

## JUDGES

### Introduction:

*The Pulpit Commentary* introduces the book of Judges with the following: “The Book of Judges, called in Hebrew JUDGES, BOOK OF *shopheTim*, and in the Vulgate LIBER JUDICUM, or JUDICES, takes its name, like the other historical books, — the five Books of Moses, the Book of Joshua, the Book of Ruth, the Books of Samuel and of the Kings, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the Book of Esther, — from its contents, viz., the history of certain transactions which took place in Israel under the judges. The judges were those extraordinary civil and military rulers who governed Israel in the interval between the death of Joshua and the foundation of the kingdom of Israel; except only that the judgeship of Samuel was a kind of connecting link between the two — Samuel himself being a judge, though of a different character from those that preceded him, and his government merging in the latter part of it into the kingdom of Saul; so that the times of Samuel occupy a middle place between the Judges and the Kings, belonging partly to both, but wholly to neither.

The age of the world in which the transactions recorded in the Book of Judges occurred was somewhere between the years B.C. 1500 and 1000. It was one marked by the same peculiar features in different parts of the earth. It was the dim twilight of history; but, as far as we can judge from those mythological accounts which precede the existence of true history, it was a time of much movement, of the birth of heroic characters, and of the incipient formation of those nations who were destined to be foremost among the nations of the earth. The mythologies of Greece tell of exploits of heroes which imply unsettled and disturbed times, the clashing of race with race, fierce struggles for the possession of lands, terrible conflicts for dominion or existence. And as far as such mythologies contain, as they doubtless do, some shreds of historical truth, and reflect something of the character of the men of the period, they are in accordance with the picture contained in the Book of Judges of the times which were more or less contemporary.

Instead of a comparison of the Greek mythologies leading to the conclusion that the history in the Book of Judges is mythological also, it rather lends a valuable confirmation of that historical character which the internal evidence of the book so abundantly claims for it. The features which are common to the Greek mythologies and the Hebrew history, the wars of new settlers with the old inhabitants, the recklessness of human life, the fierce cruelty under excitement, the heroic deeds and wild adventures of a few great leaders, the taste for riddles, the habit of making vows, the interference of gods and angels in human affairs, the frequent consultations of oracles, and so on, are the products of the same general condition of human society at the same epoch of the world. The difference between the two is, that the Greek traditions have passed through the hands of countless poets and storytellers, who in the course of generations altered, added, embellished, confused, distorted, and invented, according to their own fertile fancy and their own creative imaginations; while the Hebrew records, by the special providence of God, have been preserved some 3000 years and upwards uncorrupted and unchanged.”

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about the place of the book in the canon of Scripture: “In the order of the Hebrew Canon the Book of Judges invariably occupies the 7th place, following immediately upon Joshua and preceding Samuel and Kings. With these it formed the group of the four ‘earlier prophets’ (*nebhi'im ri'shonim*), the first moiety of the 2<sup>nd</sup> great division of the Hebrew Scriptures. As such the Book of Judges was classified and regarded as ‘prophetical,’ equally with the other historical books, on the ground of the religious and

spiritual teaching which its history conveyed. In the rearrangement of the books, which was undertaken for the purposes of the Greek translation and Canon, Judges maintained its position as 7<sup>th</sup> in order from the beginning, but the short historical Book of Ruth was removed from the place which it held among the Rolls (*meghilloth*) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> division of the Jewish Canon, and attached to Judges as a kind of appendix, probably because the narrative was understood to presuppose the same conditions and to have reference to the same period of time. The Greek order was followed in all later VSS, and has maintained itself in modern Bibles.”

*Halley's Bible Handbook* introduces the Book of Judges with: “The Hebrew Nation, after the death of Joshua, had no strong central government. They were a confederacy, of twelve independent tribes, with no unifying force, except their God. The form of government in the days of the Judges is spoken of as the ‘Theocracy’; that is, God himself was supposed to be the direct ruler of the nation. But the people did not take their God very seriously, and were continually falling away into idolatry. Being in a state of anarchy, more or less, and harassed at times by civil war among themselves, and surrounded by enemies who made attempt after attempt to exterminate them, the Hebrew Nation was very slow in its national development, and did not become a great nation till it was organized into a Kingdom the days of Samuel and David.

The exact duration of the period of the judges is uncertain. The years assigned to oppression, 111, ... and to judges, with the period of rest, 299, total, 410. But some of these figures may overlap. Jephthah, who lived near the end of the period, spoke of it as 300 years; roughly about 1400-1100 B C. From Exodus to Solomon, which includes also the periods of the wilderness, and of Eli, Samuel, Saul, and David is called in I Kings 6:1, 480 yrs.”

**Outline of the Book of Judges:**

*The Tyndale Commentary* on Judges gives the following outline:

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## **1. THE INCOMPLETE CONQUEST OF CANAAN (1:1 – 2:5)**

### **a. The conquest of southern Canaan (1:1-21)**

#### **Judg 1:1-21**

*1 After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, "Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?"*

*2 The Lord answered, "Judah is to go; I have given the land into their hands."*

*3 Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, "Come up with us into the territory allotted to us, to fight against the Canaanites. We in turn will go with you into yours." So the Simeonites went with them.*

*4 When Judah attacked, the Lord gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands and they struck down ten thousand men at Bezek*

*5 It was there that they found Adoni-Bezek and fought against him, putting to rout the Canaanites and Perizzites.*

*6 Adoni-Bezek fled, but they chased him and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and big toes.*

*7 Then Adoni-Bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off have picked up scraps under my table. Now God has paid me back for what I did to them." They brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.*

*8 The men of Judah attacked Jerusalem also and took it. They put the city to the sword and set it on fire.*

*9 After that, the men of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites living in the hill country, the Negev and the western foothills.*

*10 They advanced against the Canaanites living in Hebron (formerly called Kiriath Arba) and defeated Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmai.*

*11 From there they advanced against the people living in Debir (formerly called Kiriath Sepher).*

*12 And Caleb said, "I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath Sepher."*

*13 Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, took it; so Caleb gave his daughter Acsah to him in marriage.*

*14 One day when she came to Othniel, she urged him to ask her father for a field. When she got off her donkey, Caleb asked her, "What can I do for you?"*

*15 She replied, "Do me a special favor. Since you have given me land in the Negev, give me also springs of water." Then Caleb gave her the upper and lower springs.*

*16 The descendants of Moses' father-in-law, the Kenite, went up from the City of Palms with the men of Judah to live among the people of the Desert of Judah in the Negev near Arad.*

*17 Then the men of Judah went with the Simeonites their brothers and attacked the Canaanites living in Zephath, and they totally destroyed the city. Therefore it was called Hormah.*

*18 The men of Judah also took Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron — each city with its territory.*

*19 The Lord was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had iron chariots.*

*20 As Moses had promised, Hebron was given to Caleb, who drove from it the three sons of Anak.*

**21 The Benjamites, however, failed to dislodge the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem; to this day the Jebusites live there with the Benjamites. .**

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “After the death of Joshua. The events narrated in chs. 1. and 2:1-9 all occurred before the death of Joshua, as appears by Judges 2:8, 9, and by a comparison of Joshua 14:6-15 and 15:13-20. The words, *and it came to pass after the death of Joshua*, must therefore be understood (if the text is incorrupt) as the heading of the whole book, just as the Book of Joshua has for its heading, ‘Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord it came to pass.’ *Asked the Lord*. The same phrase as Judges 18:5; 20:18, where it is rendered *asked counsel of*. So also ... Numbers 27:21, where a special direction is given to Joshua to make such inquiries as that mentioned in this verse before Eleazar the priest, through the judgment of Urim and Thummim (cf. 1 Samuel 23. 10, 12). A still more common rendering of the Hebrew phrase in the A.V. is ‘to inquire of God’ (see, e.g. ... Judges 20:27, 28; ... 1 Samuel 22:13, 15; 23. 2, 4; 28:6, and many other places). Such inquiries were made (1) by Urim and Thummim, (2) by the word of the Lord through a prophet (1 Samuel 9:9), or (3) simply by prayer, ... (Genesis 25:22), and improperly of false gods (2 Kings 1:2, 16), of teraphim, and semi-idolatrous priests (Judges 18:5, 14).”

Simeon’s allegiances with Judah would result in them occupying territory within the parcel of Judah’s inheritance. We read in Joshua, when the land was being divided: “The second lot came out for the tribe of Simeon, clan by clan. Their inheritance lay within the territory of Judah.”<sup>1</sup>

The first victory by these two tribes was at Bezek, where they killed ten thousand men. The first king to be defeated was Adoni-Bezek. His name means “Lord of Bezek.” *The Fausset’s Bible Dictionary* writes about him: “‘Lord of Bezek,’ a city of Canaan. Leading the confederated Canaanites and Perizzites, he was conquered by Judah and Simeon, who cut off his thumbs and great toes. Conscience-struck, he confessed that 70 kings (petty princes) had gleaned (margin) their food under his table, deprived of thumbs and great toes: ‘As I have done, so God hath requited me’ (Judg 1:4-7). Brought a prisoner to Jerusalem, he died there. God pays sinners in their own coin (1 Sam 15:33). Judah was not giving vent to his own cruelty, but executing God’s *lex talionis* (Lev 24:19; Rev 16:6; Prov 1:31). The barbarity of Canaanite war usage’s appears in his conduct. The history shows that Canaan was then parceled out among a number of petty chiefs.”

We do not read how God was consulted, or by whom. It was probably the high priest. There is no mention of anyone occupying the empty place left by the death of Joshua.

It is significant that Judah was the first of tribes in Israel to start the war of conquest. When Jacob was on his deathbed he blessed Judah, saying: “Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons will bow down to you. You are a lion’s cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness — who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes will be darker than wine, his teeth whiter than milk.”<sup>2</sup>

Jacob’s blessing was a prophecy about the Messiah, who would be born as a member of

<sup>1</sup> Josh. 19:1

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 49:8-12

the tribe of Judah. When David became king in Israel, that prophecy began its fulfillment.

Judah's initiative in the conquest foreshadowed the victory of Jesus Christ over all God's enemies, including death.

Judah made an alliance with Simeon, inviting that tribe to assist in the conquest and promising to help when that tribe occupied its allotted territory. Actually, Simeon would become Judah's neighbor in Canaan, acquiring its inheritance south of Judah.

*Barnes' Notes* observes: "The priority given to Judah is a plain indication of divine direction. It points to the birth of our Lord of the tribe of Judah. Judah associated Simeon with him (Judg 1:3) because their lots were intermingled (Josh 19:1)."

The enemy territory conquered by Judah and Simeon was the kingdom of Bezek, whose king was Adoni-Bezek, "Lord of Bezek." Adoni-Bezek was captured in flight and the conquerors cut off his thumbs and big toes.

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this kind of mutilation: "These cruel mutilations, like the still more cruel one of putting out the eyes (... Judges 16:21; ... Numbers 16:14; 1 Samuel 11:2; 2 Kings 25:7), were intended to cripple the warrior in his speed, and to incapacitate him from the use of the bow, or sword, or spear, while yet sparing his life, either in mercy, or for the purpose of retaining his services for the conqueror."

The mutilated victim admitted the justice of that cruel and unusual punishment, saying that he received what was due to him, since he had applied that kind of practice to humiliate seventy kings, by making them crawl under his table and picking up crumbs.

In mentioning that Adoni-Bezek died in Jerusalem, the writer of Judges runs ahead of his story, since Jerusalem did not yet exist as a city by that name at that time.

*The Easton's Bible Dictionary* states about Jerusalem: "It is first mentioned in Scripture under the name Salem (Gen 14:18; comp. Ps 76:2). When first mentioned under the name Jerusalem, Adonizeadek was its king (Josh 10:1). It is afterwards named among the cities of Benjamin (Judg 19:10; 1 Chron 11:4); but in the time of David it was divided between Benjamin and Judah. After the death of Joshua the city was taken and set on fire by the men of Judah (Judg 1:1-8); but the Jebusites were not wholly driven out of it. The city is not again mentioned till we are told that David brought the head of Goliath thither (1 Sam 17:54). David afterwards led his forces against the Jebusites still residing within its walls, and drove them out, fixing his own dwelling on Zion, which he called 'the city of David' (2 Sam 5:5-9; 1 Chron 11:4-8). Here he built an altar to the Lord on the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite (2 Sam 24:15-25), and thither he brought up the ark of the covenant and placed it in the new tabernacle which he had prepared for it. Jerusalem now became the capital of the kingdom."

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "The territories of the tribe of Judah lay in the most southern part of the promised land, which was very mountainous, though towards the west it had many fine plains. In some of these the Canaanites had dwelt; and the expedition marked here was for the purpose of finally expelling them."

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: "There is some obscurity in this verse, which seems to tell us that Achsah, on her wedding-day, when she was going to her husband's house, persuaded him to ask of her father the *field*, viz. that in which the springs of water were, and which were not included in her original dower; and then goes on to tell us that Achsah herself made the request. The Septuagint reads, 'Othniel urged her to ask the field of her father,' and the Vulgate has, 'Her husband told her to ask her father,' and then it follows naturally, 'and she lighted from off her ass,' etc. But the Hebrew reading may be right, and it may be that when her husband, brave in storming a city, but timid in asking a favor, hung back, she, with the tenacious will of a woman,

sprang off the ass herself, and successfully preferred her request. [one Bible scholar] identifies (though not with absolute certainty) the ‘field’ thus obtained by Achsah with an unusually green valley amidst the dry, barren hills of the south country, lying south or west of Hebron, called Wady Nuukur, through which Caleb and Achsah must have ridden on their way from Hebron to Debir, or Kirjath-sepher. This valley breaks into a precipitous and still greener ravine, and both the upper and lower pastures are watered by a clear, bubbling rivulet, which rises in the upper meadow, and flows to the bottom of the ravine below.”

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “‘the children of a Kenite’ probably descended from the people of that name (Num 24:21-22). If he might not himself, his posterity did, accept the invitation of Moses (Num 16:32) to accompany the Israelites to Canaan. Their first encampment was in ‘the city of palm trees’ - not Jericho, of course, which was utterly destroyed, but a place in the surrounding district, perhaps Engedi, in early times called Hazezon-tamar (Gen 14:7), from the palm grove which sheltered it .... Thence they removed, from some unknown cause, and, associating themselves with Judah, joined in an expedition against Arad, in the southern part of Canaan (Num 21:1). On the conquest of that district some of the pastoral Kenites pitched their tents there, while others migrated to the north (Judg 4:17). It may be added, that some curious information respecting the Kenites was communicated to the meeting of the British Association at Cambridge (1862), by George Williams, in an account of a tribe of Arabs inhabiting a portion of the Arabian desert east of the Ghor - i.e., a part of the ancient land of Midian. These people are described as being much superior to the ordinary Bedouins, and in several respects very different from them. They profess the Israelite religion, and declare themselves to be Ishmaelites, descended from the Rechabites, ‘the children of the Kenite, Moses’ father-in-law,’ affirming that they reside in the original country of their forefathers. A peculiarity of the account was that these Bedouins are said to claim to be both Ishmaelites and Midianites (Judg 8:2-24; Gen 25:18).”

We met Caleb previously as one of the spies who went into Canaan with the first group to survey the country. Together with Joshua, he was the only one of the twelve who gave a good report. This allowed him to enter the Promised Land and inherit his territory.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states about him: “Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, the Kenezite, an Edomitish tribe, was one of the spies sent up to spy the land, and in doing so he came to Hebron, and there saw the giants, the sons of Anak (... Numbers 13:22). When all the spies brought up an evil report of the land, and by doing so raised a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, Caleb the Kenezite, alone with Joshua, stood firm, and, as a reward of his faithfulness, received the promise that he and his seed should possess the land on which his feet had trodden. Accordingly Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb the Kenezite (see Numbers 13, 14; ... Deuteronomy 1:36; Joshua 14:6-15; 15:13, 14).”

The Israelites had an account to settle with the Canaanites in Zephath. We read in Numbers: “When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Atharim, he attacked the Israelites and captured some of them. Then Israel made this vow to the Lord: ‘If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.’ The Lord listened to Israel’s plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns; so the place was named Hormah.”<sup>3</sup>

We get the impression that Zephath had already been conquered. In that case the original population may have succeeded in retaking their town.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states about Hormah: “This name was

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<sup>3</sup> Num. 21:1-3

not now given for the first time. On their early journey toward Canaan the Israelites had attempted to penetrate the mountainous region where Zephath was situated, and they were repulsed (Num 14); but on arriving at Kadesh they overthrew it, and called the place Hormah. On their departure from that neighborhood the native tribes resumed possession of it; and although Joshua made an effective attack upon the king (Josh 10:40-42; 12:14), its final subjugation was not accomplished until after his death, by the confederate arms of Judah and Simeon, who, in pursuance of the Israelite vow to doom it to destruction, sank the old name Zephath in the thenceforth permanent appellation Hormah.”

Interestingly, Judah seems to have had no problems in conquering the hills, which we assume would be the harder thing to do, but they ran into trouble in the plains. The reason given is that the plain’s people had iron chariots. We could say in modern terms that Judah only had infantry, but the people in the plains used tanks.

We read in an earlier account, that the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh had faced a similar problem when Joshua was still alive. He had told them: “You are numerous and very powerful. You will have not only one allotment but the forested hill country as well. Clear it, and its farthest limits will be yours; though the Canaanites have iron chariots and though they are strong, you can drive them out.”<sup>4</sup> What Judah lacked was not armory but faith. God was with Judah and He would have given them the victory over an enemy that had superior weaponry.

The same lack of faith was found with Benjamin. They tried to conquer Jerusalem, but the Jebusites succeeded in repulsing them and Jerusalem would not be conquered until David took it centuries later.<sup>5</sup>

Caleb conquered the giants. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, the Kenezite, an Edomitish tribe, was one of the spies sent up to spy the land, and in doing so he came to Hebron, and there saw the giants, the sons of Anak ( ...Numbers 13:22). When all the spies brought up an evil report of the land, and by doing so raised a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, Caleb the Kenezite, alone with Joshua, stood firm, and, as a reward of his faithfulness, received the promise that he and his seed should possess the land on which his feet had trodden. Accordingly Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb the Kenezite (see Numbers 13, 14; ... Deuteronomy 1:36; Joshua 14:6-15; 15:13, 14).”

## **b. The capture of Bethel (1:22-26)**

***22 Now the house of Joseph attacked Bethel, and the Lord was with them.***

***23 When they sent men to spy out Bethel (formerly called Luz),***

***24 the spies saw a man coming out of the city and they said to him, "Show us how to get into the city and we will see that you are treated well."***

***25 So he showed them, and they put the city to the sword but spared the man and his whole family.***

***26 He then went to the land of the Hittites, where he built a city and called it Luz, which is its name to this day.***

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “That is, the tribe of Ephraim and the half tribe of Manasseh, who dwelt beyond Jordan. Beth-el was not taken by Joshua, though he took Ai, which was near to it.”

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<sup>4</sup> Josh. 17:17,18

<sup>5</sup> II Sam. 5:6-8

Ephraim was helped in their conquest of Bethel by the fact that they captured one of its inhabitants outside the city. This man would have lost his life if he had been home. He was saved by showing the Ephraimites how to capture the city. No details are given about the information he furnished them with. As the Israelites had done with Rahab in the capture of Jericho, so the Ephraimites dealt with the man of Luz. We do not read, however, that this man had the same spiritual understanding about the meaning of Israel's conquest as Rahab had demonstrated.

Rahab had told the spies who stayed at her house: "I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."<sup>6</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on the name Bethel: "*Bethel*, now Beitin. The name (house of God) had been given by Jacob (... Genesis 28:19), but obviously would not be likely to be adopted by the Canaanitish inhabitants, by whom it was called Luz. As soon, however, as the Ephraimites conquered it, they re-imposed the name, in memory of their father Jacob.

We understand that the man who had become a spy for the Israelites did not stay at Bethel after the Israelites took the city and destroyed it. He moved away and founded the city called Luz.

Manasseh did conquer the area allotted to them, but their conquest remained incomplete, because they did not drive out or exterminate its original inhabitants. God had warned them that this would endanger their fellowship with Him and their own existence.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* refers to an observation by Josephus, about this failure. We read: "Josephus ... gives a full commentary on this passage. 'Contenting themselves with the tributes which were paid to them, the Israelites grew effeminate, as to fighting any more against their enemies; but applied themselves to the cultivation of their lands, which producing them great plenty and riches, they neglected the regular disposition of their settlement, and indulged themselves in luxuries and pleasures.'"

The basic problem of most of the tribes that failed to completely possessing the land was that they did not take God's warning of the dangers of idolatry seriously enough.

### **c. A catalogue of unoccupied territory (1:27-36)**

***27 But Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth Shan or Taanach or Dor or Ibleam or Megiddo and their surrounding settlements, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that land.***

***28 When Israel became strong, they pressed the Canaanites into forced labor but never drove them out completely.***

***29 Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, but the Canaanites continued to live there among them.***

***30 Neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron or Nahalol, who remained among them; but they did subject them to forced labor.***

***31 Nor did Asher drive out those living in Acco or Sidon or Ahlab or Aczib or Helbah or Aphek or Rehob,***

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<sup>6</sup> Josh. 2:9-11

**32 and because of this the people of Asher lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land.**

**33 Neither did Naphtali drive out those living in Beth Shemesh or Beth Anath; but the Naphtalites too lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land, and those living in Beth Shemesh and Beth Anath became forced laborers for them.**

**34 The Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country, not allowing them to come down into the plain.**

**35 And the Amorites were determined also to hold out in Mount Heres, Aijalon and Shaalbim, but when the power of the house of Joseph increased, they too were pressed into forced labor.**

**36 The boundary of the Amorites was from Scorpion Pass to Sela and beyond.**

This section tells the sad story of Israel's failure to obey God's command regarding the extermination or removal of the tribes that were living in Canaan. Israel was told to punish the Canaanites, because the measure of their sin had reached its full measure.<sup>7</sup> Evidently, Israel's concept of God's holiness was too vague for them to understand that God's patience could reach its limit as far as human sin was concerned.

In pressing some of the Canaanites into forced labor, the Israelites thought that they could get the best of both worlds. They thought they obeyed the Lord (which they didn't), and they thought they could use the devil (which they couldn't).

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes Josephus' commentary on this passage, which reads: "Contenting themselves with the tributes which were paid to them, the Israelites grew effeminate, as to fighting any more against their enemies; but applied themselves to the cultivation of their lands, which producing them great plenty and riches, they neglected the regular disposition of their settlement, and indulged themselves in luxuries and pleasures."

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments: "Upon the whole matter it appears that the people of Israel were generally very careless both of their duty and interest in this thing; they did not what they might have done to expel the Canaanites and make room for themselves. And, 1. It was owing to their slothfulness and cowardice. They would not be at the pains to complete their conquests; like the sluggard, that dreamed of a lion in the way, a lion in the streets, they fancied insuperable difficulties, and frightened themselves with winds and clouds from sowing and reaping. 2. It was owing to their covetousness; the Canaanites' labor and money would do them more good (they thought) than their blood, and therefore they were willing to let them live among them, that they might make a hand of them. 3. They had not that dread and detestation of idolatry which they ought to have had; they thought it a pity to put these Canaanites to the sword, though the measure of their iniquity was full, thought it would be no harm to let them live among them, and that they should be in no danger from them. 4. The same thing that kept their fathers forty years out of Canaan kept them now out of the full possession of it, and that was unbelief. Distrust of the power and promise of God lost them their advantages, and ran them into a thousand mischiefs."

It was this general lackadaisical attitude that determines the tone of the whole Book of Judges.

J. Sidlow Baxter, in *Explore the Book*, observes: "We are told that the nine and a half tribes which settled in Canaan did not destroy or even drive out the Canaanite nations, as God had commanded. They suffered them to remain. The other two and a half tribes—Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh, had already sadly compromised in choosing to settle in Gilead, on the eastern side of the Jordan. The first chapter of Judges gives us a list of eight incomplete

<sup>7</sup> See Gen. 15:16

conquests—by Judah, Benjamin, Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan. The other two tribes, Issachar and Simeon, are not mentioned, but the presumption is that their behavior was like that of the others. Incomplete mastery of evil at the outset always means constant trouble from it afterwards, and often defeat by it in the end. So was it with Israel. ... The Divine command to Israel was austere, but necessary. Israel allowed quarter to the foe, and lived to rue it.”

#### **d. The effect of the broken covenant (2:1-5)**

*1 The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you,*

*2 and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this?*

*3 Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be [thorns] in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."*

*4 When the angel of the Lord had spoken these things to all the Israelites, the people wept aloud,*

*5 and they called that place Bokim. There they offered sacrifices to the Lord.*

Bible scholars have argued about the term “the angel of the Lord.” The Hebrew words are *ma`lak- Yahweh*. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “Jewish commentators generally have supposed the reference is to a prophet or commissioned messenger, whom they conceive to have been Phinehas the high priest. We are inclined to think, from the authoritative tone of his language, that he was ‘the Angel of the Covenant’ (Ex 23:20; Josh 5:14); the same who appeared in human form and announced himself captain of the Lord’s host. His coming from Gilgal had a special significance, because there the Israelites made a solemn dedication of themselves to God on their entrance into the promised land; and the memory of that religious engagement, which the angel’s arrival from Gilgal awakened, gave emphatic force to his rebuke of their apostasy.”

Some Bible scholars believe that “the angel of the Lord” is the Second Person of the Trinity, who would be the Old Testament appearance of Jesus Christ. We agree with the assumption that the term “the angel of the Lord” would indicate more than a mere human being, whatever his spiritual function in Israel would be.

Gilgal was the place where Israel had crossed the Jordan River that had been miraculously dried up, leaving a clear pass. A monument of twelve stones had been erected there to commemorate that miracle.<sup>8</sup>

It was at Gilgal that the Israelite men had been circumcised and God had told them: “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.”<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew word “Gilgal” means “rolled away.” It could be seen as a prophetic reference to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the rolling away of the stone of the tomb in which He was laid. His resurrection means the rolling away of the reproach of sin for all who believe in His death and resurrection.

<sup>8</sup> Josh. 4:20-24

<sup>9</sup> Josh. 5:9

It was at Gilgal that Israel had consecrated herself anew to the Lord before the conquest of Canaan. All this had taken place in the presence of the angel of the Lord. Now Israel had moved away from this historic site and so the presence of the Lord was no longer needed there.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* also observes: “Gilgal had a special significance, because there the Israelites made a solemn dedication of themselves to God on their entrance into the promised land; and the memory of that religious engagement, which the angel’s arrival from Gilgal awakened, gave emphatic force to his rebuke of their apostasy. Bochim, ‘the weeping,’ was a name bestowed, evidently in allusion to this incident and the profound emotions of the people, on the place, which was at or near Shiloh.”

Where Gilgal had been the place of victory, Bochim can be seen as the place of defeat. It was there that God reproached Israel that they had not carried out His command to exterminate or expel the inhabitants of the land.

There is a reference to God’s covenant in these verses. God had made a covenant with Abraham. We read in Genesis: “[God] also said to [Abraham], ‘I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.’ But Abram said, ‘O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?’ So the Lord said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.’ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.’ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates — the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.’”<sup>10</sup>

God’s covenant with Abraham had been one-sided. It had been verified symbolically with the killing of animals. Such covenants were customary in the secular world of Abraham’s time. But in those instances both parties would pass between the pieces of cut up animals, indicating that, if they would not observe the conditions of the agreement, they would receive a death sentence. God had indicated to Abraham that He would receive the death sentence, not Abraham, if the covenant was broken by either party. Mankind broke the covenant, but God accepted the consequences in the death of Jesus Christ.

In New Testament terms, the death and resurrection of Jesus gives us the victory over the enemy. Satan is the defeated foe. In Old Testament terms, the inhabitants of Canaan were defeated foes when Israel entered the Promised Land. But Israel had not applied that victory in their occupation of the country. God had given them both the right and the power to do so, but that had not availed themselves of God’s promises. That is why God reproaches them their disobedience.

Israel’s lack of faith in God’s promises would leave the enemy, which would become a snare. The word “thorns” is not in the Hebrew text. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments about

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<sup>10</sup> Gen. 15:7-17

*thorns in your sides*: “This is not a translation of the Hebrew text, which only has ‘for sides,’ but a partial adaptation of Joshua 23:13, where the phrase is ‘scourges in your sides and thorns in your eyes.’ Either the words for ‘scourges in’ have fallen out of the text, or the word here rendered ‘sides’ should be rendered, as some think, ‘enemies.’”

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “Had God expelled all the ancient inhabitants at once, we plainly see, from the subsequent conduct of the people, that they would soon have abandoned his worship, and in their prosperity forgotten their deliverer. He drove out at first as many as were necessary in order to afford the people, as they were then, a sufficiency of room to settle in; as the tribes increased in population, they were to extend themselves to the uttermost of their assigned borders, and expel all the remaining inhabitants. On these accounts God did not expel the aboriginal inhabitants hastily or at once; and thus gave the Israelites time to increase; and by continuing the ancient inhabitants, prevented the land from running into waste, and the wild beasts from multiplying; both of which must have infallibly taken place had God driven out all the old inhabitants at once, before the Israelites were sufficiently numerous to occupy the whole of the land.”

Failure to be victorious is synonymous with failure to obey. The Israelites realized that they had failed the Lord. The fact that they reacted to this with tears was a most hopeful sign. Tears stand for repentance.

There is in the phrase “The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim” more than merely a reference to God moving from one place to another. If the angel of the Lord is, as we believe, the Second Person of the Trinity, He is omnipresent. There is a suggestion that it was the presence of the Lord that brought Israel to the place of tears. It is the Holy Spirit who brings conviction of sin in the human heart.

The bringing of sacrifices at Bokim expressed the fact of a renewal of surrender to the will of God.

## **2. ISRAEL IN THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES (2:6 – 16:31)**

### **a. Introduction to the period (2:6 – 3:6)**

**6** *They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.*

**7** *The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.*

**8** *The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years.*

**9** *But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, who saved them.*

**10** *The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, so that he became Israel’s judge and went to war. The Lord gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him.*

**11** *So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.*

**12** *Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and because they did this evil the Lord gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel.*

**13** *Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms.*

*14 The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.*

*15 Again the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer — Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab.*

*16 Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a foot and a half long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing.*

*17 He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man.*

*18 After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way the men who had carried it.*

*19 At the idols near Gilgal he himself turned back and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." The king said, "Quiet!" And all his attendants left him.*

*20 Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his summer palace and said, "I have a message from God for you." As the king rose from his seat,*

*21 Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly.*

*22 Even the handle sank in after the blade, which came out his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it.*

*23 Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.*

*24 After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, "He must be relieving himself in the inner room of the house."*

*25 They waited to the point of embarrassment, but when he did not open the doors of the room, they took a key and unlocked them. There they saw their lord fallen to the floor, dead.*

*26 While they waited, Ehud got away. He passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah.*

*27 When he arrived there, he blew a trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went down with him from the hills, with him leading them.*

*28 "Follow me," he ordered, "for the Lord has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands." So they followed him down and, taking possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab, they allowed no one to cross over.*

*29 At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all vigorous and strong; not a man escaped.*

*30 That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years.*

*31 After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. He too saved Israel.*

*3:1 These are the nations the Lord left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan*

*2 (he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience):*

*3 the five rulers of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the Lebanon mountains from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamath.*

*4 They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commands, which he had given their forefathers through Moses.*

*5 The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.*

*6 They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.*

The writer of Judges refers to the historical fact that, when Joshua was still alive, every tribe had been assigned a section of the Promised Land, which had been allotted by lot. The proverb states: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”<sup>11</sup> God had assigned to each tribe its proper place, but most had failed to accept what had been given to them. Corrie ten Boom has said: “Some missionaries have given everything to the Lord, but they have not taken everything from the Lord.” Such was Israel’s problem.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states about v.6: “This passage is a repetition of Josh. 24:39-31, and it was inserted here to put the reader in possession of the reasons which called forth so strong and severe a rebuke from the angel of the Lord. During the lifetime of the first occupiers, who retained a vivid recollection of all the miracles and judgments which they had witnessed in Egypt and the desert, the national character stood high for faith and piety. But in course of time a new race arose, who were strangers to all the hallowed and solemnizing experience of their fathers – ‘knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel’ - i.e., considered not, at least acted as if they had never heard of the marvelous interpositions of Yahweh in behalf of their nation, and too readily yielded to the corrupting influences of the idolatry that surrounded them.”

Israel’s problem at this time was, in fact, that the people were “second generation Christians.” For them the miracles of the exodus and the entering into Canaan were ancient history. The presence of the Lord was no longer of daily relevance to them. Joshua was dead and so was, in a sense, the God of Joshua.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes about v.7: “This verse is the epitome of the religious history of Israel from the time of the exhortation of the angel till the dying off of all those who had been elders in the time of Joshua. It probably includes some forty or fifty years from the entrance into Canaan, viz., about thirty years of Joshua’s lifetime, and ten, fifteen, or twenty years after Joshua’s death. The record of the people’s continuance in the service of the Lord connects itself with the promise made by them in Joshua 24: 21, 24.”

In the above mentioned verses the people had responded to Joshua’s challenge by saying: “We will serve the Lord,” and “We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.”<sup>12</sup>

In v.7 and following, the writer goes back to his opening statement in which he stated that Joshua had died, as had the whole generation of those who had entered the Promised Land. The people of this day were the children of the pioneers. Joshua had reached the ripe old age of one hundred ten. The place of his burial is mentioned.

For the Israelites of this day, God was merely part of ancient history. Intimate fellowship with God is not hereditary; it must be established in the life of each individual by an act of personal surrender. When there is no personal and experimental fellowship with God, the enemy, Satan, is immediately present to take His place. There is no neutral ground. There is no such thing as living for one’s-self.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The memory of God’s great works gradually faded away, and with this memory their influence upon the hearts of the people. The seductions of idolatry and the influence of heathen example were ever fresh and powerful. Had the people obeyed the voice of the Lord, the idolatry and the idolaters would have been out of the way. We may notice by the way the value to the Church of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in keeping alive a perpetual memory of Christ’s precious death until his coming again.”

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<sup>11</sup> Prov. 16:33

<sup>12</sup> Josh. 24:21, 24

We are told, in general terms, that when Israel got in trouble by forsaking the Lord, God raised up a “judge” to lead the people back on the right path.

The Hebrew word used *shaphat*, or *shophet*. The meaning of the word is not the same as of “a judge” in the judicial system of Western society. *The Easton’s Bible Dictionary* describes the person as: “Properly a magistrate or ruler, rather than one who judges in the sense of trying a cause. This is the name given to those rulers who presided over the affairs of the Israelites during the interval between the death of Joshua and the accession of Saul (Judg 2:18), a period of general anarchy and confusion. ‘The office of judges or regents was held during life, but it was not hereditary, neither could they appoint their successors. Their authority was limited by the law alone, and in doubtful cases they were directed to consult the divine King through the priest by Urim and Thummim (Num 27:21). Their authority extended only over those tribes by whom they had been elected or acknowledged. There was no income attached to their office, and they bore no external marks of dignity. The only cases of direct divine appointment are those of Gideon and Samson, and the latter stood in the peculiar position of having been from before his birth ordained ‘to begin to deliver Israel.’ Deborah was called to deliver Israel, but was already a judge. Samuel was called by the Lord to be a prophet but not a judge, which ensued from the high gifts the people recognized as dwelling in him; and as to Eli, the office of judge seems to have devolved naturally or rather ex officio upon him.’ Of five of the judges, Tola (Judg 10:1), Jair (3), Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15), we have no record at all beyond the bare fact that they were judges. Sacred history is not the history of individuals but of the kingdom of God in its onward progress.”

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* further explains: “In the early patriarchal times the heads of families and the elders of the tribes were the judges (compare Gen 38:24), and their authority was based on custom. In the wilderness Moses alone was the judge until Jethro suggested a scheme of devolution. On his advice Moses divided the people into groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and over each group a wise and good man was set as a judge. Thereafter only the most important cases were brought before Moses (Ex 18:13-26; Deut 1:9-17). This arrangement ceased to be practicable when the children of Israel settled down in Canaan. Although David took counsel with the heads of thousands and hundreds (1 Chron 13:1), it need not be assumed that this was a continuation of the plan adopted by Moses. Probably the local courts were not organized till the time of David. In the days of the Judges justice was ministered by those who had risen by wisdom or valor to that rank (Judg 4:5). An organized circuit court was established by Samuel, who judged cases himself, and also made his sons judges (1 Sam 7:16; 8:1). After the monarchy was instituted, the king tried all cases, when requested to do so by the wronged person, in the palace gate (1 Kings 7:7; Prov 20:8). There was no public prosecutor (2 Sam 14:4; 15:2-6; 1 Chron 18:14; 1 Kings 3:16; 2 Kings 15:5). Under David and Solomon there were probably local courts (1 Chron 23:4; 26:29). Jehoshaphat organized a high court of justice (2 Chron 19:8). The prophets often complain bitterly that the purity of justice is corrupted by bribery and false witness (Isa 1:23; 5:23; 10:1; Amos 5:12; 6:12; Mic 3:11; 7:3; Prov 6:19; 12:17; 18:5). Even kings sometimes pronounced unjust sentences, especially in criminal cases (1 Sam 22:6-19; 1 Kings 22:26; 2 Kings 21:16; Jer 36:26). An evil king could also bend local courts to do his will, as may be gathered from the case of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-13).”

V. 16 gives no specific details about who the judges were and how they acted in cases of emergency. We understand that God allowed Israel to be harassed by “raiders.” Those must have been parties of the original population of Canaan that the Israelites had failed to expel or

exterminate. We conclude from this that the judges were instrumental to organize a military power from among Israel's men, who were able to defend their territory. Later in the Book of Judges, we read examples of incidents, as in the stories of Gideon and Samson.

The judges were raised up by the Lord, because He had compassion on His people. We interpret this as meaning that some individuals remained faithful to the Lord and rejected the Baal worship that had become the main devotion of the general public. God endowed them with leadership qualities and strategic insight that made these men organize military units to resist invasion and harassment by Canaan's original population.

God intended Israel to be a theocracy, that is a nation where God is recognized as the highest authority and daily life of every individual is governed by divine law. Israel's Constitution was the Ten Commandments. In turning away from the worship of Yahweh to Baal, the divine rule of daily life was changed into sinful and corrupt behavior.

There are no examples in world history of a working theocracy, the reason being that human nature is corrupt. If there were no sin, there would be no need for a law. Every individual would know by the voice of his own conscience which acts were ethical and which were not. Our conscience still knows this, but sin often overrules the voice of conscience. The task of Israel's judges was mainly to remind the people of what they knew already.

We read that the Lord allowed some of Canaan's original inhabitants to remain in the land in order to test Israel. The Hebrew word used both in 2:22 and 3:1, is *nacah*, "to test." The KJV renders the verb with "prove."

The word is first used in Scripture in connection with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. We read: "Some time later God *tested* Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied. Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.'"<sup>13</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on the word: "This word *to prove* is used here in a somewhat different sense from that which it bears in ver. 4 and in ... Judges 2:22. In those passages it is used of their moral probation, of proving or testing their faith and obedience; but here it is rather in the sense of 'to exercise' or 'to accustom them,' to train them to war. A considerable period of *rest* had followed Joshua's conquest, during which the younger Israelites had no experience of war; but if they were to keep their hold of Canaan, it was needful that the warlike spirit should be kept up in their breasts."

It may seem strange to us that God would want people to go to war with each other. We find this apparent contradiction in God's call to Gideon. When Gideon was called to mobilize an army to fight the Midianites, we read: "Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it The Lord is Peace."<sup>14</sup>

God is at war with the Evil One and He wants people He created in His image to join Him in this. And Jesus, the Prince of Peace, says: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."<sup>15</sup>

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments on God's testing of Israel by making them engage in war: "There appeared to be no other way to induce this people to acknowledge the true God, but by permitting them to fall into straits from which they could not be delivered but by his special providence. These words are spoken after the manner of men; and the metaphor is taken from the case of a master or father, who distrusts the fidelity or obedience of his servant or son,

<sup>13</sup> Gen. 22:1,2

<sup>14</sup> Judg. 6:24

<sup>15</sup> Matt. 10:34

and places him in such circumstances that, by his good or evil conduct, he may justify his suspicions, or give him proofs of his fidelity.

Had God expelled all the ancient inhabitants at once, we plainly see, from the subsequent conduct of the people, that they would soon have abandoned his worship, and in their prosperity forgotten their deliverer. He drove out at first as many as were necessary in order to afford the people, as they were then, a sufficiency of room to settle in; as the tribes increased in population, they were to extend themselves to the uttermost of their assigned borders, and expel all the remaining inhabitants. On these accounts God did not expel the aboriginal inhabitants hastily or at once; and thus gave the Israelites time to increase; and by continuing the ancient inhabitants, prevented the land from running into waste, and the wild beasts from multiplying; both of which must have infallibly taken place had God driven out all the old inhabitants at once, before the Israelites were sufficiently numerous to occupy the whole of the land.

