. David then comes from a peaceable, stable haven for the holy tribe of Levi. The way to prosper upon leaving David’s hometown is to betray one’s benefactor, apostatize, and condone banditry.

No one who had had much historical experience with monarchy in the United or Divided Kingdoms would have dreamed of suggesting the absence of a king as the factor explaining domestic theft and cultic irregularity. Such a naive, unqualified promonarchical view could only arise while the monarchy was in its virgin period.⁴

The ideal Deuteronomic king “would have put a stop to such bastard worship.”⁵ In other words, David is the best choice to promote Yahweh-worship and maintain cultic purity. This is what he did in fact. He transplanted the ark to Jerusalem and planned for Yahweh’s temple. “One need only say that an ascending monarchy intent on returning Israel to its covenant faith . . . would find in these chapters precisely the polemic it needed.”⁶

On display also was the option of preferring no king at all. That was Laish’s solution—which led directly to its demise. Readers are invited to look at this history through the lens of an absence of leadership and to ask what sort of leader they want in a king. For all the negative critiques of poor leadership, ultimately it shows that having no king is worse. Consider carefully what sort of king you want, O Israel!

Andrew Mayes argues that the episode reminds the reader of Saul’s neglect of the ark of the covenant and his slaughter of the priests of Nob:

The author-redactor of Judges was intent on establishing a standard of characterization whereby his readers could evaluate the performance of subsequent leaders in Israel, especially as portrayed in 1 Samuel 1–2 and [2] Samuel 4. Thus, the implied situation of the redaction of Judges is the time of David’s rule from Hebron, prior to his rule over all Israel from Jerusalem, and the intention is to persuade Saul loyalists to support the incipient Davidic monarchy and its cult.⁷

Keep in mind also the many ties between Saul and Samson. The Micah story continues the Samson narrative in every way except chronologically, and reveals how Samson’s tribe had been oppressive and a promoter of false religion. Is the bad behavior of the Danites a reflection on Samson’s legacy? And if Samson is portrayed to look like Saul, is this an indictment of Saul’s legacy? Sensitive souls, carefully consider: which candidate should be king—the one who shares affinity with the Danites, or the one from Bethlehem?

How Is It a Sermon on Deuteronomy?

There are several other spy narratives in Scripture, each of which begins with “Yahweh has given the land”—but this statement is lacking in Judges 18. The Danites act independently from God against a peaceful city. It is interesting to observe in particular a comparison between this scenario and

Joshua 2. There, the spies come to Jericho and take up abode in Rahab the harlot's house. It is interesting that the Danite spies also have a "house of Rahab" connection in Judges 18:28, as if to encourage the reader to compare the two accounts. But if one were to find parallels, what then would be parallel to the prostitute's house? Obviously, the first and only house they came to: Micah's.⁸ Thus, Micah's house is comparable to Rahab's—his idolatrous shrine is analogous to a brothel; Micah led Israel in playing the harlot after other gods. This was due to the lack of a king. A king was supposed to guard the cult. From Solomon's time on, the monarchy usually failed to do so. This is especially true of the later kings of the northern kingdom of Israel, which the Micah narrative particularly critiques.

After Solomon's death, the northern tribes abandoned the house of David, making Jeroboam their king. But Jeroboam was concerned that the people in his kingdom would make pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. There the people would offer sacrifice and, having spiritually returned to the house of David, might politically return as well (1 Kings 12:26–27). Jeroboam solved this conundrum by establishing two alternative centers of worship. He made two golden calves and placed one at the southern end of his kingdom, in Bethel, and the other at the northern end, at the city of Dan (12:28–30). The Deuteronomic historian of 1–2 Kings calls this "the sin of Jeroboam," the perpetuation of which indicts every single king of Israel until the captivity.

It is argued that the story of Micah's idols critiques *both* these shrines. According to the story, for as long as Dan has been an Israelite city, it has infamously harbored tainted gods with a deplorable past. In addition, Micah's religious institution is called *Beth-'elohim*, which sounds like *Beth-'el*, the sanctuary of the golden calf. Perhaps Micah's house is actually Bethel itself.⁹ Micah's house is located at Bethel on the shown map. So the Micah account impugns the origins of these shrines. They began with a curse and a theft. They are stolen again. In addition, non-Levitical priests had been appointed there. The counterfeit *Beth-'el* competed with the valid "house of God" (*Beth-ha-'elohim*) at Shiloh or Jerusalem for the entire history of Israel. Shiloh's genuine cult rebuts Bethel's false one. "There is the true house of God and then there is Micah's collection of cultic trinkets."¹⁰

Josiah's reforms not only cleansed the temple in Jerusalem and cleansed all of Judah, but extended into what had been Israel before the Assyrian captivity. In particular, Josiah also rid the land of Jeroboam's shrine at Bethel

(2 Kings 23:15). An ancient text revealing the sorry origins of this shrine could not have hurt his efforts.

Much ink has been spilled on the unique phenomenon of Judges 18:30. The text reads, “Jonathan the son of Gershom, son of Moses.” In Hebrew, *Moses* is spelled with the consonants *Mšh*. Gershom is well known as Moses’ son (Ex. 2:22). But embedded within the name *Moses* is a letter *n*, which is raised up, as if in the process of being inserted, like this: *Mnšh*. These four letters exactly spell *Manasseh*, the name of the most idolatrous king who ever sat on the throne of David. Because of him, Jerusalem was doomed, despite Josiah’s reforms. Perhaps the suspended *n* was intended to remind the reader that the sort of evils he perpetrated led to captivity. If that is the case, then the suspended *n* was added sometime after Manasseh’s reign, perhaps during Josiah’s. Editing continued toward the exile and beyond.

The Micah story would have had special meaning to the exiles and those after, who were living under the conditions that Judges described: there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. It has been suggested that the Micah account in its present form dates to the exile for this reason.¹¹ In any case, Jews in exile had gone full circle to the time of the judges—no king, no temple, and suffering under a foreign oppressor. Where is the anointed leader to deliver them? It is to him that we now turn.

What Does It Mean in the Light of Christ?

Up until now, the book of Hebrews has pointed to the theme of faith in the various stories. But unlike the stories of Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, Micah’s story has no mention in Hebrews. There is no New Testament evidence that anything in Micah’s story might be an analogy to saving faith in Christ. It is a chronicle of failure. The priest did not guard what was holy. Dan failed to take its own territory. Micah and his mother were syncretistic idolaters who thought they had Yahweh in their pocket. How does this serve Christ’s gospel?

One reason given for the sorry state of affairs is that there was no king. If there had been a covenant-keeping king, presumably this sort of thing would not happen. So the account commends a law-abiding king who guards the sacred and leads in fulfilling God’s purposes for Israel. What king ever did this? David did, albeit imperfectly and with significant setbacks and sidetracks. But what King did completely and satisfactorily do as the text

suggests—lead Israel into what is right before God? Jesus, of course! Without him, it is into this sort of religious and political chaos that God's people degenerate. With Christ as Lord of the church, his people are sanctified and focused on the task at hand, fulfilling the Great Commission. Micah's sacred name meant "Who is like Yahweh?" Jesus is the One who is like Yahweh, even God with us, Immanuel. He fulfills the tabernacle at Shiloh. He *is* the true sanctuary of God in the flesh (John 2:19–21). As the genuine article, he gives the lie to every counterfeit.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, fulfilling this ancient Davidic narrative by identifying with the City of David, where Yahweh was known and served aright. Jesus is the One from Bethlehem who will minister before the true God in such a way as to extricate his people from the folly and idolatry in which they are entangled, and not so as to bring about God's curse and punishment.

TO WHAT DOES IT CALL CHRISTIANS TODAY?

