

The Story (7) – Judges

By Ashby Camp

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I. Review

A. We saw last week in the Book of Joshua that Israel came to *control* Canaan, but they still did not fully *possess* it. Various peoples continued to inhabit the more remote areas. God told Joshua that he would drive those people out, but as Joshua told the people in chapter 23, in the meantime they needed to be diligent in keeping God's law so as not to mix with the remaining nations or get pulled into worship of their gods. If that happened, then God would *not* drive those nations out, and they would become a trap that would lead to Israel's exile from the land.

B. Assuming Joshua was thirty at the time of the Exodus in 1446 B.C., a reasonable speculation, his death at the age of 110 would have been in 1366 B.C. Throughout his life the people of Israel did well spiritually, and that continued until the elders who outlived Joshua died. These elders would have included the older members of the group that was under 20 at the beginning of the 40 years in the wilderness. They "had known all the work that the LORD did for Israel," as it says in Josh. 24:31.

II. Initial Success, Flashback, and Failure (ch. 1)

A. Judges opens in the time after Joshua's death, during the days of the surviving elders, when the people were pushing in faith to complete their possession of the promise land. The tribes of Judah and Simeon went against the Canaanites who remained in the southern hill country. They defeated 10,000 Canaanites and Perizzites at Bezek, the location of which is uncertain. They also captured the king, Adoni-bezek, and cut off his thumbs and big toes. As he himself acknowledged, God repaid him for having done that same thing to 70 other kings.

B. The statement in v. 7 that they brought Adoni-bezek to Jerusalem seems to trigger a flashback to the days of Joshua that explains how they came to be, at least temporarily, in possession of Jerusalem.

1. The capture of Jerusalem is not stated in Joshua, but it is hinted at in Joshua 10 where Joshua's execution of the king of Jerusalem is mentioned. We see in Judg. 1:8 that it was captured at least principally by the men of Judah.

2. At some point after Adoni-bezek was brought to Jerusalem, the Jebusites regained control of the city (the circumstances of which are not revealed). That is why Judg. 1:27 refers to Benjamin's failure to drive the Jebusites from the city and Josh. 15:63 refers to Judah's failure to do the same. It was not until King David that Jerusalem was permanently wrested from Jebusite control (2 Sam. 5:6-9; 1 Chron. 11:4-7).

3. The flashback aspect is confirmed by the description in vv. 10-15 of the capture of Hebron and Debir that clearly refers to the events of Josh. 15:13-19.

C. Verse 16 resumes the story of Judah and Simeon's successes, but we get the first suggestion in this post-Joshua age of a lack of faith. The statement in 1:19 that the men of Judah could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain *because they had iron chariots* is a way of saying that their trust in God waned in view of this superior military technology. After all, Joshua declared in Josh. 17:18 that iron chariots would be no impediment to victory. Indeed, in Judges 4 Israel by God's power defeats Sisera who had 900 iron chariots!

D. Judges 1:22-26 recounts the house of Joseph capturing Bethel. I take it this was a *retaking* of the city after its initial fall under Joshua (Josh. 8:17, 12:16). It is not unreasonable to think the possession of various cities and towns went back and forth over time in the process of solidifying the conquest. (This is possibly another flashback to how the city fell under Joshua, but it is harder to see the rationale for a flashback in this case.)

E. Judges 1:27-36 lists the failures of a number of tribes to complete the conquest by driving out various groups from the allotted territories. This left within Israel Canaanites, Asherites, Amorites, and as indicated in chapter 3, various other groups of pagan people. This level unfaithfulness puts us a decade or more after Joshua's death, the time when the elders who outlived him had died, so it is somewhere around 1350 B.C.

III. Rebuke by Angel of the Lord and Overview of the Book (2:1-3:6)

A. In 2:1-5 the angel of the Lord rebukes the people for their unfaithfulness in not driving out the remaining inhabitants of Canaan. He declares that they now will not be driven out and will instead be a thorn in their sides and a spiritual snare for them. The people all wept and wailed over this news, so the place was named Bochim (means weepers).

B. In 2:6-9 Joshua's death is again recounted. Verse 10 specifically sets the following narrative in the time of the subsequent generation that "did not know the work the Lord had done for Israel."

C. In 2:11-3:6 we are given a summary preview of what takes place throughout the book beginning at 3:7. Israel went after the pagan gods of the people who lived among them, God gave them into the hands of their enemies, the people repented and cried out to God in their distress, and then he, in his great mercy, raised up leaders called judges to deliver them from their enemies. This cycle of apostasy, oppression, repentance, and deliverance is repeated numerous times through chapter 16, and then the book ends with two appendices in chaps. 17-21.