These observations are important, as they contain the reason why God did not expel the Canaanites. God gave the Israelites a grant of the whole land, and promised to drive out their enemies from before them if they continued faithful. While they continued faithful, God did continue to fulfill his promise; their borders were enlarged, and their enemies fled before them. When they rebelled against the Lord, he abandoned them, and their enemies prevailed against them. Of this, their frequent lapses and miscarriages, with God's repeated interpositions in their behalf, are ample evidence. One or two solitary instances might not be considered as sufficient proof; but by these numerous instances the fact is established. Each rebellion against God produced a consequent disaster in their affairs; each true humiliation was invariably followed by a special divine interposition in their behalf. These afforded continual proof of God's being, providence, and grace. The whole economy is wondrous; and its effects, impressive and convincing. The people were not hastily put in possession of the Promised Land, because of their infidelity. Can the infidels controvert this statement? If not, then their argument against divine revelation from 'the failure of positive promises and oaths,' falls to the ground. They have not only in this, but in all other respects, lost all their props."

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* states: "The people of Israel forsook the God of Israel, and gave that worship and honor to the dunghill deities of the Canaanites which was due to him alone. Be astonished, O heavens! at this, and wonder, O earth! Hath a nation, such a nation, so well fed, so well taught, changed its God, such a God, a God of infinite power, unspotted purity, inexhaustible goodness, and so very jealous of a competitor, for stocks and stones that could do neither good nor evil? Jer 2:11,12. Never was there such an instance of folly, ingratitude, and perfidiousness. Observe how it is described here, v. 11-13. In general, they did evil, nothing could be more evil, that is, more provoking to God, nor more prejudicial to themselves, and it was in the sight of the Lord; all evil is before him, but he takes special notice of the sin of having any other god. In particular, 1. They forsook the Lord (v. 12, and again v. 13); this was one of the two great evils they were guilty of, Jer 2:13. They had been joined to the Lord in covenant, but now they forsook him, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband. 'They forsook the worship of the Lord,' so the Chaldee: for those that forsake the worship of God do in effect forsake God himself. It aggravated this that he was the God of their fathers, so that they were born in his house, and therefore bound to serve him; and that he brought them out of the land of Egypt, he loosed their bonds, and upon that account also they were obliged to serve him. 2. When they forsook the only true God they did not turn atheists, nor were they such fools as to say, There is no God; but they followed other gods: so much remained of pure nature as to own a God, yet so much appeared of corrupt nature as to multiply gods, and take up with any,

and to follow the fashion, not the rule, in religious worship. Israel had the honor of being a peculiar people and dignified above all others, and yet so false were they to their own privileges that they were fond of the gods of the people that were round about them. Baal and Ashtaroth, he-gods and she-gods; they made their court to sun and moon, Jupiter and Juno. Baalim signifies lords, and Ashtaroth blessed ones, both plural, for when they forsook Jehovah, who is one, they had gods many and lords many, as a luxuriant fancy pleased to multiply them. Whatever they took for their gods, they served them and bowed down to them, gave honor to them and begged favors from them.”

One of the reasons God did not expel the original inhabitants of Canaan all at once was that wild animals would increase and present a threat to the Israelites. Moses had said: “The Lord your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you.”<sup>16</sup>

Verses 3 and 5 give a list of the tribes that inhabited Canaan when Israel invaded. At the time the Israelites entered the Promised Land, the sin of the Amorites had reached its full measure.<sup>17</sup> When Israel failed to exterminate the aboriginal tribes, they allowed their sins to remain. That exposed them to spiritual contamination. Sin is contagious, holiness is not.<sup>18</sup>

The six tribes of the aboriginal inhabitants are given as “the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.”

## **b. Othniel and Cushan-rishathaim of Aram (3:7-11)**

***7 The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.***

***8 The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years.***

***9 But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, who saved them.***

***10 The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, so that he became Israel’s judge and went to war. The Lord gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him.***

***11 So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.***

Not only did Israel allow those tribes and their sins to remain in the land, they even intermarried with them. Thus idolatry infiltrated God’s chosen people.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Intermarriage with the Canaanite nations had been expressly forbidden (... Exodus 34:15, 16; ... Deuteronomy 7:3; Joshua 23. 12), and the reason of the prohibition clearly stated, and for some time after Joshua’s death no such marriages appear to have been contracted. But now the fatal step was taken, and the predicted consequence immediately ensued: ‘they served their gods, they forgot the Lord their God, and served the Baalim and the Asheroth.’”

*The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* states about the religion of Canaan’s original inhabitants: “New vistas of knowledge of Canaanite cults and their degrading character and debilitating effect have been opened up by the discovery of the Ras Shamra religious epic

<sup>16</sup> Deut. 7:22

<sup>17</sup> Gen. 15:16

<sup>18</sup> See Hab. 2:12,13

literature from Ugarit in N. Syria. Thousands of clay tablets stored in what seems to be a library between two great Canaanite temples dating from c. fifteenth-fourteenth century B.C. give a full description of the Canaanite pantheon. Canaanite fertility cults are seen to be more base than elsewhere in the ancient world. The virile monotheistic faith of the Hebrews was continually in peril of contamination from the lewd nature worship with immoral gods, prostitute goddesses, serpents, cultic doves, and bulls. El, the head of the pantheon, was the hero of sordid escapades and crimes. He was a bloody tyrant who dethroned his father, murdered his favorite son, and decapitated his daughter. Despite these enormities, El was styled ‘father of years’ (abu shanima), ‘the father of man’ (abu adami, ‘father bull’), i.e., the progenitor of the gods. Baal, the widely revered Canaanite deity, was the son of El and dominated the Canaanite pantheon. He was the god of thunder, whose voice reverberated through the heavens in the storm. He is pictured on a Ras Shamra stela brandishing a mace in his right hand and holding in his left hand a stylized thunderbolt. The three goddesses were Anath, Astarte, and Ashera, who were all three patronesses of sex and war. All were sacred courtesans. Other Canaanite deities were Mot (death); Reshep, the god of pestilence; Shulman, the god of health; Koshar, the god of arts and crafts. These Canaanite cults were utterly immoral, decadent, and corrupt, dangerously contaminating and thoroughly justifying the divine command to destroy their devotees (Deut 20:17).”

We read that God sold the Israelites into the hands of the king of Aram Naharaim, to whom they were subject for eight years. The Hebrew verb used is *makar*, which means “to sell,” usually in the context of giving a daughter in marriage, or selling a person into slavery. The same verb is used of Joseph’s brothers who sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.<sup>19</sup>

Actually, the Israelites sold themselves into the slavery of sin. We are reminded of Jesus’ words: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”<sup>20</sup> As God’s chosen people, Israel was the only nation in the world who could have been genuinely free. God intended them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.<sup>21</sup> They chose instead to become the slaves of God’s enemy, Satan.

Some Bible scholars believe that Cushan is not a proper name, but a reference to the king of Macedonia’s wickedness.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Chushan the victorious, or the wicked. His name, Chushan, or Cushan, points to Cush, the father of Nimrod (... Genesis 10:6-8), and the seat of his kingdom in Aram-naharaim, or Mesopotamia, agrees with Nimrod’s kingdom in ‘Babel... in the land of Shinar’ (*ibid. ver.* 10). An earlier invasion of Palestine by conquerors from Mesopotamia is mentioned ... Genesis 14:2, where Amraphel, king of Shinar, is one of the five kings who invaded Sodom. Bela, son of Beer, king of Edom, seems by his name to have been clearly from Mesopotamia, as Balaam the son of Beer was (... Numbers 22:5; 23:7); and in the time of Job we read of bands of Chaldeans looting in the land of Uz (... Job 1:17).”

Evidently Cushan-Rishathaim invaded Israel and made them pay a heavy tribute. This made the Israelites turn back to the Lord and pray for deliverance. In answer to their prayer, God raised up Othniel, a younger brother of Caleb.

One of Israel’s problems seems to have been a lack of unity between the tribes. Othniel managed to organize an army of Israel’s men of fighting age to resist the enemy and regain

<sup>19</sup> Gen. 37:27,28

<sup>20</sup> John 8:34

<sup>21</sup> Ex. 19:6

independence. This put Othniel in the seat of power and he governed the country for forty years until his death.

We met Othniel earlier as he became Caleb's son-in-law by capturing Kiriath Sepher. We read: "And Caleb said, 'I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath Sepher.' Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's brother, took it; so Caleb gave his daughter Acsah to him in marriage."<sup>22</sup>

Othniel's initiative and success made him the first of a series of judges that led Israel during this period in which Israel was a theocracy. The judges did not become king over the nation of Israel. God was Israel's king. This is expressed more clearly in the story of Gideon, whom the Israelites wanted to make their hereditary ruler. Gideon refused, saying that God was Himself in charge of Israel's government.<sup>23</sup>

Othniel's leadership led Israel into a period of rest and prosperity which lasted forty years. When Othniel died the people fell back into their idol worship and history repeated itself.

When Israel fell back into idolatry, God gave them over into the power of King Eglon, who was the ruler of Moab. Eglon entered into a pact with the Ammonites and Amalekites and attacked Israel, occupying Jericho, which is here called the City of Palms.

When Israel arrived in Canaan after their long journey from Egypt, Jericho was the first city they conquered. The fascinating story of how the walls of Jericho fall after Israel walked around the city for seven days is told in Joshua.<sup>24</sup>

*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* states about Jericho that it is "One of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. Situated in the wide plain of the Jordan Valley (Deut 34:1,3) at the foot of the ascent to the Judean mountains, Jericho lies about 8 miles northwest of the site where the Jordan River flows into the Dead Sea, some 5 miles west of the Jordan.

Since it is approximately 800 feet below sea level, Jericho has a climate that is tropical and at times is very hot. Only a few inches of rainfall are recorded at Jericho each year; but the city is a wonderful oasis, known as 'the city of palm trees' (Deut 34:3) or 'the city of palms' (Judg 3:13). Jericho flourishes with date palms, banana trees, balsams, sycamores, and henna (Song 1:14; Luke 19:4)."

Since Jericho had been completely destroyed by Joshua and its walls were not rebuilt until during the reign of Ahab, the conquest of the city cannot be considered to be a major military accomplishment.

When Joshua captured Jericho, we read: "At that time Joshua pronounced this solemn oath: 'Cursed before the Lord is the man who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: At the cost of his firstborn son will he lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest will he set up its gates.'"<sup>25</sup>

Joshua's prophetic curse was fulfilled literally. We read: "In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken by Joshua son of Nun."<sup>26</sup>

Archeological excavations have proven the fulfillment of Joshua's prophecy and the truth of the statement in I Kings. In excavating parts of Jericho's walls, bones of two young children

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<sup>22</sup> Josh. 15:16,17

<sup>23</sup> Judg. 8:22,23

<sup>24</sup> Josh. 6

<sup>25</sup> Josh. 6:26

<sup>26</sup> 1 Kings 16:34

were found cemented into the wall. Evidently, Hiel killed his oldest son Abiram and buried his body in the foundation stones, believing that the idol he served would thus give his blessing to the project. And when the wall neared its completion, he sacrificed his youngest son Segub when he put in the city gates. Such acts were performed by Canaan's original inhabitants and Israel had inherited those horrible practices instead of rooting them out.

### **c. Ehud and Eglon of Moab (3:12-30)**

*12 Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and because they did this evil the Lord gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel.*

*13 Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms.*

*14 The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.*

*15 Again the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer — Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab.*

*16 Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a foot and a half long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing.*

*17 He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man.*

*18 After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way the men who had carried it.*

*19 At the idols near Gilgal he himself turned back and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." The king said, "Quiet!" And all his attendants left him.*

*20 Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his summer palace and said, "I have a message from God for you." As the king rose from his seat,*

*21 Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly.*

*22 Even the handle sank in after the blade, which came out his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it.*

*23 Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.*

*24 After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, "He must be relieving himself in the inner room of the house."*

*25 They waited to the point of embarrassment, but when he did not open the doors of the room, they took a key and unlocked them. There they saw their lord fallen to the floor, dead.*

*26 While they waited, Ehud got away. He passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah.*

*27 When he arrived there, he blew a trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went down with him from the hills, with him leading them.*

*28 "Follow me," he ordered, "for the Lord has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands." So they followed him down and, taking possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab, they allowed no one to cross over.*

*29 At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all vigorous and strong; not a man escaped.*

*30 That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years.*

Eglon's capture of Jericho, or what was left of it, began Israel's enslavement to the Moabites for eight years.

Israel's deliverance from Eglon's domination is one of the most fascinating stories in the Book of Judges. Ehud was appointed to deliver the required tribute to King Eglon. The mention that he was left-handed is given as an indication that left-handedness was considered to be unusual. In modern society, right-handed and left-handed people are considered to have equal status. But only a few decades ago, left handed children were forced in school to learn to write with their right hand.

It must have been considered that right-handedness was the proper way to go through life in the days of the judges. The right way to strap on a sword, therefore, would be on the left side of the body, so that it would be in easy reach of the right hand. We assume that people who came to have an audience with King Eglon were searched for swords by the king's guard, but only on the left side. Thus Ehud managed to approach the king with his short double-edged dagger, strapped to his right hip.

According to *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, the Septuagint and the Vulgate both read that Ehud was ambidextrous, meaning he was able to use his right and left hand with equal ease. The Hebrew text does not seem to bear this out.

Eglon is described as a very fat man. The Hebrew word used is *bariy'*, which can be rendered "plump." The word is mostly used in Scripture in connection with cattle, as in Pharaoh's dream.<sup>27</sup>

When Ehud presented the money to Eglon, the money had been carried by a group of slaves, who handed their load over to the king. Evidently, this was done under the accompaniment of some ceremony. This being done, the group left the king's palace.

But at a certain point, which is identified by the Hebrew word *peciyl*, Ehud sent his carriers on their way and returned alone to the palace. The word *peciyl* has been interpreted as "quarry" or "idols."

When Ehud was ushered back into the presence of King Eglon, he announced that he had "a secret message" for the king. At this the king shouted "Quiet!" which was interpreted by the king's attendance as an order to leave the room.

The description of Eglon assassination is given in graphic detail. When the two are alone, Ehud repeats that he has a message from God for the king. The Hebrew words used are *dabar Elohim*: "Word of God." Eglon must have known that Elohim was the Name given to the God of Israel. Whether he acknowledged God as the Creator, as some of the gentile tribes seemed to have done, is not clear.

The announcement made the king get up from his throne, at which point Ehud pulled the dagger out of his belt and plunged it into the king's fat belly. The dagger pierced his whole body, entering the stomach and protruding from the back. It completely disappeared because of the king's overweight.

Ehud said that the dagger was "a message from God." The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."<sup>28</sup>

This is the only instance we know of in which the words of Hebrews were acted out in a physical manner instead applied spiritually.

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<sup>27</sup> Gen. 41:2, 4

<sup>28</sup> Heb. 4:12-13

On leaving the throne room, Ehud pulled the door shut behind him. The NIV reads that Ehud left the room “to the porch.” The Hebrew word used is *micderown*, which Strong’s Concordance describes as “a colonnade or internal portico.” This is the only place in Scripture where this word is used and Bible scholars do not know what is exactly meant by it. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “He *went out* at once into the *parshedon*, or antechamber, for so it is best to render the last words of the verse, and thence into the *misederon*, the outer porch, having first locked the door of the summer chamber. The words *parshedon* and *misederon* occur only here, and the former is very variously rendered.”

Ehud’s way of exiting prevented the king’s servants from entering the room. Finding the door locked, they believed that the king wanted privacy and they decided not to disturb his majesty. The Hebrew idiom given here is “he covers his feet.” The same expression is used of King Saul who went to relieve himself in the cave in which David and his men were hiding.<sup>29</sup>

But when the door remained locked for a longer time than would warrant the servants’ understanding of what the king was doing, they became worried and opened the door with a key. Then they found their monarch dead. This delay gave Ehud sufficient time to get away without being caught.

*Barnes’ Notes* comments on Ehud’s escaped to Seirath: “‘The forest’ or ‘weald,’ which evidently bordered on the cultivated plain near Gilgal, and extended into ‘the mountain or hill country of Ephraim.’ Once there, he was safe from pursuit (compare 1 Sam 13:6), and quickly collected a strong force of Ephraimites and probably the bordering Benjamites.” Evidently, the area had caves in which it would be easy to hide in case of need.

Once in the area belonging to Ephraim, Ehud blew the trumpet as a sign for Israel’s men to gather. Ehud showed himself to be a capable general with strategic insight. He made his soldiers occupy the places where the Moabites would cross the Jordan River, cutting off the Moabites on the east of the river from the ones on the west. That way Moab could not get any reinforcements. The attack on Moab cost the Moabites most of their men of fighting age. The number given is ten thousand.

Moab being made powerless, the land had peace for eighty years.

#### **d. Shamgar and the Philistines (3:31)**

***31 After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. He too saved Israel.***

In the last verse of this chapter we read: “After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. He too saved Israel.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “This is an isolated movement of the Philistines, alluded to in ... Judges 10:11, but of which we have no further details. In ... Judges 10:6 we read of Israel worshipping the gods of the Philistines, and of an alliance between the Ammonites and Philistines to vex Israel; but the precise connection between the events of the two chapters, or the exact time when either occurred, cannot be determined with certainty. Nothing more is known of Shamgar, except the mention of him in Deborah’s song (... Judges 5:6).”

#### **e. Deborah and Barak against Jabin and Sisera of Canaan (4:1-24)**

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<sup>29</sup> 1 Sam. 24:3

- 1 After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord.*
- 2 So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim.*
- 3 Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.*
- 4 Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.*
- 5 She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.*
- 6 She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor.*
- 7 I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"*
- 8 Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."*
- 9 "Very well," Deborah said, "I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh,*
- 10 where he summoned Zebulun and Naphtali. Ten thousand men followed him, and Deborah also went with him.*
- 11 Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaanannim near Kedesh.*
- 12 When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor,*
- 13 Sisera gathered together his nine hundred iron chariots and all the men with him, from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River.*
- 14 Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, followed by ten thousand men.*
- 15 At Barak's advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot.*
- 16 But Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim. All the troops of Sisera fell by the sword; not a man was left.*
- 17 Sisera, however, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin king of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite.*
- 18 Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she put a covering over him.*
- 19 "I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.*
- 20 "Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say 'No.'"*
- 21 But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.*

After a brief mention of Ehud's death, the report is that Israel fell again into the sin of following the Canaanite deities, thus invoking the wrath of God.

For the first time in the history of Israel, the nation is led by a woman by the name of Deborah.

*Easton's Bible Dictionary* states about Deborah: "Deborah roused the people from their lethargy. Her fame spread far and wide. She became a 'mother in Israel' (Judg 4:6,14; 5:7), and 'the children of Israel came up to her for judgment' as she sat in her tent under the palm tree 'between Ramah and Bethel.'"

*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* states about Deborah: "The fifth judge of Israel, a prophetess and the only female judge (Judg 4-5). The Bible tells us nothing about her family except that she was the wife of Lapidoth. Deborah's home was in the hill country of Ephraim between Bethel and Ramah. The palm tree under which she sat and judged Israel was a landmark; it became known as 'the palm tree of Deborah' (Judg 4:5)."

When Israel entered Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, we read about a king of Hazor by the name of Jabin. At that time Israel conquered Hazor and killed its king.<sup>30</sup> But this was several decades before the story that is before us in this chapter. Evidently, Hazor revived when Israel became unfaithful to the Lord and another king by the same name rose up to lead his country.

Again, we read that God "sold" Israel into the hands of one of the enemies they were supposed to have eradicated.

Being a woman, Deborah could not take charge of an army. But she showed greater authority than the judges who preceded her by appointing an army general. Calling Barak from the tribe of Naphtali, she told him that the Lord had appointed him as commander. He was to mobilize the men of Naphtali and Zebulun and deliver Israel from the oppressive power of Jabin, king of Hazor.

Jabin had an army that was modern for that time, because it was outfitted with "tanks" in the form of nine hundred iron chariots. As we saw before, the same kind of armory existed in Canaan in the days of Joshua.

Deborah told Barak that God would deliver Jabin's army into the hands of the Israelites.

The name Barak means "lightning." The meaning of that name and the war that was fought may make us think of World War II in which the Hitler's Nazi troops carried out campaigns that were called "Blitz," meaning "lightning" for the speed with which they were performed.

The NIV reads: "I will lure Sisera ..." The Hebrew verb used is *mashak*, "to draw," suggesting that Sisera would be tempted to venture too far into Israel for his own safety.

When Barak received God's orders, he, evidently, lacked the faith and confidence to act upon them, so he asked Deborah to accompany his troops into the battle. The request seems unusual.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states however: "The presence of women of rank in the camp of the Orientals is not uncommon. Every classical scholar will remember the generous conduct of Alexander in the tent of Darius, when the ladies of the Persian court became his captives; and the beautiful episode of Panthea is universally known .... The policy of Barak, then, to secure the presence of the prophetess is perfectly intelligible, as it would stimulate the valor of the troops than sanction, in the eyes of Israel, the uprising against an oppressor so powerful as Jabin."

Deborah agrees to go with Barak, but she tells him that he will not get any credit for delivering Israel. The honor will go to a woman.

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<sup>30</sup> Josh. 11:1-14

Barak succeeded in mobilizing ten thousand troops from Zebulun and Naphtali. Sisera heard of Israel's mobilization and decided upon another invasion.

Some Bible scholars believe that the Kenites were descendants of Moses' brother-in-law. Others take them to be the offspring of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: "It is not certain whether it denotes the father-in-law or the brother-in-law of Moses. The direct statement of Num 10:29 is that Hobab was 'the son of Reuel.'"

About the place where the Kenites settled *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "The Kenites, as we read in ... Judges 1:16, had settled in the wilderness of Judah, south of Arad, in the time of Joshua. Heber, with a portion of the tribe, had migrated later to Naphtali, probably at the time when the Philistines were pressing hard upon Judah, in the days of Shamgar and Jael (... Judges 3:31 and 5:5)."

We are not told specifically who informed Sisera of Barak's mobilization of the Israeli troops and of his move to Mount Tabor. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* suggests the Kenites did: "because it seems that they were the parties who communicated intelligence of the formidable insurrection of the Israelite tribes, as well as of the actual muster of the rebel forces under Barak at Tabor."

Without specific knowledge of the geographic area it is difficult to place where the actual encounter of the troops of Sisera and Barak took place. The general area must have been in the vicinity of Mount Carmel. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: "The Kishon collects the streams from the western slopes of Gilboa in the rainy season; and the water from the strong spring at Jenin. Contributions also come from the copious fountains in the neighborhood of Megiddo. At Sa'adiyah, again, some 3 miles East of Chaifa, its volume is largely increased by springs rising at the base of Carmel, on the edge of the plain of Acre. From Jenin in the Southeast, the deep torrent bed follows a westerly direction, with numerous windings cutting the plain in two, until it reaches the pass at the northeastern base of Carmel. Through the gorge between the mountain and the hills of Galilee it reaches the plain of Acre. From Sa'adiyah it flows in a deep sluggish stream through the marsh-land to the sea near Chaifa."

Sisera's army must have been bound to remain in the plains, since the "tanks" would not have been suitable to operate on the mountain slopes.

When both armies had taken up their battle position, Barak's on the mountain and Sisera in the plains, Deborah gives the marching orders, saying: "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" In typical Hebrew fashion, the positive statement is given in the form of a question. The Lord had already gone ahead of Barak's troops.

The NIV reads: "the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword." The Hebrew verb used is *hamam*, which literally means "to put in commotion." The same verb is used in connection with Israel's exodus from Egypt. When the Egyptians tried to recapture the Israelites, we read: "During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and *threw it into confusion.*"<sup>31</sup>

Barak had to fight, but if the Lord had not gone ahead of him, the Israeli army would not have gained the victory. As the proverb states: "The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord."<sup>32</sup>

The Canaanites were so desperately defeated that general Sisera had to run for his life. That, however, would not save him.

<sup>31</sup> Ex. 14:24

<sup>32</sup> Prov. 21:31

He arrived at the place of Heber, the Kenite and entered into the tent of Heber's wife, Jael.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states: "According to the usages of nomadic people, the duty of receiving the stranger in the sheikh's absence devolves on his wife; and the moment the stranger is admitted into the tent, his claim to be defended or concealed from his pursuers is established." The question remains, however, whether it was proper for a man to enter a woman's tent. Evidently, among nomadic people, the men and women occupied separate dwellings and for a stranger to enter into a woman's tent may have been improper. But Jael invited Sisera in. *Geneva Notes* comments that Heber, though a stranger, worshipped God and was, therefore, joined with Israel.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes correctly: "He preferred the woman's tent because of secrecy; for, according to the etiquette of the eastern countries, no person ever intrudes into the apartments of the women. And in every dwelling the women have a separate apartment."

But Sisera was exhausted and fleeing for his life; proper etiquette may not have been his top priority to him at this point.

Sisera asked for a drink of water and was given milk. Jael also covered him with a blanket. Before falling asleep, Sisera instructed his hostess to keep watch and, in case someone would come by and ask if she had seen Sisera, to deny it.

Once Sisera is sound asleep Jael assassinates him by driving a tent pin through his temples.

Much has been written about the ethical aspect of Jael's act. She had deceitfully shown kindness and hospitality by inviting the general into her tent and giving him to drink. She could expect members of Barak's troops to come by and look for their enemy, in which case she simply could have handed him over, leaving the killing to the Israelites.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "It is impossible for us to view Jael's act in the same light as her contemporaries did, on account of its treachery and cruelty; but we can admire her faith in the God of Israel, her love for the people of God, and her marvelous courage and strength of mind in carrying out her purpose, and make allowance for the age in which she lived."

In the following chapter, we will read how Deborah praised Jael for her act, stating that she was "most blessed of women."<sup>33</sup> We could consider Jael's murder of Sisera to be like the killing of an enemy in case of war. Whether that makes it ethical or not is another question.

Sisera would have had no qualms killing Jael or her husband had he felt that they would betray him to his enemy.

When Barak arrived at Jael's tent, she showed him the body of the man he was looking for.

*Barnes' Notes* comments on v. 4:24: "The meaning is, that Barak's great victory was the beginning of a successful resistance to Jabin, by which the Israelites recovered their independence, and finally broke the Canaanite power. Accordingly, we hear no more of Canaanite domination in the Book of Judges."

## **f. Son of Deborah (5:1-31)**

***1 On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song:***

***2 "When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves —***

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<sup>33</sup> Judg. 5:24

*praise the Lord!*

*3 "Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers! I will sing to the Lord, I will sing; I will make music to the Lord, the God of Israel.*

*4 "O Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the land of Edom, the earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down water.*

*5 The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel.*

*6 "In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the roads were abandoned; travelers took to winding paths.*

*7 Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel.*

*8 When they chose new gods, war came to the city gates, and not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.*

*9 My heart is with Israel's princes, with the willing volunteers among the people. Praise the Lord!*

*10 "You who ride on white donkeys, sitting on your saddle blankets, and you who walk along the road, consider*

*11 the voice of the singers at the watering places. They recite the righteous acts of the Lord, the righteous acts of his warriors in Israel. "Then the people of the Lord went down to the city gates.*

*12 'Wake up, wake up, Deborah! Wake up, wake up, break out in song! Arise, O Barak! Take captive your captives, O son of Abinoam.'*

*13 "Then the men who were left came down to the nobles; the people of the Lord came to me with the mighty.*

*14 Some came from Ephraim, whose roots were in Amalek; Benjamin was with the people who followed you. From Makir captains came down, from Zebulun those who bear a commander's staff.*

*15 The princes of Issachar were with Deborah; yes, Issachar was with Barak, rushing after him into the valley. In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart.*

*16 Why did you stay among the campfires to hear the whistling for the flocks? In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart.*

*17 Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he linger by the ships? Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves.*

*18 The people of Zebulun risked their very lives; so did Naphtali on the heights of the field.*

*19 "Kings came, they fought; the kings of Canaan fought at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo, but they carried off no silver, no plunder.*

*20 From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera.*

*21 The river Kishon swept them away, the age-old river, the river Kishon. March on, my soul; be strong!*

*22 Then thundered the horses' hoofs — galloping, galloping go his mighty steeds.*

*23 'Curse Meroz,' said the angel of the Lord. 'Curse its people bitterly, because they did not come to help the Lord, to help the Lord against the mighty.'*

*24 "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of tent-dwelling women.*

*25 He asked for water, and she gave him milk; in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk.*

*26 Her hand reached for the tent peg, her right hand for the workman's hammer. She struck Sisera, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple.*

**27** *At her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay. At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell-dead.*

**28** *"Through the window peered Sisera's mother; behind the lattice she cried out, 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?'"*

**29** *The wisest of her ladies answer her; indeed, she keeps saying to herself,*

**30** *'Are they not finding and dividing the spoils: a girl or two for each man, colorful garments as plunder for Sisera, colorful garments embroidered, highly embroidered garments for my neck — all this as plunder?'*

**31** *"So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength." Then the land had peace forty years.*

In introducing the Song of Deborah, Arthur E. Cundall in *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The Song of Deborah is one of the finest examples of an ode of triumph preserved in Israelite literature and it is generally agreed that it is contemporary with the events it describes. ... In all probability it was included in one of the anthologies of poetry which existed in ancient Israel. Two of these collections are mentioned specifically in the Old Testament. In Numbers 21:14 there is a reference to 'the Book of the Wars of the Lord,' which presumably was an anthology of poems celebrating victory, always conceived as the work of the Lord himself. In Joshua 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:18 'the Book of Jashar' is mentioned. ..."

Our text states that Deborah and Barak sang this ode of victory, but it is not specified who composed it. It is difficult to assume that both created it.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The ode which follows was doubtless the composition of Deborah the prophetess, and was sung by her (as the gender of the Hebrew verb indicates), assisted by Barak, who perhaps sang the antistrophe (cf. ... Exodus 15:1, 21). It is a song of wonderful beauty and lyric power, somewhat difficult, as all Hebrew poetry is."

But *Barnes' Notes* suggests: "Both composed and sang this noble ode, which, for poetic spirit and lyric fire, is not surpassed by any of the sacred songs in the Bible. And, as Miriam took up the first verse of the song of Moses (Ex 15:21), and sang it as an antiphony, so Barak, with the chorus of men, answered the song of Deborah by singing Judg 5:2, which is also exactly suited for an antiphon, summing up as it does the subject matter of the whole ode."

And *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "Nothing is said respecting the authorship of this noble triumphal ode; but modern criticism has established it, by a chain of strong circumstantial evidence, to be beyond a doubt an effusion of the patriotic and pious mind of Deborah herself. The freshness of feeling that pervades the entire composition—the strong hate evinced toward the enemy, as of one smarting under his insults and oppression—the details given respecting the severity and extent of his tyrannical exactions, and the reign of terror existing in the country—the names and number of the confederate tribes that obeyed the war-summons of Barak—the ascent of the Canaanite hosts, with, their defeat, and the course of their disastrous flight—the description given of the different situations of Jael and of Sisera's mother—indicate the intense interest and accurate knowledge of a contemporary."

It is possible that the ode was originally a spontaneous improvisation, which was later edited into the form in which we have it today.

The tribal people among whom we served as missionaries in Papua, Indonesia, had certain set forms of chants which were used in improvising texts that consisted of statements sung by one individual and taken up by a chorus of others. Such may have been the form of this ode of Deborah and Barak.

The opening line in the Hebrew text reads literally: “For the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves. Praise Yahweh.” There is a hidden play-on-words in the Hebrew word for *praise*, which is “barak.”

The NIV reads v. 2 as: “When the princes in Israel *take the lead* ...” “Take the lead” is the rendering of the Hebrew words *para*, which can be rendered “to begin,” and *nadab*, “to volunteer.” The latter is sometimes used for a freewill offering. The fact that some versions render this with “for the avenging of” indicates how complicated the Hebrew text is.

V. 4 may be a poetical description of God’s intervention in the battle that gave Israel the victory. But it could also be that there was a literal earthquake and a heavy thunderstorm that routed the enemy armies. *The Pulpit Commentary* sees in Deborah’s words a picture of God’s revelation to Israel on Mount Sinai, when Israel came from Egypt and was on her way to the Promised Land.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on the words “In the days of Shamgar ... in the days of Jael”: “The association of Jael with Shamgar suggests that reference is made to some unrecorded judge of that name, probably the successor of Shamgar, and whose public authority might be of equally brief duration. The presumption that this is the true interpretation, rather than that the reference is to the wife of Heber the Kenite, is strengthened by the fact that the name of this person is introduced by the formula ‘in the days of,’ which is commonly applied to men invested with public authority (cf. Judg 8:28; 1 Sam 17:12; 2 Sam 21:2).”

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* sees in it a reference to the anarchy that ruled the country before Deborah’s rule. We read: “The land was full of anarchy and confusion, being everywhere infested with banditti. No public road was safe; and in going from place to place, the people were obliged to use unfrequented paths.”

This is well illustrated in the words that mark the theme of *the Book of Judges*: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.”<sup>34</sup> What everyone saw fit was not doing the will of God.

The Hebrew text of v. 7 reads: “villages ceased,” adding: “The inhabitants of the villages,” which is not in the original text. The meaning of those words may be that, since villages, unlike cities with protecting walls, were open to random raiding by hooligans, life in the open country was considered to be unsafe. Deborah is given credit for establishing law and order. Those words in the song may have been provided by Barak.

When the people abandoned the worship of Yahweh, even life in the city became unsafe and people were unable to defend themselves against marauders. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The cause of this misery was not far to seek; it was the idolatry of the people which provoked God to anger. Then their enemies were let loose upon them, and they dared make no resistance.”

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes about v.8: “The Vulgate gives a strange and curious turn to this verse: ... ‘The Lord chose a new species of war, and himself subverted the gates of the enemy.’ Now, what was this new species of war? A woman signifies her orders to Barak; he takes 10,000 men, wholly unarmed, and retires to Mount Tabor, where they are immediately besieged by a powerful and well-appointed army. Of a sudden Barak and his men rush upon them, terror and dismay are spread through the whole Canaanitish army, and the rout is instantaneous and complete. The Israelites immediately arm themselves with the arms of their enemies, and slay all before them; they run, and are pursued in all directions. Sisera, their

<sup>34</sup> Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 21:25

general, is no longer safe in his chariot; either his horses fail, or the unevenness of the road obliges him to desert it, and fly away on foot; in the end, the whole army is destroyed, and the leader ingloriously slain. This was a new species of war, and was most evidently the Lord's doings. Whatever may be said of the version of the Vulgate, (and the Syriac and Arabic are something like it,) the above are all facts, and show the wondrous working of the Lord."

V. 9 repeats the opening phrase of the hymn, thus making it the refrain of the song.

V. 10 presents us with another problem of translation. The Hebrew text reads literally: "Ye that ride on white asses, ye that sit in judgment and walk by the road ..." The Hebrew word, rendered "judgment" is *mad*, which can refer to "height," but also to "a garment" or to "judgment."

*Barnes' Notes* interpretation sounds most reasonable, stating: "Deborah appeals to the classes mentioned in Judg 5:6-7, to bear witness to the happy change that had followed the overthrow of Jabin." *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "She appeals to the nobles who ride on white (or roan) asses, and sit on rich saddle-cloths (not *sit in judgment*), and to the people who walk by the way, alike to speak of the great deliverance."

Two points in verse 11 call for comment. ... The meaning of the Hebrew word translated "archers" (AV, RV) is uncertain, but most probably it has to do with some kind of musicians (RSV), most likely that class of wandering musicians who played the lyre. These minstrels were back at their accustomed places, but with a new song! Another point of interest concerns the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel (RSV), where the reference is to the sturdy yeomen (cf. verse 7), who formed the backbone of the army. The deeds of these heroic men were set alongside the righteous acts (AV, RV) or triumphs (RSV) of the Lord. Glory is given where it is due, but the contribution of the lesser participants is not overlooked.

The NIV reads v. 14: "Some came from Ephraim, whose roots were in Amalek ..." It sounds strange that Ephraim would have "roots in Amalek." The Hebrew text reads literally: "Out of Ephraim [there was] a root of them against Amalek." *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests: "They who spring (whose root is) from Ephraim *went* against Amalek, following thee, O Benjamin, with thy people; from Manasseh (Machir, son of Manasseh ... Genesis 50:23) came down governors (literally, *lawgivers*: cf. ver. 9), and out of Zebulun they that handle the baton of the commander, *i.e.* the military chiefs."

Arthur E. Cundall in *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The first part of the verse reads literally 'From Ephraim their root in Amalek,' which has the obvious meaning 'From Ephraim came those whose root was in Amalek.' The reference to *Amalek* is surprising and it has been held that it indicates a group of Amalekites, a semi-nomadic group like the Kenites, who had settled amongst the Ephraimites, as did Heber a little further to the north. Since the Amalekites were the sworn enemies of Israel ... this is unlikely. No more acceptable is the suggestion that Ephraim occupied the area once occupied by the Amalekites, there being no evidence of such a northward penetration by this group. A slight emendation makes sense of the line and preserves the unity of thought in verses 13-15, 'From Ephraim they sprang forth into the valley' (cf. RSV). The general picture is of the precipitous descent of the Israelites into the valley to engage the host of Sisera, with Benjamin in the lead, followed by Ephraim, Machir, Zebulun and Issachar. *Machir* normally refers to the settlement of the half-tribe of Manasseh eastward of the Jordan, but here it refers more naturally to the western section, which the territory of the six allied tribes giving some idea of the range of Canaanite depredations."

Another strange reading in the NIV is in v.15 in the rendering: "In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart." The Hebrew text reads literally: "For the divisions of

Reuben [there were] great thought of heart.” *Barnes’ Notes* interpret this to mean: “Reuben ought to have followed in this catalogue of patriots, but with that abruptness for which this poem is so conspicuous; Deborah adverts to his absence instead.”

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “Either the Reubenites were divided among themselves into factions, which prevented their co-operation with their brethren, or they were divided in their judgment concerning the measures now to be pursued, which prevented them from joining with the other tribes till the business was entirely settled.

The thoughts of heart, and searchings of heart, might refer to the doubts and uneasiness felt by the other tribes, when they found the Reubenites did not join them; for they might have conjectured that they were either unconcerned about their liberty, or were meditating a coalition with the Canaanites.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “For the divisions, etc. or, *among the water-brooks*, i.e. the Reubenites, dwelling amidst their flocks among the water-brooks, were much perplexed with doubts whether they should stay still or join their countrymen.”

The “searching of hearts” is repeated in v. 16, suggesting the persistence of doubt among the Reubenites as to whether they ought to join the others or not. They may have felt that joining the rebellion would be acting against the will of God, who had sent the oppression as a punishment for their sin of idolatry. For this, Deborah seems to reprimand them.

While the people of Zebulun and Naphtali risked their lives, the inhabitants of Gilead, the tribes of Dan and Asher did not want to get involved. “Gilead” refers to the tribe of Dan and half the tribe of Manasseh who had decided to stay east of the River Jordan when Israel conquered Canaan.

Arthur E. Cundall in *The Tyndale Commentary* comments on vv.15b-17: “But if there was a ready acknowledgment of the participating tribes, there was also a stern rebuke for those who set their own safety before the claims of their brethren. The four tribes mentioned had their tribal portions well away from the battlefield and were probably not directly affected by the Canaanite oppression, but it is clear that the appeal made for their assistance fall upon deaf ears, for not even a token force was sent. The circumstances of these tribes may have made it impossible for them to respond to the appeal of the distressed brethren. The reference to *Dan* suggests that they had not yet migrated northward, and if this was correct they were probably already enduring the pressures from the Amorites and ‘the Peoples of the Sea’ which eventually made their original tribal portion untenable. ... The plight of *Asher* was noted in 1:31, 32. Concerning *Reuben* and *Gilead*, two tribes whose holdings were in Transjordan, very little is known except that this area was itself subject to encroachments from the Moabites and Ammonites.”

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments on v. 19: “It is conjectured that Jabin and his confederates had invaded Manasseh, as both Taanach and Megiddo were in that tribe: and that they were discomfited by the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali at Taanach and Megiddo; while Barak defeated Sisera at Mount Tabor.

They expected much booty in the total rout of the Israelites; but they were defeated, and got no prey; or, if applied to the Israelites, they fought for liberty, not for plunder.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* offers three suggestions in explanation of the words: “Kings came, they fought..., but they carried off no silver, no plunder”: “These words may mean, (1) they did not stop to plunder, they were intent only upon slaughter; or, (2) they took no ransom for their enemies’ lives; or, (3) they got nothing by their fighting, for they were all killed themselves.”

Whether v. 20 refers to an astronomical event, as in the days of Joshua when the sun stood still in answer to Joshua's prayer, is an open question. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "The angels of God came to the assistance of Israel: and the stars in their orbits fought against Sisera; probably some thunder storm, or great inundation from the river Kishon, took place at that time, which in poetic language was attributed to the stars. So our poet sung relative to the storms which dispersed the Spanish armada in 1588: 'Both winds and waves at once conspire to aid old England-frustrate Spain's desire.' Perhaps it means no more than this: the time which was measured and ruled by the heavenly bodies seemed only to exist for the destruction of the Canaanites. There may be also a reference to the sun and moon standing still in the days of Joshua."

If there had been an actual cosmic upheaval, more would have been said about it in the records of Israel's history than a mere mention in Deborah's hymn.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on v. 21: "The river of Kishon swept them away. The enemy was defeated near 'the waters of Megiddo,' the sources and side streams of the Kishon: they that fled had to cross the deep and marshy bed of the torrent, but the Lord had sent a heavy rain-the waters suddenly rose-the warriors fell into the quicksands, and, sinking deep into them, were drowned or washed into the sea."