The Micah story is a case study in religious syncretism. The people in it were Yahweh-worshippers of a sort. No doubt, connected with him were various traditions such as deliverance from Egypt. Micah knew that God liked Levites. He had some notion of cultic purity. The elements of his religion mimicked those at Shiloh, such as the ephod. But his attempt at creating his own center of worship was based on a false premise: that a Yahwist is free to do what is right in his own eyes. Intertwined with Micah's religious trappings were many transgressions of God's law. Consider how God rejected Aaron's sons when they made offering in a way that deviated from what he had prescribed (Lev. 10:1–2).

The question of what Christians ought to include in worship and what to exclude has long been a point of contention. Is anything that God doesn't forbid allowed? Is anything that God doesn't command forbidden? Should one sing only the Psalms on Sunday morning, or are hymns allowed? Should there be instrumental accompaniment to such music? On what basis should these decisions be made? If a church's practices are reactionary against the general culture, rather than genuinely the fruit of serious biblical study, those practices might be as flawed as the culture they are reacting against. We should be *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17:15–16). Be too separatist and the wider culture ceases to be significantly affected by what the church

does; be too accommodating and the church melds with the culture, again resulting in a failure to speak truth to the world. It takes more than wisdom to navigate between the two extremes—it takes a work of the Spirit.

There are many negative results in holding fast to a form of religion but denying its power, as Micah did (2 Tim. 3:5). Such a religion is weak. It can be stolen. Micah cried, “Now what is left to me?” An idolater is set up for an inevitable fall, since the gods he serves are unreal and powerless, and will always fail to deliver. This is the case with anything trusted in the place of the true and living God. One who trusts in man rather than God, for example, is like a parched shrub in the desert compared with a tree rooted by a river (Jer. 17:5–9). In fact, simply following one’s own heart and eyes rather than God is already forsaking him (Num. 15:39). The Chaldeans’ own strength is their god (Hab. 1:11). Even one’s own appetites can be one’s object of worship (Phil. 3:18–21). Covetousness is idolatry (Col. 3:5). All these false premises fail in the end. Human strength will fail. One’s appetites, and one’s capacity for coveting, are never satisfied. Without Micah’s silver deities and paraphernalia, he whined that he had nothing. Nothing? Did he not have Yahweh? So it is with idolaters: “Those who regard vanities forsake their true fidelity” (Jonah 2:8).

This sort of syncretism has other negative effects. At bottom, it is born of a false notion of the character of God. For example, Micah and his mother were apparently motivated by the desire to escape the effect of a hastily uttered curse. It is as though they were trying to pacify the Almighty with a gift. But it wasn’t only that. Micah needed something more. He wanted a spiritual father. But since he didn’t know Yahweh, he ended up with nothing. This highlights the emptiness and worthlessness of idolatry. Idolaters are adrift, justifying behavior that the Bible critiques, rationalizing apart from knowing God.

The antidote to this sort of thing is to actually know God and his Word. Many deceive themselves and don’t know any better. In this respect, the era of the judges is an era much like today. Everyone does what is right in his own eyes, inventing this god or that to follow, which leaves the person empty and lost. What such people need is the King. What they need is the covenanted Presence of God, symbolized by the tabernacle at Shiloh. What they need is the Spirit. How will they know unless someone tells them and shows them, by living a sanctified life?

TOWARD THE ESCHATON

The Micah story *means* that Israel needed a king who would guard the things of God—namely, David. It *means* that idolatry leads to captivity and curse rather than Yahweh's blessing. It *means* that Jesus, God with us, leads his church according to the will of his Father. It *means* that the world today needs the real thing in him, not false and counterfeit gods. And it also *means* that Jesus will return to judge the world.

Assyria overran the northern tribes and carried them off, never to be seen again. Until that day, the Danites continued in rebellion against God (Judg. 18:30). Amos calls this event the day of the Lord (chapter 5). The day foreshadows the end of the world, when every nation will be held to account. A curse began Micah's story, and in the end there will be no place on earth for those under the covenantal curse of God. Micah's cry that he was left with nothing will be the cry of all who serve false gods. Ultimately, the meaning of the narrative will be seen on that day, when the King of kings returns.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Why do we need a king? What sort of King do we need?
2. Sometimes one gets the opposite of what one hopes for, when one puts trust in something other than God. What examples of this phenomenon come to mind?
3. What have you trusted in for something that only God can provide? Possible examples: your savings account or Social Security checks, people's respect, modern medicine. Remember, there is the true worship of God, and there are the cheap counterfeits.
4. Look at what happened to Laish when no clear leadership existed. What does that consequence say about today?
5. Once Micah's idols were stolen, he felt that he had nothing left. What in your life would make you feel like that if it were taken away? Remember, it is just a gift from God, and your life does not consist in it.
6. Moses' grandson, priest of an idolatrous shrine? How many generations does it take for a community to go from faith to apostasy?
7. In what ways do Christians today borrow too much from our non-Christian

cultures in our worship? Do we do what is “right in our own eyes”?

8. Do you know anyone who has some knowledge of God but is adrift, without saving faith? When was the last time you invited that person to church or a small-group Bible study?

BENJAMIN'S BALEFUL BENT



The book of Judges is about to lay out its final evidence for the case it has been making. The notation that there was no king in Israel frames this sordid tale. What follows is an illustration of what it is like when everyone is a law unto himself.

Again the action centers on a Levite, and again there is a Bethlehem connection. While the couple stayed there, they were treated hospitably; in fact, they were smothered in hospitality. But when they left—nothing but disaster and death. In this respect the story mirrors the book of Ruth, in which the same movement occurs: Naomi was full in Bethlehem, and in departing, she became empty (Ruth 1:21).

GIBEAH'S GIBBOSITY—JUDGES 19:1–30

The tale begins with a nameless Levite from Ephraim taking a nameless *pilegesh* from Bethlehem. *Pilegesh* is rare in the Old Testament, a third of the word's instances occurring here. She is a “second wife,” or concubine. Apparently, she was brought along for sex.¹

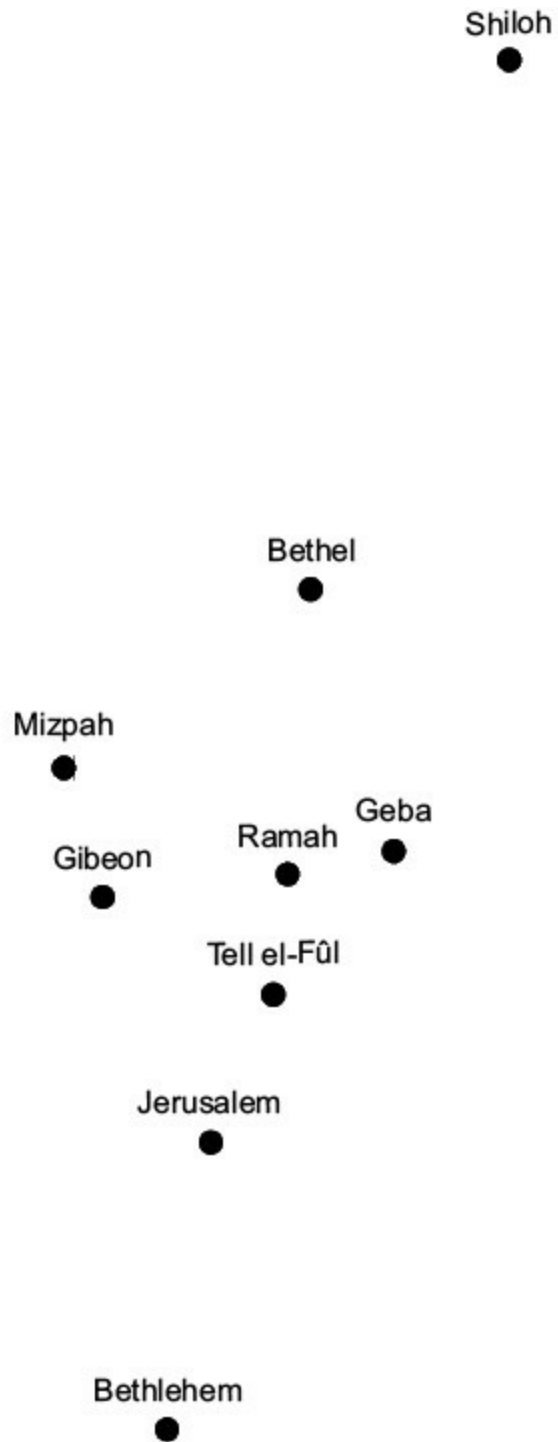
Our first hermeneutical challenge is in verse 2, where the Masoretic tradition of the Hebrew text blames her: “she whored _____ him.” The blank is a preposition that has many meanings: *upon*, *against*, *before*, *on account of*, *toward*, and many more. One Old Greek text tradition reads: “and his concubine was angry with him and she departed from him to her father’s house.” Some English translations such as the RSV reflect this reading. Others follow the extant Hebrew: “she was unfaithful to him” (NIV), “played the whore against him” (KJV). But if she whored against him, why would she run to her father? And if she was angry, why was she angry at him? Verse 3 has another Hebrew problem; the text actually reads that the Levite followed her