IV. History of the Judges (3:7-16:31)

A. Saul was anointed as king (1 Samuel 10) around 1051 B.C.¹ Given that Israel's post-Joshua idolatry did not begin to any significant extent until around 1350 B.C., there is about 300 years from that apostasy until Saul became king, even less until the prophet Samuel became a judge. So we know that some of the times and events in the Book of Judges overlapped with each other because if you add up the years of oppression and the years of deliverance and rest under the various judges it comes to 409 years. In other words, Judges is not a strictly consecutive account, and some of the oppressions that are described involved only a segment of the nation.

B. Judges were not mere judicial figures who administered justice and handled legal disputes. Rather, they were for the most part Spirit-empowered military leaders (Deborah calls Barak to fight) whom God used to rescue the people from their enemies.

C. Othniel (3:7-11) – Israel served pagan gods, and the Lord gave them into the hand of the Mesopotamian king Cushan-rishathaim. The people cried out, and God raised up Othniel, Caleb's younger brother, to free them.

D. Ehud (3:12-30) – Israel did evil, and God gave them over to the Moabite king Eglon. The people cried out, and the Lord raised up a Benjamite named Ehud to deliver them. Ehud, a lefty, made a sword about 18" long and strapped it to his right thigh under his cloths. When he delivered Israel's tribute to the king at Jericho, he told the king he had a secret for him. Eglon sent everyone out, and then Ehud jammed the sword all the way into his fat belly. He then rallied the Ephraimites to victory.

E. Shamgar (3:31) – He is mentioned as having killed 600 Philistines.

F. Deborah and Barak (4:1-5:31)

1. Israel again did evil, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan who reigned in Hazor. This "Jabin" presumably was someone operating under the dynastic name of the King Jabin who was killed under Joshua in Josh. 11:1-15. It seems Israel's laxity in finishing its conquest of Canaan led to a member of the royal house reasserting his rule from the area of Hazor (the city had been burned) some decades later.

2. The people of Israel cried out, and the Lord had the prophetess (and judge) Deborah summon Barak and through her commanded Barak to gather his men from Naphtali and Zebulun at Mt. Tabor. God said he would draw out Sisera, who was Jabin's general, and deliver him into Barak's hand. Sisera had 900 iron chariots, so this was a very intimidating assignment.

3. Barak insisted that Deborah accompany him, no doubt because he wanted the benefit of God's prophetess being onsite. She agreed to go but told him he would be deprived of the glory of the victory over Sisera; instead Sisera would be given into the hand of a woman.

¹ See Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 146-151 and Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 178-179.

4. Sisera called out his chariots, Deborah gave the "go," Barak and his men attacked, and the Lord routed Sisera's army. Sisera fled, and Jael told him he could find refuge in her tent. After Sisera fell asleep, she drove a tent peg through his head.

G. Gideon (6:1-8:35)

1. The people of Israel did evil, and God gave them over to the Midianites. The people cried out, and after sending a prophet to them to warn them about their sin, God raised up Gideon.

2. Gideon was given assurance that God was with him to accomplish Israel's deliverance. The angel of God who called Gideon to the task had him put on a rock the meat and unleavened cakes Gideon had brought out to him. He touched them with his staff, and then fire shot up from the rock consuming the items, and the angel disappeared. Gideon was later given the signs involving the skins with wool – at his request, one night the wool was wet with dew but the ground was dry, and the next night the ground was wet but the wool was dry.

3. God had Gideon pare down his forces from 32,000 to 300. He then let Gideon overhear his enemies interpreting a dream that meant Gideon was going to be victorious.

4. By God's power, Gideon defeated the vast Midianite and Amelekite army with only 300 men. There is more to say about Gideon, but I cannot take the time. Let me just say that after declining the people's request that he be their king, Gideon made an ephod out of the golden earrings the people had taken from the defeated Midianites. He put it in Ophrah, and 8:27b says, "And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family."

H. Abimelech (9:1-57)

1. In chapter 9 Abimelech, Gideon's son by a concubine, got the people of Shechem to make him king over them. To make sure none of his brothers might contest his rule, he killed 70 of them; only Jotham, the youngest, escaped.

2. God instigated conflict between Abimelech and the people of Shechem, In the ensuing fighting between the two sides, a woman at Thebez, some nine miles north of Shechem, dropped a millstone from the city tower on Abimelech's head and killed him.

I. Tola and Jair (10:1-5) – They are mentioned only briefly as having judged Israel.

J. Jephthah (10:6-12:7)

1. The people again forsook God for a host of pagan gods, and the Lord gave them into the hands of the Ammonites, mainly in the east, and the Philistines in the west. Jephthah was used to deliver the people from the Ammonites; Samson and Samuel were God's agents of deliverance regarding the Philistines.