The Hebrew verb used to express the violent way in which Sisera's army was defeated is *garaph*, which means "to bear off violently." This is the only place in Scripture where this word appears. There must have been a heavy storm with excessive rainfall which caused the river to swell and overflow its banks.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes about the river: "In the summer season the water from the springs is largely absorbed by irrigation, and the upper reaches of the river are soon dry. The bed runs along the bottom of a trench some 20 ft. deep through the plain. It is easily crossed at the fords by those who know how to avoid the localities of the springs. In time of heavy rains the trench is swiftly filled, and the soft soil of the plain goes to mud. Remembering this, it is easy to understand the disaster that overwhelmed the heavily armed cavalry and chariots of Sisera."

At this point in her hymn, Deborah seems to be overwhelmed with emotion to the point where she tells her soul to keep going. The Hebrew verb used is *darak*, meaning "to tread," but also to string a bow." The verb has a note of victory, although it may refer to simply walking about. Moses used the verb in proclaiming Israel's conquest of Canaan, saying: "Every place where you *set your foot* will be yours: Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the Euphrates River to the western sea."<sup>35</sup>

This is the only place in Scripture where Meroz is mentioned. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes: "It is a strange fate, shared with Chorazin, to be preserved from oblivion only by the record of a curse. The bitterness in the treatment of Meroz, not found in the references to any of the other delinquents, must be due to the special gravity of her offence. Reuben, Gilead and Dan were far away. This, however, is not true of Asher, who was also absent. Perhaps Meroz was near the field of battle and, at some stage of the conflict, within sight and hearing of the strife. If, when Zebulun 'jeopardied their lives unto the death, and Naphtali, upon the high places of the field,' they turned a deaf ear and a cold heart to the dire straits of their brethren, this might explain the fierce reproaches of Deborah."

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<sup>35</sup> Deut. 11:24

From the cursing of a city, Deborah turns to the blessing of a woman. The blessing of Jael sounds like Elisabeth's blessing of Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"<sup>36</sup>

Whatever we may think about Jael's deceitful behavior toward Sisera, the stars of heaven (v. 20), called her "blessed!" *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* expresses reservations about this blessing, stating: "She shall be highly celebrated as a most heroic woman; all the Israelitish women shall glory in her. I do not understand these words as expressive of the divine approbation toward Jael." *Barnes' Notes* agrees, stating: "Deborah speaks of Jael's deed by the light of her own age, which did not make manifest the evil of guile and bloodshed, the light in ours does."

Evidently, neither of these eminent Bible scholars lived through a time of war in which their country was occupied by a cruel enemy who terrorized the people and killed innocent infants.

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes: "Deborah here concludes this triumphant song with the praises of Jael, her sister-heroine, whose valiant act had completed and crowned the victory. She had mentioned her before (v. 6) as one that would have served her country if it had been in her power; now she applauds her as one that did serve it admirably well when it was in her power. Her poetry is finest and most florid here in the latter end of the song. How honorably does she speak of Jael (v. 24), who preferred her peace with the God of Israel before her peace with the king of Canaan, and though not a native of Israel (for aught that appears) yet heartily espoused the cause of Israel in this critical conjuncture, jeopardized her life as truly as if she had been in the high places of the field, and bravely fought for those whom she saw God fought for! Blessed shall she be above women in the tent. Note, Those whose lot is cast in the tent, in a very low and narrow sphere of activity, if they serve God in that according to their capacity, shall in no wise lose their reward. Jael in the tent wins as rich a blessing as Barak in the field."

In the conclusion of her ode, Deborah turns to Sisera's home, poetically describing the emotions of Sisera's mother and other women who are waiting for news from the battlefield. Arthur E. Cundall in *The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "The savage exultation in the gruesome or harrowing details illustrate Rudyard Kipling's semi-humorous dictum that 'the female of the species is more deadly than the male!' But allowing for this element, the description is vivid and moving. The delay in the loved one's return has an underlying question, an agonized uncertainty, 'Will he return?' With anxious gaze Sisera's mother stands at the window lattice, looking for the chariot, or the reassuring beat of the horses' hooves."

As mentioned above, Deborah's picture is poetical. It is unlikely that she had any personal information about Sisera's family. The fact that she mentions the mother and not Sisera's wife or wives, marks a clear difference between our modern-day family relations and those in the olden days.

The painful emotions of a grieving family also would rather evoke sympathy in our hearts, rather than joy. There is indeed a cruel rejoicing in the pain in the enemy's heart that sounds strange to us. Deborah lived in the old dispensation, not in the new one in which we are admonished to love our enemy.

Maybe the most redeeming feature, the one that puts everything in this poem in the right perspective, is the fact that Sisera, and in him all the Canaanites, are seen, not primarily as

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<sup>36</sup> Luke 1:42

Israel's enemies, but as God's. "So may all your enemies perish, O Lord!" makes this hymn into a prayer of victory of good over evil.

The chapter ends with the statement that the land had peace for forty years. This suggests that Israel had learned a lesson from history and recognized God's rule and presence over the land and the people. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "Each such victory was a foretaste of the final victory over sin and death, and of the glory of the redeemed Church."

### **g. Gideon and the Midianites (6:1 – 8:28)**

#### ***(i) The oppression of Midian (6:1-6)***

***1 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.***

***2 Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds.***

***3 Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country.***

***4 They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys.***

***5 They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it.***

***6 Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help.***

In introducing this section Arthur E. Cundall, in *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "Gideon and Samson are dealt with in greater detail than any other of the judges. Three chapters (100 verses) are devoted to Gideon and four chapters (96 verses) to Samson."

In response to their infidelity in relation to Yahweh, the Israelites became the subjects of oppression by the Midianites. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham by Keturah. We read: "Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah."<sup>37</sup> Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was a Midianite priest.<sup>38</sup> But this family relationship did not create friendly relationships between the two peoples.

And, evidently, the Midianites had abandoned their original belief in Yahweh and had given themselves to idol worship, which is what Israel had done also at this time.

*The Tyndale Commentary*, commenting on Midian, explains: "A semi-nomadic group, they were joined in their raids of Israel by *the Amalekites*, who occupied the area to the south of Judah, and *the children of the east*, a nomadic group from the Syrian desert. A new 'secret weapon' was employed in these forays in the use of the *camel*, and in this chapter there is the first documentation of the large-scale use of this animal in a military campaign. It gave the Midianites and their allies the immense advantage of a speedy, long-range fighting force and it is clear that the use of this angular and imposing beast struck terror in the hearts of the Israelites. The extent of these raids can be observed with the aid of an atlas: the tribe of Manasseh was principally affected, but the territories of Asher, Zebulun, Naphtali and Ephraim were also involved (6:35; 8:1), and penetration was made as far as Gaza, at the southern end of Philistia."

<sup>37</sup> Gen. 25:1,2

<sup>38</sup> See Ex. 2:15-21.

The Midianites planned their raids into Israel at the times when they would be most advantageous: when the Israelites harvested their crops. But they did more than just help themselves to the bounty of the harvest; they oppressed the people to the point where they felt they were no longer safe in the cities and villages. This made the bulk of the population hide in caves. The Hebrew word used is *minharah*, “a cavern.” This is the only place in Scripture where this word is found.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “Palestine is a mountainous country, and, from the limestone character of its rocks, abounds in caverns, natural and artificial. ... Many of these caves are very large, capable of holding 4,000 people. And there is reason to conclude that they were formed for the use of the living, and not of the dead. ... At the period of their national history to which this chapter refers, the Israelites appear greatly to have increased the number of these mountain grottoes, and to have become, at least in the eastern parts of Judea, to so great an extent a Troglodyte people, that the remembrance of this means of safety was never forgotten; and in times of public panic they resorted to their subterranean hiding places (1 Sam 13:6).”

A modern equivalent would be what the British did during the “Battle of Britain” when the Nazi air force bombarded London and the people hid in the railway stations of the “underground.”

The NIV reads v.4: “They camped on the land and ruined the crops.” This probably means that they helped themselves to Israel’s harvest when it was gathered in, not leaving any food for the Israelites to eat. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “Wandering hordes of Midianites, Amalekites, and Ishmaelites came, in the times of harvest and autumn, and carried away their crops, their fruit, and their cattle. And they appear to have come early, encamped in the plains, and watched the crops till they were ready to be carried off.”

*The Tyndale Commentary* explains: “The cumulative effect of these raids would be considerable: all agriculture would be affected and the plundering of Israel’s herds, crops and fruits would make for long, lean winters. Moreover, it was unsafe to dwell in open villages or even towns, the natural targets of an attacker seeking supplies or plunder; so the Israelites were forced into a primitive existence in the inaccessible mountainous regions.”

***(ii) The prophetic condemnation (6:7-10)***

***7 When the Israelites cried to the Lord because of Midian,  
8 he sent them a prophet, who said, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.  
9 I snatched you from the power of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them from before you and gave you their land.  
10 I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me."***

It was this Midianite oppression that brought Israel on its knees in prayer, crying out to God, whom they had abandoned.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments on this “repentance”: The children of Israel appear to have turned to the Lord in their extremity as a last resort, which hardly indicates a vital religious faith. The reason for their misfortune was brought home to them by an unnamed prophet whose words were similar to those of the angel of the Lord at Bochim (2:1ff).”

God's message to Israel by mouth of the anonymous prophet was a lesson in history. God reminded the people of their salvation from Egyptian slavery. At this time the exodus was ancient history to these people. They had already lived in the Promised Land for several centuries. Most people have a tendency to forget their history, which means more than a loss of a cultural heritage; it causes a lack of understanding of the present. People who forget their history often consider God to be irrelevant. He may have had meaning for their ancestors, but not for them in modern day life. Life without God makes life meaningless.

***(iii) The call of Gideon (6:11-24)***

***11 The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites.***

***12 When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."***

***13 "But sir," Gideon replied, "if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."***

***14 The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"***

***15 "But Lord," Gideon asked, "how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."***

***16 The Lord answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."***

***17 Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me."***

***18 Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you." And the Lord said, "I will wait until you return."***

***19 Gideon went in, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak.***

***20 The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And Gideon did so.***

***21 With the tip of the staff that was in his hand, the angel of the Lord touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the Lord disappeared.***

***22 When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the Lord, he exclaimed, "Ah, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!"***

***23 But the Lord said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."***

***24 So Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it The Lord is Peace. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.***

We read that the angel of the Lord came and sat down under an oak tree that belonged to Gideon's father, while Gideon was secretly threshing out some wheat to keep it from Midianite raiders. Although Gideon must have considered him to be a stranger, he did not seem to be concerned about his coming. Evidently, the stranger must have looked like an Israelite to him.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments on Gideon's secret activities: "Some extent of the influence of the Midianite raids can be gained by the reference to Gideon beating out wheat in the *winepress*, which was normally a hollow carved out of the rock with a channel connecting it to a lower trough. The grapes were placed in this depression and trodden out by foot, the juice running down into the lower receptacle. Threshing was normally carried out with a threshing-sledge by oxen, in an exposed place so that the wind could carry away the chaff, but Gideon was improvising in the winepress, away from the sight of marauding bands. The same reference indicates the smallness of the harvest. It could be beaten out with a rod or staff in a confined place."

The angel of the Lord addresses Gideon as "mighty warrior." This is the translation of the Hebrew words *gibbowr chayil*. God calls Gideon a hero. The word *gibbowr* is first used for the *Nephilim*, mentioned in the pre-flood period of our planet. They were referred to as "the heroes of old, men of renown."<sup>39</sup> They may have been giants, in the physical sense of the word.

The words "The Lord is with you" may have been a common greeting in Israel in Gideon's lifetime. In some parts of Germany, for instance, the common greeting is "God greets you!"<sup>40</sup> If that was the case among the Israelites, Gideon's answer suggests that this greeting ought no longer to be used, since there was no evidence of God's presence. Gideon does not comment at this point on the predicate "mighty warrior."

Gideon seems to be saying that God may have been present in Israel in the past, but He certainly was not in the present, otherwise the Midianite oppression would not have caused the famine which made the people suffer. Gideon was familiar with the historical evidence of God's presence, but to him this was ancient history.

It is obvious that Gideon considered his visitor to be a common Israelite. He had no idea that he was speaking to the angel of the Lord, the Second Person of the Trinity.

The angel of the Lord makes no effort to prove Who He is; He simply gives Gideon His marching orders. The Hebrew reads literally: "Go in this your might." The Hebrew word used is *koach*, meaning "vigor," or "strength." The command to go is given as a typical Hebrew idiom in the form of a question: "Am I not sending you?"

At this point Gideon must have understood that it was a divine being who was giving the orders. That did not mean that Gideon obeyed immediately without any reservations. There may have been true humility in his reaction: "Who am I that God would choose me for such a task?"

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "The command and the promise made Gideon aware of the real character of his visitor; and yet, like Moses, from a sense of humility, or a shrinking at the magnitude of the undertaking, he excused himself from entering on the enterprise. And even though assured that, with the divine aid, he would overcome the Midianites as easily as if they were but one man, he still hesitates, and wishes to be better assured that the mission was really from God. He resembles Moses also in the desire for a sign; and in both cases it was the rarity of revelations in such periods of general corruption that made them so desirous of having the fullest conviction of being addressed by a heavenly messenger. The request was reasonable, and it was graciously granted."

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on Gideon's answer: "The least fit are usually the most forward, the most fit the most backward, to undertake great offices (...Judges 9:8-15). True humility is the usual companion of true greatness (see ... 2 Corinthians 2:16; 3:5).

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<sup>39</sup> Gen. 6:4

<sup>40</sup> "Gruesst Gott!"

*The Tyndale Commentary* states: “The words may indicate his natural humility, but may also be based on the hard facts of experience. Gideon knew just how poor his father was at this time of crisis. The second assurance of the Lord (16) seems to have had a greater effect upon Gideon. In passing it should be observed that there are timeless assurances in verses 14 and 16 for all those who are called to the word of the Lord. There is might in the consciousness of the Lord’s commission (14); there is a greater might in the consciousness of divine companionship (16). *Have I not sent thee?* and *Surely I will be with thee* have their New Testament parallel in Matthew 28:19, 20 and they have been a source of strength and inspiration to many who, like Gideon, have been called to the Lord’s service.”

When Gideon answers the Lord’s call, he uses the Hebrew word Adonai, (Lord) which is used exclusively to address God. The Jews used it because they did not dare to use the word Yahweh, fearing that they could sin by using the Name in vain, which would constitute a sin against the second commandment.<sup>41</sup>

Although Gideon must by now have been aware of the fact that the person who addressed him was no ordinary human being, he asked for a sign. This may not have been to prove the reality of the divine presence as the reliability of his own senses. He may have wondered if he was dreaming. He asks the divine person to wait for him to prepare a sacrifice.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “Gideon was not fully aware of the identity of the One who was commissioning him, but he did realize that there was something unique about him, hence his request for a sign and his offering of a *present* (Heb. *minhâ*), a word which was often used of the freewill offering in Israel’s sacrificial system, but was also used of the tribute brought to a king or a superior ... The leisureliness of the East is reflected in the time it must have taken to prepare such a meal (cf. Gen 18:6ff.). The ephah of flour (19), alone weighed between 34 and 45 pounds, which, in a time of scarcity, was a not inconsiderable gift.”

Having prepared a complete meal consisting of a young goat and unleavened bread, Gideon brought it to the divine being. He is told to put it all on a certain rock and pour the broth over it, soaking it to the point where it could no longer be used as a burnt offering. At that point the angel of the Lord touched the offering with His staff and makes it go up in flames, disappearing Himself at the same time.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The food was disposed of in accordance with the instructions of the angel of the Lord (20), the rock upon which the food was placed being probably a part of the winepress itself. It has been suggested that it was an ancient rock altar with cup-shaped hollows for receiving libations; but such an altar, while well known in antiquity, is not necessarily indicated. It was when the meal was consumed with fire at the touch of the angel’s rod, followed immediately by the disappearance of the angel himself (21), that Gideon realized with terror the nature of his heavenly visitor (22). It was widely believed in Israel that no man could see God face to face and live (Gen. 16:13; 32:30; Exod. 20:19; 33:20; Judg. 13:22; Isa. 6:5). Gideon, assured that no harm would befall him, immediately erected an altar, the name of which, *The Lord is peace* (RSV), reflected the opening words of the divine promise. That altar, which doubtless became a center of interest and worship following the sweeping victory of Gideon, still existed in the editor’s day, which indicates a considerable lapse of time, otherwise there would be no point in the observation.”

One of the amazing features in the story is the naming of the altar Gideon built to worship at the place of the divine revelation: *Yahweh Shalom*, “God is Peace.” That name seems to be in total opposition to the instructions received to go to war against the Midianites.

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<sup>41</sup> See Ex. 20:7

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "The words Yahweh-shaalowm signify The Lord is my peace, or The peace of Yahweh; and this name he gave the altar, in reference to what God had said, Judg 6:23, Peace be unto thee, *shaalowm l'kaa*, 'Peace to thee.' which implied, not only a wish, but a prediction of the prosperous issue of the enterprise in which he was about to engage. It is likely that this is the altar which is mentioned in Judg 6:26, and is spoken of here merely by anticipation."

***(iv) Gideon's first assignment (6:25-32)***

***25 That same night the Lord said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.***

***26 Then build a proper kind of altar to the Lord your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering."***

***27 So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the men of the town, he did it at night rather than in the daytime.***

***28 In the morning when the men of the town got up, there was Baal's altar, demolished, with the Asherah pole beside it cut down and the second bull sacrificed on the newly built altar!***

***29 They asked each other, "Who did this?" When they carefully investigated, they were told, "Gideon son of Joash did it."***

***30 The men of the town demanded of Joash, "Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it."***

***31 But Joash replied to the hostile crowd around him, "Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar."***

***32 So that day they called Gideon "Jerub-Baal," saying, "Let Baal contend with him," because he broke down Baal's altar.***

Gideon's preliminary task, the one given to him before his assignment to rid Israel of the Midianite yoke, was to clean up at home. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The man who was to throw off the yoke of Midian and bring his people back to a true faith in the Lord must first of all set things right in his own home. There are strange inconsistencies in the narrative which reflect the syncretistic tendencies of the age and suggest strongly that, for Joash, Yahweh was regarded as one of the Baal gods. His own name is compounded with the name of Yahweh (lit. 'Yahweh has given') but the alternative name of his son, Jerubbaal (meaning 'may Baal give increase'), incorporates the name of Baal. Later on the name was deliberately emended to Jerubbesheth (2 Sam. 11:21), the Hebrew word *bosehth*, meaning 'shame,' being substituted for Baal, the Canaanite god whose worship had led Israel astray ... The sacred oak is contrasted with the Asherah ... a wooden pillar representing the sacred tree, which was regularly associated with the Canaanite cultus, and the altar which Gideon built contrasts with the Baal altar of his father. Even the reference to the bull which Gideon employed and then sacrificed may fit into the pattern, for the bull was the sacred animal of the fertility cults. El himself, the head of the Canaanite pantheon, was often distinguished by the epithet 'Bull.' This particular animal may already have been designated for sacrifice to Baal."

Bible scholars have argued about "the second bull" which Gideon was to take and sacrifice.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “There are two ways of understanding the verse. One, that of the A.V., supposes that only one bullock is spoken of, and that ‘*the young bullock*’ belonging to Joash is further described as ‘even the second bullock of seven years old;’ to which it is objected that a bullock of seven years old is not ‘a young bullock,’ ‘the bullock of an *ox*,’ as the Hebrew phrase is, and that there is no explanation of the meaning of ‘the second bullock;’ and that the Hebrew manifestly describes two bullocks:

- (1) Joash’s young bullock, and
- (2) the bullock of seven years old.

The other supposes two bullocks, and instead ‘of’ has the more natural rendering ‘and.’ The only objection to this, by far the most natural rendering, is that Gideon is not told what to do with the first bullock. But it is a simple explanation that the two bullocks were used in the laborious work of demolishing the altar of Baal, and removing the earth and the stone to build the altar of the Lord, and that when the work was finished one of the bullocks — the seven-year-old — was sacrificed.”

A footnote in the NIV gives the alternate reading: “Take a full-grown, mature bull from your father’s herd,” which would leave it up to Gideon to make his own choice. It makes no difference in the importance of Gideon’s act as to whether there were two bulls or one.

The bull chosen was probably the one set aside as a sacrifice to Baal. There was at his father’s house an altar dedicated to Baal and a pole, or tree devoted to Asherah. All of these had to be claimed for the worship of Yahweh.

Gideon was understandably afraid of what the public, including his own father, would do to him if he obeyed God’s orders in broad daylight. He might not even be able to carry out the whole task if the people saw what he was doing. Both fear and wisdom made him decide to do the task in the dark. Since it involved more labor than he would be able to get done alone, he took ten servants with him to help him. These slaves would obey him without asking questions.

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests that two bullocks were sacrificed. We read: “It appears that the second bullock was offered, because it was just seven years old, Judg 6:25, being calved about the time that the Midianitish oppression began; and it was now to be slain to indicate that their slavery should end with its life. The young bullock, Judg 6:25, is supposed to have been offered for a peace-offering; the bullock of seven years old, for a burnt-offering.”

When the day dawns and the people awake, they see Baal’s altar and the Asherah pole destroyed and one of the bulls, dedicated to the idol, sacrificed on another altar. An investigation as to who was the author of this desecration, points the finger at Gideon. We don’t read how Gideon was identified; it is probable that some of Gideon’s ten slaves had talked. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “A secret known to ten men is no secret.”

The Baal worshippers gathered at Gideon’s home and demanded that Joash brings out his son to be executed for his crime. Whether Joash was really a secret worshipper of Yahweh, or whether he took the Lord’s side because of the danger to his son’s life, is not clear. But he shows considerable courage in opposing the angry crowd of idol worshippers and telling them that Baal’s reaction to the supposed insult ought to show whether he really had any power or not.

It may have been parental affection that brought Joash under Yahweh’s protection. It takes more than human courage to stand up against an angry crowd. *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* suggests that Joash may have been “one of the chief men of the city,” which would add power to his threat that anyone seeking the death of his son in the name of Baal, would be in danger of being condemned to death himself. The Hebrew text reads literally: “If he be a god, let him plead for himself, because [one] has cast down his altar.” The Hebrew verb used is *riyb*,

meaning “to quarrel.” We find it in the verse: “But the herdsmen of Gerar *quarreled* with Isaac’s herdsmen and said, ‘The water is ours!’ So he named the well Esek, because they disputed with him.”<sup>42</sup>

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “If Baal was a real god it was an insult worthy of death to intervene on his behalf (31); a god who was really God could vindicate himself, without the necessity for human interference. If this advice had been followed by the devotees of the world’s religions, not excepting many who claimed to be Christians, the world would have been spared a great deal of torture, bloodshed and untold misery. Joash’s defense of his son was possibly the first step in his own spiritual rehabilitation.”

The incident gave Gideon the nickname “Jerub-Baal,” meaning “let Baal content with him.” *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The name *Jerubbaal* appears as *Jerubbesheth*; *besbeth* or *bosheth*, meaning *shame*, i.e. a shameful idol, being substituted for Baal, as in the name *Ishbosheth*, for *Eshbaal* (see ... 2 Samuel 2:8; ... 1 Chronicles 8:33).”

**(v) Gideon’s response to the Midianite invasion (6:33-35)**

**33 Now all the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the Valley of Jezreel.**

**34 Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him.**

**35 He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, calling them to arms, and also into Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, so that they too went up to meet them.**

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments on Gideon’s reaction to the next Midianite invasion: “For eight year in succession they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the valley of Jezreel at the eastern end of Esdraelon, which was not only a particularly fertile area, but also provided a convenient point for raids on the surrounding areas. It is known that Gideon’s brothers were slain at Tabor, in this area (8:18), but it is by no means certain that it was on this particular occasion. Gideon became a typical, charismatic judge when *the Spirit of the Lord came upon him* (34). The verb is suggestive, meaning ‘to clothe with’ (cf. RV mg): ‘the Spirit of the Lord clothed itself with Gideon’ betokening complete possession (cf. 1 Chr. 12:18; 2 Chr. 24:20, where the same verb occurs ...). [One Bible scholar] observes, ‘The spirit of the Lord became incarnate in Gideon, who then became the extension of the Lord.’ Thus equipped, Gideon was ready for the immense task that awaited him and the summons went out to the tribes (35). The fact that the men of *Abiezer*, Gideon’s home town, were the first to respond, must have been an encouragement to him and shows that his earlier resolute action had caused no lasting rift. *Manasseh*, his own tribe, likewise rallied to his support, quickly followed by representatives from Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, ... although the full contingents from these tribes may not have participated in the battle until after the initial success (cf. 7:23). The omission of Ephraim, the most powerful of the tribes, may reveal the timidity of Gideon even at this stage. Perhaps he feared the reaction of the Ephraimite rulers if he, a member of a less powerful tribe, should be presumptuous enough to set himself up as a leader. In view of the sequel (7:24; cf. 8:1ff.) the failure to summon the Ephraimites was significant.”

The trumpet Gideon blew is called a *shophar*, which was probably a ram’s horn. Blowing a *shophar* was done as a convocation for gathering in a public meeting.

<sup>42</sup> Gen. 26:20

The first one to respond was the clan of Abiezer, which was Gideon's own family. Members of that family were then sent to the tribes of Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, which were the closest. They all lived in the territory surrounding the Sea of Galilee.

**(vi) *The sign of the fleece (6:36-40)***

**36 Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—  
37 look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said."  
38 And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew — a bowlful of water.  
39 Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew."  
40 That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.**

Strangely enough, it was when a rather large group responded to his call to arms that Gideon began to have doubts about his own call. Evidently, he never considered himself to be the right person for the task to which God had called him.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments on Gideon's doubts: "Gideon's faith was not constant; it knew moments of uncertainty as well as heights of greatness. The patience of the Lord is remarkably shown in this section, in which Gideon twice sought confirmation of the challenge presented to him. The Lord graciously accommodated himself to Gideon's requests, understanding fully the frailty of human nature (cf. Ps. 103:14). The reason for the change in detail of the sign was probably Gideon's realization that the fleece would absorb a heavy dew much more readily than the rock of the threshing-floor and would therefore dry much less quickly when the sun arose. The reverse would be the greater miracle and Gideon asked for this, conscious that he was coming very close to angering God by his lack of trust and yet searching desperately for confirmation of the divine promise. This was readily forthcoming, for the Lord deals more tenderly and graciously with his children than an earthly father."

The reason for Gideon's desire for confirmation of his call was probably more psychological than spiritual. Like his fellowmen, he wished to be delivered from the oppression by the Midianites. And although he did not consider himself to be the right person to take the lead, he did want to shake off the heavy Midianite yoke. So he asked God to give him a sign.

"Putting out a fleece" has become an expression for seeking confirmation about God's call. The Hebrew word used is *gazzah*, which is only found in Scripture in this chapter of the Book of Judges. The fleece was probably the wool gathered from the recent sheering of a sheep, which had not yet been pulled apart, washed and spun into yarn. It could also have been the whole skin of a sheep that had recently been slaughtered.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "It is difficult to guess what led to this somewhat quaint sign which Gideon asked. Possibly the dews were usually heavy upon the hill of Gilead (... Judges 7:3) where Gideon was encamped, as they seem to have been on Mount Gilboa (... 2 Samuel 1:21) and on Hermon (... Psalm 133:3), and sheep-skins may have been a common protection against the cold nights, as in Afghanistan; and he may have noticed how often in the morning both the skin that covered him, and the ground around, was wet with the heavy dew.

And this may have suggested the double test, by which his faith was, through God's condescending mercy, confirmed and established."

**(vii) *Strange generalship (7:1-8)***

**7** *Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh.*

**2** *The Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.*

**4** *But the Lord said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go."*

**5** *So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the Lord told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink."*

**6** *Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.*

**7** *The Lord said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place."*

**8** *So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others. Now the camp of Midian lay below him in the valley.*

Although Gideon had successfully gathered a group of men to oppose the Midianite army, their number was pitiful in comparison with the overwhelming power of the enemy. A human reaction in this situation would have been: "We don't have enough!" God's reaction was "You have too many!" King Saul's son, Jonathan, understood that one man with God is a majority in any situation. That made him say to his arm bearer: "Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few."<sup>43</sup>

It is interesting that, at this point, Gideon is called by his nickname Jerub-Baal, (let Baal contend with him), as if to emphasize that the battle is not between flesh and blood but that it is a spiritual battle between God and Satan.

According to *The Tyndale Commentary*, the distance between the Midianites and the Israelites must have been approximately 5 miles.

In order to reduce the number of Israeli combatants, God tells Gideon to allow those "who trembles with fear" to go home. This sounds strange to us, not because we assume that anyone fighting in a war would be a hero, but because it takes more courage to admit fear than to fake bravery. Before entering Canaan, Moses gave these instructions to the Israelite fighting men: "When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you. When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army. He shall say: 'Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before them. For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to

<sup>43</sup> I Sam. 14:6

give you victory.’ The officers shall say to the army: ‘Has anyone built a new house and not dedicated it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else may dedicate it. Has anyone planted a vineyard and not begun to enjoy it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else enjoy it. Has anyone become pledged to a woman and not married her? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else marry her.’ Then the officers shall add, ‘Is any man afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his brothers will not become disheartened too.’”<sup>44</sup> Gideon was given the same instruction God had given to Moses several centuries earlier.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “Before the engagement in the conflict Gideon was commanded to reduce his army from 32,000 men to a paltry 300, the number appearing the more insignificant in view of the strength of the opposing army (described in hyperbolic language in verse 12). The point is often stressed in the Old Testament that mere numbers themselves are no guarantee of success; it is the presence of the Lord that ensures victory and his is able to work through a handful of dedicated men. The glory of that victory was to be manifestly the Lord’s, not men’s.”

As it turned out, fear of the enemy reduced Gideon’s army by two-thirds, but this was still not enough in the Lord’s sight.

The way the next reduction was determined was a very strange one. It seems to have been a random way of determining who should go and who should stay. It had nothing to do with courage. Ten thousand men were taken to a river or a brook and told to drink. Some would drink by putting their mouths to the water and drink; others would scoop up the water in their hand and drink.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments on the way the selection was made: “Whilst the first stage in the reduction of the number was concerned with the morale of the army, the reason for the second step is not immediately apparent, as is witnessed by the diverse explanation of commentators. It may be that we are not to look for any explanation other than the desire to reduce the number by one means or another. However, it may be that the second test placed a premium upon alertness and the display of a soldierly spirit that took care not to be caught off-guard. Those who were rejected were those who, casting caution to the winds, dropped to their knees to drink. Those who were retained were those who lapped *as a dog laps*, a description that has perplexed many. Obviously it cannot mean that the 300 used their tongues to lap up the water from the spring, since this would involve falling upon their knees like the others and, in any case, the use of the hand is specifically indicated (6). The best explanation appears to be that the 300 used their hands as a dog uses its tongue to scoop up the water while they remained on their feet, watchful and prepared for any emergency. Such was the confidence in victory that the rejected 9,700 were allowed to return home!”

The Hebrew text of v.8 reads literally: “So the people took in their hand victuals and all their trumpets: and [the rest of] Israel he sent every man unto his tent, and retained those three hundred men: Midian was beneath him in the valley.” We assume that in that way everyone who remained came in possession of a trumpet. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “It is almost certain that the passage ought to be rendered, “And they took the victuals of the people in their hands, and their trumpets,” *i.e.* the three hundred took or borrowed what provisions they needed for a few days, and the trumpets, which were to play an important part in the stratagem, from the people who were about to return to their homes.”

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<sup>44</sup> Deut. 20:1-8

**(viii) Confirmation of victory (7:9-15)**

**9 During that night the Lord said to Gideon, "Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands.**

**10 If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah**

**11 and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp." So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp.**

**12 The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.**

**13 Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. "I had a dream," he was saying. "A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed."**

**14 His friend responded, "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands."**

**15 When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped God. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, "Get up! The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands."**

God spoke again to Gideon during the night. It may have been difficult for Gideon to sleep after having gone through a day of severe testing of his faith. After the enthusiastic response by many to his call to arms, he was left with a handful of men, facing an overwhelming enemy majority. At that point God repeated the assurance that He would accompany Gideon and his men and He issued the order to attack.

God knew, however, how Gideon felt and, without any reproach, He provided him with another encouragement by making him hear how the enemy felt. They were more afraid of Gideon than he was of them! The way God went overboard to encourage Gideon was full of kindness. There was no reproach for a lack of faith as we find elsewhere in Scripture.<sup>45</sup>

In order to find this out Gideon is told to sneak into the enemy camp in the dark with his servant Purah. Actually, Gideon did not have to venture far into the camp. He and Purah probably only went as far as the tents of the guards.

The Midianite army is hyperbolically described as a locust plague and the number of camels is "as the sand by the seaside for multitude." The phrase may describe Gideon's impression as he approached the enemy camp.

It may have been at the tent of a camp guard that Gideon and Purah overheard the man telling his roommate the story of his dream. The fact that a guard who was supposed to be awake and alert tells his dream to another guard, may have been another encouragement to Gideon. The Midianites were so confident of their power and victory that they had become less alert.

In his dream the Midianite soldier saw "a round loaf of barley bread" rolling down and striking a tent, which collapse at the impacts. The Hebrew word used to describe the bread is *tseluwl*, which is only used in Scripture in this verse.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "Every dream was believed to be capable of interpretation, although this was, of course, the point where difficulties arose. It is generally maintained that the *cake of barley bread* (13) represented the poor yeoman farmer of Israel, whose staple crop was barley, whilst the *tent* was the natural symbol for a nomadic community

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<sup>45</sup> See Mark 16:14.

like the Midianites.” It was the interpretation of the dream by the dreamer’s mate that gave Gideon the final assurance about God’s call to attack.

Gideon’s reaction to hearing the dream was to worship God. The Hebrew verb used is *shachah*, which literally means “to bow down.” We find the same verb used in Abraham’s reaction to the visit of the angels. We read: “Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and *bowed low* to the ground.”<sup>46</sup> Being in the position in which he was, crouched low to the ground beside the tent, it probably means that Gideon said a silent prayer of praise, not that he physically bowed.

Gideon must have told his men about the dream and repeated the Midianite soldier’s words “the sword of Gideon,” for when the Israelites shout the battle cry, which they were told, was “for the Lord and for Gideon,” they actually shouted: “a sword for the Lord and for Gideon!”

***(ix) The rout of the Midianites (7:16-22)***

***16 Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside.***

***17 "Watch me," he told them. "Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do.***

***18 When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, 'For the Lord and for Gideon.'***

***19 Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard. They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands.***

***20 The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!"***

***21 While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled.***

***22 When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. The army fled to Beth Shittah toward Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath.***

The way Gideon and his army of three hundred men routed the Midianites is a striking example of God’s sense of humor. The Midianite army was large and well armed and equipped with camels, which made them fast and mobile. Gideon’s army consisted of three hundred men outfitted with toys: ram’s horns and “flashlights.” Under the cover of darkness, “at the beginning of the middle watch,” which, according to *Barnes’ Notes*, “would be about eleven o’clock at night,” they surrounded the enemy camp.

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on the time of night at which the attack took place: “The ancient Israelites divided the night into three watches of four hours each, from sunset to sunrise, *i.e.* from six p.m. to six a.m. The first watch, from six to ten, is not mentioned in the Old Testament; but we have the *middle* watch mentioned here (from ten to two), and the *morning watch* (from two till six): ... Exodus 14:24 and ... 1 Samuel 11:11. According to this, Gideon’s attack would have taken place soon after ten p.m., or towards eleven, the time when the sleep

<sup>46</sup> Gen. 18:2

would be the deepest, the watchmen of the first watch having lately fallen into their first sleep. The later Israelites adopted the Roman division of the night into four watches (... Matthew 14:25; ... Mark 6:48; cf. ... Luke 12:38; ... Mark 13:35).”

Gideon told his men to do as he would do, which was blow the ram’s horn and smash the jars in which the torches were burning. This would wake up the Midianites and give the impression that they were surrounded by a large army. Being suddenly roused from their sleep, they were unable to judge the situation correctly and they supposed that the Israelites were among them. So they pulled their swords and began killing, what they thought was the enemy. In reality they killed their fellowmen. Gideon’s army never moved. They stood where they were and just made noise.

Whether the Midianites could understand what the Israelites shouted, is not clear. The cry “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” was more meant for the Israelites than for the Midianites. The sword of the Lord, literally in Hebrew: *chereb la-Yahweh* was, actually, the Midianites’ own sword which they used on each other. Those that survived fled “to Beth Shittah toward Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath.” These place names appear nowhere else in Scripture, except for Abel Meholah.<sup>47</sup> It probably means that they crossed the Jordan, fleeing back to their homeland.

***(x) Reinforcements for Gideon (7:23-25)***

***23 Israelites from Naphtali, Asher and all Manasseh were called out, and they pursued the Midianites.***

***24 Gideon sent messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters of the Jordan ahead of them as far as Beth Barah." So all the men of Ephraim were called out and they took the waters of the Jordan as far as Beth Barah.***

***25 They also captured two of the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued the Midianites and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon, who was by the Jordan.***

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “No doubt the inhabitants of the hill-country to the north and south of the valley of Jezreel were keeping a close watch on the situation, so it would not take long to bring them into action following the rout of the Midianites. The initial summons (6:35) had gone to the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali. Now it appears that a fresh call for assistance was issued. Those who had formerly been so fearful would take courage on hearing of Gideon’s success and it is probably that most of the members of his augmented army were among the original 32,000. Gideon now found the necessary confidence to approach the Ephraimites, whose tribal position south of Manasseh would enable them to intercept the remnants of the fleeing Midianite army. Specific instructions were given to secure the fords.”

There seems to be a problem of timing in the routing of the Midianites and the call upon the above mentioned tribes to secure the fording places of the Jordan in order to cut off the Midianite retreat. It would take time to send messengers to Ephraim and call them into action. It may have been that the messengers did not have to travel far. The mountain tribes’ people in Papua, Indonesia, were we worked as missionaries, had a way to communicate by shouting from

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<sup>47</sup> I Kings 19:16

mountain to mountain and pass on messages over a long distance in a very short time. It was a system of communication similar to the “yodel” practiced in the Swiss and Austrian Alps.

The Ephraimites were able to capture two of the Midianite kings, Oreb and Zeeb, whom they killed. The places at which the two were executed were given the names of the victims: “the rock of Oreb,” and “the winepress of Zeeb.” Both names have a specific meaning; Oreb means “raven” and Zeeb means “wolf.”

***(xi) Resentment and appeasement (8:1-3)***

***1 Now the Ephraimites asked Gideon, "Why have you treated us like this? Why didn't you call us when you went to fight Midian?" And they criticized him sharply.***

***2 But he answered them, "What have I accomplished compared to you? Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer?"***

***3 God gave Oreb and Zeeb, the Midianite leaders, into your hands. What was I able to do compared to you?" At this, their resentment against him subsided.***

These verses reveal that there must have been some tension among the tribes of Israel regarding who was the most important. They also show some of Gideon’s diplomatic skills.

The Ephraimites seemed to have had a problem with pride. We read that they argued, at a later date, in the same way with Jephthah, when they were left out of the campaign against the Ammonites. We read: “The men of Ephraim called out their forces, crossed over to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, ‘Why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We’re going to burn down your house over your head.’”<sup>48</sup>

Gideon’s answer to the Ephraimites may have been a common proverb. It contains also a reference to the Levitical law that forbade a landowner to go over his harvest field a second time after gathering in the crop. We read: “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God.”<sup>49</sup>

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “He said ... What have I done now in comparison of you? His mild and truly modest answer breathes the spirit of a great as well as good man, who was calm, collected, and self-possessed in the midst of most exciting scenes. It succeeded in throwing oil on the troubled waters (Prov 16:1); and no wonder, because in the height of generous self-denial it ascribes to his querulous brethren a greater share of merit and glory than belonged to himself (1 Cor 13:4; Phil 2:3).”

There is also a hidden sting in Gideon’s words. In quoting the law, he compares the Ephraimites to “the poor and the alien.” But the Ephraimites may have missed that.

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “Gideon’s character comes out splendidly in this answer. Humble and unassuming (... Judges 6:15, 36 ...), and indisposed to glory, he was willing to give the Ephraimites full credit for their share in the great victory; prudent, and a lover of his country, he saw the immense importance of union among themselves, and the danger of intestine divisions and discord, and so at once met Ephraim’s taunts by the soft answer which turneth away wrath (... Proverbs 15:1). The insertion of the word *grapes*, which is not in the Hebrew, rather spoils the proverb. It would run better, the gleanings of Ephraim is better than the

<sup>48</sup> Judg. 12:1

<sup>49</sup> Lev. 19:9,10

vintage of Abiezer. The word *vintage* sufficiently shows that the *gleaning* meant was a gleaning of grapes. Ephraim, who came in at the end of the fight, like the gleaner when the vintage is finished, had got more glory by the capture of Oreb and Zeeb than the Manassites, who had gone through the whole campaign. The passage above referred to in Isaiah (... Isaiah 10:25) implies that a great slaughter of the Midianites took place at the rock of Oreb.”

Ultimately, Gideon suggests that the Ephraimites give glory to God instead of seeking glory for themselves. It was God who gave Oreb and Zeeb, the Midianite leaders, into their hands. In saying this, he gives God the glory for his own victory also.