“to restore him.” The medieval rabbis wrote in the margin that this should be read “to restore *her*” (so reflected in English translations). But what if the Hebrew as written is correct, and the Levite pursued her to get *himself* restored, to get back in her good graces? Pamela Reis suggests that verse 2 should be read, “And his concubine whored *for* him”—i.e., he was pimping her, until she got fed up, left him, and fled home to her father. The Levite then had to sweet-talk her into returning with him.² If this is correct, then the story begins with this girl sexually exploited by her own husband from verse 2.

Four months later, the Levite traveled south to Bethlehem with a servant boy and a few donkeys. Apparently the father was glad for the visit. The only indication that he may be concerned is his delay of their departure, as if he did not want her to go away again. But she never speaks in the story; even while she is being raped, the narrator does not permit her to cry out. She is marginalized to the point of dehumanization, a mere object or toy to be used. Her father seemed happy that the Levite returned to take possession of her.

The Levite intended to “speak to her heart,” glossed “speak tenderly” or “kindly” to her. This sounds sensitive, does it not? As sensitive as the prince of Shechem, who spoke to Dinah’s heart after raping her (Gen. 34:2–3).

Her father and husband were drinking buddies. There are days and nights of parties; the concubine at this point is absent from the narrative. It is all about the men enjoying themselves. The father seems almost manipulative in keeping the Levite around to entertain. But after days of merrymaking, the Levite, his servant boy, his donkeys, and his *pilegesh* finally leave.



So they left, late in the day, and traveled north from Bethlehem toward the Levite's Ephraim home. They reached Jerusalem and had to make a decision. Should they stop there, a place that was not then under Israelite control? Or should they press on to spend the night in a genuine Israelite city? The Levite

decided to head for one of two cities: Ramah or Gibeah. Note that the concubine had no say. The map shows several points of interest. Although archaeologists were once quite certain that Gibeah (not Gibeon) was located at Tell el-Fûl, this site now seems not to have been in existence before the time of Saul. The modern city of Jeba is probably the site, called Geba on the map (per Judg. 20:10), which is opposite Ramah, as the text indicates. The text also specifies the territory of Benjamin (19:14).

They entered the city square at sundown. At first no one in the town showed hospitality. Finally, one old Ephraimite approached. He asked where they were going—and at this point the text has a problem. The Levite correctly states where they have come *from*, but instead of saying where they were going *to*, it reads, “I am headed to the house of Yahweh” (19:18). The Old Greek has him say “my house.” It is patent that this Levite was *not* headed toward the tabernacle (at Shiloh), but home (see 19:29). Thus, some English Bibles have him say “the house of the LORD” (NIV, KJV), and others edit out Yahweh’s house and name, following the Greek (NASB). The fact is, this Levite was a liar. To seem pious and trustworthy, to sweeten the deal, he lies about his destination.³ (He also embellishes his ability to feed himself and his animals.) Now the old man is not simply offering hospitality to sojourners—he is showing Yahweh respect as well.

One approach to this text is that it is all about ancient hospitality mores:

When a stranger enters the zone of obligation, that stranger, who has no legal status or rights other than those extended to him by a patron (i.e., host), must be transformed from a potential threat to the city into an ally (however temporary) by being offered hospitality.⁴

Some suggest that the men of Gibeah were angered because the old sojourner shamed them by offering hospitality first. Although an argument can be made for this view, the text itself is not interested in their motives. They embody the town’s depravity and the hubris of Benjamin. They are cold-blooded degenerates, plain and simple.

THE CONCUBINE’S RAPE AND MURDER—JUDGES 19:22–30

In my lectures, before I treat the next section, I express awareness that one or more students might be a victim of sexual assault, and I give them the opportunity to leave class. I also offer to help find someone for them to talk

with if needed. I suggest that pastors do the same.

The Levite, his servant, and his concubine settle into the old man's house, and the men begin to live it up. While they are amusing themselves, the men of the city beat on the door, demanding to have the Levite, "that we may know him" (Judg. 19:22). What follows is a repeat of the Sodom calamity. In Lot's house, there had been two sojourners, the host, and two women. Judges replicates this scenario exactly, a second woman suddenly present for one verse (19:24). The host offers two women to the reprobates, saying literally "torment them" and "do to them what is good in your eyes."

But they had asked for the Levite. This was not about homosexual lust—they finally did take his concubine instead. It was about humiliation and power; it was about shaming. This is why they did not take the host's daughter. They took the Levite's concubine and "they knew her and *'alal* her all night" (Judg. 19:25). The word *'alal* has two semantic domains. First, *'alal* I in Judges denotes "gleaned." They "gleaned" her all night. Everything sweet and desirable was reaped from her. Gideon called slaughtering Midian "gleaning" (8:2). Saul killed himself rather than let the Philistines *'alal* him, "abuse" him (1 Chron. 10:4). Second, *'alal* II denotes "insert, thrust in," particularly, inserting one's "horn" into something (Job 16:15 NASB). Both meanings fit.

Apparently, the Levite and his host slept through the prolonged gang rape outside. Perhaps they continued their drinking. The next morning, the silent figure was found at the threshold, presumably dead (although the text does not explicitly say so). He commanded her, "Arise, let us go" (Judg. 19:28). This echoes the angels' call to Lot's family in Sodom (Gen. 19:14). When she failed to respond, he tossed her onto the back of a donkey and went home.

A home is supposed to be a place of security and refuge. In the sanctity of the home, he took out a knife and sliced her into small pieces. Let's hope she was already dead when he started. He "seized" her to cut her up—the same verb as when he had "seized" her to thrust her into the street. He rived her into twelve pieces; "pieces" elsewhere always denotes sacrificial animal parts. He cut her "to the bone"; *cut* is also a cultic word. Thus he continued to brutalize and dehumanize her. He paraded the butchered woman throughout Israel. Her twelve parts represent twelve tribes; her disarticulated corpse, a

fractioned Israel. This certainly did get their attention. It showed that morally and spiritually, in their midst was dangerous evil, a worse depravity than the practices of the nations they were purging.

ISRAEL IS REAL INCENSED—JUDGES 20:1–48

In contrast to the dissevered *pilegish*, Israel came together “as one man,” from northern Dan to the southernmost city. They gathered at Mizpah (see map). Before Yahweh they “presented themselves”—a word often denoting standing in the presence of God (Deut. 7:24; 31:14; Josh. 24:1). This is a *religious* meeting. There, the Levite again engaged in embellishment. He claimed that they wanted to kill him. He avoided details of how they had gotten their hands on his concubine. He also accused the “lords” of the city—the public officials—of wrongdoing; chapter 19 calls them “sons of Belial” (Judg. 19:22), “worthless fellows,” hardly the city fathers. The Levite was successful in convincing the Israelites that they had to do something. All Israel united as one man, assembled before Yahweh, ready to purge evil from the land. Too bad the enemy was one of their own cities.