2. The people repented, and 10:16 says the Lord "became impatient over the misery of Israel." The leaders of Gilead begged Jephthah, a mighty warrior, to lead them against the Ammonites. Jephthah was from Gilead but had been driven from there by his brothers because he was the son of a prostitute. The fact these elders who earlier supported his being driven away were now coming to him for help was not lost on him. He told them he would do it on the condition he would be their leader if God should grant him the victory.

3. Jephthah tried negotiating with the Ammonites on the basis that Israel had held the land east of the Jordan for 300 years, but they would not listen. (Note that Jephthah may be exaggerating the years or liberally rounding up for rhetorical purposes.) God then gave Jephthah an overwhelming victory. You may recall his tragic vow that if God would give him the victory he would offer to the Lord as a burnt offering whatever first came out of his house. His daughter, his only child, was first out to greet him.

4. The Ephraimites were angry that they had not been invited to share in the fighting against the Ammonites. This deteriorated into a civil war between the men of Ephraim and the men of Gilead.

K. Izbón, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15) – They are mentioned briefly as judges.

L. Samson (13:1-16:31)

1. Regarding the Philistine oppression, God miraculously gave Manoah and his barren wife a child named Samson and gave them instructions that he was to be raised as a Nazirite. No razor could be used on his head, and he was to eat nothing unclean or drink any wine or strong drink. Samson was endowed with miraculous strength, and unlike the other judges, he used that personal strength instead of an army to take on the enemy.

2. The Lord moved Samson to seek a Philistine wife as a way to engage the Philistines. When at the wedding they bribed his bride to reveal his riddle, he killed thirty Philistines to get the clothes to pay off the bet and then stormed off. His wife-to-be was then given to his best man. And for that, Samson burned the Philistines' fields at harvest. The Philistines later came charging at him to kill him, and he killed a thousand of them.

3. Samson eventually was captured when he revealed to Delilah, a woman he loved, that the key to his strength was his hair that had never been cut. I believe Samson lost his strength because his willingness to allow his hair to be cut off by revealing that to Delilah after she had repeatedly tried to have him captured showed he did not trust that his strength really was from God. He did not think that unfaithfulness to his Nazirite vows would render him powerless because he no longer believed God was his strength.

4. In his final act, Samson, blinded by the Philistines and brought out for entertainment, prayed to God for one last miraculous empowerment. And with it he broke the weight bearing pillars of the building causing it to collapse, killing himself and some 3,000 Philistines.

V. Appendix 1: Idolatry of Micah and the tribe of Dan (chaps. 17-18)

A. The two appendices at the end of the book probably took place early during the time of the judges. In the first, a wealthy man of Ephraim named Micah built a house for his idols and installed his son as priest of his shrine. A young Levite from Bethlehem stayed there when traveling through, and Micah offered him a job as his personal priest. He accepted.

B. A search party from the tribe of Dan that was scouting out territory that some of their tribe could capture stayed at Micah's house. Later 600 Danites who were on their way to conquer Laish, the new site chosen for Dan, they took Micah's idols and got the Levite to come with them. Micah pursued them but in the end did not have the force to oppose them.

VI. Appendix 2: Immorality and lawlessness in the tribe of Benjamin (chaps. 19-21)

A. A Levite who lived in the territory of Ephraim went to Bethlehem to retrieve his concubine who had fled back home. On his way with her back to Ephraim, they stayed with an old man in the town of Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin.

B. The men of the city, after some drinking, surrounded the house and were beating on the door demanding to have sex with the man. The master tried to buy them off by offering to give them his daughter and the man's concubine which, as horrible as it was, would be less horrible than raping his male guest, but they refused. The Levite then threw his concubine to them hoping they would settle for her despite what they said.

C. The men abused the poor woman all night and left her dead on the doorstep. The Levite took her body home, cut it up into twelve pieces, and sent the pieces throughout all the territory of Israel as a call to action for the horrific deed. A civil war ensued which resulted in great loss of life, but Benjamin was finally defeated and almost completely wiped out.

D. After their victory, the people of Israel were sorrowful over the prospect that the tribe of Benjamin was now bound to go extinct because their women had been killed (20:48, 21:16) and they had taken an oath not to let any of their daughters marry any of the surviving men. Since no one from Jabesh-gilead had assembled with Israel at Mizpah when they gathered to fight Benjamin, they attacked Jabesh-gilead, captured 400 women, and gave them to the surviving fighters from Benjamin. That was not enough, so to make up the shortfall they authorized the men of Benjamin to steal the women of Shiloh who came out to dance during a city feast. They then convinced the fathers and brothers of the women to agree to the process after the fact.

VII. Concluding Comments

A. Israel's immorality throughout this period is captured in the statement in Judges 21:25 - *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes* (see also, 17:6).

B. Despite all the flaws in these men that God used to deliver Israel, they were people of great faith. Hebrews 11:32-34 states: *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--³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.*