***(xii) The refusal of hospitality (8:4-9)***

***4 Gideon and his three hundred men, exhausted yet keeping up the pursuit, came to the Jordan and crossed it.***

***5 He said to the men of Succoth, "Give my troops some bread; they are worn out, and I am still pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian."***

***6 But the officials of Succoth said, "Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your troops?"***

***7 Then Gideon replied, "Just for that, when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will tear your flesh with desert thorns and briers."***

***8 From there he went up to Peniel and made the same request of them, but they answered as the men of Succoth had.***

***9 So he said to the men of Peniel, "When I return in triumph, I will tear down this tower."***

There seems to be another problem of chronology here. *The Tyndale Commentary*, comments on this, stating: “It is probable that 8:1-3 are out of chronological order in their present position, having been set there following the recording of Ephraim’s intervention in 7:24, 25. The adventures of the original 300 are now resumed. Some indication of the disorderliness of the precipitate flight of the Midianites can be gained by the reference to the Israelite forces taking part in the mopping-up operations. Gideon appears to have made no attempt to integrate his force with that of the men of Naphtali, Asher and Manasseh (7:23). The lack of an effective rearguard action by the Midianites allowed his puny force to forge ahead as fast as possible, whilst the hastily assembled, allied supporting force made its own way in pursuit of the widely separated stragglers.”

Succoth was in the territory of Gad. Its name had been given to it by Jacob when he returned from his stay with his uncle Laban and met Esau after many years. We read: “Jacob, however, went to Succoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Succoth.”<sup>50</sup> The Gadites of Succoth, evidently, thought that the Midianites could return at a later date and chastise them for succoring Gideon. They did not believe the miracle that God had wrought by defeating the large army of Midianites by a small group of Israelites. They thought that the Midianites would return and punish them severely for helping Gideon and his army.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Nothing could be more selfish, cowardly, and unpatriotic, than the conduct of the chief men of Succoth. Instead of aiding Gideon in his gallant enterprise for the deliverance of his country, they refused even food to his weary followers, for fear of the possibility of incurring the anger of the Midianites in case Gideon should fail. Their

<sup>50</sup> Gen. 33:17

conduct and that of the men of Penuel is perhaps one among many indications how little real union there was between the tribes on the opposite sides of the Jordan (see ... Judges 5:16, 17).”

*The Tyndale Commentary* adds: “The reply of the officials of Succoth (6) showed that they gave Gideon’s minute peasant-army little chance of capturing the leaders of an elusive and still numerous semi-nomadic group operating in conditions favorable to them. The recollection of at least seven years’ domination was not dimmed by what could prove to be a passing victory. This unpatriotic action indicates the breakdown of the tribal unity which led to the virtual separation of the eastern tribes from their brethren west of Jordan.”

Gideon was confident that his little army would capture the Midianite leaders Zebah and Zalmunna and so he promised the leaders of Succoth a corporal punishment upon his victorious return.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* describes this punishment as: “A cruel torture, to which captives were often subjected in ancient times, by having thorns and briars placed on their naked bodies, and pressed down by sledges, or heavy implements of husbandry being dragged over them.” It seems, however, that “sledges, or heavy implements of husbandry” dragged over a body would cause instant death, not merely physical injury.

Bible scholars do not agree on the actual meaning of Gideon’s threat.

Traveling on, Gideon made the same request for food for his hungry and exhausted army to the inhabitants of Penuel, which lay about 5 miles east of Succoth, and he received the same answer. Penuel had a watch tower from which watchmen could survey the surrounding area and see if an enemy was approaching their city. Gideon promised to tear down the tower of Penuel, which would leave the inhabitants open to sudden attacks.

### ***(xiii) The final rout of the Midianites (8:10-12)***

***10 Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with a force of about fifteen thousand men, all that were left of the armies of the eastern peoples; a hundred and twenty thousand swordsmen had fallen.***

***11 Gideon went up by the route of the nomads east of Nobah and Jogbehah and fell upon the unsuspecting army.***

***12 Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian, fled, but he pursued them and captured them, routing their entire army.***

Gideon must have received some provisions for his three-hundred men army, but we don’t read how and when. His men would also have had a chance to rest. So this pursuit may have occurred the day after the initial victory. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The remnant of the once-mighty Midianite army must have considered themselves safe when they reached *Karkor*, by the Wadi Sirhan, well to the east of the Dead Sea, but they reckoned without the tenacity of Gideon and his men, who must have secured provisions en route. Not all the cities east of Jordan were as boorishly self-interested as Succoth and Penuel. ... Gideon, following *by the way of them that dwell in tents* (AV, RV), i.e. along the caravan routes (cf. RSV), fell upon the Midianites, who secure in this remote area, had apparently neglected to set a watch. This second appearance of Gideon and his men, so far from the hill of Moreh, struck further terror into their demoralized antagonists and led to further headlong flight.”

There is some confusion about the word *Karkor*. Bible scholars do not agree as to whether it is the name of a place, which is nowhere else mentioned in Scripture, or a Hebrew

word that could mean “to rest.” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “If this were a place, it is nowhere else mentioned in Scripture. Some contend that *Qarqor* signifies rest; and thus the Vulgate understood it: Zebah and Zalmunna ... rested, with all their army. And this seems the most likely, for it is said, Judg 8:11, that Gideon smote the host, for the host was secure.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “We are still on unknown ground. The situation assigned to it by Eusebius and Jerome, as being the same as a castle called Carcaria, near Petra, is quite out of the question, as being greatly too far south. As an appellative it suggests the idea of a walled-in space (*kir*: a wall; *kir-kir*: a space walled all round; cf. the Latin *carcer*, a prison); possibly an enclosed sheep or cattle fold on a large scale (see ... Numbers 32:36: ‘built ... folds for sheep’), affording some protection to the Midianite soldiers.”

Whatever the meaning, Gideon managed to capture the two Midianite kings and rout their army.

#### ***(xiv) Vengeance upon Succoth and Peniel (8:13-17)***

***13 Gideon son of Joash then returned from the battle by the Pass of Heres.***

***14 He caught a young man of Succoth and questioned him, and the young man wrote down for him the names of the seventy-seven officials of Succoth, the elders of the town.***

***15 Then Gideon came and said to the men of Succoth, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me by saying, 'Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your exhausted men?'"***

***16 He took the elders of the town and taught the men of Succoth a lesson by punishing them with desert thorns and briers.***

***17 He also pulled down the tower of Peniel and killed the men of the town.***

V.13 reads literally in the Hebrew text: “And Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle before the sun [was up].” The Hebrew word rendered “sun” by the KJV is *cherec*, meaning “to scrape.” The NKJV reads: “Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle, from the Ascent of Heres,” leaving open the possibility that it pertains to a place name or a sunrise.

The important fact is that somewhere Gideon and his men captured a young man from the city of Succoth, who wrote down the names of seventy-seven leading men of the town.

Commenting on that fact, *The Tyndale Commentary* states: “It is particularly unfortunate that the translation of the AV and RV, *described* (14) should obscure this last fact, which is a vital witness to the wide dissemination of the arts of writing and reading (cf. RSV, *wrote down*). The development of the alphabetical script, with its limited number of letters compared to the multitude of elements in ideographic or syllable writing, was one of the great steps forward in civilization, and brought writing within the compass of this young man of Succoth, as well as of Gideon himself. Possibly the youth used a sharp pointed instrument to scratch the words upon a fragment of pottery or a piece of shale, a method frequently employed for much of the Old Testament period.”

Obviously, many details are left out, as for instance, how Gideon identified the people whose names he had on the list. We only read that they received a painful thrashing. Whether the young man was able to return to his hometown and live among those whose name he had given is another unanswered question.

The punishment for the town of Peniel consisted in the demolishing of the city tower, for which no role call was needed.

*(xv) The slaughter of the Midianite kings (8:18-21)*

**18 Then he asked Zebah and Zalmunna, "What kind of men did you kill at Tabor?" "Men like you," they answered, "each one with the bearing of a prince."**

**19 Gideon replied, "Those were my brothers, the sons of my own mother. As surely as the Lord lives, if you had spared their lives, I would not kill you."**

**20 Turning to Jether, his oldest son, he said, "Kill them!" But Jether did not draw his sword, because he was only a boy and was afraid.**

**21 Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Come, do it yourself. 'As is the man, so is his strength.'" So Gideon stepped forward and killed them, and took the ornaments off their camels' necks.**

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "It may be assumed that the scene had now reverted to Ophrah, since Jether, Gideon's first-born son, would not have accompanied the 300 warriors in their exacting campaign through Transjordan. Up to this point Gideon's main concern had been the deliverance of his downtrodden countrymen from the Midianite menace; but now a secondary concern is introduced, the exaction of blood revenge for the death of his brothers at the hands of the Midianites. The question of verse 18 is literally, 'Where are the men ...?' (cf. RSV), and this is best rendered idiomatically, 'What about the men you slew at Tabor?' Having dealt with the national crisis, Gideon was now free to settle his own private account with Zebah and Zalmunna. There is no means of establishing the time or the circumstances of the death of his brothers. It could have been in a preliminary skirmish when Gideon's army was assembling, or in a Midianite campaign of a previous year. If it was the latter case Gideon was clearly lacking in courage to avenge his brothers' deaths before the divine intervention. Verse 19 may suggest that his brothers had been captured by the Midianites and subsequently put to death, not killed in the heat and anonymity of battle, and that the two kings were therefore directly responsible. Gideon's basically humane nature is revealed in the latter part of the verse, but, according to the harsh standards of his day, he had no alternative but to exact vengeance. The reply of the two kings (18), who knew full well that they were marked out for death, hardly answers Gideon's question. It is clear that they recalled the incident and Gideon's words probably made them aware of the likeness between the men they had slain and the man who now confronted them. There is also an incidental witness to the imposing appearance of Gideon. The command of a father to his son to slay two kings in cold blood is indicative of the general standards of the age, which were not those of the New Testament. It would be accounted an honor for a youth to slay such important prisoners of war, and a corresponding disgrace for the captives themselves."

There are some presumptions in the above comment that cannot be clearly proven from the text of Scripture. It may be that the description given by the two Midianite kings of the men they called, "each one with the bearing of a prince," was more meant to flatter Gideon than an actual description of Gideon's physical appearance. The two kings may have hoped to escape death by using flattery.

There is also no means of knowing the age of Gideon's oldest son. He may have been old enough to bear a sword. If he were a mere child or teenager, it would have been quite humiliating for the two Midianite lords to be killed that way.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "An incident not before related is here brought to light, viz., that on some unknown occasion, possibly as soon as the rising of the Israelites under

Gideon became known, or when, as related in ... Judges 6:2, they had sought to hide themselves in Mount Tabor, but had been caught, Zebah and Zalmunna had put to death Gideon's brothers. We may observe in passing how characteristic this is of a true narrative in which everything that happened cannot possibly be related (see ... Judges 10:11, 12, note). The word here rendered *what manner of*, i.e. *of what sort*, means, in every other place in which it occurs, where? and the sense of *what sort* is only inferred from the answer, *As thou art, so were they*. But it is not safe thus to change the universal meaning of a common word. It is better to take the words of Gideon, *Where are the men whom ye slew at Tabor?* as an upbraiding of them for the murder of his brethren, and a threat that where they were their murderers would soon be. The answer of Zebah and Zalmunna, which is not given in its entirety, was no doubt intended to be soothing and deprecatory of Gideon's wrath. They pleaded the necessity they were under in self-defense to slay them; they were men of such royal stature and prowess that their own lives would have been in danger had they spared them. But Gideon turned a deaf ear to their plea. He must avenge the death of his own brothers, his own mother's sons. He would have spared them as prisoners of war (... 2 Kings 6:22), but he must do his part as *goel* or *avenger* (... Numbers 35:12). Observe the stress laid on their being not merely his father's sons by another wife, but his own mother's sons, a much more tender relation (cf. Psalm 50:20)."

The Hebrew in the answer the two Midianite kings give to Gideon reads literally: "You rise and fall upon us: as the man [is, so is] his strength." What they seem to be saying is: "Do not humiliate us to the point where we will be executed by a small boy." So Gideon personally executed the two. This would have given him the right to take whatever possessions these men had on them. The only things Gideon took were the ornaments on the camels' necks.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments on these ornaments: "The ornaments (AV, the word indicates that they were crescent-shaped, RV, RSV) which adorned their camels became part of the spoils of war. Such crescents are mentioned in the Bible only in this chapter and Isaiah 3:18, but crescent-moon-shaped ornaments have been found at many excavated sites in Palestine. They are widely used by the Arab peoples up to the present day."

***(xvi) Invitation to kingship (8:22, 23)***

***22 The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us — you, your son and your grandson — because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian."***

***23 But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you."***

In gratitude for Gideon's actions that saved Israel from further Midianite invasions, the people offered Gideon a royal crown. There was a place for the establishment of royalty in Israel in which a king would be ruling by the grace of God.<sup>51</sup> Gideon would not have sinned against the Lord if he had accepted the offer. There may have been circumstances that are not mentioned in the text, other than Gideon's recognition of Yahweh's supremacy, that led him to refuse the crown.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "It is not clear how representative was the delegation from *the men of Israel* who requested Gideon to establish a dynastic rule. It could have been limited to a relatively small area (cf. the extent of Abimelech's rule in chapter 9), and it is not easy to envisage the powerful and proud tribe of Ephraim accepting a king from another tribe.

<sup>51</sup> See Deut. 17:14-20.

However, this section is of great importance in any consideration of the period of the judges. In an acute crisis involving a number of the tribes the courageous action of an individual had integrated the resources of the tribes and had averted disaster. It was not accepted, but it was only a matter of time before an even greater emergency, involving a majority of the tribes, precipitated a similar situation and led to a demand for a single ruler to co-ordinate the forces of the tribes. It was the Philistine pressure which provided such a stimulus and led to the demand to ‘make us a king to judge us like all the nations’ (I Sam. 8:5). Gideon’s reply was a model of noble unselfishness which recognized the essential fact that the nation *had* a king if they would only acknowledge him. Their king was Yahweh, who was all to them and more than the kings of other nations were to their subjects (cf. I Sam. 10:19). The government in Israel was essentially a theocracy, not a monarchy, and even when the monarchy was introduced it was qualified by this consideration. Gideon’s action in resolutely thrusting from him the prospect of personal advancement was exemplary and merits the highest praise.”

We do observe, however, that the phrase “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” occurs several times in *The Book of Judges*, and seems to serve as the theme of the book.<sup>52</sup>

When the Israelites came to the time where they demanded to become a secular kingdom, it was not the fact that they asked for a king, but that they rejected the rule of the Lord in the process, that caused the anger of God.

**(xvii) Gideon’s ephod (8:24-28)**

**24 And he said, "I do have one request, that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder." (It was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings.)**

**25 They answered, "We'll be glad to give them." So they spread out a garment, and each man threw a ring from his plunder onto it.**

**26 The weight of the gold rings he asked for came to seventeen hundred shekels, not counting the ornaments, the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian or the chains that were on their camels' necks.**

**27 Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.**

**28 Thus Midian was subdued before the Israelites and did not raise its head again. During Gideon’s lifetime, the land enjoyed peace forty years.**

We read above that Gideon took the ornaments from the necks of the camels that were part of the Midianite army. That must have amounted to a considerable amount of gold.

The men of Gideon’s army had also taken plunder from the Midianites who were killed and they had collected a large amount of gold rings. The NIV calls those “earrings.” The Hebrew word is *nexem*, which usually refers to a nose ring, as in Isa. 3:21.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “It seems to have been a national custom with the Ishmaelites, among whom the Midianites are reckoned (see ... Genesis 37:25-28), to wear golden rings; hence when they came to strip the slain there was a vast booty of gold rings. These Gideon asked for as his share, and the people readily agreed to the request.”

Gideon must have ended up with a huge amount of gold, which he used to make an ephod. Originally, the word *ephod* seems to refer to a piece of clothing. But the ephod Gideon

<sup>52</sup> Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25

made of the gold given to him, must have been a statue. It could be that Gideon originally intended the statue to be nothing but a memorial to the battle that delivered Israel from the dominion of the Midianites. But it seems to have turned into an object that became an idol and the people began to attribute their victory to the idol instead of to the Lord.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about Gideon's ephod: "The ephod mentioned in Judg 17:5; 18:14 f; Hos 3:4 is associated with teraphim and other idolatrous images. We may frankly confess that we do not know the shape, size and use of the ephod in these cases, though even here also the ephod may well have been a priestly garment. The same remark holds good of the ephod made by Gideon, and which became an object of idolatrous worship in Israel (Judg 8:27). It has been argued that a vestment would not cost seventeen hundred shekels of gold. Possibly Gideon set up an apparatus of worship containing other articles just as the mother of Micah began with the promise to make a graven image and a molten image, and afterward added an ephod and teraphim (17:1-5). Moreover, if gems and brilliants were put on Gideon's ephod, who can say that it did not cost seventeen hundred shekels?"

*The Living Bible* reads v. 26: "Their value was estimated at \$25,000."

## **h. Gideon's later years (8:29-35)**

### ***(i) The family of Gideon (8:29-31)***

***29 Jerub-Baal son of Joash went back home to live.***

***30 He had seventy sons of his own, for he had many wives.***

***31 His concubine, who lived in Shechem, also bore him a son, whom he named Abimelech.***

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes about Gideon's years of retirement: "Gideon's retirement from public life following his rejection of the invitation to become king, and the establishment of a large family, serve as a necessary introduction to the events of chapter 9. The *many wives* of Gideon show that he lived in considerable prosperity, a far cry from the day when he described his family as 'poor in Manasseh' (6:15). A large harem was the usual appendage of the monarchy in the Fertile Crescent (cf. 2 Sam. 5:13ff.; 1 Kgs 11:1-4), but the effects of such a situation in the history of Israel's kings appears uniformly disastrous. There is a marked contrast between the seventy sons and Abimelech. The former 'came out of his loins' (so the meaning of the Hebrew), the seat of procreative power, the meaning being that they were reckoned by male descent to his own tribe. *Abimelech*, on the other hand, was the son of a concubine who probably remained with her own family group in Shechem, being visited by her husband from time to time. A similar situation may be observed in the case of Samson (15:1; 16:4ff.). It is important to observe that any offspring of such a union belonged to the wife's family. Thus the seventy legitimate sons traced their descent through Gideon and Abiezer, but Abimelech's lineage was reckoned through his Shechemite mother. As there is evidence to show that Shechem was a Canaanite city incorporated by alliance into Israel ... she may have been a Canaanite woman. The name given to Abimelech ('my father a king,' or 'the king is father') may show that Gideon still hankered after the honor he had refused, although names compounded with *melech* were common in Israel."

### ***(ii) The death of Gideon (8:32-35)***

***32 Gideon son of Joash died at a good old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash***

*in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.*

**33 No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and**

**34 did not remember the Lord their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side.**

**35 They also failed to show kindness to the family of Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) for all the good things he had done for them.**

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “He was judge over Israel for forty years, with a household and a harem like a great prince, living in his paternal city, with the ephod set up there, himself the centre round which the powers of Church and State gathered; directing the affairs of his country, both civil and ecclesiastical, with eminent success, so that the country was at peace for forty years (a peace as long as that which followed the battle of Waterloo), and the detestable Baal-worship was effectually suppressed. And having lived in wealth and honor, he died in peace, and was buried in the sepulcher of his father at Ophrah in a good old age. He remains to us as one of the most remarkable characters of the Old Testament, not indeed without faults and blemishes, and not wholly unspoiled by prosperity, but still a great man, and an eminent servant of God.”

Although we read that the ephod became a spiritual trap for Gideon, the nation as a whole seems to have stayed true to the Lord during the rest of Gideon’s life. It wasn’t until after his death that the people returned to idolatry. The name of the god they began to call upon is given as Baal-Berith. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* calls him “Baal of the Covenant,” stating: “An idol worshipped by the Shechemites after Gideon’s death (Judg 8:33), as protector and guardian of engagements. His temple is also referred to in Judg 9:4.”

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The death of a judge once more led to the removal of restraint and a movement towards the Baal-worship of their neighbors. The particular variant of Baal-worship which followed was that of Baal-berith (‘Baal or lord of the covenant’) or ‘El-berith’ (9:46 (‘god of the covenant’), which appeared to have centered to have centered in Shechem. The covenant may have been between Israel and the incorporated Canaanite cities, or between the cities themselves and their own native deity. There is further evidence here of the Canaanization of Israel’s worship, in which the nature of Yahweh was obscured and his mighty acts were forgotten. Yahweh might well be the God for a time of crisis, but the fertility gods appeared to offer more for the everyday life. For, as well as the sensual appeal of their worship, there was the preoccupation of these gods with the ‘bread and butter’ of existence. Less surprising was the failure of the Israelites to hold the remembrance of Gideon in honor. Many years had passed since his magnificent exploit (all his sons had grown into manhood in that time) and the opulence of his family life may have aroused jealousy in the new generation, and the feeling that he had been rewarded sufficiently.”

## **i. The rise and fall of Abimelech (9:1-57)**

**(i) The massacre of the sons of Gideon (9:1-5)**

**1 Abimelech son of Jerub-Baal went to his mother’s brothers in Shechem and said to them and to all his mother’s clan,**

**2 "Ask all the citizens of Shechem, ‘Which is better for you: to have all seventy of Jerub-Baal’s sons rule over you, or just one man?’ Remember, I am your flesh and blood."**

**3 When the brothers repeated all this to the citizens of Shechem, they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother."**

**4 They gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, and Abimelech used it to hire reckless adventurers, who became his followers.**

**5 He went to his father's home in Ophrah and on one stone murdered his seventy brothers, the sons of Jerub-Baal. But Jotham, the youngest son of Jerub-Baal, escaped by hiding.**

*Barnes' Notes* observes: "We are not told how soon after the death of Gideon these events happened. There must have been time for the apostasy and establishment of Baal-worship, and for the development of ill-will between Abimelech and his brethren."

Obviously, the oldest of the legitimate sons of Gideon would have more rights to the place of leadership in Israel than Abimelech had, who was the son of one of Gideon's concubines.

Abimelech may have resented the fact that his father, Gideon, had rejected the offer to become Israel's first king. He had aspirations of his own for that position. But there were seventy others, who had priority over him and who probably looked down upon him as being the offspring of their father's concubine.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: "Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem. The idolatry which had been stealthily creeping into Israel during the latter years of Gideon was now openly professed; Shechem was wholly inhabited by its adherents: at least idolaters had the ascendancy. Abimelech, one of Gideon's numerous sons, was connected with that place, was ambitious of sovereign power, and having plied successfully the arts of a demagogue with his maternal relatives and friends, he acquired both the influence and money by which he raised himself to a throne."

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "This revolt from the house of Gideon in favor of Abimelech seems to partake of the nature of an Ephraimite rising against the supremacy of Manasseh. It was doubtless galling to the pride of the great tribe of Ephraim (... Judges 8:1, 2; 12:1-6) that Ophrah of the Abiezrites should be the seat of government, and Gideon's ephod the centre of religion for the tribes of Israel. And so they seem to have taken advantage of Gideon's death, and of Abimelech's connection with Shechem, to make a league with the Hivite inhabitants of Shechem (see vers. 27, 28) to set up Abimelech as king, and to restore the worship of Baal, under the title of Baal-berith (... Judges 8:33; 9:4, 27, 46), at Shechem for all Israel to resort to."

*The Tyndale Commentary* states: "The fear implanted in the minds of the Shechemites by Abimelech may have had little foundation in fact, his own personal ambition, and possibly, a jealous hatred of his brothers (who probably regarded him as inferior; cf. verse 18) being the real motives. The fact that the family of Gideon was still in residence in Ophrah (5), and not in the more important centers, indicates that the influence of Gideon himself was limited. Shechem, one of the old city-states of Canaan, may have been more inclined to accept a king than the Israelites, and the son of the great Gideon, who was one of them by the ties of flesh and blood, was an obvious candidate. Abimelech's plan met with a ready acceptance and he acted with a vigor characteristic of his father, but without the scruples. The resources of the sanctuary were used to finance the operation (4; cf. 1 Kgs 15:18; 2 Kgs 18:15, 16) and the hired assassins appear to have met with little opposition at Ophrah, which may indicate that the family of Gideon maintained a very modest establishment without armed retainers. The precise reference to the place of execution as upon *one stone* (5, 18) may be a significant parallel to the sacrificial

slaughtering of animals in the open (cf. 1 Sam 14:33, 35). The disposal of the blood of slaughtered beasts was a matter of great consequence, for ‘the life of the flesh is in the blood’ (Lev 17:11), and in this ritual slaughter of his half-brothers Abimelech may have been seeking to avoid adverse repercussions by punctilious care in disposing of the blood of his victims.”

Abimelech received the support of the other seventy sons of Gideon, who were his half-brothers. They must have put their trust in him, but they did this at the cost of their own life. Abimelech must have told them that he needed finances in order to establish a kingdom. He probably mentioned a bodyguard or a small army for the defense of their cities. But with the seventy pieces of money, he hired an army of hooligans. The NIV calls them “reckless adventurers.” The Hebrew words used are reeqiyim `naasyim, (vain persons). They did the dirty work for Abimelech and assassinated all of his brothers, with the exception of the youngest one, Jotham, who managed to escape.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “This is the first mention of a barbarous atrocity which has, with appalling frequency, been perpetrated in the despotic countries of the East—that of some one son of the deceased monarch usurping the throne, and hastening to confirm himself in the possession by the massacre of all the natural or legitimate competitors. Abimelech killed his brothers on one stone, either by dashing them from one rock or sacrificing them on one stone altar, in revenge for the demolition of Baal’s altar by their father. This latter view is the more probable, from the Shechemites (Judg 9:24) aiding in it.”

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The extent of Abimelech’s kingdom was very limited; only Shechem, Beth-millo, Arumah (41) and Thebez (50) are mentioned as under his jurisdiction and it is unlikely that it extended beyond a portion of western Manasseh. The reference in verse 22 must be understood in this limited sense. His turbulent three-year rule, secured by guile and maintained by force, was hardly more than an incident in the development of the monarchy, for the kingdom itself did not survive his death. In the same way Abimelech, the opportunist, must not be given a place amongst the judges of Israel who owed their position to their character and achievements in delivering the people.”

***(ii) The fable of Jotham (9:7-22)***

***7 When Jotham was told about this, he climbed up on the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted to them, "Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you.***

***8 One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Be our king.'***

***9 "But the olive tree answered, 'Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees?'***

***10 "Next, the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come and be our king.'***

***11 "But the fig tree replied, 'Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?'***

***12 "Then the trees said to the vine, 'Come and be our king.'***

***13 "But the vine answered, 'Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and men, to hold sway over the trees?'***

***14 "Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, 'Come and be our king.'***

***15 "The thornbush said to the trees, 'If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!'***

**16 "Now if you have acted honorably and in good faith when you made Abimelech king, and if you have been fair to Jerub-Baal and his family, and if you have treated him as he deserves—**

**17 and to think that my father fought for you, risked his life to rescue you from the hand of Midian**

**18 (but today you have revolted against my father's family, murdered his seventy sons on a single stone, and made Abimelech, the son of his slave girl, king over the citizens of Shechem because he is your brother)—**

**19 if then you have acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal and his family today, may Abimelech be your joy, and may you be his, too!**

**20 But if you have not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelech!"**

**21 Then Jotham fled, escaping to Beer, and he lived there because he was afraid of his brother Abimelech**

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "The sole survivor of the bloodbath at Ophrah was *Jotham*, the youngest son of Gideon, whose hope of safety lay in putting the greatest distance possible between himself and Abimelech. Before his flight, however, he uttered his famous parable, which was both a protest against the shameful treatment meted out to the house of Gideon and a prophecy of the effect of Abimelech's rule. Approximately a century and a half before, six of the tribes had stood on the slopes of Mount Gerizim and thundered out their 'Amens' to the blessings of the law, pronounced by the Levites (Deut. 27:12; 28). Now Jotham stood on the same mountain, using it as a pulpit from which to denounce the shameful action of the Shechemites. It is unlikely that he was on the summit of the mountain, 1,000 feet above the city; a convenient crag is indicated, from which he could be heard by at least some of its citizens and from which he could beat a hasty retreat. Voices can carry a long way in the atmosphere of the Near East and Gerizim itself was used as an open-air pulpit in the great religious ceremony of Joshua 8:30-35, which itself was a fulfillment of the provisions of Deuteronomy 27 ... Similarly, our Lord could address thousands without apparent difficulty (Mark 4:1; 6:34-44).

The parable deals with their choice of a king and it is interesting to observe that the principle of the monarchy itself is not condemned. The main point is that a worthless person, Abimelech, has been chosen. The implication is that the sons of Gideon, including Jotham himself, would have been a more desirable choice, although this is not specifically stated."

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "It appears that Jotham received this message from God, and that he spoke on this occasion by divine inspiration."

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: "This is the earliest example of a *fable* in Scripture; indeed the only one except that in ... 2 Kings 14:9. It is remarked that in the Indian and Greek fables the animals are the *dramatis personae*, the fox, the lion, the ass, etc.; whereas in the only two specimens of Hebrew fable remaining to us, the members of the vegetable kingdom, the olive, the fig, the vine, the bramble, the cedar, the thistle, are the actors and speakers. The *parable*, of which ... Isaiah 5:1-7 is a beautiful example, is quite different in its structure. Like the inimitable parables of our Savior in the New Testament, it sets forth Divine truth under an image, but the image and all its parts are in strict accordance with nature. In the Scripture *allegory* real persons and their actions prefigure the actions and the persons which they are intended to represent (see ... Matthew 12:39, 40; ... Galatians 4:21-31; ... Hebrews 11:19).

Allegorical personages may, however, be fictitious, as in the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress.’ The general meaning of this fable is clear. The trees worthy to reign for their intrinsic excellence refused the proffered kingdom one after another. The vilest and most unworthy accepted it. The result would be that a fire would burst out from the despicable bramble, and set fire to the lofty cedar tree. Thus Gideon refused the kingdom, and his sons had virtually refused it likewise. The base-born Abimelech had accepted it, and the result would be a deadly strife, which would destroy both the ungrateful subjects and the unworthy ruler.”

Jotham, unlike Jesus in regard to most of His parables, gave a clear application of the meaning of his parable. He reminded the people of their history and exhorted them to learn its lesson. The tragedy of history is often that it is not remembered. If people do not remember from where they came, they won’t know where they are going either. That means that life does not have a goal and direction. Life thus becomes meaningless. Forgetting what Gideon had done for them in delivering them from the power of Midian, would make them subject to the tyranny of others.

There is irony in Jotham’s remark: “If then you have acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal and his family today, may Abimelech be your joy, and may you be his, too!” The point he was making was that what the people of Shechem had done was all but honorable. They had dishonored the memory of their redeemer and honored his corrupt offspring.

A parallel in recent history is the way the German people received Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party, which led to the Second World War of the twentieth century.

Jotham believed that the people of Shechem would not accept his admonishment and therefore, he fled for his life after having delivered his message from a safe distance.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: “There is no record of the reaction of the Shechemites, but it may be gauged by the precipitate flight of Jotham to a retreat beyond the reach of Abimelech.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Being close to the top of Gerizim, Jotham had the open country before him. It would take the men of Shechem twenty minutes to ascend the hill, by which time Jotham would be out of sight, and two or three miles on his way. *Beer*, to which he fled, is thought to be either the same as *Beeroth*, among the heights of the tribe of Benjamin (...Joshua 9:17), now *El-Birch*, ‘the first halting-place for caravans on the northern road from Jerusalem.’”

### ***(iii) Friction between Abimelech and the Shechemites (9:22-25)***

***22 After Abimelech had governed Israel three years,***

***23 God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, who acted treacherously against Abimelech.***

***24 God did this in order that the crime against Jerub-Baal’s seventy sons, the shedding of their blood, might be avenged on their brother Abimelech and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers.***

***25 In opposition to him these citizens of Shechem set men on the hilltops to ambush and rob everyone who passed by, and this was reported to Abimelech.***

We may assume that an evil spirit had been working in Abimelech and among the citizens of Shechem before the end of Abimelech’s three-year reign over them. They had been partners-in-crime with their criminal king, having participated in the murder of Gideon’s sons.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “His reign did not probably at first extend beyond Shechem; but by stealthy and progressive encroachments he subjected some of the neighboring towns to his away. None could ‘reign’ in Israel except by rebellious usurpation; and hence, the reign of Abimelech is expressed in the original by a word signifying ‘despotism;’ not that which describes the mild and divinely-authorized rule of the judge.”

The verb used to describe Abimelech’s reign is *suwr*, meaning “to have power.” The only other place in Scripture where this verb is used is in Hosea’s mention of Jacob’s struggle with the angel: “He struggled with the angel and *overcame* him.”<sup>53</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The Hebrew word here used is quite a different one from that in vers. 8, 10, 12, 14, and elsewhere, where the reign of a king is designated. It means to exercise dominion, to be a chief or captain over a people. The use of it here suggests that though, as we read in ver. 6, the Canaanite men of Shechem and the house of Millo had made him th

Their king, yet he was not made king by the tribes in general, only he exercised a kind of dominion over them, or over a sufficiently large portion of them to warrant their being called *Israel*.”

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “Self-seeking opportunists and those capable of treacherous murder never make easy companions, and it was not long before a breach occurred between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. Perhaps it is of significance that Abimelech does not seem to have resided in the principal city of his domain but delegated the oversight thereof to Zebul (30). The nature of his rule (*reigned*, AV, is too strong; the word is literally ‘princed’) was that of a local chieftain or petty king over a limited area, and there was no question of a general acceptance of his role by all the tribes. The overruling action of God, sovereign in history, is indicated in verse 23 (cf. 1 Sam. 16:14; 18:10; 1 Kgs 22:19-23). The point which precipitated the dispute was the action of the Shechemites in setting armed bands in ambush beside the trade-routes in the vicinity of Shechem, thus depriving Abimelech of the dues which he would normally exact from the caravans which passed through his territory. This would have the effect of reducing the number of travelers and caravans in such a troubled area, thus emptying the pockets of Abimelech as well as hitting at his pride; for he could not guarantee safety of travel in his domain.”

The phrase that catches our eye is “God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem.” We may interpret this in the same way as God giving permission to Satan to put Job to the test.<sup>54</sup> Although in this case the purpose was not to test Abimelech’s faith. It was more that God said to Satan: “Take what is yours!”

#### ***(iv) The rebellion of Gaal (9:26-29)***

***26 Now Gaal son of Ebed moved with his brothers into Shechem, and its citizens put their confidence in him.***

***27 After they had gone out into the fields and gathered the grapes and trodden them, they held a festival in the temple of their god. While they were eating and drinking, they cursed Abimelech.***

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<sup>53</sup> Hos. 12:4

<sup>54</sup> Job 1:12

**28 Then Gaal son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should be subject to him? Isn't he Jerub-Baal's son, and isn't Zebul his deputy? Serve the men of Hamor, Shechem's father! Why should we serve Abimelech?"**

**29 If only this people were under my command! Then I would get rid of him. I would say to Abimelech, 'Call out your whole army!'"**

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "Nothing is known of *Gaal the son of Ebed* apart from the information given in this chapter. The men of Shechem were apparently easily swayed and Gaal gained their confidence by his slick talk, just as Abimelech had done previously. The time of this change of allegiance was the season of the vintage harvest at the end of summer. The great New Year Festival of Israel's immediate neighbors, the chief event in their cultus, was associated with the gathering of the summer fruits. Its counterpart in Israel was the Feast of Tabernacles, which, under the influence of the Canaanite religion, displaced the Passover Festival as the great popular festival until the reformations of Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Kgs 23:21ff.; 2 Chr. 30:1ff.; 35:1ff.). Grapes were gathered and trodden out in the winepresses to produce wine at this season, which became a time of merry making, over-indulgence and licentiousness, hardly compatible with the spirit of truly religious thanksgiving."

To be chosen to a position of power during the grape harvest by people who are intoxicated does not give one a solid basis of future public support.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* assumes that Gaal was not even an Israelite, but a member of one of the original Canaanite tribes. Since nothing is known about him, this cannot be proven or denied.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: "Who he was, or of what tribe or race he and his brethren were, we have no means of knowing; he seems to have been an adventurer who sought to turn the growing disaffection of the Shechemites to his own advantage by offering himself as a leader of the malcontents."

The next step forward in the rebellion was taken at the time of the vintage, probably when they were inflamed with wine; for, after they had gathered in and trodden the grapes, they kept high festival in the temple of Baal-berith, on occasion of offering to their god the solemn thank offering for the vintage. And then, speaking freely under the influence of wine, they cursed Abimelech. The whole talk of the company was of his misdeeds, and seditious and rebellious words were freely uttered on all sides."

The whole episode is typical for the spirit of the age which is evinced in the history recorded in the *Book of Judges*. It fits the theme of the book: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."<sup>55</sup>

It is true that Gaal had the same rights or the same lack of rights as Abimelech. That calls for anarchy.

Gaal entices the people of Shechem to challenge Abimelech, which would lead to their undoing, as we see in the rest of the story.

**(v) Zebul's decisive action (9:30-41)**

**30 When Zebul the governor of the city heard what Gaal son of Ebed said, he was very angry.**

**31 Under cover he sent messengers to Abimelech, saying, "Gaal son of Ebed and his brothers have come to Shechem and are stirring up the city against you."**

<sup>55</sup> Judg. 21:25

**32 Now then, during the night you and your men should come and lie in wait in the fields.**

**33 In the morning at sunrise, advance against the city. When Gaal and his men come out against you, do whatever your hand finds to do."**

**34 So Abimelech and all his troops set out by night and took up concealed positions near Shechem in four companies.**

**35 Now Gaal son of Ebed had gone out and was standing at the entrance to the city gate just as Abimelech and his soldiers came out from their hiding place.**

**36 When Gaal saw them, he said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!" Zebul replied, "You mistake the shadows of the mountains for men."**

**37 But Gaal spoke up again: "Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and a company is coming from the direction of the soothsayers' tree."**

**38 Then Zebul said to him, "Where is your big talk now, you who said, 'Who is Abimelech that we should be subject to him?' Aren't these the men you ridiculed? Go out and fight them!"**

**39 So Gaal led out the citizens of Shechem and fought Abimelech.**

**40 Abimelech chased him, and many fell wounded in the flight — all the way to the entrance to the gate.**

**41 Abimelech stayed in Arumah, and Zebul drove Gaal and his brothers out of Shechem.**

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "The insurrection was nipped in the bud by the prompt action of Zebul, whose anger was prompted by the derogatory remark made concerning him, inferring that he was just Abimelech's lieutenant and no more (28). A message was hastily dispatched to Abimelech to acquaint him of the situation. ... Zebul not only warned of the potentially dangerous situation, he urged a certain course of action upon Abimelech, no doubt reasoning that it would be preferable to take the initiative rather than to allow Gaal time to consolidate his position. The freedom which Zebul himself enjoyed in the remainder of the story does suggest that the uprising was still in an early stage. Abimelech followed the advice of his deputy and deployed his forces by night in four companies, thus lessening the risk of detection. [one Bible scholar] observes, 'So the contingent in the city under Zebul was literally a 'fifth column.'"

Zebul may have thought of Joshua's capturing of the city of Ai. Part of the Israelite army had launched an open attack upon the city and drew out Ai's army by faking defeat. When the Israelite detachment fled before the men of Ai, another section of the army, which had laid in ambush during the night, captured the city and set it to fire.<sup>56</sup>

The NIV reads that Zebul sent his message to Abimelech "under cover." The Hebrew word used is *tormah*, which can be rendered "fraud," or "deceit." We find the same word in the verse "You reject all who stray from your decrees, for their *deceitfulness* is in vain."<sup>57</sup> The suggestion is that Zebul became a traitor to his own people.

Another word in the same verse that is difficult to interpret is *tsuwr*, which the NIV renders as "stirring up." The KJV reads: "they fortify the city." In some case it is rendered as "to besiege," as in "And Saul called up all his forces for battle, to go down to Keilah to *besiege* David and his men."<sup>58</sup> In this case it means probably that the people of Shechem were stirred up

<sup>56</sup> Josh. 8:4-22

<sup>57</sup> Ps. 119:118

<sup>58</sup> I Sam. 23:8

emotionally by Gaal against Abimelech, not that they physically reinforced their city wall against a possible siege by Abimelech and his army.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Gaal now saw his opportunity, and encouraged the revolt. *Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should serve him?* The meaning of these words, though somewhat obscure at first, becomes plain if we compare the two similar passages, 1 Samuel 25:10; ... 1 Kings 12:16. In the first we have the contemptuous question, ‘Who is David?’ and in the second the analogous one, ‘What portion have we in David?’ but in both we have the same person described by different terms: ‘Who is David? and who is the son of Jesse?’ and, ‘What portion have we in David? Neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse.’ Here, therefore, it is clear that *Shechem* is merely another name for *Abimelech*; and it is easy to see why. Abimelech’s mother was a Canaanite bondswoman, a Shechemite; and the plea for making Abimelech king was, ‘for he is our brother’ (vers. 2, 3). *Shechem*, or *the son of Shechem*, was therefore a natural description of Abimelech. But, adds Gaal, *is not he the son of Jerubbaal? and (is not) Zebul his officer? i.e.* he is not a real Shechemite; he is the son of Jerubbaal; and what right has he to reign over you Shechemites? And why should Zebul lord it over you? He is only Abimelech’s officer, *No; serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem*. Fling off the yoke of the Abiezrite stranger, and set up a real Canaanite government from the old race of Hamor, the true founder and head of Shechem (cf. 1 Chronicles 2:50-52).”