The tribes of Israel demanded that Benjamin turn over the sons of Belial for justice (20:13). Paul uses Belial as a sort of antichrist, Jesus’ satanic opposite, analogous to idolatry, darkness as opposed to light (2 Cor. 6:14–16). These men of Gibeah were an evil in the land that had to be, literally, “burned” from Israel (Judg. 20:13). Israel tried to minimize the extent of the purge, however, and demanded only the actual offenders. For whatever reason, Benjamin decided to circle the wagons around these sociopaths, and prepared for war. Among them were seven hundred elite ambidextrous fighters, trained as Ehud had been (20:16). (In fact, Ehud might have been one of these men.)

This section of the story has many connections with the first two introductory chapters of the book. In Judges 1:1–2, Israel inquired of God, “Who shall go up for us?” and the answer was “Judah.” Now for the second and last time, Israel again asked God who should lead in battle, and the answer again was “Judah” (20:18). In 20:9, they drew lots to see who should lead them; elsewhere in Judges, “lot” occurs only in 1:3: “Judah said to Simeon, ‘Come up with me into my *lot*.’ ” What is happening is a recapitulation of the opening verses of the book, this time with one of their own tribes being treated as Canaanite.

Three battles are described. Notice how the book has more to say about Israelite-on-Israelite violence than it does about foreign oppression. It is about Israelites behaving badly.

The first battle was won by the people of Benjamin. They were tough characters, able to fend off the combined might of all the other tribes. The Israelites were reeling in shock after their loss and gathered at Bethel, weeping before Yahweh. This also harks back to the opening chapters, when they wept before God at “Bochim” (probably Bethel) after the Angel pronounced his judgment (Judg. 2:3–5).

Again they inquired of God, and again they went up against Benjamin and were defeated. Again they wept before him at Bethel. After the second defeat, however, more detail is given about how they earnestly sought after God. They wept, they prayed, they fasted all day; they made sacrifice. The reader is informed of two new details. First, they were at Bethel, since the ark of the covenant was there (Judg. 20:27). Apparently, it had been separated from the tabernacle at Shiloh. Second, the priest who served Yahweh before the ark was none other than Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest (20:28). Here is another surprise, and one reason why the identification of Moses’ grandson in the previous story should stand and not be read as Moses’ distant descendant. Unlike Jonathan there, here the named priest is well known, obviously not a distant descendant (see Ex. 6:25). Why give his lineage if not to positively identify him? In fact, he is the only individual with a name in the story.

Phinehas here is true to character. He is the man who, with holy zeal, took it upon himself to drive a spear through an Israelite who flouted God’s law, and in so doing saved Israel from plague. Yahweh said, “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them” (Num. 25:7–11). Phinehas negotiated a potentially violent dispute between tribes in the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 22:30). Here in Judges, this Phinehas ministers before Yahweh, and is apparently making inquiry and delivering his answers to Israel. Phinehas is again willing to see violence done to guard the sanctity of a holy God, a holy people, and his holy Law. Of course, Phinehas’s involvement means that this story takes place very early in the period of the judges.⁵

Yahweh promised victory in the third battle; then “Yahweh defeated Benjamin before Israel” (Judg. 20:35). The people of Israel used their previous defeats to advantage, causing Benjamin to misinterpret their actions and fall into a trap. Part of Israel’s strategy was a signal: a great cloud of smoke rising up from Gibeah, a column of smoke up to heaven (20:38, 40). This recalls the end of Sodom: Abraham saw that “the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace” (Gen. 19:28). This is part of how the storyteller links Sodom and Gibeah.

But the slaughter did not stop with burning the city of Gibeah. Benjamin continued to be pursued and its cities burned. Some of the language used to describe the rout hints at poetic justice. The Benjaminites fled to the rock of “Rimmon” (Judg. 20:45), which means “pomegranate”—a word with sexual overtones (e.g., Song 8:2). This is a reminder of the sexual assault. The same verse reports that five thousand were “gleaned”—language from Judges 19:25, describing what had been done to the concubine. Two verses later (20:47), the remnant of Benjamin fled to Rimmon for four months, the same duration the concubine had stayed with her father. In addition, the next verse (20:48) uses unusual language to describe their downfall: “and they smote them with the edge of the sword from the *methom* city, including cattle.” The NASB says “the entire city;” KJV, “every city;” NIV, “all the towns.” But the word elsewhere means “soundness, health,” of flesh (Ps. 38:3, 7; Isa. 1:6), yielding something like “undefiled city.” Perhaps an adjective that treats flesh connects with the concubine’s body. Israel took wholesome cities and gleaned them, violated them.

VAMOOSING VIRGINS—JUDGES 21:1–25

All of Israel rose up in righteous indignation against the evil of Gibeah, and against the victimization of the Levite’s concubine. Israel won. The enemy was diminished to a mere six hundred men. Why then did Israel weep again at Bethel? The three battles are patterned, beginning with asking God about the attack, and ending with Israel weeping. And the third cycle is no exception. This time the Israelites wept for the opposite reason as the first two times: they wept because they were so successful, because Benjamin was near extinction.

Israel had taken an oath, having no doubt considered the fate of the concubine, not to marry its daughters to any Benjaminite. How then would

the tribe be perpetuated? Wives had to be provided to those six hundred bachelors from somewhere. What was needed was a community of pure-blooded Israelites who had not participated in the oath. It was noted that when Israel came together at Mizpah, one city was not represented: Jabesh-gilead. This city was located across the Jordan, relatively distant from the action. Israel's brilliant solution, born of compassion, was this: attack the city and kill everyone except marriageable virgins.

That is just what Israel did. This time, the people did not consult God first. They raped Jabesh-gilead, killing men, women, and children. There they found four hundred young virgins for the Benjaminites. Imagine what this looked like. How did the soldiers determine whether one was a virgin? Perhaps they subjected each girl to a physical examination, to see whether her hymen was intact. If it was, she was spared. But the girls had to watch their younger siblings, brothers, and parents disemboweled, their homes burned to the ground. Then they were handed over to the assailants' kin to be impregnated, at the tabernacle in Shiloh, the center of true, unadulterated Yahweh-worship.

The tabernacle was there, but Judges 21:12 locates Shiloh in the "land of Canaan." Why put it that way? Geographically, of course it is in Canaan. It has been suggested that identifying Israel's religious center with Canaanite territory indicts the Israelites as being fundamentally Canaanite in their conduct. Presumably this means "idolatrous," that even their attempt at being true to Yahweh was wrong. But perhaps Shiloh is identified with non-Israelite territory because the event took place early in the history of Israel in Canaan—when the conquest was barely finished, before the settlement was well underway.⁶

There is another linkup with the opening chapters. In Judges 21:11, Israel determined to "utterly destroy" (Hebrew, *herem*) all but virgins. Zephath (1:17) was the only other *herem* city in Judges (which is why Judges calls it *Hormah*). This is what Israel was supposed to do to Canaanite cities such as Jericho. But except for Zephath, the only other *herem* town was Israelite.

They found enough young virgins there for only two out of three Benjaminite bachelors. They were two hundred short. To find them, Israel needed another plan. The new plan was to permit the remaining bachelors to attend the annual festival of Yahweh at Shiloh. No doubt this festival was

connected with the worship of God at the tabernacle. Part of the uplifting religious event was celebration in dance. Young, carefree girls joined in, dancing among the vineyards of Shiloh. So the book of Judges ends with a great spiritual celebration before Yahweh at the Deuteronomic center of worship, the tabernacle.

This year, however, two hundred sexual predators menaced the celebration. One by one, each Benjaminite would abduct an adolescent girl.⁷ The combined army of Israel empowered the molesters. Since the Shiloh men had taken oaths not to give their daughters to Benjaminites, they could not willingly consent. But the girls could be kidnapped. This was a loophole in the oath. So one tribe of Israel did not perish. The men of Shiloh were not bloodied as Jabesh-gilead had been. All six hundred Benjaminites had wives. And everyone lived happily ever after.

In those days, everyone did what was right in his own eyes. There was no king in Israel.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

This story of three parts (Benjamin's crime, defeat, and restoration) concludes the book. This is Judges' final argument, the last word on the subject. This is an example of what anarchy is like, and why the right king was needed. It works on several levels.

As Apology for David

The clearest and most undeniable swipes at Saul can be found in all three parts of this story. First of all, the city of Gibeah is famous because it is Saul's hometown. A snippet of his inauguration account is 1 Samuel 10:24–27:

And Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see him whom Yahweh has chosen? There is none like him among all the people.” And all the people shouted, “Long live the king!”

Then Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship; and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before Yahweh. Then Samuel sent all the people away, each one to his home. Saul also went to *his home at Gibeah*, and with him went men of valor whose hearts God had touched. But some *worthless fellows* said, “How can this man save us?”

And they despised him, and brought him no present. But he held his peace.

Saul's home was Gibeah—still plagued with “sons of *Belial*.” In Judges 20:16, ambidextrous Benjaminites fought for them, able to sling a stone at a hair and not miss. This described Saul's kinsmen, as evidenced in the later literature of 1 Chronicles 12:2. The tale about the sin of Gibeah is a tale about Saul, his kinsmen, his city, and his family history. This is a strong case for an anti-Saulide polemic in Judges. Imagine the Ish-bosheth party trying to smear David for his Moabite ancestry. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. How much more vulnerable is Saul?

Immediately after the quotation above (1 Sam. 10:24–27) is the account of the city of Jabesh-gilead's coming under siege (11:1–10). Perhaps the reader experiences *déjà vu* at this point, since Israel had laid siege to this city to secure Benjamin some wives—yet another connection with the early years of Saul. News of the siege reached him at Gibeah. There, Saul

took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hand of messengers, saying, “Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!” Then the dread of Yahweh fell upon the people, and they came out as one man. (1 Sam. 11:7)

Yet another *déjà vu* scenario. The Levite chopped up his concubine, and Saul cut up oxen and sent the parts throughout Israel. In both cases, Israel responded as one man. Jabesh-gilead was close to Saul, and Saul had saved it. Its citizens were the men who buried him. David tried to win them over to his side after Saul's death (2 Sam. 2:4–7). Perhaps this was a reminder that loyalty to Saul's tribe had not always worked out for them.

The Levite was much better off in Bethlehem; there he was treated well. But in Saul's hometown, he was treated abominably. Bethlehem is *David's* hometown. This story is the second of the Bethlehem trilogy, the third being the book of Ruth. It highlights Gibeah's depravity; Ruth highlights Bethlehem's peaceful Yahwistic piety. The political message of Judges is this: Which would you prefer, O Israel: the values of Gibeah or of Bethlehem? Which society do you want reflected in her leadership?

In addition to displaying the superiority of David's city over Saul's, the

tribes of Judah and Benjamin are contrasted. Remember the account of Sodom in Genesis 19. There, fire and brimstone rained down on the city from heaven. The angelic heavenly host—two of whom saved Lot and his daughters—destroyed the city. In this story’s parallel with Judges 19, the work of the divine assembly of angels, the heavenly court, is done by the tribe of Judah. It is Judah whom Yahweh chooses to lead Israel in battle (Judg. 20:18). All of Israel was united under Judah—except Benjamin. Judah judges Benjamin.

Dale Davis notes that one theme in chapter 20 is “the prowess of Benjamin.”⁸ The Benjaminites are portrayed as very difficult to beat. It took all Israel against them, and for a while it looked like Israel would lose. Finally, though, they were defeated, and the last chapter—the final word of Judges—is a concern for “reconciliation and restoration.”⁹ They are tough, they are competent at what they do, but when up against all Israel they lose.

Thus the message is this: Benjamin, you almost destroyed yourself before, digging in your heels against Israel. This is a time for unity. We need your skill against the Philistines now. Join us!

How Is the Gibeah Saga a Sermon on Deuteronomy?

Deuteronomy promises blessings and threatens curses to Israel on the basis of covenantal obedience or disobedience. There are specific commands that in Judges are broken, and the reader is privy to the consequences that follow. This story seems especially to be an illustration of Deuteronomy 12:8, “You shall not do according to all that we are doing here this day, every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes.” In Judges 19:25, the men of Gibeah “would not listen to him.” This sounds like Deuteronomy 13:8, what Israel is supposed to do with a person promoting other gods. A bit further on (Deut. 13:13), “sons of Belial” are mentioned (see Judg. 19:22)—such a city advocating the worshiping of other gods should be utterly destroyed. In Deuteronomy 22:21, a bride who is found by her new husband not to be a virgin is to be killed, for doing “folly” in her father’s house. This is the language the old man used to persuade the men of Gibeah in Judges 19:23: “do not do this folly!”

What does it all mean? The language used to describe *herem*-warranting idolatry is employed to describe moral and ethical outrage, and language used to describe capital-punishment-warranting sexual license is also used. Thus,

evil such as Gibeah's is as deserving of eradication as the evil of idolatry. Along with idolatry are other evils that also call for this response. The social and ethical aspects of the Law are also important. It is Yahweh who enforced the Law here, as Israel rose up in anger against Benjamin. In Deuteronomy, failure to keep covenant brings Yahweh's curse—and that is on display in Judges chapter 20. At issue this time is not the worshiping of another god, but the betrayal of the ethical laws so central to Deuteronomy. Over against Benjamin, Israel fulfills Deuteronomy's cultic requirements by worshiping at the central location that God has provided—the tabernacle.

Susan Niditch calls Judges 19–20 “a thematic companion piece” to Joshua 22:10–34.¹⁰ In Joshua 22, the Transjordan tribes Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh built an unauthorized altar to Yahweh on the east bank of the Jordan. The other tribes, to the west of the Jordan, discovered this to their horror and immediately gathered at Shiloh to prepare for war. They were prepared to consider the Transjordan tribes no better than Canaanites. They sent Phinehas (yes, the same guy as in Judges 20) to confront them. The Transjordan tribes argued that the altar was not for sacrifice, but was merely a witness or reminder of the one true God. It would not compete with the tabernacle at Shiloh. This argument was acceptable, and civil war was averted. *This presumably happened around the time that they all turned on Benjamin.* Israel under Joshua valued zeal for Yahweh over the bonds of kinship. This is the Deuteronomic ideal (Deut. 13:6–9).

At various stages of history, when Deuteronomy's perspective was needed, this story might have helped to keep Israel on the straight and narrow. For Josiah's reforms it teaches that although justice and righteousness will out in the end, the process can be very painful and costly, but worth the cost. Also, this sort of thing is what happens in the absence of leadership. Although Yahweh was consulted in chapter 20, he said nothing to encourage the violence of chapter 21 against Jabesh-gilead and Shiloh. A king was needed—and all the regulations that govern a king in Deuteronomy were *sorely* needed (see Deut. 17:18–20).

How Does It Advance the Gospel of Christ?

Hebrews 11 reads the sagas of the Spirit-empowered episodic judges as illustrations of a life of faith—in fact, part of Hebrews' narrative that includes suffering and martyrdom for the sake of God and Jesus. Is it going too far to

suggest that by faith the people of Israel burned the evil from among them, even at the great cost of one of their tribes? Is this idea beyond the pale? Immediately after listing the heroes, Hebrews reads: “who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (Heb. 11:33–34). The text does emphasize how costly this was, and Yahweh was directing the Israelites in their campaign. Phinehas the faithful priest, zealous for God, led the campaign. God designated Judah (the tribe of kings) to go up first. Consider Israel’s prior willingness to go to war over cultic purity with the Transjordan tribes. Hebrews could easily have found a faith motif in Judges 20. Thus, through faith Israel imaged the heavenly court in executing justice against wickedness and apostasy.