The story is told in colorful detail. At the morning of Abimelech’s attack of Shechem, Gaal, who was unaware of any upcoming attack, went for a walk outside the city. He sees Abimelech’s men coming out of the places where they had been hiding. Zebul, who knew what was happening and who stood by Gaal, tells him that he takes the shadows on the mountain, produced by the rising sun, for men. But Gaal persisted that he knew what he saw. Then Zebul, trying to evoke fear in Gaal’s mind, challenges him to go and fight.

The Hebrew text reads literally: “Where is now your mouth, wherewith you said, who is Abimelech that we should serve him? [Is] this not the people you have despised? I pray go out, and fight now.”

At this point Gaal must have known on which side Zebul was and he must have felt betrayed. But, evidently, the men of Shechem were on Gaal’s side and they come out to fight Abimelech. Abimelech’s army, however, won the battle.

Having Abimelech on his side, Zebul evicted Gaal and his family from the city.

#### ***(vi) The destruction of Shechem (9:42-45)***

***42 The next day the people of Shechem went out to the fields, and this was reported to Abimelech.***

***43 So he took his men, divided them into three companies and set an ambush in the fields. When he saw the people coming out of the city, he rose to attack them.***

***44 Abimelech and the companies with him rushed forward to a position at the entrance to the city gate. Then two companies rushed upon those in the fields and struck them down.***

***45 All that day Abimelech pressed his attack against the city until he had captured it and killed its people. Then he destroyed the city and scattered salt over it.***

Evidently, Abimelech, in his initial attack, did not occupy the city of Shechem, but only went as far as the city gates. But when he saw that the day after his military action the people

took up their daily chores as if nothing had happened, he decided to show the inhabitants who he was and that he had power over them.

*The Tyndale Commentary* states: “Abimelech, by his action in destroying Shechem, abandoned all pretence of ruler over a kingdom, for the sphere of his influence was truncated without this important city. It appears as an act of revenge against those who had questioned his leadership. Men like Abimelech, who rise from an inferior status to a position of authority, are often capable of vengeful actions which destroy the basis of their own power. Zebul’s action had brought the situation under control, but his master was concerned to teach Shechem a lesson. The people, apparently confident that the matter was concluded, *went out into the fields* as usual to engage in their daily occupations, although it has been suggested that the reference is to the marauding bands leaving the city on their errand of brigandage, in which case a different construction must be set upon Abimelech’s action. However, this second alternative is not well supported by the context. Another ambush was set and at the opportune moment one company captured the gate, thus cutting off the retreat of the Shechemites in the fields. These were butchered by the remaining two companies, who were later able to reinforce their companions in the city and exact a similar, terrible vengeance there. The sowing of the city *with salt* does not mean that all cultivatable soil was made unfruitful; this would have required an operation of impossible magnitude. Rather, it indicates a symbolic ritual action in which the destroyed city was condemned to perpetual desolation (cf. Deut. 29:23; Ps. 107:34; Jer. 17:6). Shechem was rebuilt during the reign of Jeroboam I, more than a century and a half after the campaign of Abimelech (1 Kgs 12:25).”

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “When all the Shechemites in the field were smitten or dispersed, Abimelech stormed the city, weakened as it was by the previous loss of so many of its defenders. The city made an obstinate defense notwithstanding, but was taken before night, and all the inhabitants were put to the sword. The walls were then razed to the ground, and the site was sown with salt to express the wish that it might be barren and uninhabited for ever (cf. ... Psalm 107:34, marg.; ... Jeremiah 17:6). This action of sowing with salt is not elsewhere mentioned; but it is well known that salt destroys vegetation, and is used by gardeners for this very purpose.”

***(vii) The destruction of the tower of Shechem (9:46-49)***

***46 On hearing this, the citizens in the tower of Shechem went into the stronghold of the temple of El-Berith.***

***47 When Abimelech heard that they had assembled there,***

***48 he and all his men went up Mount Zalmon. He took an ax and cut off some branches, which he lifted to his shoulders. He ordered the men with him, "Quick! Do what you have seen me do!"***

***49 So all the men cut branches and followed Abimelech. They piled them against the stronghold and set it on fire over the people inside. So all the people in the tower of Shechem, about a thousand men and women, also died.***

Evidently, at this point Abimelech had not yet entered the city itself. So the people of Shechem, fearing an attack, gathered in the temple of their idol El-Berith. This must have been a local deity, who was considered the protector of the city. They figured that this was a safe place, since they had put themselves under the idol’s protection.

Abimelech took advantage of the fact that the whole population had gathered in a relatively small area and decided to set fire to the place, burning everyone to death.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “Normally the stronghold of a walled city would be within the wall, but the impression gained from this narrative is that the tower of Shechem was outside the city, possibly on some adjacent outcrop of rock. But the impression may be more apparent than real, due to the narrator’s method of dealing with one subject at a time. Having dealt exhaustively with the destruction of the city itself, he now deals with the destruction of its stronghold. It may be observed that no reference is made to the stronghold in connection with the two ambushments, which would be seriously threatened if a manned fortress was in the vicinity. ... Here the remnants of the population gathered to make their final resistance. Abimelech adopted a stratagem which has been employed many times since by a besieging army. Leading his men to *mount Zalmon* (cf. Ps. 68:14), a heavily wooded hill popularly located to the south of Gerizim ..., he and they lopped branches from the trees and piled them against the fortress walls. The intense heat generated by the conflagration that was kindled destroyed the tower and all its occupants. So perished the men of Shechem and another Canaanite enclave was obliterated.”

***(ix) The death of Abimelech (9:50-57)***

***50 Next Abimelech went to Thebez and besieged it and captured it.***

***51 Inside the city, however, was a strong tower, to which all the men and women — all the people of the city — fled. They locked themselves in and climbed up on the tower roof.***

***52 Abimelech went to the tower and stormed it. But as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire,***

***53 a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull.***

***54 Hurriedly he called to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and kill me, so that they can't say, 'A woman killed him.'" So his servant ran him through, and he died.***

***55 When the Israelites saw that Abimelech was dead, they went home.***

***56 Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers.***

***57 God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them.***

From the tower of Shechem we are taken to the tower of Thebez, the next city Abimelech intended to destroy. The fact that the historian makes particular mention of the fact that this tower was inside the city suggests that in Shechem the tower had been outside the city walls, or maybe part of the walls.

Abimelech must have thought that he could use the same method of killing the people of Thebez as he had used at Shechem. So he gathered wood to burn the tower and its occupants. But this became his undoing. A woman who was in the tower dropped a millstone on his head, cracking his skull. He did not die immediately, but the injury was fatal.

The Hebrew word used is *pelach rekeb*, which literally means “a piece of a millstone.” The NIV renders it “an upper millstone.” *The Tyndale Commentary* explains: “The Hebrew word (*pelach rekeb*, lit. ‘a stone of riding’) shows that it was probably the upper millstone.”

Abimelech seems to have been more concerned about his reputation after his death than about his reputation before his Creator whom he was about to meet. If it became known that he had died by the hand of a woman, that would be considered a dishonor. He wanted to die an

honorable death, so he asked his armor-bearer to kill him. His armor-bearer obliged and ran his sword through his master.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "It was a disgrace to be killed by a woman. . . . Abimelech was also afraid that if he fell thus mortally wounded into the hands of his enemies, they might treat him with cruelty and insult."

The author of Judges comments that the way Abimelech died and the city of Shechem was destroyed were God's judgment upon both. The people of Shechem had helped Abimelech in murdering his brothers, the seventy sons of Gideon.

#### **j. Tola (10:1, 2)**

***1 After the time of Abimelech a man of Issachar, Tola son of Puah, the son of Dodo, rose to save Israel. He lived in Shamir, in the hill country of Ephraim.***

***2 He led Israel twenty-three years; then he died, and was buried in Shamir.***

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "With Tola we are introduced to the second of the minor judges, the others being Shamgar (5:31), Jair (10:3-5), Ibzan, Elon and Abdon (12:8-15). Scant detail concerning these men has been preserved, with the inevitable consequence that they appear as very nebulous characters in comparison with Gideon, Deborah, Abimelech, Jephthah and Samuel. Sometimes they are regarded as being concerned with judicial affairs, the arbiters of disputes within or between the tribes, or the custodians and interpreters of the casuistic laws. It may be that they were the leaders in Israel during the periods of rest when no foreign domination threatened. But the statement concerning Tola, that he arose to defend Israel (AV), warns against reading too much into the little extant information concerning these men. The likelihood is that if spectacular deeds had been performed by these men some traces of them would have survived, but we cannot go beyond this and say that, in fact, no such exploits were wrought. In the case of Tola little has survived apart from his name and a few essential facts. In Genesis 46:13 and Numbers 26:23 Tola and Puah are connected with the tribe of Issachar."

*The Pulpit Commentary* adds: "Nothing more is known of Tola than what is here told us, viz., his name, his parentage, his dwelling-place, his office, the length of time which he held it, and the place of his burial. Who were the enemies from whom Tola was raised up to save Israel we are not told. There was probably no great invasion or grievous servitude, but perhaps frequent border wars requiring an able and watchful chief to maintain the independence of Israel. Tola and Puah . . . were both names of families in Issachar (... Genesis 46:13; ... Numbers 6:23)."

#### **k. Jair (10:3-5)**

***3 He was followed by Jair of Gilead, who led Israel twenty-two years.***

***4 He had thirty sons, who rode thirty donkeys. They controlled thirty towns in Gilead, which to this day are called Havvoth Jair.***

***5 When Jair died, he was buried in Kamon.***

The information about Jair states that he lived in Gilead. The Hebrew name Jair means: "giving light." We read that he had thirty sons. It would be hard to believe that they were all born by one woman and it is, therefore, likely that he had several wives. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, however, states: "His having 30 sons is no conclusive evidence that he had

more than one wife; much less that he had more than one at a time. There are instances in this country of men having as many children, by two successive wives.”

The fact that his sons went around riding thirty donkeys is considered to be a sign of dignity. Some Bible scholars interpret this information differently. We read in *The Pulpit Commentary*: The number and dignity of these knightly sons of Jair shows that Jair himself, like Gideon (... Judges 8:30), assumed the state of a prince. The word in Hebrew for ass *colts* is identical with that for *cities*, as here pointed, and this play upon the words belongs to the same turn of mind as produced Jotham’s fable and Samson’s riddle (... Judges 14:14).”

The Hebrew word *ayir* literally means “bearing a burden.” The same word is used in Zechariah’s prophecy about Jesus’ entering Jerusalem: “Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a *colt*, the foal of a donkey.”<sup>59</sup>

*The Tyndale Commentary* writes about Jair: “the record concerning Jair appears to connect with the conquest of Gilead, when a predecessor with the same name captured a group of towns in Bashan and renamed them Havvoth-jair, i.e. ‘the tent-villages of Jair’ (Num. 32:39-42; Deut. 3:14, etc.). In this same area, about 12 miles south-east of the Sea of Galilee, Jair exercised his authority, supported by his thirty sons. The mention that they rode on thirty ass-colts (cf. the similar reference to the sons and grand-sons of Abdon, 12:14) was a mark of prestige as well as a sign of prosperity.

## **I. Jephthah and the Ammonites (10:6 – 11:40)**

### ***(i) The effect of apostasy (10:6-16)***

***6 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him,***

***7 he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites,***

***8 who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites.***

***9 The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and the house of Ephraim; and Israel was in great distress.***

***10 Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord, "We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."***

***11 The Lord replied, "When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines,***

***12 the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands?***

***13 But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you.***

***14 Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!"***

***15 But the Israelites said to the Lord, "We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now."***

***16 Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.***

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<sup>59</sup> Zech. 9:9

It is hard to understand how easily the Israelites were drawn away from Yahweh, the God who had saved them out of Egyptian slavery and brought them into the Promised Land, and fell into idolatry.

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes: "Israel returned to their idolatry, that sin which did most easily beset them (v. 6): They did evil again in the sight of the Lord, from whom they were unaccountably bent to backslide, as a foolish people and unwise. They worshipped many gods; not only their old demons Baalim and Ashtaroth, which the Canaanites had worshipped, but, as if they would proclaim their folly to all their neighbors, they served the gods of Syria, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, and the Philistines. It looks as if the chief trade of Israel had been to import deities from all countries. It is hard to say whether it was more impious or impolitic to do this. By introducing these foreign deities, they rendered themselves mean and despicable, for no nation that had any sense of honor changed their gods. Much of the wealth of Israel, we may suppose, was carried out, in offerings to the temples of the deities in the several countries whence they came, on which, as their mother-churches, their temples in Israel were expected to own their dependence; the priests and devotees of those sorry deities would follow their gods, no doubt, in crowds into the land of Israel, and, if they could not live in their own country, would take root there, and so strangers would devour their strength. If they did it in compliment to the neighboring nations, and to ingratiate themselves with them, justly were they disappointed; for those nations which by their wicked arts they sought to make their friends by the righteous judgments of God became their enemies and oppressors."

One of Israel's problems may have been that the God of heaven and earth, who had called them and adopted them to be a kingdom of priests, was invisible to the human eye. The idols, worshipped by the nations surrounding Israel, were all represented by their statues. But none of Israel's surrounding nations could boast on a history, similar to Israel's, in which a people had been delivered from slavery and miraculously survived a desert journey to enter into a land occupied by enemies and possess it.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: "We may conclude that Tola and Jair had used their influence to maintain the worship of Jehovah; but at their death idolatry broke out with more virulence than ever. Not only were the many altars of Baal and Ashtoreth honored, as in former times, but new forms of idol-worship, according to the rites of all the neighboring nations, were introduced among them. The gods of Syria, *i.e.* Aram, who are not usually named, but whose worship is spoken of (... 2 Chronicles 28:23), and whose altar attracted the attention of Ahaz (... 2 Kings 16:10), and one of whom was Rimmon (... 2 Kings 5:18); the gods of the Sidonians, Baal and Ashtoreth, probably with rites somewhat differing from those of Canaan; Chemosh, the god of the Moabites; Milcom or Moloch, the god of the children of Ammon; and Dagon, the god of the Philistines — all were worshipped, while the service of Jehovah was thrust aside (see ... 1 Kings 11:5-7)."

*The Tyndale Commentary* adds: "The worship of the Baalim and the Ashtaroth has already been dealt with ... and the worship of the gods of Syria and Zidon was of a similar pattern, with local variations. The evidence suggests that the gods of the Philistines were also of the same type, as the Philistines rapidly adopted the customs and the culture of the peoples over whom they ruled. The three gods mentioned elsewhere in connection with the Philistines, Dagon, Ashtoreth and Baal-zebul, were all Canaanite deities. The gods of Moab and Ammon, two kingdoms which came into existence within fifty years of the Israelite settlement, were Chemosh and Malcam (with its associated forms Milcom, Molech and Moloch) respectively. The only

kingdom contiguous to Israel which did not make any religious impact upon the Israelites was, significantly, the profane kingdom of Edom. The subtle attraction of these heathen religions, with their material and sensuous satisfactions, proved too much for Israel.”

We read that God “sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites.” The Hebrew verb used is *makar*, which literally means: “to sell as merchandise into slavery.” For the next eighteen years the Philistines and Ammonites treated the Israelites as slaves. We could say that, actually, the Israelites sold themselves and God allowed this to happen.

The first enemy mentioned who became a tool in God’s hand to correct the Israelites, was the Ammonites. They were the descendants of Lot and the Israelites had not been permitted to attack them in their conquest of Canaan. Moses had said: ‘When you come to the Ammonites, do not harass them or provoke them to war, for I will not give you possession of any land belonging to the Ammonites. I have given it as a possession to the descendants of Lot.’<sup>60</sup> Now they became Israel’s enemies.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “It would seem that at this time the king of the children of Ammon was also king of the Moabites, since he laid claim (... Judges 11:13, 24) to the land which had once belonged to Moab. If we may trust the king of the Ammonites’ statement, the object of the war was to recover that land, and he carried the war across the Jordan into the territory of Judah and Ephraim in order to compel the Israelites to give it up.”

*The Tyndale Commentary* states: “Now the Philistines and the Ammonites became the rod of God’s anger (cf. Isa. 10:5) just as he had used Cushan-rishathaim (3:8), Eglon (3:12), Jabin and Sisera (4:2) and the Midianites (6:1) on earlier occasions. The main weight of the Ammonite attacks fell on Gilead in Transjordan, i.e. on the Israelite territory adjacent to their kingdom, but there were also forays against the west-Jordan tribe of Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim. As there was undoubtedly pressure from the Philistines against the western frontiers of these tribes their predicament can be imagined. The acuter pressure at this stage came from the Ammonites who were crueler in nature and more predatory in their methods than the Philistines (cf. 1 Sam. 11:1, 2).” The political and probably physical pressure made the Israelites turn back to the Lord.

One interesting part of vv. 10-15 is that we do not read about any prophet who presented Israel’s plea to the Lord and gave the people the answer God had given. There seems to have been a direct communication between the people and the Lord.

God’s immediate answer was that since the people had exchanged Him for the idols of the land, they ought to pray to their idols for deliverance. The people’s answer consisted in a confession of sin and an act of unconditional surrender. The Hebrew text of their prayer reads literally: “And the children of Israel said unto the Lord, We have sinned: do unto us whatever seems good unto you, only deliver us this day, we pray you.”

They followed that prayer by ridding themselves of their idols and by serving the Lord. The latter was probably done by resuming bringing their sacrifices unto the Lord. The NIV reads: “And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.” The Hebrew reads literally: “And his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.” The Hebrew word, rendered “could bear no longer” is *qatsar*, which is actually a word that refers to cutting off something in order to harvest.

## ***(ii) Renewed Ammonite pressure (10:17, 18)***

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<sup>60</sup> Deut. 2:19

**17 When the Ammonites were called to arms and camped in Gilead, the Israelites assembled and camped at Mizpah.**

**18 The leaders of the people of Gilead said to each other, "Whoever will launch the attack against the Ammonites will be the head of all those living in Gilead."**

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "This verse ought to begin the new chapter. The preliminary matter of Israel's sin, of their oppression by the Ammonites, of their repentance and return to the God of their fathers, and of God's merciful acceptance of their penitence and prayer, was concluded in the last verse. The history of their deliverance by Jephthah begins here."

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: "From carrying on a guerilla warfare, the Ammonites proceeded to a continued campaign, their settled aim being to wrest the whole of the trans-Jordanic territory from their actual occupiers. In this great crisis a general meeting of the Israelite tribes was held at Mizpeh. This Mizpeh was in eastern Manasseh (Josh 11:3)."

*The Tyndale Commentary* states: "This particular invasion of the Ammonites, Israel's eastern neighbor, whose capital was at Rabbah, was presumably at the end of the eighteen years' oppression noted in verse 8. Gilead is normally used to designate the central of these main divisions of the Israelite settlement east of the Jordan, between Bashan in the north and the southern tableland, but the term is used somewhat loosely. To meet this emergency the people of the Israelite tribes involved assembled themselves together, with possibly a new morale and a will to resist following their repentance and return to the Lord. All they lacked was a suitable commander to marshal their forces. Mizpeh (AV) or Mizpah (RV, RSV), which means 'watchtower,' was a common place-name in a country often subjected to attack by marauding bands, and any identification is hazardous. The Mizpah associated with Jacob's covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:46ff.) and Ramoth-mizpeh (usually identified with Ramoth-gilead, Josh. 13:26; cf. Josh 20:8; Deut. 4:43; 1 Kgs 22:3) have been suggested as possible sites, but there can be no certainty."

### ***(iii) The rejection of Jephthah (11:1-3)***

**1 Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute.**

**2 Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman."**

**3 So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him.**

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "The narrative here goes back probably some years, to explain the antecedents of Jephthah, who was about to play so prominent a part in the ensuing history. Jephthah we learn was a bastard son of Gilead by a foreign harlot, an Aramitess, if there is any connection between this verse and ... 1 Chronicles 7:14; and when the sons of Gilead's wife were grown up, they expelled Jephthah, and refused to let him have any share in the inheritance of their father, because he was the son of a foreigner; Jephthah therefore fled from Gilead, and took up his residence in the land of Tob, apparently an Aramean settlement (... 2 Samuel 10:6, 8), and presumably the land of his mother's birth, where he gathered round him

‘vain men’ (... Judges 9:4), and became a famous freebooter. There he was at the time of the Ammonite invasion mentioned in ... Judges 10:17, and thither the Gileadites sent for him to come and be their captain, after the consultation in ... Judges 10:18, with the promise that if he came he should be the head or prince of all the inhabitants of Gilead. After some demur he agreed, and came, and was installed as head of the state at the Gileadite metropolis of Mizpah.”

Jephthah is called in the NIV “a mighty warrior.” The Hebrew words used are *gibbowr chayil*. The term is used in Scripture of the Nephilim, the giants who lived on earth before the flood of Noah. We read: “The Nephilim were on the earth in those days — and also afterward — when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, *men of renown*.”<sup>61</sup>

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments on Jephthah’s background: “The cloud upon his birth appears greater than that of Abimelech. He was the son of Gilead, whose name is identical with the grandson of Manasseh who was the founder of the clan, but his mother was a *harlot* (1), a *strange woman* (2, AV) who may have been a non-Israelite. Living in his father’s house Jephthah was deprived of his family rights by his illegitimacy and, unlike Abimelech, he had no share in his mother’s clan. Eventually he was thrust out by his stepbrothers, an event which determined his whole future, for he became a brigand chief over a group of outcasts and social misfits.”

***(iv) The recall of Jephthah (11:4-11)***

***4 Some time later, when the Ammonites made war on Israel,***

***5 the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob.***

***6 "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites."***

***7 Jephthah said to them, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?"***

***8 The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be our head over all who live in Gilead."***

***9 Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me — will I really be your head?"***

***10 The elders of Gilead replied, "The Lord is our witness; we will certainly do as you say."***

***11 So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the Lord in Mizpah.***

The NIV’s “some time later” is the rendering of the single Hebrew word *hayah*, which literally means “to exist.”

No specific time is mentioned, but evidently, the Ammonites made frequent raids against Israel and the leaders of the nation became desperate as they found no one to organize a force that could resist the enemy.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “the encroachments of the Ammonites made the elders of Gilead desperate enough to seek help from Jephthah, who must have built up a considerable reputation for leadership in the course of his brigandage. His answer to their request implies that they were as blameworthy as his own brethren in his expulsion from the family, but in spite of the sting in his words, there is not the vindictiveness that is revealed in 12:1-6.

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<sup>61</sup> Gen. 6:4

Jephthah probably realized that the conventions of society left them no alternative but to acquiesce in the harsh action of his brethren.”

There is unfairness in the stigma of one’s birth. It wasn’t Jephthah’s fault that he was born “out of wedlock” and that his mother was a prostitute. We could say that his birth, in a way, foreshadowed the birth of Jesus Christ, who came into this world without having an earthly father.

The Israelites had enough people to fight the Ammonites, but they needed a leader. Evidently, they felt that no one among them qualified and so they turned to the one they had rejected. In this also Jephthah points to Jesus. At the Second Coming, the Jewish nation and probably Jews worldwide will see the One they have pierced and mourn over the fact that they rejected their Savior.<sup>62</sup>

The NIV reads v.8: “The elders of Gilead said to him, ‘*Nevertheless*, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be our head over all who live in Gilead.’” The Hebrew word used is *ken*, which in some cases is translated “so,” as in “So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was *so*.”<sup>63</sup> In another instance it is used in the sense of “therefore,” as in: “*For this reason* a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”<sup>64</sup> The latter fits better the context in which it is used in our text.

Jephthah wanted to be sure that the elders of would keep their word, although he was not sure that the Lord would give him the victory over the Ammonites. He made the elders swear an oath.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The invitation to Jephthah was virtually that he should become a local dictator for the rest of his life. But while his self-seeking impulse is evident, his strong faith in Yahweh is evident. It was the Lord who would be the real deliverer (9). The compact between Jephthah and the elders was sealed in a solemn ceremony, almost a coronation, at the local sanctuary of Mizpeh . . . . It will be observed that Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, was invoked as the witness to this agreement (10, 11).”

***(v) Charge and countercharge (11:12-28)***

***12 Then Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: "What do you have against us that you have attacked our country?"***

***13 The king of the Ammonites answered Jephthah's messengers, "When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. Now give it back peaceably."***

***14 Jephthah sent back messengers to the Ammonite king,***

***15 saying: "This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites.***

***16 But when they came up out of Egypt, Israel went through the desert to the Red Sea and on to Kadesh.***

***17 Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Give us permission to go through your country,' but the king of Edom would not listen. They sent also to the king of Moab, and he refused. So Israel stayed at Kadesh.***

<sup>62</sup> See Zech. 12:10.

<sup>63</sup> Gen. 1:7

<sup>64</sup> Gen. 2:24

**18 "Next they traveled through the desert, skirted the lands of Edom and Moab, passed along the eastern side of the country of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was its border.**

**19 "Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon, and said to him, 'Let us pass through your country to our own place.'**

**20 Sihon, however, did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. He mustered all his men and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel.**

**21 "Then the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his men into Israel's hands, and they defeated them. Israel took over all the land of the Amorites who lived in that country,**

**22 capturing all of it from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the desert to the Jordan.**

**23 "Now since the Lord, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it over?**

**24 Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever the Lord our God has given us, we will possess.**

**25 Are you better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever quarrel with Israel or fight with them?**

**26 For three hundred years Israel occupied Heshbon, Aroer, the surrounding settlements and all the towns along the Arnon. Why didn't you retake them during that time?**

**27 I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by waging war against me. Let the Lord, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites."**

**28 The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him.**

Jephthah began his reign by trying to solve the tension between Israel and the Ammonites with diplomatic means. He shows an amazing knowledge of Israel's three-hundred-year old history. As a matter of fact, it seems that Jephthah knew his history better than the king of Ammon knew that of his own nation.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: "Jephthah sent messengers unto the king of the children of Ammon. This first act in his judicial capacity reflects the highest credit on his character for prudence and moderation, justice and humanity. The bravest officers have always been averse to war; so Jephthah, whose courage was indisputable, resolved not only to make it clearly appear that hostilities were forced upon him, but to try measures for avoiding, if possible, an appeal to arms; and in pursuing such a course, he was acting with the prudence, and on the pacific policy, which became a leader in Israel, who was required by law not to resolve on war until negotiation had failed (Deut 20:10-18)."

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The Ammonite king stated his ground of quarrel very distinctly. He claimed the land between the Ammon and the Jabbok as Ammonitish or Moabitish territory, and demanded its surrender as the only condition of peace. It appears from ... Joshua 13:25 that part of the land of the tribe of Gad, that, namely, 'on the western side of the upper Jabbok,' had once belonged to the Ammonites, but had been conquered by the Amorites, from whom Israel took it, together with that which had formerly belonged to the Moabites."

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The reply of Jephthah was not entirely based on sweet reason! The first point which he emphasized was that Israel, on the journey from Egypt, had behaved with restraint and propriety in its relationships with Edom and Moab. The two kingdoms were established about fifty years before the Israelites entered Canaan, but during this period their frontiers had become well established and secured by a series of fortresses. Israel had not violated their land although this involved a long detour around their frontiers.... A

glance at the map will show how greatly Edomite approval of a passage through her territory would have shortened the journey of Israel. A similar request to Sihon, the Amorite king, was met with downright hostility as well as refusal. There being no kinship between the Israelites and the Amorites, as there was between Israel, Edom and Moab (cf. Deut. 2:4-9), Israel dealt resolutely with this barrier to their access to the Promised Land.”

We read about the reaction of the king of Ammon to Jephthah’s message: “The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him.” Ammon continued its raids into Israeli territory.

***(vi) Jephthah’s vow (11:29-31)***

***29 Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites.***

***30 And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands,***

***31 whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."***

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The troops of Jephthah were drawn from the Israelites settled east of the Jordan, the base-camp being Mizpah of Gilead .... Two facts in this section stand in sharp contrast. First, Jephthah, by the coming of *the Spirit of the Lord* upon him, became a charismatic hero, empowered by God to effect the deliverance of the people. But then, in the second place, he showed his lack of appreciation of the character and requirements of the Lord, and also a lack of confidence in the divine enablement, by seeking to secure the favor of God by his rash *vow*.

It can hardly be assumed, as does *The Tyndale Commentary*, that Jephthah had anything but an animal sacrifice in mind.

Bible scholars have argued to the point to exhaustion. The pagan influences that would require human sacrifices have been put forth. It has been suggested that an unclean animal, like a dog, could have come out of Jephthah’s door, etc. The easiest explanation seems to be that Jephthah was careless in the way he formulated his vow.

The greatest problem is that vows were considered so sacred and the breaking of even a carelessly formulated vow was supposed to bring God’s wrath upon a person’s head, so that in the Jewish mind any vow had to be fulfilled literally.

Solomon defines the concept in his observation in Ecclesiastes, stating: “When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the [temple] messenger, ‘My vow was a mistake.’ Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?”<sup>65</sup>

An interesting point is that “the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah” to prepare him for the ensuing battle and give the victory. But Jephthah did not consult the Spirit when he made his vow. As a matter of fact, his vow suggests that there was some doubt in Jephthah’s mind whether God would give him the victory. “If you give the Ammonites into my hands” makes the vow conditional upon God’s help.

Much has been made about the phrase: “whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me ...” Some Bible scholars believe that those words are indication that Jephthah could not

<sup>65</sup> Eccl. 5:4-6

have had an animal in mind, since it could have been his dog that came to greet him. And dogs could not be sacrificed, being an unclean animal. The most logical explanation about Jephthah's vow seems to be that he made it without thinking through what he said.

Another point of interest is that Jephthah's vow put him before the predicament of a choice between two sins: breaking a vow, or committing a murder. Every time we find this dilemma occurring in Scripture, the persons involved chose, what seems to be the worst option: murder. The fact that King Herod had made a vow, cost John the Baptist his head.<sup>66</sup> The reputation of being "a man of his word" was more important than taking someone's life.

***(vii) Defeat of the Ammonites (11:32, 33)***

***32 Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands.  
33 He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon.***

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: "He met and engaged them at Aroer, a town in the tribe of Gad, upon the Arnon. A decisive victory crowned the arms of Israel, and the pursuit was continued to *`Aabeel K<sup>a</sup>raamiym* - i.e., plain of the vineyards; from south to north, over an extent of about 60 miles."

Jephthah's victory over Ammon was total, but it did not annihilate them. *The Tyndale Commentary* states: "The Ammonites were to re-emerge as a threat to Israel about fifty years after this defeat (1 Sam. 11:1ff)."

***(ix) The fulfillment of Jephthah's vow (11:34-40)***

***34 When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter.***

***35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break."***

***36 "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites.***

***37 But grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry."***

***38 "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and the girls went into the hills and wept because she would never marry.***

***39 After the two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin. From this comes the Israelite custom***

***40 that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.***

Still holding on to the thought that Jephthah must have had a human sacrifice in mind, *The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "The victorious general returned to Mizpah, no doubt expecting that the fulfillment of his vow would involve no more than the sacrifice of one of his many household servants. To his horror, however, he was greeted by his daughter, coming to

<sup>66</sup> See Matt. 14:6-9; Mark 6:22-26.

meet her conquering father in a typically Hebrew manner (cf. Exod. 13:20; 1 Sam. 18:6; Ps. 68:25). ... Great stress is placed upon the fact that Jephthah's daughter was an *only child* (34), the Hebrew reading literally 'and she only was an only child' (cf. Gen. 22:2; John 5:16). The fact of her *virginity* is also bewailed (38, 39). Corporate personality, that sense of identification within the clan or group, was very strong at this early stage in Israel's history. The individual lost something of his identity within the group, and the concept of an individual resurrection was hardly possible in this setting. But there were compensations; the individual lived on in his descendants. He would not see the future himself but it belonged to him so long as his line was maintained; hence the power in a curse which involved a man's offspring (2 Sam. 3:28, 29). The fact that Jephthah's daughter bore no child was more than a tragedy of a life unfulfilled ... It represented the termination of the clan of Jephthah himself, since she was his only child."

One wonders, however, if those were the main thoughts in Jephthah's mind when he saw his daughter coming to greet him. The fact that he would have to kill his own daughter must have been as abhorrent to him as it is to us after so many centuries.

We read that Jephthah tore his clothes when he saw his daughter as the first person to come and greet him. The text does not state that he explained the content of his vow to the Lord, but only that he said to his daughter that he had made a vow. It seems that she understood what this meant, as she answered that he should keep his promise to God.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes about Jephthah's daughter's reaction: "The touching submission of Jephthah's daughter to her unnatural and terrible fate, while it reveals a most lovable character, seems also to show that the idea of a human sacrifice was not so strange to her mind as it is to ours. The sacrifice of his eldest son as a burnt offering by the king of Moab, some 300 years later, as related ... 2 Kings 3:27; ... the sacrifices of children to Moloch, so often spoken of in Scripture; the question in ... Micah 6:7, 'Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' ... and many other examples, prove the prevalence of human sacrifices in early times, and in heathen lands. This must be borne in mind in reading the history of Jephthah."

Whether Jephthah actually gave his daughter up to the Lord as a human sacrifice, is an open question. The law allowed for redemption.

*Pictorial Bible Dictionary* writes the following about the fulfillment of Jephthah's vow regarding his daughter: "The great point in this history is his vow (Judg. 11:29-40) and the way in which it was fulfilled. On his return home after the victory over the Ammonites, his own daughter was the first to meet him from his house. A man of the highest integrity, he knew that he could not go back on his vow to the Lord, and his daughter agreed with him. She asked only that she and her companions be allowed to go for two months to the mountains to bewail her virginity. When she returned to her father, he 'did with her according to his vow which he had vowed which he had vowed: and she knew no man' (Judg. 11:39). After that she was lamented by the daughters of Israel four days every year.

How was the vow fulfilled? Did he actually sacrifice his daughter as a burnt offering, or did he redeem her with money and doom her to perpetual celibacy? The ancient Jewish authorities and the early Church fathers, as well as many in modern times, like Martin Luther, hold that she was actually sacrificed, as a first reading of the narrative suggests. It is said that Jephthah was either ignorant of the law against human sacrifices or that he flagrantly violated it. Those who hold the other view support it by saying that Jephthah's whole history, and especially his message to the king of the Ammonites, shows him to be a man well acquainted with the history of God's dealings with His people, as given in the law of Moses, and able to appreciate

its bearing on his age. His own words, and those of his daughter (Judg. 11:34, 35), imply a knowledge of the Mosaic law as to vows (Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:23). A true worshipper of Jehovah could not regard human sacrifices with anything but abhorrence. Such a thing would be impossible of Jephthah, the chosen leader of God's people, all of whose dealings are thoroughly godly, who had just been filled with the Spirit of God to carry on the work; and whose faith is celebrated in Hebrews. Leviticus 27:1-8 contemplates the possibility of a man's vowing to give himself or some person of his household to the Lord, and makes provision for the redemption of such a person in money. We know too from the experience of Samuel that sometimes persons coming under a vow were handed over for the service of the sanctuary (1 Sam. 1:11). It is therefore thought that Jephthah redeemed his daughter with money and gave her up to the service of the Lord as a perpetual virgin. That is the meaning of her request that she be allowed to bewail her virginity for two months, and of the statement made in Judges 11:39, 'and she knew no man.' The fact is, however that we cannot be absolutely certain of the mode of fulfillment of Jephthah's vow."

Jephthah's daughter requested one favor from her father, that she be given a two months' respite in order to bewail the fact that she would never marry. The Hebrew reads literally: "I and my fellows bewail my virginity."

Since we do not know whether Jephthah actually killed his daughter or whether she would be kept a virgin for the rest of her life, we cannot be sure what was the actual matter she and her friends would bewail. It would mean the end of the line of Jephthah. To an Old Testament Jew, not leaving behind any offspring would be the equivalent of not having eternal life. At least that seems to have been the philosophy of the age.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* takes this interpretation of the text and comments: "From Judg 11:39 it appears evident that Jephthah's daughter was not SACRIFICED to God, but consecrated to him in a state of perpetual virginity; for the text says, She knew no man, for this was a statute in Israel. *Wat<sup>a</sup>hiy choq b<sup>aa</sup>Yisraa'eel*; namely, that persons thus dedicated or consecrated to God, should live in a state of unchangeable celibacy. Thus, this celebrated place is, without violence to any part of the text, or to any proper rule of construction, cleared of all difficulty, and caused to speak a language consistent with itself, and with the nature of God."

*The Pulpit Commentary*, believing that Jephthah did in fact sacrifice his daughter, writes: It is a striking evidence of the strong desire among Hebrew women to be mothers, as seen in Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, and others, that it was the prospect of dying unmarried which seemed to Jephthah's daughter the saddest part of her fate. So in ... Psalm 78:63, *their maidens were not given to marriage* is one of the items of the misery of Israel .... Verse 39 — *Who did with her according to his vow*. Nothing can be more express than this statement. In fact, except the natural horror we feel at a human sacrifice, there is nothing to cast the least shade of doubt upon the fact that Jephthah's daughter was offered up as a burnt offering, in accordance with heathen notions, but, as Josephus says, neither 'conformably to the law, nor acceptably to God.' Most of the early Jewish commentators and all the Christian Fathers for ten or eleven centuries (Origen, Chrysostom, Theodore, Jerome, Augustine, etc.) held this view. Luther's comment is, 'Some affirm that he did not sacrifice her, but the text is clear enough.'"

The Scripture text states that the Israelites commemorated the fact of Jephthah's daughter's death by setting aside a day of commemorating every year. One problem is that there is no indication that such a day was ever kept in Israel's history.

*Barnes' Notes* observes: "There is no allusion extant elsewhere to this annual lamentation of the untimely fate of Jephthah's daughter. But the poetical turn of the narrative suggests that it may be taken from some ancient song."

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, which takes the view that Jephthah's daughter was not killed sacrificially, states: "It might be that this anniversary was observed only during the lifetime of Jephthah's daughter, and chiefly by the women of the Gileadite district who were acquainted with her, or cognizant of the circumstances connected with her pious self-sacrifice. This view of Jephthah's vow, which has occasioned perplexity in every subsequent age of the Church, seems in perfect accordance with Scripture, and possesses the merit of rescuing from the reproach of a dark and malignant superstition the character of a judge in Israel, whom the Spirit of God has enrolled among the worthies of the ancient congregation."

### **m. Jephthah and the jealous Ephraimites (12:1-7)**

*1 The men of Ephraim called out their forces, crossed over to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, "Why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We're going to burn down your house over your head."*

*2 Jephthah answered, "I and my people were engaged in a great struggle with the Ammonites, and although I called, you didn't save me out of their hands."*

*3 When I saw that you wouldn't help, I took my life in my hands and crossed over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave me the victory over them. Now why have you come up today to fight me?"*

*4 Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because the Ephraimites had said, "You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh."*

*5 The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No,"*

*6 they said, "All right, say 'Shibboleth.'" If he said, "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.*

*7 Jephthah led Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died, and was buried in a town in Gilead.*

It is obvious that something is missing in the details of the story. Jephthah says that he appealed to the Ephraimites to come and help in the battle against the Ammonites. This is not mentioned in the previous text, but there is no reason to believe that this had not been the case.

The Ephraimite action against Jephthah may have been an effort to cover up their previous lack of initiative. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "Probably Jephthah asked the help of Ephraim when he was first made chief of the Gileadites, and they refused partly because they thought the attempt desperate, and partly because they were offended at Jephthah's leadership."

We read that Jephthah called together the men of Gilead to fight the Ephraimites who came to kill him. Probably Jephthah asked the help of Ephraim when he was first made chief of the Gileadites, and they refused partly because they thought the attempt desperate, and partly because they were offended at Jephthah's leadership.

*The Easton's Bible Dictionary* states about Gilead: "It comprised the possessions of the tribes of Gad and Reuben and the south part of Manasseh (Deut 3:13; Num 32:40). It was

bounded on the north by Bashan, and on the south by Moab and Ammon (Gen 31:21; Deut 3:12-17). ‘Half Gilead’ was possessed by Sihon, and the other half, separated from it by the river Jabbok, by Og, king of Bashan. The deep ravine of the river Hieromax ... separated Bashan from Gilead, which was about 60 miles in length and 20 in breadth, extending from near the south end of the Lake of Gennesaret to the north end of the Dead Sea. Abarim, Pisgah, Nebo, and Peor are its mountains mentioned in Scripture.”

It is not clear why the Ephraimites stated that the Gileadites were “renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh.” The Hebrew word used is *paliyt*, which literally means: “a refugee.” Bible scholars agree that the Hebrew text is not clear.

Being one of the larger of Israel’s tribes made the Ephraimites into a group of haughty and arrogant people. Jephthah’s leadership is apparent in the way he tried to counter the Ephraimite accusation of having gone to war without consulting them first. He tried to solve the tension by diplomatic means. It was only when this failed that he engaged in battle, which was an act of self-defense.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The Ephraimites, undoubtedly armed, expressed their resentment to Jephthah in no uncertain terms. They, the leading tribe in central and northern Israel, had been slighted by him in not being called to the battle, now they purposed taking a summary vengeance upon this upstart. ... The course of the battle makes it clear that the Ephraimites had already crossed the Jordan, so in fact their route was to the east, not the north.