Whenever David does something, or something is said about him, the New Testament can read this as also true of David’s Son, the Messiah. For example, in the Greek wording of 2 Samuel 22:3, David says about God, “I will put my trust in him.” This statement is quoted in Hebrews 2:13, where the author asserts that it was Jesus who said it. In other words, if David said it, then Jesus said it. Jesus owns everything that is David’s. If Judges once served as propaganda for David, then it is also an argument for Jesus the Son of David. David is the king for whom the text yearns, when it yearns for a covenant-keeping king who leads the nation in true righteousness and holiness. If so, then *Jesus* is the King for whom the text yearns, when it yearns for a covenant-keeping King who leads the nation in true righteousness and holiness. Even David lost his way, and a large part of his story chronicles struggle and dissension because of his own companion sin to that of Gibeah. What is needed is a King whose leadership is *not* morally and ethically dubious. We need a King of unambiguous leadership. We need Jesus, who teaches us how to do what is right in God’s eyes.

Notice that the book of Judges ends by trashing Shiloh. This is where the tabernacle was kept (Judg. 18:31), although the ark was temporarily located at Bethel (20:27). Judges ends with the place blessed with the presence of God, ransacked for virgins. The Israelites who do this justify themselves as if they had done the inhabitants a favor. This underscores their character. How will this people ever be made holy? How will they possibly *change* and become the sort of community that God defines in his Law? They need a king

who is everything they are not, morally, ethically, spiritually, who will lead by example and demonstrate what sort of community they are meant to be.

TO WHAT DOES IT CALL CHRISTIANS TODAY?

In addition to Hebrews 11, another hermeneutic that can be brought to bear is Paul's in 1 Corinthians 10. There, he states that stories such as these were written as warnings for the church. What warnings are there for today?

One lesson for the church is that the ethical and public practice of righteousness is important and should be a priority. It is not enough to observe the correct form in worship, to name Yahweh and keep the proper ritual. One must internalize his character and behave in a way that witnesses to his holiness. One challenge for the church is this: are you orthodox in your theology but heretical in your practice? *Orthopraxis* is as important as *orthodoxy*. To forsake the former renders the latter hypocritical and powerless. "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways" (2 Cor. 4:2). Show me a Christian who behaves as if the ends justify the means, and I'll show you a dissembler.

In 1 Corinthians 5:1–2, Paul confronts the church with an accusation of sexual deviancy. The Corinthian church was behaving like Benjamin, arrogantly supporting the evildoer. Paul takes the command in Deuteronomy to stone the immoral person, and uses it as warrant to excommunicate unrepentant Christians (Deut. 21:21; 1 Cor. 5:13). Spiritually, a vibrant church should do as Israel did to Gibeah: purge the evil. No longer do we shed blood to honor God, but we insist that church members represent Christ in their lives. To *not* discipline a contumacious person is to hold back and *not* engage in purging the land of evil.

Sometimes church discipline is done without love and sensitivity to the spiritual needs of the offender—particularly when an offender is not actually contumacious but honestly disagrees with the judgment of the court. Be careful when exercising it. Remember Judges 20, and how God's people wept after zeal for discipline had taken on a life of its own and gone so far as to harm the nation rather than heal. Look at how the war that began under God's auspices quickly lost sight of him, spun out of control, and ended up profaning his sanctuary (chapter 21).

We Christians might begin with holy zeal to effect change. Sometimes it is

called “cleaning house.” But at what point have we lost sight of our heavenly Father and degenerated into merely “doing what is right in our own eyes,” plotting and scheming like secular partisans? Is there something ridiculous in our witness, giving the world just cause to laugh at us and condemn us as hypocrites?

TOWARD THE ESCHATON

The sin of Gibeah is meant to be read in conjunction with Genesis 19, about Sodom. There are many parallels, including destruction by fire and the smoke rising to heaven. In Genesis, Lot’s firstborn daughter looked down on the destruction and said literally: “there is not a man on earth” (Gen. 19:31). (It is interesting that this account is followed by that of a people-group perpetuated by means of a vineyard, just as in Judges 21.) To say that there is not a man on earth sounds like the end of the world, i.e., all the men of the land have perished by fire. Jesus connected this destruction with the actual end of the world:

It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot’s wife! (Luke 17:28–32 NIV)

This is the moral that Jesus draws from the type-scene: it is about the end of the world. It will be like that when the Son of Man is revealed. Therefore, flee from the wrath to come, and don’t look back longingly at the city. Lot’s wife did, revealing where her loyalties were, and she was caught up in the judgment against it.

“Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins,” says Revelation 18:4, which also describes the destruction of the city of this world, Babylon, whose smoke goes up to heaven “for ever and ever” (Rev. 19:3).

Israel put the city to *herem* fire. The last word of the Christian Old Testament is *herem*; the prophecy is that the whole world will be *herem*, on the great and terrible day of the Lord (Mal. 4:6). God will judge sin in the

end, and this hellfire is what Gibeah experienced ahead of time—and for which the whole world presently waits.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Sexual exploitation is a serious matter. If you have experienced it, or know someone who has, consider talking to someone about it.
2. How have you been the victim of a crime?
3. Has your home always been a place of safety and refuge? If not, how not?
4. Israel imaged the heavenly court from Genesis 19. Christians also are messengers of God, sent into the world to build a civilization that honors him. What role in this mission do you play?
5. Again, in Genesis 19 Abraham was an active participant in determining what action heaven would take. Think about that. We also participate in the heavenly court in our corporate prayers. How should this fact affect our attitudes toward prayer and corporate worship?
6. The church is the modern-day Shiloh. Consider how to make it your ambition to be a vital and vibrant part of the community of faith.
7. Does your church practice discipline? How does it handle one who stubbornly refuses to renounce his or her sin? What should be done about that?
8. Care must be taken in exercising discipline. Have you seen the church treat Christians badly? If so, how else should these situations have been handled?
9. Are you orthodox in your theology but heretical in your practice? Have you seen that dichotomy in others? What should you do about it?
10. In your zeal to do the will of God, remember to do so in a Christian way, not in a way that looks more like the violence of Judges. When have you seen situations like that?

CONCLUSION



The introduction to this book was a sermon on Samson and the lion. This is an image for the spiritual realities of the present day. Jesus the Spirit-endowed Judge defeats the beast that roars against God's elect, and from within its powerless ruin of fearsome aspect thrives a community, producing something sweet to God. Judges is about God's forging a community of faith for himself out of this people. He uses various methods, such as raising up opposition to pressure them to return to faith, empowering judges to lead them out of the consequences of their folly, and harshly checking their self-destructive arrogance and folly. Judges reads at times like a secular history, but it is not. Spiritual principles drive events; behind the scenes God is working to bring about the desired result.

Judges puts on display what Spirit-led and Spirit-empowered saviors can do. Nothing can stand against them. They serve as types of the Spirit-endowed kings, Saul and David. They also continue the work of Joshua. Thus, they model what is possible for Christians, building God's kingdom and his church. The saviors had personalities ill-equipped for the task, yet in the Spirit, the task was accomplished. Christians also are wayward and foolish, and yet the task at hand for the church will surely be completed.

What the text longs for is such a leader, a king like David, who has the Spirit without measure, who never fails, who always leads aright. Thus, Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the book of Judges; he is the Savior extraordinaire who will save his people from the consequences of their sin.

The book of Judges illustrates the operation of Deuteronomy's covenant curses and blessings. Faithfulness leads to blessing; apostasy leads to curse. What is needed is a king who will lead on the path of blessing.

The ultimate meaning of the book of Judges will be revealed when Jesus the Judge and Savior returns: "From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will

tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” (Rev. 19:15). On that day every enemy will be vanquished, and the community of faith will live with a new heavens and a new earth, the ultimate Promised Land, forever and ever. Amen; come, Lord Jesus.