It was not long before the situation worsened, fanned into a by the sneering aspersions of the Ephraimites (4) in which they accused the Gileadites of being renegade Ephraimites. The army of Jephthah, demobilized after the crushing of the Ammonite menace, was hastily recalled and gained as complete a victory over their fellow countrymen as they had over the foreign invader. In Gideon’s campaign with the Midianites it was the Ephraimites who had secured the fords against a defeated enemy. Now the Jordan fords were seized to cut off the retreat of their own shattered forces. ... A devastatingly simple test was devised to ascertain the identity of those who sought passage over the Jordan. Those who confessed to being Ephraimites were presumably killed at once; those who denied were commanded to say a word, *Shibboleth* (meaning ‘ear of corn’), which the Ephraimites were constitutionally unable to pronounce. ... Any other word with *sh* would have sufficed, but it was the word *shibboleth* which has come into common usage to denote the watchword or catchphrase of a particular sect or group.”

The story of Jephthah’s life ends with the mention that he died after leading Israel for six years. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “After a government of six years this ‘mighty man of valor died;’ and however difficult it may be for us to understand some passages in his history, he has been ranked by apostolic authority among the worthies of the ancient Church. He was followed by a succession of minor judges, of whom the only memorials preserved relate to the number of their families and their state.”

## **n. Ibzan (12:8-10)**

**8** *After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem led Israel.*

**9** *He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. He gave his daughters away in marriage to those outside his clan, and for his sons he brought in thirty young women as wives from outside his clan. Ibzan led Israel seven years.*

**10** *Then Ibzan died, and was buried in Bethlehem.*

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments on Ibzan and his leadership: “There is no mention of Ibzan anywhere else in the Old Testament. The number of his children indicates his wealth and position in the community the word abroad (AV, RV) means no more than that his children married members of another clan (cf. RSV). Beth-lehem is not to be identified with Bethlehem in Judah. The tribe of Judah, apart from occasional references appears to have been cut off from intertribal life during the major portion of the period of the judges. The likelihood is that this Beth-lehem was the town in western Zebulun, about 10 miles north of Megiddo (Josh. 19:15).”

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “It is uncertain whether Bethlehem of Judah is meant, or Bethlehem in the tribe of Zebulun, mentioned in ... Joshua 19:15. Josephus says that Ibzan was of the tribe of Judah, and of the city of Bethlehem, and some have supposed a connection between the names of Boaz and Ibzan. But as Bethlehem of the tribe of Judah is generally called Bethlehem of Judah, or Bethlehem-Ephrata, and as Elon and Abdon were judges in North-East Israel, it is perhaps more probable that Bethlehem of Zebulun is meant.”

It must be assumed that Ibzan had several wives. We are not told how many, but it would have been impossible for one woman to give birth to sixty children.

Since nothing more is mentioned about Ibzan we may suppose that the seven years of his leadership were peaceful ones.

#### **o. Elon (12:11-12)**

***11 After him, Elon the Zebulunite led Israel ten years.***

***12 Then Elon died, and was buried in Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.***

We are given even less information about Elon. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “If the identification of Beth-lehem (8) is correct, then both Ibzan and Elon were from the tribe of Zebulun. No supplementary information concerning Elon is given beyond the name of his tribe, the length of his period of office and his burial place. *Aijalon in the country of Zebulun*, this distinguishing it from the better-known Aijalon in Danite territory. Aijalon in Zebulun is usually located in the vicinity of Rimmon, but as the form of the word is exactly the same as Elon in the unpointed Hebrew text the name of the judge and the place of his burial may be identical, as in the LXX.”

#### **p. Abdon (12:13-15)**

***13 After him, Abdon son of Hillel, from Pirathon, led Israel.***

***14 He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys. He led Israel eight years.***

***15 Then Abdon son of Hillel died, and was buried at Pirathon in Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.***

Information about Abdon is similarly skimpy. *The Tyndale Commentary* writes about Abdon: “The prestige and wealth of Abdon is revealed in the number of his *sons* and *grandsons* (not nephews as AV) and their mounts (cf. 10:4). The reference to the *mount* or *hill country*, of the Amalekites is perplexing. It has been conjectured that this reference, together with that in 5:14, supports the view that there was a small Amalekite enclave in the territory of Ephraim, a possibility which is not completely ruled out by the inveterate hostility which existed between the Israelites and the Amalekites generally ... The reference may be with one or other of the

incursions into Israelite territory by hostile groups which included the Amalekites (3:13; 6:3, 33; 7:12; 10:12). It should be noted that the Amalekites, because of their treacherous attack in the earlier part of the wilderness wanderings, came under permanent condemnation and were to be destroyed (Exod. 17:8-13; Deut. 25:17-19; 1 Sam. 15:2, 3.)”

### **q. Samson and the Philistines (13:1 – 16:31)**

#### ***(i) The Philistine oppression 13:1***

***13 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.***

In a general introduction to this period in Israel’s history, *The Tyndale Commentary* writes about the Philistines: “The Philistines had settled in large numbers on the coastal plain about a generation after the Israelites had entered the land (c. 1200 BC), although the possibility of earlier, smaller settlements of ethnically related groups is not excluded (Gen. 21:32, 34; 26:1ff. ...). When they had established themselves in the pentapolis (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath) they began to penetrate the hinterland. At some point they were momentarily repulsed by Shamgar, thus affording temporary respite to the Israelites (3:31). The Philistine pressure on the Amorites led to a corresponding pressure on the Israelites (1:34-36) and this led in turn to the migration of a portion of the Danites to the extreme north of the land (18:1ff.). ... The Philistine menace was the greater because it was so insidious in some of its phases. The direct and cruel aggression of the Moabites, Canaanites, Midianites and Ammonites, etc. was missing, to be replaced by infiltration through intermarriage and trade. Their rule over the peoples they dominated does not appear at all onerous at this early stage and the men of Judah, who like the Danites were affected by the encroachments, seem to have resented the exploits of Samson and to have accepted the Philistine yoke with docility (15:11). There was the possibility that the Philistines might have continued this movement and eventually have taken over the whole land.

It was in this situation of apathetic acceptance of a potentially dangerous situation that Samson emerged to wage a one-man war against the Philistines. With remarkably little support from his own fellow-countrymen (nowhere does he have one single soldier at his side, let alone an army), he brought the danger into the open. There is no doubt that his exploits sharpened the animosity of the Philistines against the Israelites and led to the employment of greater force in carving out their empire. This represented a greater threat to Israel than any other invasion up to that point. But at least the issues were clear and the essential conflict was on the battlefield. Israel was able to appreciate and meet this threat, whereas the earlier and greater threat had been largely unrecognized. So these narratives are of historical importance, for they document a vital stage of the Philistine threat.”

#### ***(ii) Samson’s birth foretold (13:1-5)***

***2 A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was sterile and remained childless.***

***3 The angel of the Lord appeared to her and said, "You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son.***

***4 Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean,  
5 because you will conceive and give birth to a son. No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines."***

The birth of Samson was in a way miraculous in that his mother was sterile. This put him in the same line of miracle babies as Isaac, Jacob, Samuel, and John the Baptist.

Interestingly, the name of Samson's mother is not mentioned, only the father's name. Yet it was to her that the angel of the Lord appeared and told her that she would become pregnant and have a son. She was also told that her boy would be a Nazirite.

The law on Nazirites had been given to Moses and we find it recorded in the *Book of Numbers*, which reads: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: "If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the Lord as a Nazirite, he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or from other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins. During the entire period of his vow of separation no razor may be used on his head. He must be holy until the period of his separation to the Lord is over; he must let the hair of his head grow long. Throughout the period of his separation to the Lord he must not go near a dead body. Even if his own father or mother or brother or sister dies, he must not make himself ceremonially unclean on account of them, because the symbol of his separation to God is on his head. Throughout the period of his separation he is consecrated to the Lord."<sup>67</sup>

The interesting difference between the law and the instructions given to Manoah's wife is that in all other circumstances, it was the person who wanted to be a Nazirite who made the vow. In this case there was no vow; Manoah's wife was simply told what she had to observe before the birth of her Nazirite son.

Another difference was that the Nazirite vow was usually done for a limited period of time, decided by the person who made the vow. For Samson it was a lifelong obligation. Samson was one of three people known in Scripture who were lifelong Nazirites. The other two were Samuel and John the Baptist.

We don't read that Samson would not be allowed to drink any wine or eat any fruit of the grapevine, as was stipulated in the Nazirite law. Manoah's wife was only told that his hair must never be cut.

Matthew calls Jesus "a Nazarene," suggesting that Jesus was a Nazirite. There is a play-on-words in Matthew's observation, since the name Nazareth contains the Hebrew word *natsar*, meaning "vow." Jesus abstained from wine after celebrating the last supper with His disciples, saying: "I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."<sup>68</sup> This suggests that Jesus was only a Nazirite during the process of the crucifixion.

### ***(iii) The angel's second visit (13:6-14)***

<sup>67</sup> Num. 6:1-8

<sup>68</sup> Matt. 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18

**6 Then the woman went to her husband and told him, "A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name.**

**7 But he said to me, 'You will conceive and give birth to a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from birth until the day of his death.'**

**8 Then Manoah prayed to the Lord: "O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born."**

**9 God heard Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman while she was out in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her.**

**10 The woman hurried to tell her husband, "He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!"**

**11 Manoah got up and followed his wife. When he came to the man, he said, "Are you the one who talked to my wife?" "I am," he said.**

**12 So Manoah asked him, "When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?"**

**13 The angel of the Lord answered, "Your wife must do all that I have told her.**

**14 She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her."**

There are some strange features in this story that raise questions to which no answer is given. It is true that it was Manoah's wife who would give birth to the baby and the child would probably be mainly her responsibility in the early years. She was the one who must abstain from drinking wine. But ultimately the child would belong to both parents and it would have been more natural if the divine message had been given to both.

Manoah's wife tells her husband that she had been met by this most impressive man whom she expected to be an angel. But evidently the divine messenger did appear to her in human form.

Manoah believes his wife, but he would like to hear the message himself, so he prays for the angel to return and repeat the message to him also. The answer to his prayer comes, but again in an unusual way. When the angel appears for the second time Manoah is again not present. Manoah's wife runs home and calls her husband. When he arrives in the field, the divine messenger is still there and he repeats what he had already told to the woman.

We don't read that Manoah's wife repeated the angel's word about the task her son would perform in beginning to deliver the Israelites from the Philistine oppression. To her the fact that she would become pregnant and have a son was more important than any political change in her country. Manoah would probably have considered that the most important part of the message.

**(iv) The sacrifice of Manoah (13:15-23)**

**15 Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, "We would like you to stay until we prepare a young goat for you."**

**16 The angel of the Lord replied, "Even though you detain me, I will not eat any of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the Lord." (Manoah did not realize that it was the angel of the Lord.)**

**17 Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the Lord, "What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?"**

**18 He replied, "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding."**

**19 Then Manoah took a young goat, together with the grain offering, and sacrificed it on a rock to the Lord. And the Lord did an amazing thing while Manoah and his wife watched:**

**20 As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame. Seeing this, Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground.**

**21 When the angel of the Lord did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized that it was the angel of the Lord.**

**22 "We are doomed to die!" he said to his wife. "We have seen God!"**

**23 But his wife answered, "If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor shown us all these things or now told us this."**

Manoah's reaction to the information his wife gave him about the visitation of the angel indicates that there was a relationship of genuine confidence between the two. He does not dismiss her word as the product of imagination or hysteria, but he prays, asking the Lord to send the angel again to repeat the message to him personally. His prayer is answered, but in an indirect manner. When the angel appears it is again to his wife. She runs home to tell her husband. We do not read that she asked the angel to wait, but that is understood, because when Manoah follows his wife to the place where the angel appeared, he is still there and he repeats the message he had given to Mrs. Manoah.

Apparently, Manoah did not recognize the divine messenger as an angel. He must have thought him to have been a human prophet. He wanted to show him hospitality such as must have been customary at that time. As *The Tyndale Commentary* observes, the offered hospitality was typical for the culture of the place and time. We read: "The time involved in preparing such a meal is indicative of the leisureliness of the period, a far cry from the quick-frozen, 'prepared in ten minutes' meal of the modern Western world." Manoah would have to go to his stable, slaughter an animal and prepare it, a feat that would take several hours.

The angel answers that Manoah may do as he said, but that he would not eat the food; it could be given as a sacrifice to the Lord. We are told that Manoah still had no idea he was in the presence of "the angel of the Lord." In the Old Testament that title is usually reserved for the Second Person of the Trinity.

Before preparing the meal or sacrifice, Manoah asks the messenger his name. He intends to honor this prophet, probably by offering him a present when his prediction came true. The Hebrew text of the angel's answer reads literally: "And the angel of the Lord said to him, Why ask you thus after my name, seeing that it is secret?" The Hebrew word used is *pil'iy*, which can mean either "secret," or "wonderful." The same word is used in the Psalm verse: "Such knowledge is too *wonderful* for me, too lofty for me to attain."<sup>69</sup>

We read that Manoah offered the sacrifice upon a rock. *The Tyndale Commentary* supposes that it was upon a rock altar that the sacrifice was offered. From that point on the angel is called "the Lord," indicating that it was God Himself who had appeared in human form.

Manoah and his wife, evidently, understood at this point what kind of revelation they had witnessed. Manoah must have lit the fire on the altar and as the sacrifice began to burn up the angel of the Lord went up in the flame.

<sup>69</sup> Ps. 139:6

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “In contrast with the events in chapter 6, where the staff of the angel was used to kindle the flame, Manoah appears to have offered the sacrifice in the normal way, and the whole incredible incident came to its frightening climax when the angel ascended heavenward in the flame of the altar. Immediately full recognition flashed upon Manoah and his wife and left them prostrate and terror-stricken upon the ground. Manoah was the first to speak but the last to recover his composure, reflecting the widely held belief that if a man saw God he would die (Exod. 33:20; Judg. 6:22, 23). His wife, who had an advantage over her husband in that she had been in the presence of their divine visitor on an earlier occasion, and had survived that encounter, was more rational. With sound common sense she reasoned that the Lord would hardly have accepted an offering from them, or revealed such things concerning the future, if he purposed their death.

**(v) *The birth of Samson (13:24, 25)***

***24 The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the Lord blessed him,  
25 and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him while he was in Mahaneh Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.***

Nothing particular is stated about Samson’s early years. We read that the Holy Spirit began “to stir him” at a certain point. Although no further explanation is given, we assume that this means that he began to experience unusual physical strength, which later became typical for his endeavors. *The Tyndale Commentary* comments: “Like his predecessors among the judges of the various tribes he received his charismatic anointing of *the Spirit of the Lord*, an anointing which was reflected in his unique strength and spectacular feats. The reference to the *camp of Dan* (AV), *Mahaneh-dan*, RV, RSV) is interesting for it suggests a temporary habitation, possibly caused by the pressure from the Ammonites and Philistines, in which case it could be viewed as a displaced persons’ camp, 18:12.”

**(vi) *Samson’s first love 14:1-4***

***1 Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman.  
2 When he returned, he said to his father and mother, "I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife."  
3 His father and mother replied, "Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me. She's the right one for me."  
4 (His parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.)***

We read earlier that Samson’s parents lived at Zorah, which was also the place where Samson was born. According to *The Tyndale Commentary*, Timnah was “a little more than an hour’s stroll” from Zorah, which indicates how deeply the Philistines had penetrated into Israelite territory.

Since Samson fell in love with a Philistine girl who was living there and wanted to marry her, we may assume that he was in his late teens at this point. Whether he was unaware of the

resentment most Israelites must have felt about the Philistine intrusion into their territory, or whether he didn't care, we are not told.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "To marry with any that did not belong to the Israelitish stock, was contrary to the law, Ex 34:16; Deut 7:3. But this marriage of Samson was said to be of the Lord, Judg 14:4; that is, God permitted it, (for in no other sense can we understand the phrase), that it might be a means of bringing about the deliverance of Israel."

Although the Lord used the incident to bring deliverance of the Philistine yoke to the Israelites, we can hardly say that Samson felt led by the Holy Spirit in everything he did.

It is interesting to observe that Samson's parents called the Philistines "uncircumcised." The term refers in this context to the fact that they did not worship the same God as the Israelites. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The epithet, *uncircumcised* (3), applied to the Philistines in many Old Testament references, is appropriate, for all Israel's neighbors with the exception of the Philistines observed this practice. There were important differences, however. For instance, circumcision outside Israel was often attached to the rites of puberty or pre-marriage, and in Egypt it appears to have been restricted to the priests and possibly the ruling class."

About Samson's attitude toward his parents, the same commentary states: "Samson's lack of concern on such an important religious issue was matched by his lack of submission to his parents. In Israelite society the father was the head of the family and as such exercised control over all of its members, including the choice of wives for his sons (e.g. Gen. 24:4; 38:6). It was exceptional for a son to contravene the wishes of his parents in this or any other realm (Gen. 26:34, 35; 27:46), for the unit was the clan and personal preference was subordinated to it. The remonstrances of Samson's parents were dismissed curtly in the light of his overwhelming desire for this Philistine woman."

***(vii) Samson and the lion (14:5-7)***

***5 Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him.***

***6 The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat. But he told neither his father nor his mother what he had done.***

***7 Then he went down and talked with the woman, and he liked her.***

As is noted above, the parents were the ones who undertook the arrangements for a marriage of their son. It was therefore that this little party of three made the journey by foot to Timnah. Evidently, the parents walked ahead while Samson strolled more leisurely behind them. He must have lagged behind far enough that they noted nothing of the lion's attack on their son or of his remarkable way of dealing with this threat on his life.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "Samson had left the road along which his father and mother were walking, at a pace, perhaps, too slow for his youthful energy, and had plunged into the vineyards. Of a sudden a young lion, — a term designating a lion between the age of a cub and a full-grown lion, — brought there, perhaps, in pursuit of the foxes or jackals, which often had their holes in vineyards (... Song of Solomon 2:15), roared against him."

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes: "The lion is not found in Palestine at the present day, though in ancient times it is known to have inhabited not only Syria and Palestine but also Asia Minor and the Balkan peninsula, and its fossil remains show that it

was contemporary with prehistoric man in Northwestern Europe and Great Britain. Its present range extends throughout Africa, and it is also found in Mesopotamia, Southern Persia, and the border of India. There is some reason to think that it may be found in Arabia, but its occurrence there remains to be proved. The Asiatic male lion does not usually have as large a mane as the African, but both belong to one species, *Felis leo*.”

Although the animal that attacked Samson is called “a young lion” there is sufficient reason to believe that the incident ought to have been fatal. But it wasn’t deadly because the Spirit of the Lord endued Samson with superhuman strength that made him tear the animal apart. The fact that Samson never even mentioned the incident to his parents suggests that he thought nothing about it.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: “Many circumstances could have caused a temporary separation on the way down to Timnah and, in fact, all other information in this section is secondary to the slaying of the lion, since this is linked with its sequel in the riddle which Samson put at the marriage feast. ... Samson, attacked by a young lion, received a sudden accession of irresistible strength, attributed to *the Spirit of the Lord coming mightily upon him*. This manifestation of unusual physical strength appears to be the sole effect of the divine impulse upon Samson (cf. verse 19; 15:14; and the reference to Saul in I Sam. 11:6). The emphasis in the narrative is upon the ease with which he performed this exploit, not the manner itself, although the verb rent (AV, RV) suggests that he tore the lion down the middle, presumably by ripping the hind legs apart.”

Samson’s killing of the lion is the first incident that demonstrated his superhuman strength. Whether it was the first proof for Samson himself, is not recorded. Since he treated the incident as not important enough to reveal to his parents we could assume that he had been made aware of his specific gift before.

We read that after the encounter with the lion Samson met his wife-to-be and “talked with her.” Whether this means that he actually proposed to her, is not clear. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* believes that it means that he “espoused her; because the interview between the youth of different sexes is extremely rare and limited in the East, and generally after they, are betrothed.”

The Hebrew text reads literally: “and she pleased well.” Since we read earlier that Samson liked her, which was the reason he asked his parents to arrange the marriage, probably more was involved than mere conversation. It may be a euphemistic expression for the first experience of their marriage relationship.

***(ix) Honey from the lion’s corpse (14:8, 9)***

***8 Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion's carcass. In it was a swarm of bees and some honey,***

***9 which he scooped out with his hands and ate as he went along. When he rejoined his parents, he gave them some, and they too ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass.***

From this text we assume that Samson’s marriage with the Philistine girls was not consummated, since he did not take her home to live with her. How much time elapsed between this episode and the previous one is not indicated. It took enough time for bees to form a hive in the carcass of the lion Samson had killed.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The reference to the lapse of time is indeterminate, but since Samson shared the honey with his parents it is probable that he was on the homeward journey from Timnah to Zorah. It was almost certainly subsequent to the earlier visit, since a honeycomb had been formed. Turning aside, which suggests that his exploit was performed away from the main route, he discovered that *a swarm of bees* had settled in the carcass of the lion. In the extreme heat of a Palestinian summer a carcass becomes dehydrated very quickly, thus staying putrefaction and allowing the bees to hive, for normally bees will not approach a decomposing body. Possibly also those natural scavengers, the ants, vultures and jackals, had performed their office, thus leaving a natural cavity for the bees.”

**(ix) Samson’s feast (14:10, 11)**

**10 Now his father went down to see the woman. And Samson made a feast there, as was customary for bridegrooms.**

**11 When he appeared, he was given thirty companions.**

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “It is not clear what is meant by this mention of his father alone; but it was probably some part of the wedding etiquette that the father should go to the bride first alone; perhaps, as [one Bible scholar] says, to give her notice of the bridegroom’s approach, that she might get ready. Among the preparations may have been the selection of the thirty young men to be ‘the children of the bride-chamber’ (... Matthew 9:15). As these were all Philistines, the inference is that they were selected by the bride, just as with us the bride has the privilege of choosing the minister who is to officiate at the marriage. — *When they saw him*, i.e. when the father and mother and friends of the bride saw him approaching, they went to meet him with the thirty companions who had been selected. We still see a strong resemblance to the wedding arrangements referred to in ... Matthew 9:15, and 25:1-12; only in this case they were young men instead of young women who went out to meet the bridegroom. We may observe, by the way, that the scale of the wedding feast, as regards numbers and duration, indicates that Samson’s family was one of wealth and position.”

*The Tyndale Commentary* proposes another meaning of the father’s visit. We read: “Again we notice an enigmatic reference to Samson’s *father*; it is not clear why he journeyed to Timnah, since Samson was the one who provided the feast. This was at the bride’s house, making it apparent that this was not a normal Jewish marriage. It may be that the visit of Samson’s father was connected with an abortive effort to stop the marriage which he could not sanction. But we cannot be sure of this; some of the details appear to have been omitted. Marriage customs are notoriously tenacious and some of the details of this particular wedding feast appear in many subsequent celebrations, even up to the present day. The usual length of a celebration was seven days and the marriage was not consummated until the end of that period. The *thirty companions* were the ‘sons of the bride-chamber’ (Matt. 9:15; Mark 2:19; Luke 5:34, RV), who probably originated as a bodyguard to prevent the wedding party being surprised by marauders seeking easy pickings. The text seems to suggest something abnormal about his particular arrangement, as though the engagement of the thirty men was an afterthought. The LXX reflects this caution by its translation ‘when they feared him’ (11), i.e. they were a bodyguard to protect *against* Samson! But there was no apparent reason to fear him at this junction, and his frequent visits to Timnah would have made them familiar with his abnormal physique long before the point.”

**(x) Samson's riddle (14:12-18)**

**12 "Let me tell you a riddle," Samson said to them. "If you can give me the answer within the seven days of the feast, I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes.**

**13 If you can't tell me the answer, you must give me thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes." "Tell us your riddle," they said. "Let's hear it."**

**14 He replied, "Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet." For three days they could not give the answer.**

**15 On the fourth day, they said to Samson's wife, "Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your father's household to death. Did you invite us here to rob us?"**

**16 Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer." "I haven't even explained it to my father or mother," he replied, "so why should I explain it to you?"**

**17 She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people.**

**18 Before sunset on the seventh day the men of the town said to him, "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" Samson said to them, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle."**

Some Bible scholars have difficulties determining the time at which Samson proposed his riddle to the groomsmen. The Hebrew text reads literally: "I will put forth a riddle now unto you: if you can certainly find it out and declare it me [within the] seven days of the feast, then I will give you thirty sheets and thirty change of garments." We could read this to mean that Samson wanted the answer to the riddle any time during the week-long wedding celebration.

The articles of clothing mentioned stand for the Hebrew words *cadiyn*, which could be translated "undershirt" or "wrap-around," and *chaliyphah* beged "covering," or "outer-clothing."

We find the first word in the chapter in Proverbs that exalts the merits of the perfect housewife: "She makes *linen garments* and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes."<sup>70</sup> The second word is found in the list of items Eliezer brought when he went to look for a bride for Isaac. He brought "gold and silver jewelry and *articles of clothing* and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave costly gifts to her brother and to her mother."<sup>71</sup>

It is obvious that Samson believed that the groomsmen would never be able to come up with the answer. If they did, the deal would be much more of a burden to Samson than if they would lose the bet. They would only have to come up with one set of clothing each, while Samson would be responsible for thirty sets.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "In the general festive atmosphere of the feast Samson's challenge was readily accepted, for the thirty men would consider the advantages of their combined wisdom and time to be on their side. In fact, the stakes were high. The *sheets* (12, 13, AV) were large rectangular pieces of fine linen which were worn next to the body by day or by night. The *change of garments* (AV; cf. RV) were properly festal garments (RSV) which were equivalent to the modern 'Sunday best.' These were garments of superior quality and decoration, which were not for everyday use but for special occasions such as weddings. The average person

<sup>70</sup> Prov. 31:24

<sup>71</sup> Gen. 24:53

would possess only one such garment. Such attire was often the principle source of spoil in battle (cf. 5:30). Samson's riddle was in the form of a couplet, each line having three beats, the rhyme in our English rendering being accidental:

*Out of the eater came something to eat.  
Out of the strong came something sweet (RSV)."*

It is not clear why the NIV reads that the groomsmen went to the bride on the fourth day. The Hebrew text reads "seventh." *Barnes' Notes* comments: "Proposed alterations, such as 'six days ... on the fourth day,' are unnecessary if it be remembered that the narrator passes on first to the seventh day (at Judg 14:15), and then goes back at Judg 14:16 and beginning of Judg 14:17 to what happened on the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> days."

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "There is some apparent difficulty in understanding how to reconcile this statement with what was said in ver. 14, that they could not in *three days* expound the riddle; and also with what is said in vers. 16 and 17, that Samson's wife *wept before him the seven days of the feast*. And several different readings have arisen from this difficulty: viz., in this verse, the reading of the *fourth* day for the *seventh*, and the omission of the words, *And it came to pass on the seventh day*; and, in the latter part of ver. 14, seven days for three days. But all difficulty will disappear if we bear in mind the peculiarity of Hebrew narrative noticed in note to section vers. 1-6 of ch. 2., when we come to consider ver. 16."

It is obvious that no one could answer Samson's riddle, since he had not told his experience with the lion to anyone, not even his parents. The groomsmen must have felt more embarrassed about their inability to solve what should have been a simple puzzle than about the fact that they were being "robbed." *The Tyndale Commentary* states: "The atmosphere of the feast assumed an ugly, menacing aspect with their threat (15), in which they assumed that Samson's wife was implicated in a plot to strip them of their possessions. 15:6 shows that it was no idle threat. The woman, fearing for her life and her father's house, used the last resort of her sex, a flood of tears and the innuendo that Samson did not love her or he would keep no secrets from her – devices that have led to untold misery for both sexes! Samson was able to answer the innuendo by pointing out that his own parents, to whom he had the greater responsibility, were in ignorance of the answer (16); but he could not withstand the corrosive influence of three or four days of weeping. The suspense was maintained up to the last day. Samson anticipating the consummation of the marriage, was anxious to stop the flow of tears. But the shared secret meant that the marriage was, in fact, never consummated, for, as the seventh day drew to its close, the riddle was answered. Samson never entered the bridal chamber and without this the marriage was considered invalid. His retort to the thirty companions is in the same form as the riddle, a three-beat couplet which, somewhat unusually in Hebrew poetry, has a rhyme formed by the repetition of the first person singular suffix to the nouns. [One Bible scholar] successfully renders this:

If ye had not plowed with this heifer of mine,  
Ye would not have found out this riddle of mine."

It is supposed that Samson used a common expression about plowing with his heifer. It was not that he compared his wife-to-be with a cow.

***(xi) Samson's exploit at Ashkelon (14:19, 20)***

**19 Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of their belongings and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he went up to his father's house.**

**20 And Samson's wife was given to the friend who had attended him at his wedding.**

Ultimately, the Philistines paid for the riddle, although they were not the groomsmen. Samson killed 30 men in Ashkelon and took their garments which he delivered to the men who had “solved” his riddle. According to *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, Ashkelon “was about 24 miles west by southwest from Timnath; and his selection of this place, which was dictated by the Divine Spirit, was probably owing to its bitter hostility to Israel.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “Ashkelon (... Judges 1:18) — one of the five Philistine cities, but the least often mentioned, owing, it is thought, to its remote situation ‘on the extreme edge of the shore of the Mediterranean, far down in the south.’ *His anger was kindled* — against the Philistines in general, and his wife in particular, so that he went back to his father’s house without her.”

Since the marriage was not consummated at the end of the week-long celebration, the bride’s parents gave her away to someone else. Some Bible scholars think the lucky man must have been the groom’s best man.

**(xii) Samson rejected (15:1, 2)**

**1 Later on, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat and went to visit his wife. He said, "I'm going to my wife's room." But her father would not let him go in.**

**2 "I was so sure you thoroughly hated her," he said, "that I gave her to your friend. Isn't her younger sister more attractive? Take her instead."**

In spite of the strange ending of the celebration, Samson considered himself legally married. We do not read what time of the year the wedding feast, reported in the previous chapter, had taken place. So we don’t know how long Samson was home with his parents before he decided to go back to the home of his in-laws and claim his wife.

*The Pulpit Commentary* places the wheat harvest in the month of May. But *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “Climatic conditions are slightly variable in the various regions of Palestine, so that the time of the *wheat harvest* is not uniform throughout the country. In Israel, of course, it was associated with the second of the three great harvest festivals, Passover (barley), Weeks or Pentecost (wheat), and Tabernacles (figs, grapes, olives, etc.). In the region of Timnah the wheat harvest would come somewhere near the end of May or the beginning of June.”

Obviously, Samson’s fierce anger had subsided by that time and his old feelings of love had returned. His father-in-law, however, refused to let him see his wife, telling him she had been married to Samson’s best man. He must have feared his offended son-in-law, so he offered his younger daughter to him as an alternative, saying that she was more attractive.

Some Bible Commentators believe that Samson’s bride had not actually been married yet. *Barnes’ Notes*, for instance states: “From Samson’s wife being still in her father’s house, it would seem that she was only betrothed, not actually married, to his companion.” The father of the bride must have been aware of the manner in which Samson obtained the thirty sets of clothing he used to pay off his groom’s men. He must have had his reservations to give his daughter to such a wild guy as Samson. But then, why offer her younger sister to him?

**(xiii) Samson's revenge and its sequel (15:3-6)**

**3 Samson said to them, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them."**

**4 So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails,**

**5 lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves.**

**6 When the Philistines asked, "Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law, because his wife was given to his friend." So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death.**

The Hebrew text of v. 3 reads literally: "And Samson said concerning them, Now I shall be more blameless than the Philistines though I do them a displeasure." The key word in the phrase is *naqah*, "guilty."

The problem, however, is that what was done to Samson was not the fault of all the Philistines. Giving Samson's bride away to his best man had not been a public decision. Samson's act of revenge can therefore hardly be qualified as reasonable. His desire to avenge himself upon the whole population reveals a sentiment of hatred toward all Philistines, which was probably typical of the feeling of the whole Israelite people.

Samson's cruelty toward the foxes would evoke a strong reaction among animal rights advocates in modern society. But such emotions probably did not exist in Israel's society at that time.

The animals Samson caught for his purpose of revenge are called *shuw'al* in Hebrew, which can be a fox or a jackal.

It has been suggested that Samson could hardly have caught three hundred foxes by himself. He may have used the help of his father's servants or slaves. We are given no details as to how he went about this.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes about the result of Samson's act of revenge: "The burning of *standing corn* was a common method of retaliation or revenge in the ancient world and its effect in an agricultural community was very serious. ... We can imagine the delight with which the Israelite would tell this story of revenge against the nation which was to oppress them so sorely. But such wanton cruelty to animals, whose sufferings must have been hideous, cannot be condoned. The harvest was being gathered in at the time, for shocks (5) refers to the heaped sheaves. The hurt done to the Philistines was increased when the fire spread to the olive plantations. The reputation of Samson was such that the Philistines had no difficulty in discovering the identity of the incendiary, or his motive, and their words (6) confirm the suggestions made above, that the *Timnite* had acted hastily and inadvisably. In seeking to save his daughter's honor he had started a chain reaction that was to have disastrous consequences. It was easier for the Philistines to wreak vengeance on him and his daughter than to capture Samson himself, so the fate which Samson's intended wife endeavored to escape by inveigling his secret from him befell her after all. ... It would have been wiser for her to have informed her husband as soon as it was made, for he was well able to take care of himself and of her and her father."

***(xiv) Further slaughter of the Philistines (15:7, 8)***

***7 Samson said to them, "Since you've acted like this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you."***

***8 He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam.***

The Hebrew text of v. 8 uses an expression that is incomprehensible to us. It must have been a proverb at that time. The verse reads literally: "He smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter." *The New Living Translation* renders this: "So he attacked the Philistines with great fury and killed many of them."

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "The number of Samson's victims is not specified, nor is the reference that *he smote them hip and thigh* (8) intelligible to us today. The suggestion that he hewed them in pieces with such violence that their limbs were piled up one on another is somewhat fanciful. More plausible is the suggestion that the expression was a proverbial one which originated in the art of wrestling, although something a little more potent than bare hands, brute strength and wrestling ability is called for to account for such slaughter of opponents who presumably were all armed."

***(xv) Samson's exploits at Lehi (15:9-17)***

***9 The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi.***

***10 The men of Judah asked, "Why have you come to fight us?" "We have come to take Samson prisoner," they answered, "to do to him as he did to us."***

***11 Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?" He answered, "I merely did to them what they did to me."***

***12 They said to him, "We've come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines." Samson said, "Swear to me that you won't kill me yourselves."***

***13 "Agreed," they answered. "We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock.***

***14 As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands.***

***15 Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men.***

***16 Then Samson said, "With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men."***

***17 When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi.***

Evidently, Samson's fellowmen did not appreciate what Samson had done to their overlords. They feared that the consequences of his revenge upon the Philistines would only result in more severe suppression.

As a rather large army of Philistines gathered, the Judeans sent them a message asking why they came to attack. The answer they received was that they did not come to fight the whole population but only to capture Samson to kill him for what he had done to them.

It is also clear that Samson's act of revenge upon the Philistines had not been an effort to liberate his country and people from oppression; it had been a matter of personal retaliation.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The massacre of their compatriots at Timnah led to the assembling of a force of at least a thousand Philistines (15, 16) to deal with this one-man menace. This is itself a tribute to Samson's strength. Their assembly-point, Lehi, meaning 'jawbone' is so called proleptically, in anticipation of Samson's exploit. The presence of such a considerable band of warriors caused understandable concern to the men of Judah resident in the vicinity. The story is illustrative of the conditions obtaining in the Shephelah at that time. It shows the Judeans accepting the domination of the Philistines, and fearful of the consequences of Samson's exploits. No doubt they were secretly sympathetic with Samson, yet such was their fear of the Philistines that a band of three thousand thought only of binding him and handing him over to their common adversaries, rather than standing with this hero against them. It is clear also that the Philistines had no quarrel with the men of Judah."

It is clear that, if the Israelites had intended to kill Samson, he could have done to them what he did to the Philistines, which would be to kill a large group of his own people. That was what he didn't want to do. So he made his fellowmen swear that they would not kill him, but merely tie him up and hand him over to their enemies.

It is somewhat difficult to understand where Samson had been hiding and how the Israelites got to him. We read that, after they tied him up, they "led him up from the rock." The Hebrew text reads literally: "And they bound him with two new cords, and brought him up from the rock."

The Philistines were jubilant when they saw their enemy all tied up and they anticipated killing him, probably after making him suffer torture. At this point his supernatural strength, attributed to the Spirit of the Lord, came upon him and his cords snapped as if they were burned pieces of thread.

He found "a fresh jawbone of a donkey" and with it killed a thousand men. *The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "Samson's impromptu weapon, a *fresh* (lit. 'moist') *jawbone of an ass*, would be heavier and less brittle and therefore a more effective implement than a jawbone that was old and dry. His song of exultation was a four-beat couplet, with a play on the words ass and heap in the first line that is not easily reproduced in English. The words in Hebrew are identical (*hamôr*). Moffat's attempt is commendable, 'With the jawbone of an ass I have piled them in a mass!' C.F. Barney seize upon the fact that *hamôr* means literally 'the reddish-colored animal and notes the correspondence between this and the blood-stained pile of Philistine corpses. He renders the first line, 'With the red ass's jawbone I have reddened them right red.' Such wordplay is typically Hebrew and such coarse illustration is typical of Samson."

We read that Samson called the place of this massacre Ramah Lehi, which literally means "jawbone hill." Much of the play on words in Hebrew could be rendered in similar fashion in English, but since most Americans prefer to refer to the animal, of which the bone was taken, as "donkey," it would be considered improper to pursue that.

***(xvi) God's care for the overwrought Samson (15:18-20)***

***18 Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the Lord, "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?"***

**19 Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi.**

**20 Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines.**

This is the first time we read that Samson cried to the Lord in prayer. Although there had been moments when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, we do not read that he recognized that God had something to do with his superhuman strength. It took the fear of death to bring him to that realization.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: “The man who had not feared when he was delivered, bound, into the camp of the enemy now shrank in fear and distrust at the prospect of death through thirst, with the probability of the Philistines returning to mutilate his corpse.”

*Matthew Henry’s Commentary* observes: “His having experienced the power and goodness of God in his late success: Thou hast given this great deliverance into the hand of thy servant. He owns himself God’s servant in what he had been doing: ‘Lord, wilt thou not own a poor servant of thine, that has spent himself in thy service? I am thine, save me.’ He calls his victory a deliverance, a great deliverance; for, if God had not helped him, he had not only not conquered the Philistines, but had been swallowed up by them. He owns it to come from God, and now corrects his former error in assuming it too much to himself; and this he pleads in his present strait. Note, Past experiences of God’s power and goodness are excellent pleas in prayer for further mercy. ‘Lord, thou hast delivered often, wilt thou not deliver still? 2 Cor 1:10. Thou hast begun, wilt thou not finish? Thou hast done the greater, wilt thou not do the less?’ Ps 56:13. His being now exposed to his enemies: ‘Lest I fall into the hands of the uncircumcised, and then they will triumph, will tell it in Gath, and in the streets of Ashkelon; and will it not redound to God’s dishonor of his champion become so easy a prey to the uncircumcised?’ The best pleas are those taken from God’s glory.”

According to *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, En Hakkore means “The well of the implorer.” A footnote in the NIV notes the meaning as “caller’s spring.”

Although Samson’s story does not end with this event, the Scriptures note here that the length of Samson’s leadership of Israel was twenty years. Samson was never a judge in the same sense as some of the other judges. His main role was the reduction of Philistine rule over Israel, but that was more the result of his reaction to personal injury than an effort to free his nation.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “It looks as if it had been the intention to close the history of Samson with these Words, but that ch. 16. was subsequently added, possibly from other sources. Compare the close of chs. 20. and 21. of the Gospel of St. John. A possible explanation, however, of this verse being placed here is that it results from the statement in ver. 19, that Samson’s spirit came again, and he revived, or came to life again, after being on the very point of death; and, adds the writer, he judged Israel after this for twenty years.”

*The Tyndale Commentary* states: “The judgeship of Samson is noted as *twenty years*, and whilst any dates must be conjectural, the period c. 1080–1060 BC is most plausible. The nature of his office is clear from the records; it consisted of his lone exploits against the Philistines and appears completely devoid of judicial functions. His area of influence was confined to the small tract of country where the Philistines impinged upon the tribes of Dan and Judah. It is possible that Abimelech and Jephthah were contemporaries of Samson, but it is extremely unlikely that they had any mutual contact.”

**(xvii) Samson's exploit in Gaza (16:1-3)**

**1 One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her.**

**2 The people of Gaza were told, "Samson is here!" So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, "At dawn we'll kill him."**

**3 But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.**

At this point we are led back to some incidents in Samson's life which depict the weaker side of the strong man. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes correctly: "The man whose great strength made him a legend in his own lifetime was completely unable to bridle his own passions and this weakness was to lead to his eventual downfall."

We don't read that Samson ever married after the failed effort to betroth a Philistine bride. There is no indication either at which point in Samson's life this incident in Gaza took place.

Gaza was a coastal city in the southern part of Israel on the way from Jerusalem to Egypt. In the time of Israel's conquest of Palestine it fell to the tribe of Judah. We read in Joshua's account: "The men of Judah also took Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron — each city with its territory."<sup>72</sup> But, evidently, the Judeans were unable to keep it occupied and it became part of Philistine rule before Samson's time.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: "We have no clue as to the motive of Samson's visit to Gaza, whether he was meditating its conquest, or an assault upon its inhabitants, or whether he came merely in the wild spirit of adventure, or upon civil business. We only know that he came there, that, with his usual weakness, he fell into the snare of female blandishments, that the Philistines thought to have caught him and killed him, but that he escaped by his supernatural strength."