NOTES



CHAPTER ONE: JUGGLING JUDGES

- 1 Robert B. Chisholm, “The Chronology of the Book of Judges: A Linguistic Clue to Solving a Pesky Problem,” *JETS* 52, 2 (2009): 247–55.
- 2 The events of Judges 17–18 are part of the history of the conquest, summarized in Joshua 19:47.
- 3 Jay G. Williams, “The Structure of Judges 2:6–16:31,” *JSOT* 49 (1991): 77–86.

CHAPTER TWO: SIGNIFICATIVE STYLIZATION

- 1 Juliana M. Claassens, “The Character of God in Judges 6–8: The Gideon Narrative as Theological and Moral Resource,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 23, 1 (2001): 64. She also suggests symbolic value for *Oreb* and *Zeeb*.
- 2 Richard S. Hess, “The Name Game: Dating the Book of Judges,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 30, 6 (2004): 40.
- 3 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 91.

CHAPTER THREE: AUTHORS’ AGENDAS

- 1 John E. Hamlin, “Adoni-Bezek: What’s in a Name (Judges 1:4–7),” *Proceedings* 4 (1984): 146–52.
- 2 Dale R. Davis, “A Proposed Life-Setting for the Book of Judges” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978).
- 3 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 4 “Bochim” is probably a euphemism for “Bethel” (see Judg. 21:2). Perhaps this critiques the golden calf that Jeroboam erected there. Here is another symbolic name change!
- 5 Daniel I. Block, “Why Deborah’s Different,” *BR* 17, 3 (2001): 52.
- 6 The “reticent narrator” is characteristic of Hebrew narrative, and is not unique to the book of Judges. What did God think of Jacob’s stealing his brother’s blessing, or of Rebekah’s helping him?
- 7 I treat the Angel as a definite being who watches over Israel, like Michael in Daniel 10. A case for “an angel” was recently made by René López, “Identifying the ‘Angel of the Lord’ in the Book of Judges: A Model for Reconsidering the Referent in Other Old Testament Loci,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20, 1 (2010): 1–18. Translations disagree on this. Many strike a middle way, making him lowercase yet definite: “the angel.”
- 8 As substantive participle, used as a noun. Only Yahweh is called a “Judge” by name.
- 9 Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 12.

11 Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), 151.

CHAPTER FOUR: A KEEN KENITE

1 Because this verb comes into play later, it is noted here.

2 Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "Framework and Discourse in the Book of Judges," *JBL* 128, 4 (2009): 693.

CHAPTER FIVE: SOILED SOUTHPAW, ROTUND RULER

1 The City of Palms is usually equated with Jericho, but there is no evidence that Moab ever had a presence there. Terry Hefeker argues that Ehud's daring act of heroism took place "deep in the Moabite heartland." "Did Eglon of Moab Die in Jericho? Challenging a Presumptive Interpretation" (paper presented at the Near East Archaeological Society Meeting, Atlanta, 2010), 11.

2 Marc Zvi Brettler, "Never the Twain Shall Meet? The Ehud Story as History and Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 62 (1991): 294.

3 Ibid.

4 If *dalet* is spurious, the word is virtually identical with "offal" and not a pun.

5 Tom A. Jull, "MQRH in Judges 3: A Scatological Reading," *JSOT* 81 (1998): 63–75.

6 Baruch Halpern, "The Assassination of Eglon: The First Locked-Room Murder Mystery," *BR* 4, 6 (1988): 33–41, 44.

7 The historical Eglon may have been muscular and formidable; see Lawson G. Stone, "Eglon's Belly and Ehud's Blade: A Reconsideration," *JBL* 128, 4 (2009): 649–63.

8 Geoffrey P. Miller, "Verbal Feud in the Hebrew Bible: Judges 3:12–30 and 19–21," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 55 (1996): 114.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 115.

11 Brettler, "Never the Twain Shall Meet?," 297–98.

12 Dale R. Davis, "A Proposed Life-Setting for the Book of Judges" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978), 102.

13 Lowell K. Handy, "Uneasy Laughter: Ehud and Eglon as Ethnic Humor," *SJOT* 6, 2 (1992): 238.

14 Joshua Berman, "The 'Sword of Mouths' (Jud. iii 16; Ps. cxlix 6; Prov. v 4): A Metaphor and Its Ancient Near Eastern Context," *VT* 52, 3 (2002): 292.

15 Eric S. Christianson, "A Fistful of Shekels: Scrutinizing Ehud's Entertaining Violence (Judges 3:12–30)," *Interpretation* 11, 1 (2003): 53–78.

16 He may have risen because he saw the sword.

17 Ibid., 77.

18 Gregory Wong, "Ehud and Joab: Separated at Birth?," *VT* 56, 3 (2006): 399–412.

19 David M. Gunn, *Judges* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 39–40.

CHAPTER SIX: DOES GOD COMMAND JIHAD?

1 Lowell K. Handy, "Uneasy Laughter: Ehud and Eglon as Ethnic Humor," *SJOT* 6, 2 (1992): 234.

- 2 Ferdinand Deist, “ ‘Murder in the Toilet’ (Judges 3:12–30): Translation and Transformation,” *Scriptura* 58 (1996): 266.
- 3 Brittany E. Wilson, “Pugnacious Precursors and the Bearer of Peace: Jael, Judith, and Mary in Luke 1:42,” *CBQ* 68, 3 (2006): 436–56.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE Sissy, THE SISTERS, AND SISERA

- 1 Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4–5,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58, 3 (1990): 391.
- 2 Daniel I. Block, “Why Deborah’s Different,” *BR* 17, 3 (2001): 49.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 This is different from the more common *barak*, which means “to bless.”
- 5 Baruch Margalith, “Observations on the Jael-Sisera Story (Judges 4–5),” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright et al. (Winona Lake: IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 633.
- 6 Ibid., 640.
- 7 Block, “Why Deborah’s Different,” 50–51.
- 8 Marc Rozelaar, “An Unrecognized Part of the Human Anatomy,” *Judaism* 37, 1 (1988): 97–101.
- 9 Scott C. Layton, “Ya‘el in Judges 4: An Onomastic Rejoinder,” *ZAW* 109, 1 (1997): 93–94.
- 10 Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading,” *SJOT* 19, 1 (2005): 24–47.
- 11 Ibid., 33.
- 12 John Sawyer, “From Heaven Fought the Stars,” *VT* 31, 1 (1981): 87–89.
- 13 Dale R. Davis, “A Proposed Life-Setting for the Book of Judges” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978), 105.
- 14 Richard S. Hess, “Judges 1–5 and Its Translation,” in *Translating the Bible*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Richard S. Hess (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 153.
- 15 Davis, “A Proposed Life-Setting,” 105.
- 16 Simeon also gets a pass; perhaps Shamgar represented that tribe (Judg. 5:6).
- 17 Othniel Margalith, “Dor and En-Dor,” *ZAW* 97, 1 (1985): 109–11.

CHAPTER EIGHT: MASTERING MIDIAN

- 1 Pronounced “reev.”
- 2 L. Juliana M. Claassens, “The Character of God in Judges 6–8: The Gideon Narrative as Theological and Moral Resource,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 23, 1 (2001): 64.
- 3 Josiah Derby, “Gideon and the Ephraimites,” *JBQ* 30, 2 (2002): 119.
- 4 *BHS* emends to “thresh,” citing 8:7. I disagree, for the reason stated.
- 5 Dale R. Davis, “A Proposed Life-Setting for the Book of Judges” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978), 108–9.
- 6 Diane M. Sharon, “Echoes of Gideon’s Ephod: An Intertextual Reading,” *Journal of the Ancient Near*

Eastern Society 30 (2006): 93, 89.

7 Ibid., 94.

CHAPTER NINE: ABOMINABLE ABIMELECH

- 1 It is sheer convention to translate “gods” rather than “God” in Judges 9:9, 12. Obviously, “gods” avoids the theological conundrum of God enjoying oil and wine.
- 2 Hayyim Angel, “The Positive and Negative Traits of Gideon: As Reflected in His Sons Jotham and Abimelech,” *JBQ* 34, 3 (2006): 159–67.
- 3 The NIV and RSV ignore the verb altogether. The KJV treats it as a place name.
- 4 J. Gerald Janzen, “A Certain Woman in the Rhetoric of Judges 9,” *JSOT* 38 (1987): 35.
- 5 Dale R. Davis, “A Proposed Life-Setting for the Book of Judges” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978).
- 6 Jan P. Fokkelman, “Structural Remarks on Judges 9 and 19,” in *Sha’arei Talmon*, ed. Michael Fishbane and Emanuel Tov (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 34.

CHAPTER TEN: MINOR MAGISTRATES

- 1 Richard D. Nelson, “Ideology, Geography, and the List of Minor Judges,” *JSOT* 31, 3 (2007): 347–64.
- 2 S. D. Snyman, “Shamgar ben Anath: A Farming Warrior or a Farmer at War?,” *VT* 55, 1 (2005): 125–29.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: JEPHTHAH’S JAUNDICE

- 1 David Marcus, “The Bargaining between Jephthah and the Elders (Judges 11:4–11),” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 19 (1989): 95–100.
- 2 Ibid., 98.
- 3 Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah’s Daughter,” *Prooftexts* 17, 3 (1997): 279–98.
- 4 This is *qr’* II, “to meet,” not *qr’* I, “to call, name.”
- 5 David Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech, 1986), 9.
- 6 Hannah vowed to give to God a son, meaning that he would serve the cult from childhood (1 Sam. 1:11).
- 7 Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, 34.
- 8 Reis, “Spoiled Child,” 282.
- 9 Alice Logan, “Rehabilitating Jephthah,” *JBL* 128, 4 (2009): 665–85.
- 10 Ibid., 672.
- 11 Ibid., 682.
- 12 Here also is a vow with echoes of “Achor.” In this case the victim was *not* killed.
- 13 Phyllis Tribble, “A Daughter’s Death: Feminism, Literary Criticism, and the Bible,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 22, 3 (1983): 180.

- 14 The exception is when the text makes the connection explicit, as in Judges 1:17; 6:32.
- 15 David Marcus, "Ridiculing the Ephraimites: The Shibboleth Incident (Judg. 12:6)," *Maarav* 8 (1992): 100.
- 16 Dale R. Davis, "A Proposed Life-Setting for the Book of Judges" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978), 116.
- 17 Ibid., 117. In David's case, the pedigree problem was his Moabite ancestry.
- 18 Ibid., 119.
- 19 J. Cheryl Exum, "Murder They Wrote: Ideology and the Manipulation of Female Presence in Biblical Narrative," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 43, 1–4 (1989): 31.
- 20 Michael J. Smith, "The Failure of the Family in Judges. Part 1: Jephthah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162, 647 (2005): 279–98.
- 21 David Janzen, "Why the Deuteronomist Told about the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter," *JSOT* 29, 3 (2005): 341.
- 22 Lippman Bodoff, "The Tragedy of Jephthah," *JBQ* 28, 4 (2000): 251–55.
- 23 The Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 485.

CHAPTER TWELVE: PHILISTINE FOXES

- 1 Jay G. Williams, "The Structure of Judges 2:6–16:31," *JSOT* 49 (1991): 84.
- 2 The Philistines were sea peoples from across the Mediterranean, who might have brought some Greek traditions with them into Canaan. It is pure speculation to wonder how they perceived Samson, an Israelite Hercules.
- 3 Joshua Roy Porter, "Samson's Riddle: Judges 14:14, 18," *Journal of Theological Studies* 13, 1 (1962): 106–9. He notes a cognate for *honey* similar to *lion*.
- 4 Claudia V. Camp and Carole R. Fontaine, "The Words of the Wise and Their Riddles," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, ed. Susan Niditch, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 127–51.
- 5 Othniel Margalith, "Samson's Foxes," *VT* 35, 2 (1985): 224–29.
- 6 The *di* sound in biblical Aramaic is the relative pronoun, which often prefixes a longer word, as in *dilili* of Daniel 2:19, "that which is of the night."
- 7 Williams, "The Structure of Judges 2:6–16:31," 84.
- 8 Jack M. Sasson, "Who Cut Samson's Hair? And Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16," *Prooftexts* 8, 3 (1988): 333–39.
- 9 Williams, "The Structure of Judges 2:6–16:31," 84.
- 10 Charles Halton, "Samson's Last Laugh: The Š/ŠHQ Pun in Judges 16:25–27," *JBL* 128 (2009): 61–64.
- 11 J. Cheryl Exum, "The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga," *VT* 33, 1 (1983): 42.
- 12 Simcha Shalom Brooks, "Saul and the Samson Narrative," *JSOT* 71 (1996): 22.
- 13 Dale R. Davis, "A Proposed Life-Setting for the Book of Judges" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978), 123.

14 Ibid., 126.

15 Barry Webb, "A Serious Reading of the Samson Story (Judges 13–16)," *Reformed Theological Review* 54 (1995): 114.

16 Ibid., 120.

17 Richard G. Bowman and Richard W. Swanson, "Samson and the Son of God, or Dead Heroes and Dead Goats: Ethical Readings of Narrative Violence in Judges and Matthew," *Semeia* 77 (1997): 59–73.

18 Webb, "A Serious Reading of the Samson Story," 119.

19 J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions," *Semeia* 32 (1984): 27.

20 Ibid., 28.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DAN'S DIRTY DEALINGS

1 Gale A. Yee, "Ideological Criticism: Judges 17–21 and the Dismembered Body," in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 158.

2 E. Aydeet Mueller, *The Micah Story: A Morality Tale in the Book of Judges*, Studies in Biblical Literature 34 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 67.

3 A. Macintosh, "The Meaning of MKLYM in Judges 18:7," *VT* 35, 1 (1985): 73.

4 Dale R. Davis, "A Proposed Life-Setting for the Book of Judges" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978), 157.

5 Ibid., 158.

6 Ibid., 130.

7 Andrew Mayes, "Deuteronomistic Royal Ideology in Judges 17–21," *Biblical Interpretation* 9, 3 (2001): 245.

8 Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 496.

9 Yairah Amit, "Hidden Polemic in the Conquest of Dan: Judges 17–18," *VT* 40, 1 (1990): 4–20.

10 Dale R. Davis, "Comic Literature—Tragic Theology: A Study of Judges 17–18," *WTJ* 46, 1 (1984): 158.

11 Mueller, *The Micah Story*, 75.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: BENJAMIN'S BALEFUL BENT

1 Koala Jones-Warsaw, "Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19–21," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 22, 1 (1994): 18–35.

2 Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "The Levite's Concubine: New Light on a Dark Story," *SJOT* 20, 1 (2006): 125–46.

3 Ibid.

4 Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Genesis 19 and Judges 19," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 22 (1992): 4.

- 5 The very last verse of Joshua (24:33) associates Gibeah and Phinehas with the literal phrase, “Gibeah of Phinehas.”
- 6 Compare with Joshua 21:2 and 22:9. Apparently, locating Shiloh in Canaan was a typical designation in this period.
- 7 This is the second time in Judges where daughter(s) came out dancing after an oath was made. The result of the first oath was that she died a virgin; the result of the second, they forcibly lost their virginity.
- 8 Dale R. Davis, “A Proposed Life-Setting for the Book of Judges” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978), 134.
- 9 Ibid., 135.
- 10 Susan Niditch, “The ‘Sodomite’ Theme in Judges 19–20: Family, Community, and Social Disintegration,” *CBQ* 44, 3 (1982): 365–78.

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