We don't know if the woman Samson saw was a professional prostitute, although the NIV states this. The Hebrew words describing her do not rule this out, but they do not confirm this either. She probably tempted Samson and he spent the night with her.

We do not read whether the woman informed the city authorities about Samson spending the night with her, or whether other people had observed him going into her house and reported this. We read that the people surrounded the place where he stayed, thinking that he would try to leave the city in the morning when the gates opened. They intended to kill him when he went through the city gate. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "Instead of attacking him directly, they took a round-about course, and set an ambush for him in the city gates, probably in the guard-room by the side of the gate, intending when he came forth unsuspectingly in the morning, at the hour of opening the gates, to rush upon him and kill him."

The Hebrew text of v. 2 reads literally: "And they encompassed him and laid in wait for him all night in the gate of the city, and were quiet all the night, in saying, [it is] day, the morning, when we shall kill him."

Somehow this plan must have been communicated to Samson, since he decided not to wait till dawn before leaving. There are several details we are not given, but we read that Samson

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<sup>72</sup> Judg. 1:18

got up in the middle of the night and broke through the city gate, taking the city gates and posts upon his shoulders and depositing them on top of a hill that faces Hebron. Whether at that time the city guards were asleep or absent, we are not told either.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: *Took the doors*, etc. Rather, *laid hold of*. For *went away with them*, translate *plucked them up*. It is the technical word for plucking up the tent pins. *Bar and all*, or, *with the bar*. The bar was probably a strong iron or wooden crossbar, which was attached to the posts by a lock, and could only be removed by one that had the key. Samson tore up the posts with the barred gates attached to them, and, putting the whole mass upon his back, walked off with it.”

What Samson did was obviously humanly an impossible feat. Superhuman strength was needed to perform this. We do not read at this point that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. Samson did this in his own strength. The fact that he had just spent the night with a prostitute probably made him hesitant to pray for divine help. This was not the work of the Spirit but of the flesh. No prayer was involved.

***(xiix) Samson’s love for Delilah (16:4, 5)***

***4 Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah.***

***5 The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver."***

The introductory words “sometime later” suggest that Samson’s involvement with Delilah occurred after the previously reported incident in Gaza. This time Samson fell in love; his attachment to Delilah was not the same as his visit with a prostitute.

According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* the name Delilah means: “dainty one.” *The Tyndale Commentary*, however, gives the meaning of the name as “worshipper,” or “devotee.” It is not clear whether she was Jewish or a Philistine. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes about this: “Her name is Semitic, but as the Philistines intermarried freely with the peoples they dominated this is not significant, and the details of the narrative suggest that she was, in fact, a Philistine.”

Since Delilah had no qualms betraying Samson’s secret to the Philistines, which suggests strongly that she may not have been Jewish, she can hardly have loved Samson. Or the lure of “eleven hundred shekels of silver” was stronger than her love.

A footnote in the NIV gives the amount of silver as “twenty-eight pounds.” *The New Living Translation* renders this with “1,100 pieces of silver.” According to *The Living Bible*, this would amount to five times one thousand dollars, a thousand dollars given by each of the five Philistine princes. It was an offer that was hard to resist for Delilah, so she lured Samson into her web.

***(ixx) Samson’s secret undisclosed (16:6-14)***

***6 So Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued."***

**7 Samson answered her, "If anyone ties me with seven fresh thongs that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man."**

**8 Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh thongs that had not been dried, and she tied him with them.**

**9 With men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the thongs as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.**

**10 Then Delilah said to Samson, "You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied."**

**11 He said, "If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man."**

**12 So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads.**

**13 Delilah then said to Samson, "Until now, you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied." He replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric [on the loom] and tighten it with the pin, I'll become as weak as any other man." So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric**

**14 and tightened it with the pin. Again she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric.**

It appears that Samson played as much a game with Delilah as she faked to play with him. If Samson had any suspicion about that fact that she was acting in behalf of the Philistine authorities it is not clear from his behavior. The fact that he didn't tell Delilah his true secret until the fourth time may indicate that he was suspicious, but it may also have meant that he played games.

It seems that the first three times the Philistines that were hiding in another room of Delilah's house never showed their face when it was clear the Samson's strength was still present. It would be hard to imagine that Samson would have allowed them to get away unharmed if he had seen them. It would also indicate to him that his girlfriend was not playing games.

It has been suggested that Samson paid more visits to Delilah than can be made up out of the text. The fact that the Philistines had to provide Delilah with the material Samson had to be tied with proves that he frequented her more often.

The first time Samson suggests being bound with "seven green withs." The Hebrew word used is *yether*, which was probably some kind of climbing vine. The word is used of a bowstring in one of the Psalms.<sup>73</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that it may refer to "cat gut" used to make bowstrings. *The Tyndale Commentary* states: "The seven green withs (7, AV, RV) of the first attempt should be read as seven fresh bowstrings (RSV), which were made of twisted gut."

The NIV's reading "You have made a fool of me; you lied to me" is the translation of the literal Hebrew text: "You have mocked me." The Hebrew word is *hathal*, meaning "to deride," or "to cheat." Jacob used the word when he told his wives: "Your father has *cheated* me by changing my wages ten times."<sup>74</sup> Delilah did as if she played games, but she shows that she didn't want to be played with.

<sup>73</sup> Ps. 11:2

<sup>74</sup> Gen. 31:7

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: “The liaison must have been a long-standing one for the Philistine lords to have heard of it and to have observed its potential usefulness to their aim. In the first three attempts made by Delilah Samson adopted a playful, teasing attitude. Six visits may have been made by Samson during this time, in three groups of two, on the first of which Delilah elicited the information and on the second of which, having secured the material from the Philistines, she carried it into effect. Alternatively, Delilah may have been given the new suggestion immediately following the failure of the previous one, which would reduce the minimum number of visits to four.”

Samson’s second reply is that if he were tied up with “new ropes” he would be powerless. No further details are given about these ropes. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “It is not said of what material they were formed; but, from their being dried, it is probable they were twigs, like the former. The Hebrew intimates that they were twisted or interwoven, and of a thick, strong description.”

But the new ropes snapped like the previous material, making Delilah look even more foolish. The real fool in the drama, however, was Samson himself. He should have begun to have some suspicion, but that doesn’t seem to have been the case. Samson must have thought they were merely playing games and he was ready to continue playing.

In the third round of the game, Samson came closer to revealing the secret by referring to his hair. *The Tyndale Commentary* states: “The third attempt was perilously near the truth, for it concerned Samson’s hair (13, 14) and this may reveal a stage in breaking down of his will.

The details of this particular method are not made clear in any of the versions. Indeed it is doubtful if this could be achieved without considerable amplification. The reference is to the weaving process. Primitive looms were either horizontal or upright; the former type would allow Delilah more freedom to deal with the hair of the sleeping Samson, assuming that his head was upon her lap, but the details suggest that latter type. In the upright type of loom two vertical posts fixed in the ground were fastened at the top by a cross-beam from which the warp threads were suspended. The long hair of Samson was woven into the warp and then beaten up into the web with a pin (14) thus producing a firm piece of material.

To test the effectiveness of each method Delilah gave warning of the approach of the Philistines, with spectacular results. On the first occasion the bow-strings were snapped as easily as a thread of tow snaps when the flame licks (9; Heb. ‘smells,’ i.e. having no direct contact) upon it; on the second occasion the new ropes were as effective as a fragile thread; on the third occasion it is possible that the whole loom was wrenched out and carried away. One wonders who was kind enough to disentangle Delilah’s labors!

The temptress herself gently but persistently applied herself to her mission, increasing gradually the tone of hurt reproach as her endeavors were mocked. ... The hypocrisy of Delilah, pretending to love but all the time plotting the death of her lover, can be left without comment.”

As mentioned earlier, she must have thought of her “bank account,” which inspired her to continue.

***(xx) Samson’s secret revealed (16:15-20)***

***15 Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength."***

***16 With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death.***

**17 So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man."**

**18 When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, "Come back once more; he has told me everything." So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands.**

**19 Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him.**

**20 Then she called, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had left him.**

The irony in Delilah's words 'how can you say, 'I love you' is too thick to need any comment. She used her strongest weapon: nagging. The Hebrew text reads literally: "She pressed him with her words."

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* exclaims with appropriate indignity: "What a consummate fool was this strong man! Might he not have seen, from what already took place, that Delilah intended his ruin? After trifling with her, and lying thrice, he at last commits to her his fatal secret, and thus becomes a traitor to himself and to his God. Well may we adopt the sensible observation of Calmet on this passage: 'The weakness of Samson's heart in the whole of this history is yet more astonishing than the strength of his body.'"

Samson told Delilah that the secret of his strength was that he had been dedicated to the Lord from birth as a Nazirite. The word Nazirite comes from the Hebrew word *nazar*, meaning "to separate." The law of the Nazirite vow is found in the Book of Numbers.<sup>75</sup> In most cases the Nazirite made the vow himself or herself. In Samson's case his separation unto the Lord had been from birth. The angel who had come to Samson's parents had said: "No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth."<sup>76</sup> It was Samson's mother who had to abstain from fermented drinks. We may assume, however, that Samson himself was not allowed to drink wine or eat of any fruit of which wine was made. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "He had often been in contact with the dead, he can hardly have kept himself from strong drink; but his hair still remained unshorn." There is, however, no biblical proof that Samson ever drank wine.

Delilah's female intuition told her that Samson had told her the actual secret and she sent word to the Philistine authorities that she had him in her power. Her message was convincing enough for the Philistines to come with money in their hands.

The Hebrew text of v.19 sounds rather complicated. It reads literally: "And she made him sleep upon her knees; and she called for a man, and she caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him." The problem is how to interpret the word "afflict."

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments: "She had probably tied his hands slyly, while he was asleep, and after having cut off his hair, she began to insult him before she called the Philistines, to try whether he were really reduced to a state of weakness. Finding he could not disengage himself, she called the Philistines, and he, being alarmed, rose up, thinking he could exert himself as before, and shake himself, i.e., disengage himself from his bonds and his

<sup>75</sup> Num. 6:1-8

<sup>76</sup> Judg. 13:5

enemies: but he wist not that the Lord was departed from him; for as Delilah had cut off his locks while he was asleep, he had not yet perceived that they were gone.”

*The Tyndale Commentary* states: “The precise meaning of she began to afflict him (19, AV, RV) is obscure, since Delilah herself would hardly dare attempt any hurt to Samson until she was quite sure that his strength was gone. Perhaps the verb should have Samson as its subject, ‘and he began to be afflicted.’ The warning call was given as on earlier occasions and Samson, awakened from his slumber, purposed to do as before, quite unaware of what had taken place. There is possibly no sadder verse in the Old Testament than the final sentence in verse 20. In Numbers 14:40-45 there is the sad picture of a nation temporarily forsaken by God; here there is the tragedy of a man unconscious of the fact that the Lord was no longer with him.”

The way all this is recorded makes it sound as if there was magic in Samson’s long hair. It was the fact that Samson was no longer a Nazirite that caused the Spirit of the Lord to depart from him.

We can hardly say that Samson ever knew intimate fellowship with God. His sexual behavior gave no testimony of this. The power of the Holy Spirit in Samson had been muscle power. This is difficult for us to understand from our New Testament perspective. But in the same way as God’s blessing in the Old Testament was often interpreted in terms of material affluence, so spiritual power was expressed in exceptional physical exploits. David sang: “With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall.”<sup>77</sup>

Samson soon found out what it feels like to be forsaken by God. There is in Samson’s fate a vague shadow of the One who would later cry: “‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’”<sup>78</sup>

***(xxi) Samson’s humiliation (16:21, 22)***

***21 Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison.***

***22 But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.***

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The weakened Samson was now easily captured by the Philistines. His eyes were gouged out and he was brought down to Gaza, the scene of one of his earlier feats of strength (16:1-3), and put to work at the tedious task of grinding out corn, probably at a hand mill, since there is no evidence of the larger, ass-powered mill until the fifth century BC. This occupation was not only menial, it was humiliating, since it was invariably women’s work .... *Fetters of brass* is a dual form, suggesting that his hands and his feet were both secured. It is surprising that his captors, having ascertained the secret of his great strength, did not take steps to see that he was shaved regularly, probably they thought that they had little to fear from this sightless, shambling wreck.”

***(xxii) Samson’s final revenge (16:23-30)***

***23 Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands."***

***24 When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, "Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain."***

<sup>77</sup> Ps. 18:29

<sup>78</sup> Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34

**25 While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. When they stood him among the pillars,**

**26 Samson said to the servant who held his hand, "Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them."**

**27 Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform.**

**28 Then Samson prayed to the Lord, "O Sovereign Lord, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes."**

**29 Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other,**

**30 Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.**

The Philistines attributed their victory over Samson to the god Dagon. Since Samson had been dedicated to YHWH, which was the essence of the Nazirite vow, the Philistine celebration was an insult to the Creator of heaven and earth. As far as the Philistines was concerned they, evidently, believed God only to be a local deity, worshipped by the Israelites.

The fact that the author of *The Book of Judges* makes particular mention of the fact that Samson's hair had grown back suggests that there was some magic in his hair, as if his supernatural strength was in his hair instead of in the fact that he was a Nazirite. This may have been the popular belief of that time.

The idol Dagon was represented in the form of a woman who had the tail of a fish. To this monster the Philistines brought sacrifices to celebrate their victory over Israel's hero. The confrontation here is not between Samson and the Philistines, but between God and Dagon. The capture of Samson was celebrated as a religious feast.

It seems that bringing Samson to the temple was an afterthought. It was also the most dangerous thing the Philistines could do. They brought Samson to the temple to make fun of him. The Hebrew word used is *sachaq*, which literally means "to play." The same word is used in the verse that celebrated David's victories: "As they danced, they *sang*: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.'"<sup>79</sup>

*The Tyndale Commentary* states: "The influence of Samson's anti-Philistine activities is reflected in the national thanksgiving celebration and in their description of him as *the ravager of our nation* (24, RSV). Such festivals, in which wine flowed freely, were often the occasion for debauchery, but on this occasion, when the strong drink had begun its influence, their inclinations took a more sadistic turn and they called for Samson, their prize exhibit, that he might put on a performance for them and that they might bait him. The verb *make sport* comes from a root meaning 'to laugh' or 'deride'; possibly they wanted Samson to amuse them with the kind of performance we would associate with a strong man in a fair booth. So the man whom armed Philistines had not dared to approach was led in by a single attendant."

When blind Samson was led into Dagon's temple, he asked the one who had guided him to take him to one of the pillars of the temple, saying he wanted to lean against it. The temple was crowded inside and about three thousand people were on the roof of the building.

<sup>79</sup> I Sam. 18:7

Samson said his last prayer, addressing God as Yahweh Adonai. God heard him and the Holy Spirit gave him back his supernatural strength for the last feat of his life. He pushed against the two main pillars on which the structure rested and brought down the building, killing himself and thousands of people. The text reads: "Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived." Again, he prefigured, although negatively, the One who would save more people in His death than He had during His life.

### **3. APPENDICES (17:1 – 21:25)**

#### **a. Micah's household and the Danite migration (17:1 – 18:31)**

##### *(i) Micah and his mother (17:1-6)*

*1 Now a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim*

*2 said to his mother, "The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you and about which I heard you utter a curse — I have that silver with me; I took it." Then his mother said, "The Lord bless you, my son!"*

*3 When he returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, she said, "I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol. I will give it back to you."*

*4 So he returned the silver to his mother, and she took two hundred shekels of silver and gave them to a silversmith, who made them into the image and the idol. And they were put in Micah's house.*

*5 Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some idols and installed one of his sons as his priest.*

*6 In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.*

In a general introduction to this last section of *The Book of Judges*, *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The contents of this final section of the book of Judges differ in character from the rest of the book. There is no suggestion of foreign domination apart from the inference that the Danite migration (18) is connected with the Philistine oppression, and no judge appears on the scene. The editorial comment, oft repeated in the earlier section, that the Israelites did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, is missing, to be replaced by the observation that 'in those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes' (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Thus the disorders of the time are attributed not so much to a falling away from the Lord but to the absence of a strong central authority, and there is an absence of the religiously motivated comment of the earlier section. This does not necessarily prove that these chapters were added by a different hand after the completion of the first draft of the book. The incidents narrated in the appendices make their own vivid contribution to the whole. The original editor may well have included them without comment, allowing them to speak for themselves. ... We are made vividly aware of the low moral standards, of the debased religious conceptions and of the disordered social structure. The picture must not be overdrawn, however, for the tribal structure itself survived and we see the intertribal organization, the amphictyonic league, at work, albeit imperfectly, dealing with the disorderly situation concerning Benjamin. Even in the horror of a civil war there is the evidence of a compassionate spirit for the decimated Benjamin on the part of the other tribes which shows that the sense of

solidarity still remained.”

The story is of a man named Micah, who is described as a thief. He stole money from his mother. The amount is given as “eleven hundred shekels of silver.” *The Living Bible* renders this as “one thousand dollars,” indicating that it was a huge amount.

Somehow Micah came under conviction and confessed the theft to his mother. He may have feared his mother’s curse upon the thief more than God’s wrath upon those who break the commandment “You shall not steal.”<sup>80</sup>

What follows is a vivid illustration of the syncretistic spirit of the age. The service of Yahweh was observed in the same way as the idol worship of the people who had been expelled from the Promised Land when Israel invaded it. Micah and his mother did not either observe the first commandment, which stated: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.”<sup>81</sup>

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states: “Micah and his mother were sincere in their intention to honor God. But their faith was blended with a sad amount of ignorance and delusion. The divisive course they pursued, as well as the will-worship they practiced, subjected the perpetrators to the penalty of death.”

Of the eleven hundred shekels returned to her, she took two hundred which she gave to a silversmith who melted them down and cast it into the shape of an idol. The amount of silver taken for the idol image seems to be intended as a tithe to honor the Lord. Obviously, there was no knowledge of the law that specifically forbade this kind of acts. What is said about the days of Samuel, applies to this period also: “In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.”<sup>82</sup> The written Word, left behind by Moses, was no longer observed. The silver was given back to Micah for the purpose of making “a carved image and a cast idol.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes about those words: “There is a good deal of difficulty in assigning the exact meaning of the two words here used, and their relation to one another in the worship to which they belong. *The molten image (massechah)*, however, seems to be pretty certainly the *metal*, here the *silver*, image of a calf, the form which the corrupt worship of Jehovah took from the time when Aaron made the molten calf (... Exodus 32:4, called there ‘*egel massechah*, a molten calf) to the time when Jeroboam set up the golden calves at Dan and Bethel (... 1 Kings 12:28, 29). And that *massechah* means something *molten* is certain both from its etymology (*nasach*, to pour) and from what Aaron said in ... Exodus 32:24: ‘I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf.’ Here too Micah’s mother gives the silver to the founder, *i.e.* to the fuser of metals. The *pesel*, or *graven image*, on the other hand, is something hewn or graven, whether in wood or stone, and sometimes overlaid with gold and silver (... Deuteronomy 7:25). One might have thought, from the language of ver. 4, and from the mention of the *pesel* alone in ... Judges 18:30, 31, that only one image is here intended, which was graven with the chisel after it was cast, as Aaron’s calf seems to have been. But in ... Judges 18:17, 18 they are mentioned separately, with the ephod and teraphim named between them, so that they must be distinct. From the above passages the *pesel* or *graven image* would seem to have been the most important object, and the difficulty is to assign the true relation of the *massechah* or *molten image* to it.

<sup>80</sup> Ex. 20:15

<sup>81</sup> Ex. 20:3-5

<sup>82</sup> I Sam. 3:1

[One Bible scholar] thinks the *massechah* was a pedestal on which the *pesel* stood, and that the ephod was the robe with which the *pesel* was clothed, and that the teraphim were certain tokens or emblems attached to the ephod which gave oracular answers. But this is not much more than guess-work. [Another Bible scholar] considers the ephod, here as elsewhere, to be the priest's garment, put on when performing the most solemn services, and specially when seeking an answer from God. And he thinks that the *massechah* formed a part of the ornament of the ephod, because in ... Judges 18:18 the Hebrew has 'the *pesel* of the ephod.' The teraphim he thinks are idols, a kind of *Dii minores* associated with the worship of Jehovah in this impure worship. But there does not seem to be any means at present of arriving at any certainty. The *massechah* might be a rich gold or silver overlaying of the wooden image, possibly movable, or it might be the separate image of a calf supposed to belong, as it were, to the *pesel*, and to symbolize the attributes of the Godhead."

This section ends with the words "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." The words remind us of what Gideon said when the people wanted to make him king of Israel: "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you."<sup>83</sup> But even the Lord was not recognized as the actual King of Israel.

**(ii) Micah and the Levite (17:7-13)**

**7 A young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, who had been living within the clan of Judah, 8 left that town in search of some other place to stay. On his way he came to Micah's house in the hill country of Ephraim.**

**9 Micah asked him, "Where are you from?" "I'm a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah," he said, "and I'm looking for a place to stay."**

**10 Then Micah said to him, "Live with me and be my father and priest, and I'll give you ten shekels of silver a year, your clothes and your food."**

**11 So the Levite agreed to live with him, and the young man was to him like one of his sons.**

**12 Then Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in his house.**

**13 And Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest."**

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "Micah's private, well-equipped shrine, attended by his own son, sufficed him until the arrival of a genuine *Levite*. The Levites, according to the Mosaic legislation, were allocated forty-eight cities for their personal use (Num. 35:1ff.; Josh. 21:1ff.). These cities were evenly distributed throughout the land to ensure maximum effectiveness, but it is apparent that the political and social disorders of the judges' period had caused this organization to lapse. Micah does not seem to have had access to the services of a Levite up to this point."

There is some confusion about the Hebrew text that opens this story. The NIV tries to circumvent this by stating that the Levite had been living "within the clan of Judah." The Hebrew text reads literally: "And there was a young man out of Bethlehem Judah of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there." If we apply Judah to the tribal area in which Bethlehem was located, there should be no problem of interpretation.

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<sup>83</sup> Judg. 8:23

Bible scholars do not agree on the conditions that forced this young Levite to wander away from his original place of residence.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* blames it on the character and wanderlust of the young man, stating: "A competent provision being secured for every member of the Levitical order, his wandering about showed him to have been a person of a roving disposition or unsettled habits. In the course of his journeying he came to the house of Micah, who, on learning what he was, engaged his permanent services." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, however, gives him the benefit of the doubt, stating: "He went about the country seeking for some employment, for the Levites had no inheritance: besides, no secure residence could be found where there was no civil government."

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "It is not clear why the Levite had been displaced from Bethlehem. Possibly it was because the support upon which the Levites depended was not forthcoming. Micah, hearing of his situation, gave an invitation to him to stay and minister to him. The terms of the settlement, 'board and lodging,' a new set of garments and ten pieces of silver (approximately £2<sup>84</sup>) each year make very interesting reading in the light of the present high standard of living and working conditions, as well as giving some indication of the relative value of the amounts in 16:5 and 17:2." *The Pulpit Commentary* puts the amount of the Levite's compensation on £ 20!

Having room, board and employment, the young Levite became part of Micah's family. Having a real Levite as his personal priest gave Micah the assurance that he would be acceptable to God.

### ***(iii) Micah's Levite and the Danite spies (18:1-6)***

***1 In those days Israel had no king. And in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking a place of their own where they might settle, because they had not yet come into an inheritance among the tribes of Israel.***

***2 So the Danites sent five warriors from Zorah and Eshtaol to spy out the land and explore it. These men represented all their clans. They told them, "Go, explore the land." The men entered the hill country of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah, where they spent the night.***

***3 When they were near Micah's house, they recognized the voice of the young Levite; so they turned in there and asked him, "Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? Why are you here?"***

***4 He told them what Micah had done for him, and said, "He has hired me and I am his priest."***

***5 Then they said to him, "Please inquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful."***

***6 The priest answered them, "Go in peace. Your journey has the Lord's approval."***

The section opens with the theme of this last section of the book: "In those days Israel had no king," leaving out the words "everyone did as he saw fit." But that is strongly suggested, even though it is not said.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "The Danites were quite unable to occupy the territory allocated to them (Josh. 19:41-46) due to the opposition of the Amorite and the pressure

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<sup>84</sup> The author of *The Tyndale Commentary* was obviously from Great Britain.

of the Philistines. Pressed up into the hill-country, they were confined to a very small area in the region of Zorah and Eshtaol, where the activities of Samson centered (13:2, 25), in territory which, according to Joshua 15:35, was also on the border of Judah. Probably the difficulties in settlement made for a lack of precision in the intertribal boundaries. The reference to the 'camp of Dan' (13:25; 18:12) also hints at an unsettled situation. At last, in desperation, a considerable group of them ... decided to seek a more congenial and secure situation. Joshua 19:47 gives a summary of this northward migration and was added to the details of the Danite territory after the event. The sending of the five spies to reconnoiter the land recalls the incidents of Numbers 13. On their way they came to Mount Ephraim and recognized the voice of the Levite (5). Possibly he had passed through their territory on his journeyings or, due to the close connection between the tribes of Dan and Judah, they may conceivably have known him when he was at Beth-lehem. Alternatively, their recognition may not have been personal but of his southern accent or of one fulfilling the duties of a Levite. Their barrage of questions having been met with satisfactory replies, they requested guidance on their own mission (5). Since the sanctuary of Micah was designed to give such help it was readily forthcoming after the Levite had consulted the oracle. His favorable reply was to have an important bearing upon subsequent events."

There are several unanswered questions in this section. The small group of Danites, who were looking for a place to settle, is called "warriors," which hardly indicate that they were on a peaceful mission. When the land was divided by lot in the days of Joshua, the Danites met with resistance from the side of the original population. We read: "But the Danites had difficulty taking possession of their territory, so they went up and attacked Leshem, took it, put it to the sword and occupied it. They settled in Leshem and named it Dan after their forefather."<sup>85</sup> Evidently, this did not accommodate the whole tribe, since this group was looking for more territory in which to settle.

Another question is about the mention of the fact that these Danites "recognized the voice of the young Levite." Some Bible scholars believe that this means that they knew him from an earlier encounter. More likely is that they heard him chanting his prayers and realized that he must be a member of the priestly cast who was performing a religious ceremony.

So they approached the young Levite and asked him where he was from and what he was doing in Micah's house. Realizing that he was in fact a priest they asked him to consult the Lord in their behalf and he assured them that their quest met with God's approval.

***(iv) The report of the Danite spies (18:7-10)***

***7 So the five men left and came to Laish, where they saw that the people were living in safety, like the Sidonians, unsuspecting and secure. And since their land lacked nothing, they were prosperous. Also, they lived a long way from the Sidonians and had no relationship with anyone else.***

***8 When they returned to Zorah and Eshtaol, their brothers asked them, "How did you find things?"***

***9 They answered, "Come on, let's attack them! We have seen that the land is very good. Aren't you going to do something? Don't hesitate to go there and take it over.***

***10 When you get there, you will find an unsuspecting people and a spacious land that God has put into your hands, a land that lacks nothing whatever."***

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<sup>85</sup> Josh. 19:47

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The northward journey of the Danites took them about 100 miles from their starting point before they found a satisfactory location for their proposed new settlement. They were now clear of the region occupied by the Israelites and in a small but very fertile area populated by people of Phoenician or Aramean stock ... The size of the mound, about half a mile in diameter, which was the site of the ancient city, witnesses to its importance. Its natural connections were with the area to the south, for it was cut off from Aram (Syria) by the bulk of Mount Hermon and from Phoenicia by the Lebanon range. There was an assured water supply from the springs and streams which supplied the Jordan waters. Of great importance, in view of the relatively small fighting force of the Danites (13), was the fact that the inhabitants of the land, secure in their isolation, had taken no precautions against a surprise attack. The unanimous and enthusiastic report of the spies when they returned to their brethren and the urgency with which they advocated action are in marked contrast to the doleful account of the ten companions of Joshua and Caleb (Num. 13:27-29; 31-33).”

We must bear in mind that this event took place years after Israel had invaded and occupied Canaan. Joshua was no longer alive and most of the Israelites had been settled for years in the areas allotted to them. The Danite search for new territory may have been prompted by a population explosion within their tribe which called for a search of new terrain.

Bible scholars agree that the Hebrew text of v.7 is unclear and difficult to translate and interpret. The Hebrew reads literally: “Then the five men departed and came to Laish, and saw how the people that [were] therein, dwelt careless, after the manner of the Zidonians quiet and secure, and there was none that might put them to shame in any thing; and they [were] far from the Zidonians magistrate, and had no business with any man.”

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments on the phrase “And had no business with any man”: “In the most correct copies of the Septuagint, this clause is thus translated: ... and they had no transactions with SYRIA. Now it is most evident that, instead of `aadaam, MAN, they read `aaraam, SYRIA; words which are so nearly similar that the difference which exists is only between the *resh* ר (r) and *daleth* (d), and this, both in MSS. and printed books, is often indiscernible. This reading is found in the Codex Alexandrinus, in the Complutensian Polyglot, in the Spanish Polyglot, and in the edition of the Septuagint published by Aldus. It may be proper to observe, that Laish was on the frontiers of Syria; but as they had no intercourse with the Syrians, from whom they might have received the promptest assistance, this was an additional reason why the Danites might expect success.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* agrees that there is obscurity in the verse, stating: “The remainder of this verse is exceedingly obscure; a probable translation is as follows: ‘And they saw the people that was in the midst of it dwelling in security after the manner of the Zidonians, “*quiet and secure, and none doing any injury to any one in the land, possessing wealth;*” and they were far from the Zidonians, and had no business with any man.’ The words in italics are probably a poetical quotation, descriptive of the people of Laish, which would account for the peculiar diction and the grammatical changes; for whereas the word *dwelling* is in the feminine gender, agreeing with *people*, the words *quiet* and *secure* and *possessing* are in the masculine, which can be readily accounted for if they are a quotation. This would also account for the tautology, ‘dwelling in security,’ ‘quiet and secure,’ and for the poetical character of the phrase ‘*possessing wealth,*’ and for the unusual form of the word here rendered *wealth* (*etzer* with an ain, instead of the usual *otzar* with an aleph), in accordance with the Septuagint and Vulgate and Gesenius, who derive the meaning of *wealth* from *collecting*, from which the common word *atzereth* derives its meaning of a *collection* or *congregation* of people.”

Footnotes in the NIV state about: *they were prosperous*, “The meaning of the Hebrew for this clause is uncertain.” And about: *and had no relationship with anyone else*, “Hebrew; some Septuagint manuscripts *with the Arameans*.”

There doesn't seem to have been any spiritual incentive in the Danite effort for extension of their territory. The fact that the inhabitants of Laish were left undisturbed in the conquest of Canaan was not a factor. The Lord's enemies had been allowed to continue living undisturbed in the Promised Land. "

David's observations in Psalm 37 were no part in this conquest. We read: “For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.” And: “But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.” And: “Those the Lord blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be cut off.” And: “The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.”<sup>86</sup>

**(v) *The despoliation of Micah's sanctuary (18:11-20)***

***11 Then six hundred men from the clan of the Danites, armed for battle, set out from Zorah and Eshtaol.***

***12 On their way they set up camp near Kiriath Jearim in Judah. This is why the place west of Kiriath Jearim is called Mahaneh Dan to this day.***

***13 From there they went on to the hill country of Ephraim and came to Micah's house.***

***14 Then the five men who had spied out the land of Laish said to their brothers, "Do you know that one of these houses has an ephod, other household gods, a carved image and a cast idol? Now you know what to do."***

***15 So they turned in there and went to the house of the young Levite at Micah's place and greeted him.***

***16 The six hundred Danites, armed for battle, stood at the entrance to the gate.***

***17 The five men who had spied out the land went inside and took the carved image, the ephod, the other household gods and the cast idol while the priest and the six hundred armed men stood at the entrance to the gate.***

***18 When these men went into Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, the other household gods and the cast idol, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?"***

***19 They answered him, "Be quiet! Don't say a word. Come with us, and be our father and priest. Isn't it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as priest rather than just one man's household?"***

***20 Then the priest was glad. He took the ephod, the other household gods and the carved image and went along with the people.***

Six hundred men set out on the warpath, taking their families with them. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “Six hundred Danite warriors responded to the challenge and moved northwards with their families and possessions (21), forming a party of about two or three thousand. The relatively small numbers may indicate the decimation of the tribe resulting from years of hostile pressure. Alternatively, it may be that when the moment of decision came a majority were unwilling to leave their familiar surroundings. ...

The short journey of the first day took them in a north-easterly direction to the west (behind, AV, RV) of *Kiriath-jaerim*, no more than 8 or 9 miles from the starting point. *Kiriath-*

<sup>86</sup> See Ps. 37:9, 11, 22, 29.

jaerim was one of the four towns of the Gibeonite confederacy which entered by guile into an alliance with Joshua (Josh. 9:17). ... The next day brought them to the vicinity of the house of Micah at Mount Ephraim. ...

The words at the end of the comment by the five spies (14) was a thinly-veiled suggestion, and a minor deviation brought the whole company to Micah's home. Here the five spies, no doubt influenced by the apparent success of their appeal to the oracle on their earlier visit, advanced and renewed their acquaintance with the Levite, while the 600 warriors took up a threatening station at the gate. ...

It is not clear whether the five spies, or a group from the main body, purloined the essential articles from the sanctuary. The feeble remonstrances of the Levite were soon silenced by the prospect of promotion, from being a spiritual counselor for a small company to exercising the same function for a whole tribe. The complete lack of loyalty to Micah, overlooking the latter's kindness, and the mercenary attitude of the Levite reflect discreditably on him and on the standards of the age. ... With gladness of heart the Levite connived at this act of armed robbery and went with his new masters, taking with him all the cultic trappings of the shrine of his original benefactor."

The articles the Levite took with him, the ephod, the household gods and the carved image, belonged to Micah. The young man added theft to the other sins of misrepresenting God's moral claims. As the words at the beginning of this section state so clearly "in those days Israel had no king." The Levite did what was right in his own eyes. Or rather he did not care whether things were right or not.

***(vi) Micah's abortive intervention (18:21-26)***

***21 Putting their little children, their livestock and their possessions in front of them, they turned away and left.***

***22 When they had gone some distance from Micah's house, the men who lived near Micah were called together and overtook the Danites.***

***23 As they shouted after them, the Danites turned and said to Micah, "What's the matter with you that you called out your men to fight?"***

***24 He replied, "You took the gods I made, and my priest, and went away. What else do I have? How can you ask, 'What's the matter with you?'"***

***25 The Danites answered, "Don't argue with us, or some hot-tempered men will attack you, and you and your family will lose your lives."***

***26 So the Danites went their way, and Micah, seeing that they were too strong for him, turned around and went back home.***

Evidently, the Danites expected that if they were attacked it would be from the rear, so they put the small children and their possession in front and moved away.

Micah must have engaged his neighbors in the pursuit of his property. They may have considered Micah's possession of some idols and priestly paraphernalia to be a divine protection for the whole neighborhood.

It never came to a physical struggle between the Danites and their pursuers. All there was amounted to some shouting. The Danites yelled to Micah and his friends "Why do you want a fight?" And Micah replied: "You stole my gods and my priest." The words "What else do I have" are among the saddest in this story. How far this is from Asaph's wonderful cry: "Whom

have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.”<sup>87</sup> Micah did not have the God of heaven and earth, which made him the poorest man on earth.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “Micah’s more mobile force soon overtook them and from this point on the Danite blustered and threatened their way through, trampling over justice in the consciousness of their superior might. They knew full well why they were being pursued, but when this was made plain to them in tones of understandable indignation they threatened Micah and his men with force if he continued to disturb the peace. The expression *angry fellows* (25), lit. ‘men bitter of soul,’ indicates men easily aroused and capable of fierce action (cf. 2 Sam. 17:8 where the same phrase is translated ‘chafed in their minds’). Enraged but helpless in the presence of such an aggressive attitude, Micah had no alternative but to return home empty handed. The gods which he had made (24) were completely unable to avert this catastrophe (cf. Isa. 44:9-20; 46:6, 7). This incident is a sad commentary on the disturbed state of the land at this time, with no strong, centralized authority to ensure that justice was ultimately done. The revealing comment of 18:1 shows the editor’s diagnosis of the situation.”

***(vii) The capture of Laish (18:27-31)***

***27 Then they took what Micah had made, and his priest, and went on to Laish, against a peaceful and unsuspecting people. They attacked them with the sword and burned down their city.***

***28 There was no one to rescue them because they lived a long way from Sidon and had no relationship with anyone else. The city was in a valley near Beth Rehob. The Danites rebuilt the city and settled there.***

***29 They named it Dan after their forefather Dan, who was born to Israel — though the city used to be called Laish.***

***30 There the Danites set up for themselves the idols, and Jonathan son of Gershom, the son of Moses, and his sons were priests for the tribe of Dan until the time of the captivity of the land.***

***31 They continued to use the idols Micah had made, all the time the house of God was in Shiloh.***

The tone of this section suggests sympathy with the population of Laish. Nothing seems to be left of the vision from the days of Joshua when the Israelites knew that possession of the Promised Land was God’s gift to them as a nation. That fact makes the mention of Jonathan, the grandson of Moses an interesting reference to the relatively short time that had elapsed since the conquest of Canaan began. This happened only one generation away from those who first entered the country God wanted them to possess.

One strange feature in v.30 is the mention of the captivity. *The Tyndale Commentary* comments: “*Until the day of captivity of the land* is usually taken as a reference to the defeat of Israel and the deportation of many of its inhabitants by Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria in 733-732 BC, or to the final reduction of the land and the deportation under Sargon in 722-721 BC (2 Kgs 15:29; 17:6). In this case the historical reference could have been added by a later editor. But the reference to the house of God at *Shiloh* (31) suggests a link with an earlier period connected with the Philistines. This occasion could have been either after the twin defeat at Aphek (1 Sam. 4:1-11) or, more probably, after the death of Saul, when David reigned over Judah from Hebron, Ishbaal reigned over a truncated Israel from Mahanaim in Transjordan and the Philistines,

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<sup>87</sup> Ps. 73:25

presumably, controlled all the other areas including Dan, which suggests that it no longer functioned during his reign over the united kingdom. There is no record of the destruction of Shiloh in the historical book, but the event itself is noted in Jeremiah 7:12, 14; 26:6; and Psalm 78:60. Archaeological evidence shows clearly that the temple there was destroyed about 1050 BC, which must have been immediately after the events of I Samuel 4.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes about the phrase *And Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh*: “The Hebrew text really has *the son of Moses*. But a little *n* is written above the line between the M and the S of Moses (Mosheh), so as to be read *Manasseh*, as thus: MSH; so that they avoided the pain of reading aloud that the grandson or descendant of Moses was an idolatrous priest, without actually altering the written text. It is indeed most sad that it should have been so, though like examples are not wanting, as, e.g., the sons of Eli and of Samuel.”

## **b. The outrage at Gibeah and the punishment of the Benjamites (19:1 – 21:25)**

### **(i) The Levite and his concubine (19:1-9)**

**1** *In those days Israel had no king. Now a Levite who lived in a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim took a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.*

**2** *But she was unfaithful to him. She left him and went back to her father's house in Bethlehem, Judah. After she had been there four months,*

**3** *her husband went to her to persuade her to return. He had with him his servant and two donkeys. She took him into her father's house, and when her father saw him, he gladly welcomed him.*

**4** *His father-in-law, the girl's father, prevailed upon him to stay; so he remained with him three days, eating and drinking, and sleeping there.*

**5** *On the fourth day they got up early and he prepared to leave, but the girl's father said to his son-in-law, "Refresh yourself with something to eat; then you can go."*

**6** *So the two of them sat down to eat and drink together. Afterward the girl's father said, "Please stay tonight and enjoy yourself."*

**7** *And when the man got up to go, his father-in-law persuaded him, so he stayed there that night.*

**8** *On the morning of the fifth day, when he rose to go, the girl's father said, "Refresh yourself. Wait till afternoon!" So the two of them ate together.*

**9** *Then when the man, with his concubine and his servant, got up to leave, his father-in-law, the girl's father, said, "Now look, it's almost evening. Spend the night here; the day is nearly over. Stay and enjoy yourself. Early tomorrow morning you can get up and be on your way home."*

This story also opens with the significant statement that Israel lacked an important central authority, which left the population of the country without any appeal for justice. Justice had become a matter of subjective interpretation. It was no longer considered to be part of a divine attribute. Everyone did as he saw fit. That means that, in reality, God was no longer considered to be the ultimate ruler of the nation, as Gideon had stated.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Judg. 8:23

The introduction to the actual events to follow is an illustration of procrastination. The Levite from Ephraim had married a concubine, whom he tried to retrieve after she had run back home.

Many details are being withheld. We are not told how many other wives the Levite had, or how long the girl from Bethlehem had lived with him. The fact that she ran home suggests that there had not been a strong and loving relationship between the two.

Although polygamy is not condemned in the Old Testament, this story sheds a negative light on it.

The girl did not simply run home. The Hebrew text of v. 2 is more explicit than the NIV's reading suggests. The Hebrew word used is *zanah*, which has the meaning of committing adultery. We find it in the verse in which Jacob's sons defend their action of killing Shechem and the people of his village because he had raped their sister Dinah.<sup>89</sup> When Jacob protested, we read: "But they replied, 'Should he have treated our sister like a *prostitute*?'"<sup>90</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on the girl's behavior: "Perhaps the phrase only means that she revolted from him and left him. Her returning to her father's house, and his anxiety to make up the quarrel, both discourage taking the phrase in its worst sense."

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The penalty against the adulteress was death (Lev. 20:10), but a heated argument would allow the Levite to seek a reconciliation when the passions of temper had subsided. The expression *to speak kindly to her* (3, RV, RSV) is in Hebrew 'to speak to her heart,' a frequently used and most suggestive idiom. One of the asses would be for her use on the return journey. The attitude of the concubine's father suggests that nothing serious was involved, and since the disgrace of his daughter's separation from her husband would fall upon him, his joy at seeing the Levite, and the festivities that followed, is understandable. The leisureliness of the East, particularly in connection with festive occasions (cf. Gn 24:55) showed itself in the hospitality pressed upon the Levite, whose attempts to return on the fourth day was completely thwarted. Similar endeavors, reflecting the social etiquette of the period, were almost successful in retaining the party for another complete day. The language of this hospitable man of Beth-lehem (9) is most picturesque and contains several allusions to the years spent in the semi-nomadic wandering of the wilderness period. *The day draws to its close* (RSV) is lit. 'the encamping of the day,' i.e. the time to pitch camp for the night, and the word translated *home* is actually 'tent.' ... On this occasion, however, the will of the Levite was asserted and he made his departure somewhere about the middle of the afternoon. ... as events turned out, he would have done better to have asserted himself earlier in the day, or else to have yielded to his host's importunities to stay yet another night."

The fact that the Levite was so easily talked into this procrastination does not plead for a decisive character. This may explain his overreaction to the tragedy that was to follow.

## ***(ii) From Beth-lehem-judah to Gibeah (19:10-15)***

***10 But, unwilling to stay another night, the man left and went toward Jebus (that is, Jerusalem), with his two saddled donkeys and his concubine.***

***11 When they were near Jebus and the day was almost gone, the servant said to his master, "Come, let's stop at this city of the Jebusites and spend the night."***

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<sup>89</sup> See Gen. 34.

<sup>90</sup> Gen. 34:31

**12 His master replied, "No. We won't go into an alien city, whose people are not Israelites. We will go on to Gibeah."**

**13 He added, "Come, let's try to reach Gibeah or Ramah and spend the night in one of those places."**

**14 So they went on, and the sun set as they neared Gibeah in Benjamin.**

**15 There they stopped to spend the night. They went and sat in the city square, but no one took them into his home for the night.**

The party arrived at Jerusalem, which, interestingly, is still called here by the name Jebus. The author of Judges explains, however, that it is Jerusalem, called so when the story was written. Jerusalem became one city when the two cities of Jebus and Salem were fused into one.

*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* writes about the city: "The earliest known name for Jerusalem was Urushalem. Salem, of which Melchizedek was king (Gen 14:18), was a natural abbreviation for Jerusalem and probably referred to the city. Thus, Jerusalem appears in the Bible as early as the time of Abraham, although the city had probably been inhabited for centuries before that time.

The city of Jerusalem is mentioned directly in the Bible for the first time during the struggle of Joshua and the Israelites to take the land of Canaan (Josh 10:1-4). Their efforts to take the city were unsuccessful, although the areas surrounding the city were taken and the land was given to the tribe of Judah. Still remaining in the fortress of the city itself were the Jebusites. Thus, the city was called Jebus."

The fact that the city is said to be occupied by the Jebusites doesn't mean that the chronology of this account is incorrect. Apparently, the Jebusites did not form a threat to the Israelites at this time. They probably didn't even in the days of David. David besieged and conquered Jerusalem because he obeyed the vision God had given to him about possession of the land.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: "But from this verse it would appear that the Israelite population had withdrawn and left the city to be entirely occupied by the Jebusites, who held it till the time of David (... 2 Samuel 5:6). Jerusalem is only about two hours from Bethlehem."

In spite of the fact that the Jebusites may not have constituted a threat to the Israelites, the Levite did not feel safe to spend the night in their neighborhood. He probably would have done better in Jerusalem than in Gibeah, where he received a horrible treatment by people of his own race, the Benjamites.

The Levite, his concubine and his servants arrived at the city square, hoping to find hospitality, but they didn't. Bible scholars have wondered whether there were no inns in the city.

### ***(iii) The gracious hospitality of a stranger in Gibeah (19:16-21)***

**16 That evening an old man from the hill country of Ephraim, who was living in Gibeah (the men of the place were Benjamites), came in from his work in the fields.**

**17 When he looked and saw the traveler in the city square, the old man asked, "Where are you going? Where did you come from?"**

**18 He answered, "We are on our way from Bethlehem in Judah to a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim where I live. I have been to Bethlehem in Judah and now I am going to the house of the Lord. No one has taken me into his house.**

**19 We have both straw and fodder for our donkeys and bread and wine for ourselves your servants — me, your maidservant, and the young man with us. We don't need anything."**

**20 "You are welcome at my house," the old man said. "Let me supply whatever you need. Only don't spend the night in the square."**

**21 So he took him into his house and fed his donkeys. After they had washed their feet, they had something to eat and drink.**

It must have been relatively early in the evening, before sunset, because we read that an old man who had worked in his field, came in on his way home.

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "The inference is that the Levite and his party would have waited in vain but for the arrival of an old man, who was himself a native of **Mouth** Ephraim and a stranger in the city."

The old man engaged the Levite in a conversation and offered him and his people hospitality. His advice not to spend the night in the open square suggests that he knew the mentality of his fellow citizens; it wouldn't be safe!

The Levite told his host that he didn't need anything for himself or his group, apart from a roof over their heads to spend the night. They had food for themselves and fodder for their animals.

The old man, who was himself a stranger in Gibeah, took them in and provided hospitality.

***(iv) The bestiality of the men of Gibeah (19:22-28)***

**22 While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, "Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him."**

**23 The owner of the house went outside and said to them, "No, my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this disgraceful thing."**

**24 Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But to this man, don't do such a disgraceful thing."**

**25 But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go.**

**26 At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight.**

**27 When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold.**

**28 He said to her, "Get up; let's go." But there was no answer. Then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home.**

The old man must have mastered the gift of hospitality, because we read that the Levite and his party were enjoying themselves, when the house was surrounded by a crowd of hoodlums. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah was about to repeat itself. These perverts did not just want sex; they wanted a homosexual relation with the Levite.

The old man was brave enough to meet the crowd face to face, probably risking his own life. The Hebrew text of his words reads literally: “Nay my brethren, nay, I pray you, seeing that [this] man is come into mine house, [do] not do this folly so wickedly.” Instead of the man, he offered his own daughter and the man’s concubine for the men to abuse, which they did all night long.

*The Tyndale Commentary* states: “The festivity inside was abruptly disturbed when the house was surrounded by the men of Gibeah, described as *sons of Belial* (AV, RV). The word is a compound form (*bēlîya’al*) of obscure derivation, although the general meaning is plain. The usual interpretation links it with the Hebrew *ya’al* (meaning ‘to profit’ or ‘help’), so giving it the meaning ‘worthlessness.’ Alternatively some have connected it with the Babylonian goddess of vegetation, who was possibly also the goddess of the underworld, which makes it synonymous with the Abyss or Sheol, the place of no return. This view is strengthened by a consideration of Psalm 18:4, 5 where Belial (‘ungodly men,’ AV, ‘ungodliness,’ RV) corresponds to death and Sheol in the parallelism of the verses. A third and less likely view links it with the verb *’ālâ* (to come up’), giving a sense of ‘ne’er-do-well’ or, in modern parlance, ‘layabout.’ Not only their words but their actions also must have been frightening, for the word *beat* (22) is *hithpa’el* form having intensive force. [One scholar] observes, ‘The ruffians were dashing themselves against, hurling themselves on the door in an attempt to break it down and gain entrance.’ As no attempt was made subsequently by the rulers of Gibeah to punish the offenders, or to repudiate their vicious actions, it appears that the men of the city generally were involved, and not just a lewd minority. It may be that their motive was, in part, a sense of offended pride that a sojourner in their city should put them to shame by proffering the hospitality which they had withheld. Their request to the old man (22) revealed the extent of their sexual perversion, whilst his answer to them (23, 24) showed his immediate and horrified recoil at such conduct which would shatter all the conventions of hospitality (cf. the treacherous action of Jael, 4:17-21). ... The word *folly* (AV, RV) is inadequate to convey the meaning of *nēbālâ* which indicates an insensibility to the claims of God or man, and is best rendered ‘impiety,’ ‘churlishness’ (cf. Nabal, I Sam. 25:25) or ‘wantonness.’ There are many parallels between this grisly incident and the one recorded in Genesis 19:1ff., but at Gibeah there were no angels to thwart the evil intentions of the men of the city.”

It must be remembered that it was for this kind of moral behavior that God had considered the measure of the sins of the original inhabitants of Canaan to be filled to the brim, which made them ready for extinction.

The Levite sacrificed his concubine to the angry crowd. In doing so, he saved his own skin. Such egoism suggests that the poor girl had ample reason for running home in the first place. The perverts gang-raped her all night long, only letting her go at daybreak.

The Levite must have gone to bed and probably had a good night of sleep, because we read that he got up in the morning and was ready to continue his journey. He found his concubine lying at the door of the house where she had collapsed and died.

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* captures well the repulsive reality of the scene with: “The men of Gibeah who wished to abuse the body of the Levite; the Levite who wished to save his body at the expense of the modesty, reputation, and life of his wife; and the old man who wished to save his guest at the expense of the violation of his daughter; are all characters that humanity and modesty wish to be buried in everlasting oblivion.”

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The narrator does not dwell on the harrowing details, but if ever a human being endured a night of utter horror it was the Levite’s concubine on

that night, which must have seemed as interminable as eternity and as dark as the pit itself. It is not only the action of the men of Gibeah which reveals the abysmally low moral standards of the age, the indifference of the Levite, who prepared to depart in the morning without any apparent concern to ascertain the fate of his concubine, and his curt, unfeeling command when he saw her lying on the threshold (27, 28), these show that, in spite of his religion, he was devoid of the finer emotions. The sense of outrage does not appear to have influenced him until he realized that she was dead, when he lifted her body on to one of his asses and continued his journey. The whole shocking incident made an indelible impression upon Israel, and was referred to by the prophet Hosea as one of the greatest examples of corruption (Hos. 9:9; 10:9)."

The references in Hosea read: "They have sunk deep into corruption, as in the days of Gibeah. God will remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins." And: "Since the days of Gibeah, you have sinned, O Israel, and there you have remained. Did not war overtake the evildoers in Gibeah?"

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "There must have been a fearful absence of all law and order and government when such deeds could be done without any interference on the part of magistrate or elder or ruler of any kind. The singular resemblance of the whole narrative to that in Genesis 19 suggests that the Israelites by their contact with the accursed Canaanites had reduced themselves to the level of Sodom and Gomorrah. Surely this shows the wisdom of the command to destroy utterly the workers of abomination."

***(v) The summons to the nation (19:29, 30)***

***29 When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel.***

***30 Everyone who saw it said, "Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Think about it! Consider it! Tell us what to do!"***

To our Western mindset, what the Levite did with his wife's dead body was as much proof of the depravity of the age as what the men of Gibeah had done. The scene has been compared to what the newly consecrated king Saul did to his oxen by cutting them in pieces and sending them to the twelve tribes with a message that called them up in arms.<sup>91</sup> But the Levite desecrated his wife's body to send his message.

The author of *The Book of Judges* could hardly have used as more graphic illustration of the point he wanted to make that there was no king in Israel and everyone did as he saw fit.

***(vi) The Levite reports to the assembly (20:1-7)***

***1 Then all the Israelites from Dan to Beersheba and from the land of Gilead came out as one man and assembled before the Lord in Mizpah.***

***2 The leaders of all the people of the tribes of Israel took their places in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand soldiers armed with swords.***

***3 (The Benjamites heard that the Israelites had gone up to Mizpah.) Then the Israelites said, "Tell us how this awful thing happened."***

***4 So the Levite, the husband of the murdered woman, said, "I and my concubine came to Gibeah in Benjamin to spend the night.***

<sup>91</sup> See I Sam. 11:1-8.

**5 During the night the men of Gibeah came after me and surrounded the house, intending to kill me. They raped my concubine, and she died.**

**6 I took my concubine, cut her into pieces and sent one piece to each region of Israel's inheritance, because they committed this lewd and disgraceful act in Israel.**

**7 Now, all you Israelites, speak up and give your verdict."**

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: "It is assumed that the tribe of Benjamin was included in the summons but they withheld their support, thus automatically identifying themselves with the men of Gibeah; hence the parenthetical reference in 20:3. The messengers who bore these grisly tokens to the various tribes were no doubt commissioned to tell the story of the outrage of the men of Gibeah and verse 30, especially the latter part, comes more naturally from their lips, although their words would be echoed in shocked tones by those addressed. This foul deed was considered to be the outstanding atrocity since the time of Exodus, the decisive event which was the foundation of the nation."

In reporting his experiences to the gathered tribes, the Levite shows to have a selective memory of the events. There was no indication that the men of Gibeah intended to kill the Levite. They wanted a sexual experience, not murder. The fact that the Levite's concubine died may have made the Levite think that he would not have survived if he had been the victim of a gang rape.

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on the part of the Levite's testimony in which he mentioned he feared for his life: "This was so far true that it is likely he was in fear of his life; but he doubtless shaped his narrative so as to conceal his own cowardice in the transaction."

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The Levite's report to the assembled tribes (4-7) corresponds with the actual event with the single addition that the men of Gibeah purposed his death (5). However, in the light of the fate of his concubine, it was a reasonable inference that the men of the city intended more than their foul suggestion of 19:22."

**(vii) The resolution of the assembly (20:8-11)**

**8 All the people rose as one man, saying, "None of us will go home. No, not one of us will return to his house.**

**9 But now this is what we'll do to Gibeah: We'll go up against it as the lot directs.**

**10 We'll take ten men out of every hundred from all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred from a thousand, and a thousand from ten thousand, to get provisions for the army. Then, when the army arrives at Gibeah in Benjamin, it can give them what they deserve for all this vileness done in Israel."**

**11 So all the men of Israel got together and united as one man against the city.**

It was felt that a campaign to punish the criminals of Gibeah would not require the involvement of the whole Israelite army. One tenth of all the armed forces would suffice. The choices would be made by throwing lots.

The Hebrew text of v. 8 reads literally: "And all the people arose as one man, saying, we will not go any [of us] to his tent, neither will any [of us] turn to his house." *The Tyndale Commentary* comments on this: "The parallelism of *tent* and *house* (8) is reminiscent of the wilderness period, and an indication that Israel was not far removed from the stage of transition in its settlement in the land."

The act of the men of Gibeah is condemned as “vileness.” That is the translation in the NIV of the Hebrew word *nebalah*. We find the same word used in the verse that recount the rape of Dinah, Jacob’s daughter. We read: “Now Jacob’s sons had come in from the fields as soon as they heard what had happened. They were filled with grief and fury, because Shechem had done a *disgraceful thing* in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter — a thing that should not be done.”<sup>92</sup>

Although v. 11 mentions “all the men of Israel” as going against the city of Gibeah, it was obviously only the selected army that carried out the punitive campaign.

***(ix) The approach to the tribe of Benjamin (20:12-17)***

***12 The tribes of Israel sent men throughout the tribe of Benjamin, saying, "What about this awful crime that was committed among you?***

***13 Now surrender those wicked men of Gibeah so that we may put them to death and purge the evil from Israel." But the Benjamites would not listen to their fellow Israelites.***

***14 From their towns they came together at Gibeah to fight against the Israelites.***

***15 At once the Benjamites mobilized twenty-six thousand swordsmen from their towns, in addition to seven hundred chosen men from those living in Gibeah.***

***16 Among all these soldiers there were seven hundred chosen men who were left-handed, each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.***

***17 Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered four hundred thousand swordsmen, all of them fighting men.***

The Israelites sent an ultimatum to the Benjamites, telling them to hand over the men of Gibeah who committed the crime, but the tribe of Benjamin put loyalty of the tribe above justice. So the Benjamites mobilized their own army consisting of twenty-six thousand to fight the rest of Israel, which had, even in their reduced size, an overwhelming majority of four hundred thousand men. The NIV uses the term “swordsmen” as a translation of the Hebrew “men that draw the sword.”

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes about the numbers: “The precise number of the Benjamites is not clear: verse 15 mentions 26, 700; verse 35 records 25,100 casualties, verses 44-47 note 25,000 casualties and 600 survivors. The difference may be accounted for by the unrecorded casualties of the first two days, although the divergency in the numbers given for verse 15 in different recensions of the LXX (Vaticanus reads 23,000; Alexandrinus 25,000) warns against any easy solution of the problem. However, laying aside the difficulty which is found in interpreting the numbers of the Old Testament, the general picture is clear.”

Although this is not particularly stated, the inference is that the seven hundred left-handed men who had a perfect record with the slingshot, were Benjamites.

The Hebrew word used is *chata'*, “to miss.” The word has acquired significance as a theological term, because in the Septuagint the Greek word *hamartano*, “to sin” is used. This defines sin as “missing the mark.”

Even in Hebrew the word is used in this context, as in the verse: “Then God said to [Abimelech] in the dream, ‘Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from *sinning* against me. That is why I did not let you touch her.’”<sup>93</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Gen. 34:7

<sup>93</sup> Gen. 20:6

The idea of defining sin as “missing the mark” becomes even more pertinent if we read Paul’s definition of the mark: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The “mark” is God’s glory. God intends to share his glory with us, which is something we should not miss!

***(ix) The first encounter (20:18-23)***

***18 The Israelites went up to Bethel and inquired of God. They said, "Who of us shall go first to fight against the Benjamites?" The Lord replied, "Judah shall go first."***

***19 The next morning the Israelites got up and pitched camp near Gibeah.***

***20 The men of Israel went out to fight the Benjamites and took up battle positions against them at Gibeah.***

***21 The Benjamites came out of Gibeah and cut down twenty-two thousand Israelites on the battlefield that day.***

***22 But the men of Israel encouraged one another and again took up their positions where they had stationed themselves the first day.***

***23 The Israelites went up and wept before the Lord until evening, and they inquired of the Lord. They said, "Shall we go up again to battle against the Benjamites, our brothers?" The Lord answered, "Go up against them."***

It seems that the Israelite action against Benjamin was right and they were correct in assuming that they could count on God’s blessing and protection. Yet, the men of Judah, who were selected by lot to attack first, suffered a devastating defeat. Twenty-two thousand Judeans were killed in the first encounter.

According to *The Tyndale Commentary* the terrain favored Benjamin. We read: “The terrain in the vicinity of Gibeah favored a defensive force rather than an attacking force, especially if the former was in a strong position, as was likely in this case, since the Benjamites were familiar with their own tribal portion. In such a situation superior numbers were of limited value, since they could not be effectively deployed, and a determined group of men armed with slings could inflict heavy casualties on an attacking force. A realization of the danger confronting the vanguard of the army probably lay behind the request which was made to the divine oracle, and the choice of the tribe of *Judah* for this invidious task rested on the fact that Judah was a tribe renowned for its fighting qualities, whose territory was similar to that of Benjamin.”

The initial defeat brought the Israelites on their knees weeping. This may mean that there was a confession of sin and a promise of repentance. When after this they consulted the Lord, they received orders to attack again the next day. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The unexpected repulse they had met with had begun to produce its intended effect. There was a humbling of themselves before God, a brokenness of spirit, a deepened sense of dependence upon God, and a softening of their feelings towards their *brother* Benjamin.”

***(x) The second encounter (20:24-28)***

***24 Then the Israelites drew near to Benjamin the second day.***

***25 This time, when the Benjamites came out from Gibeah to oppose them, they cut down another eighteen thousand Israelites, all of them armed with swords.***

**26 Then the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel, and there they sat weeping before the Lord. They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the Lord.**

**27 And the Israelites inquired of the Lord. (In those days the ark of the covenant of God was there,**

**28 with Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, ministering before it.) They asked, "Shall we go up again to battle with Benjamin our brother, or not?" The Lord responded, "Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands."**

Although they had the apparent approval of the Lord, the Israelite army suffered defeat in the second attack also. Eighteen thousand Israelites lost their lives. This must have been hard to understand for them.

There may have been more confidence in their superior numbers than in the Lord. We have the example of Gideon's battle with Midian. God said to him: "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her."<sup>94</sup>

The second defeat brought about a spiritual victory in that the Israelites humbled themselves before the Lord with prayer and fasting and, probably, with a confession of sin.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "This is the first place where fasting is mentioned as a religious ceremony, or as a means of obtaining help from God."

There is some problem about the statement that the Ark of the Covenant resided at Bethel at that time. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "It is not in accordance with the other intimations given us concerning the tabernacle, that Bethel should be its resting-place under the high priesthood of Phinehas. In ... Joshua 18:1 we have the formal pitching of the tabernacle of the congregation at Shiloh; in ... Joshua 22:12 we find it there, and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest before it; in ... 1 Samuel 1:3; 2:14; 3:21; 4:3, we find it settled there till taken by the Philistines; and in ... Psalm 78:60 we find Shiloh described as the abode of the tabernacle till its capture by the Philistines, and there is no hint anywhere of Bethel or any other place having been the resting-place of the ark before it fell into the hands of the Philistines. Neither, again, is the explanation of some commentators, that the words *the ark... was there in those days* implies 'that the ark of the covenant was only temporarily at Bethel,' at all satisfactory. *In those days* has naturally a much wider and broader application, like the expression (... Judges 17:6; 18:1), *in those days there was no king in Israel*, and contrasts the time of Phinehas and the judges with the times of the monarchy, when the ark and the high priest were at Jerusalem. Unless, therefore, we understand Bethel in vers. 18, 26, 31 to mean the house of God, which seems quite impossible, we must interpret the word *there* to mean Shiloh, and suppose that the writer took no count of the temporary removal to Bethel for the convenience of consultation, but considered that it was at Shiloh in one sense, though momentarily it was a few miles off. Possibly too in the fuller narrative, of which we have here the abridgment, the name of Shiloh was mentioned as that to which there referred."

When God was consulted again for the third time, the answer came that this time God would give them the victory over Benjamin. There is a moving detail in the fact that Benjamin is called "out brother." This was a civil war.

### **(xi) The third encounter (20:29-36)**

<sup>94</sup> Judg. 7:2

**29 Then Israel set an ambush around Gibeah.**

**30 They went up against the Benjamites on the third day and took up positions against Gibeah as they had done before.**

**31 The Benjamites came out to meet them and were drawn away from the city. They began to inflict casualties on the Israelites as before, so that about thirty men fell in the open field and on the roads — the one leading to Bethel and the other to Gibeah.**

**32 While the Benjamites were saying, "We are defeating them as before," the Israelites were saying, "Let's retreat and draw them away from the city to the roads."**

**33 All the men of Israel moved from their places and took up positions at Baal Tamar, and the Israelite ambush charged out of its place on the west of Gibeah.**

**34 Then ten thousand of Israel's finest men made a frontal attack on Gibeah. The fighting was so heavy that the Benjamites did not realize how near disaster was.**

**35 The Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel, and on that day the Israelites struck down 25,100 Benjamites, all armed with swords.**

**36 Then the Benjamites saw that they were beaten. Now the men of Israel had given way before Benjamin, because they relied on the ambush they had set near Gibeah.**

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "Although they were assured of success, the Israelites were not careless in their method of deployment. On earlier occasion a direct frontal assault had been decisively repulsed; not their strategy was to lure the over-confident Benjamites out of their secure position, destroy the city by a force left in ambush and then trap their enemy, demoralized by the severing of their escape route, in a pincers movement. A similar ruse, adopted with conspicuous success by Joshua at Ai (Josh. 8:3-28), may have provided the inspiration on this occasion."

Although some details seem to be left out in the story about Benjamin's defeat, the whole picture is clear enough. The Israelites counted on Benjamin's overconfidence when they faked defeat, thus drawing the whole Benjamite fighting force out of the city. This left the city open for destruction by those who lay in ambush.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The narrative is singularly obscure and broken, and difficult to follow. But the meaning seems to be, that when the Israelite army had reached Baal-tamar in their flight, they suddenly stopped and formed to give battle to the pursuing Benjamites. And at the same time the liers in wait came out from their ambushment and placed themselves in the rear of the Benjamites on the direct road to Gibeah."

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments: "The Israelites seem to have divided their army into three divisions; one was at Baal-tamar, a second behind the city in ambush, and the third skirmished with the Benjamites before Gibeah."

*Barnes' Notes* adds: "Baal-tamar is only mentioned here. It took its name from some palm-tree that grew there; perhaps the same as the 'palm-tree of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel' (Judg 4:5), the exact locality here indicated, since 'the highway' (Judg 20:31) along which the Israelites enticed the Benjamites to pursue them, leads straight to Ramah, which lay only a mile beyond the point where the two ways branch off."

*The Tyndale Commentary* further comments on the battle: "The fury with which the men in ambush made their onslaught is concealed in the AV, *came forth* (33). The verb means 'to break forth' and is used of water gushing forth, or of a child bursting out of the womb. The

direction of the attack was probably from the east. (The Hebrew *neged* corresponds to *lipnê*, ‘before,’ with the sense of ‘eastward of’).”

**(xii) The defeat of Benjamin (20:37-44)**

**37 The men who had been in ambush made a sudden dash into Gibeah, spread out and put the whole city to the sword.**

**38 The men of Israel had arranged with the ambush that they should send up a great cloud of smoke from the city,**

**39 and then the men of Israel would turn in the battle. The Benjamites had begun to inflict casualties on the men of Israel (about thirty), and they said, "We are defeating them as in the first battle."**

**40 But when the column of smoke began to rise from the city, the Benjamites turned and saw the smoke of the whole city going up into the sky.**

**41 Then the men of Israel turned on them, and the men of Benjamin were terrified, because they realized that disaster had come upon them.**

**42 So they fled before the Israelites in the direction of the desert, but they could not escape the battle. And the men of Israel who came out of the towns cut them down there.**

**43 They surrounded the Benjamites, chased them and easily overran them in the vicinity of Gibeah on the east.**

**44 Eighteen thousand Benjamites fell, all of them valiant fighters.**

*The Tyndale Commentary* describes the battle with: “Entrance into the city appears to have been easily effected, since the main Benjamite army had been drawn away in the opposite direction, on which side the attention of the remaining defenders would also be centered. The pre-arranged signal (38, RSV) for the springing of the trap was also the sign that the force in ambush had completed its task, the firing of the city itself. The word for sign (AV, RV) is found in Jeremiah 6:1 with the meaning of fire-beacon .... When the smoke of the doomed city was seen by the main Israelite force they turned back (AV *retired* gives quite the wrong sense) and the Benjamite force, flushed with the thought of their initial success, also observed that sign that caused their self-confidence to evaporate in a moment, to be replaced by abject fear and precipitate flight.

There are certain topographical references which are not clear, but those which are identifiable enable us to make a reasonable reconstruction of the whole campaign from the beginning. The main Israelite force had approached and then withdrawn towards the north-west, i.e. towards Gibeon, drawing the defenders away in this direction. The smaller Israelite force had been in ambush in the vicinity of Geba, north-east of Gibeah, and they attacked the condemned city from the east. The fleeing Benjamites headed in an easterly direction, *unto the way of the wilderness* (42) away from the Israelite force which was westward of them. The fact that the Israelites *inclosed the Benjamites round about* (43, AV, RV) suggests that *cities* (42) should be singular, as in many Greek manuscripts. In this case the reference is to the Israelites, who, having destroyed Gibeah, now emerged from the burning city to cut off the escape route of the Benjamites. In this pincers movement 18,000 Benjamites perished, but the survivors broke out of the trap and continued their flight....

Two references in this section are quite obscure. In verse 43 with *ease over against* (AV) is, in Hebrew, ‘(at their) resting-place’ (cf. RV, RSV mg.). It may be that the Benjamites,

imagining that they had eluded their pursuers, had made a temporary halt eastward of Geba, only to be caught up by the Israelites. Alternatively, ‘resting-place’ could be read as a proper name, *Nohah* (cf. RSV), which appears in I Chronicles 8:2 as the name of the fourth son of Benjamin, and thus may have been the name of a city. But such a site has not been identified. A further possibility is that it should be translated with ‘without respite,’ which fits admirably into the context. The second problem relates to *Gidom* (45), which is quite unknown apart from this reference. Possibly it was in the vicinity of the rock of Rimmon, but it has been conjectured that it should be read as Geba, and that this city marked the area where the pursuit was terminated. In the final stages of the pursuit 5,000 Benjamites were cut off in the highways and a further 2,000, accepting the conjectural explanation offered above, perished when the Israelites again surprised the Benjamites at their temporary bivouac east of Geba. The Israelites apparently made no attempt to pursue the surviving 600 Benjamites, who made good their escape to *the rock of Rimmon*, which is identified with the modern Rummūn, a village on the summit of a conical hill about 4 miles east of Beth-el. Instead, the Israelites turned in judgment upon the other Benjamite cities, which by their intervention on behalf of the men of Gibeah had become associated in its guilt. As all the able-bodied men of Benjamin were doubtless involved in the earlier battles, this would be no difficult task, but rather a slaughter of the helpless, if not, by Israelite standards, the innocent. The justification for this action may be found in Deuteronomy 13:12-18, where the crime specified is that of idolatry, but the evidence of Judges 21 shows that either the Israelites bitterly regretted their revengeful action, or that they performed their punitive duties with little heart.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes about v. 43 ff: “Another difficult passage, having all the appearance of being a quotation from some poetical description of the battle. The tenses of the verbs and the absence of any conjunctions in the Hebrew makes the diction like that of ... Judges 5:19. The italic words *thus* and the two ands ought to be omitted, to give the stately march of the original. ‘They inclosed, etc.; they chased them; they trod them down,’ etc. *They inclosed* seems to refer to the stratagem by which the Benjamites were *surrounded* by the ambush in their rear and the Israelites in front. Then came the pursuit — ‘they chased them;’ then the massacre — ‘they trod them down.’ The three verbs describe the three stages of the battle.

*With ease.* It does not seem possible that the Hebrew word *menuchah* can have this meaning. It means sometimes a *place of rest*, and sometimes a *state of rest*. Taking the latter meaning, the words *they trod them into rest* may mean *they quieted them by crushing them to death under their feet*, or *in rest* may mean *unresisting*. Some render it *unto Menuchah*, as if *Menuchah* was the name of a place, or *from Nochah*, as the Septuagint does. Others, *at the place of rest*, *i.e.* at every place where they halted to rest the enemy was upon them.”

### **(xiii) *The grief of the Israelites (21:1-9)***

**1 *The men of Israel had taken an oath at Mizpah: "Not one of us will give his daughter in marriage to a Benjamite."***

**2 *The people went to Bethel, where they sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly.***

**3 *"O Lord, the God of Israel," they cried, "why has this happened to Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel today?"***

**4 Early the next day the people built an altar and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings.**

**5 Then the Israelites asked, "Who from all the tribes of Israel has failed to assemble before the Lord?" For they had taken a solemn oath that anyone who failed to assemble before the Lord at Mizpah should certainly be put to death.**

**6 Now the Israelites grieved for their brothers, the Benjamites. "Today one tribe is cut off from Israel," they said.**

**7 "How can we provide wives for those who are left, since we have taken an oath by the Lord not to give them any of our daughters in marriage?"**

**8 Then they asked, "Which one of the tribes of Israel failed to assemble before the Lord at Mizpah?" They discovered that no one from Jabesh Gilead had come to the camp for the assembly.**

**9 For when they counted the people, they found that none of the people of Jabesh Gilead were there.**

The oath, mentioned in v.1 is not recorded in the earlier part of the story. It must have been made by the men of Israel when the Levite reported what had happened to his concubine, that she had been raped and murdered by the men of Gibeah.

It was an oath made in haste, because it would involve the extinction of the whole tribe of Benjamin.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "Of this oath we had not heard before; but it appears they had commenced this war with a determination to destroy the Benjamites utterly, and that if any of them escaped the sword no man should be permitted to give him his daughter to wife. By these means the remnant of the tribe must soon have been annihilated."

The members of the remaining eleven tribes realized the terrible reality of the fact that the whole tribe of Benjamin could eventually become extinct.

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "When the heat of the battle was over and the memory of the shameful events of the first two days had been set in healthier perspective by the ultimate victory, the Israelites had occasion to reflect and to repent. Their action had been necessitated by the outrage of the men of Gibeah, and the war was, in a sense, a holy war. But it had brought in its wake a sense of shattered brotherhood and a realization that, in the heat of the crisis, some of their vows had been extreme. It is obvious that, at this stage, a keen sense of unity prevailed, which was not always in evidence in later generations. In particular they regretted their solemn vow not to allow any intermarriage between their daughters and the men of Benjamin, since this meant that a tribe of Israel must inevitably perish. It was a tragedy when a family in Israel was in danger of extinction, hence the device of levirate marriage. But the tragedy was greater when a whole tribe was involved. However, a vow once made, even if it was rash and ill-considered, could not be revoked; so the people mourned before God at his sanctuary in Beth-el (cf. 20:18, 26). Their action in building an altar on which to offer sacrifices appears strange, since there was an altar at Bethel where sacrifices had been offered (20:26). The most likely explanation is that the location of the altar was at *Mizpah*, which was ... the base-camp of the assembled tribes (cf. the reference to *the camp*, 8). There is strong evidence that altars were not erected indiscriminately in Israel. They were normally erected in places where a theophany had occurred but they were built at other places in a time of national peril or rejoicing, often before or after a battle (cf. I Sam. 7:9; 13:8ff.; 14:35). This occasion being in the nature of an emergency, merited such an exceptional procedure."

***(xiv) Wives for the surviving Benjamites (21:10-12)***

***10 So the assembly sent twelve thousand fighting men with instructions to go to Jabesh Gilead and put to the sword those living there, including the women and children.***

***11 "This is what you are to do," they said. "Kill every male and every woman who is not a virgin."***

***12 They found among the people living in Jabesh Gilead four hundred young women who had never slept with a man, and they took them to the camp at Shiloh in Canaan.***

The problem, as we have seen above, was that the Benjamin tribe was doomed to extinction, since the remaining males would not be given wives from other tribes and thus would have no offspring to continue their name. The Israelites had been unanimous in vowing that they would not give any of their daughters to surviving Benjamites. They also had vowed that any of the Israelites who would not respond to the call to arms would be punished by death (v.5).

An investigation showed that the people of Jabesh Gilead had never responded to the call. That made them liable to punishment. It was decided that the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead must be punished for their unwillingness to get involved and a force of twelve thousand men was sent to that city to meet out punishment. Every inhabitant was killed, with the exception of some four hundred young girls who were found to be virgins.

The solution was as bad as the problem. Fortunately, the grizzly details of this action are not given to us. We are only told that the surviving males of Gibeah were offered four hundred brides. But that did not completely solve the problem, because there were 600 bachelor Benjamites and only 400 virgins from Jabesh Gilead.

In order to solve part of the problem that whole population of Jabesh Gilead was massacred with the exception of the virgins. That act would give new meaning to the word "solution."

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The action appears cruel in the extreme to the modern reader, but the virtual sacredness of the bond linking the several tribes into the amphictyony<sup>95</sup> must be appreciated and the sin of Jabesh Gilead seen in its light."

***(xv) The embassy to the Benjamites (21:13-15)***

***13 Then the whole assembly sent an offer of peace to the Benjamites at the rock of Rimmon.***

***14 So the Benjamites returned at that time and were given the women of Jabesh Gilead who had been spared. But there were not enough for all of them.***

***15 The people grieved for Benjamin, because the Lord had made a gap in the tribes of Israel.***

When the smoke settled and emotions were calmed an offer of peace was sent to the surviving Benjamites. The Hebrew reads literally: "call unto them peaceably."

Four months had elapsed before this event took place, because we read earlier: "But six hundred men turned and fled into the desert to the rock of Rimmon, where they stayed four months."<sup>96</sup>

<sup>95</sup> The word refers to a federation of ancient Greek cities.

<sup>96</sup> Judg. 20:47

*The Tyndale Commentary* comments: “The fact that 400 prospective wives had been procured for them must have convinced the Benjamites of the sincerity of the endeavors of their brethren to effect a reconciliation. There was still a deficiency of 200 maidens, however, and it is clear that the contrite Israelites felt themselves responsible for making up this lack, although their vow made it impossible for them to give their own daughters in marriage. The sparing of the 600, who were as guilty as their fellow-Benjamites who had perished, seems to have been prompted by the consideration that, in any case, sufficient punishment had been meted out, and that the breach must not be made absolute by the complete annihilation of one tribe.”

The feeling of suffering among the tribes about the fate of the remaining Benjamites reflect a New Testament truth, expressed by the Apostle Paul that, as one member of the body of Christ suffers, the whole body suffers.<sup>97</sup>

The problem for the Israelites, at this point was the oath that forbade them to give their daughters in marriage to any Benjamite. There is an amusing touch in the solution found for solving that problem.

***(xvi) More wives for the Benjamites (21:16-24)***

***16 And the elders of the assembly said, "With the women of Benjamin destroyed, how shall we provide wives for the men who are left?"***

***17 The Benjamite survivors must have heirs," they said, "so that a tribe of Israel will not be wiped out.***

***18 We can't give them our daughters as wives, since we Israelites have taken this oath: 'Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to a Benjamite.'***

***19 But look, there is the annual festival of the Lord in Shiloh, to the north of Bethel, and east of the road that goes from Bethel to Shechem, and to the south of Lebonah."***

***20 So they instructed the Benjamites, saying, "Go and hide in the vineyards***

***21 and watch. When the girls of Shiloh come out to join in the dancing, then rush from the vineyards and each of you seize a wife from the girls of Shiloh and go to the land of Benjamin.***

***22 When their fathers or brothers complain to us, we will say to them, 'Do us a kindness by helping them, because we did not get wives for them during the war, and you are innocent, since you did not give your daughters to them.'"***

***23 So that is what the Benjamites did. While the girls were dancing, each man caught one and carried her off to be his wife. Then they returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and settled in them.***

***24 At that time the Israelites left that place and went home to their tribes and clans, each to his own inheritance.***

The Israelites decided that the extinction of the tribe of Benjamin would be a national disaster that must be avoided at any price. Israel must remain a nation consisting of twelve tribes. The fact that 400 women had been provided was not considered a sufficient solution to the problem, although that would have guaranteed the continuation of the tribe. Evidently, more was involved than mere survival. It may be that it was felt that the 200 Benjamites who would be condemned to celibacy for the rest of their life would be a threat to the health of the tribe and the nation. Two hundred dissatisfied males could easily turn into a band of marauders that would make travel on the highways a danger for the other tribes.

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<sup>97</sup> I Cor. 12:26

*The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “The reference to *an inheritance* (17) is not clear, since it is the provision of wives, not a tribal portion (the usual meaning of ‘inheritance’), which is required. Possibly there is compression of thought; the remnant of Benjamin were to be allowed to return in peace to their own territory, but unless wives were provided then the line of Benjamin would cease, and a tribe would be blotted out in Israel. In this predicament their fertile imagination suggested another alternative, possibly prompted by the fact that the camp was now at Shiloh. The words of verse 19 are addressed to the 200 Benjamites without wives, and the precision of the description suggests that Shiloh was a small settlement off the main highway. ...

It has been conjectured that the annual *feast* (19) or pilgrimage (so the meaning of the Heb. *hāg*) was the Passover, and that the dancing commemorated the rejoicing of Miriam and the women of Israel after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 15:20, 21). More plausible, in the light of the mention of *vineyards* (20), is that it was the Feast of Tabernacles, in the time of the vintage harvest.”

The remaining Benjamin celibates were told, first of all, about the oath the people of the other tribes had taken that prevented them to allow the Benjamites to marry any of their maidens. Secondly they were shown a way to circumvent the problem by hiding in the vineyards at the place where the girls would dance during the festival. They would have the opportunity to see the girls, to choose the one they wanted and to abduct a girl and elope with her.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* refers to the reading of the Vulgate of v.22: “‘Pardon them, for they have not taken them as victors take captives in war; but when they requested you to give them you did not; therefore the fault is your own.’ Here it is intimated that application had been made to the people of Shiloh to furnish these two hundred Benjamites with wives, and that they had refused; and it was this refusal that induced the Benjamites to seize and carry them off. Does not Jerome, the translator, refer to the history of the rape of the Sabine virgins? ... ‘Pardon them, I beseech you for they have not each taken his wife to the war; and unless you now give these to them you will sin.’ This intimates that, as the Benjamites had not taken their wives with them to the war, where some, if not all, of them might have escaped; and the Israelites found them in the cities, and put them all to the sword; therefore the people of Shiloh should give up those two hundred young women to them for wives; and if they did not, it would be a sin, the circumstances of the case being considered.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on the KJV's reading, *We reserved not to each man his wife*, etc.: “These words are somewhat difficult. If we may insert the word *to*, as the A.V. does, before *each man* (for it is wanting in the Hebrew), the sense is good. The Israelites acknowledge their own fault in not reserving women enough to be wives to the Benjamites, and ask the fathers and brothers of the daughters of Shiloh to do them a favor by enabling them to repair their fault. But it is rather a strain upon the words. The omission of the *to* is not natural in such a phrase (... Numbers 26:54 is hardly to the point, nor is ... Genesis 41:12, where the *to* had been expressed before the us), and *reserved* is a forced interpretation of the verb. If the words were spoken by the Benjamites, all would be plain and easy: ‘We received not each man his wife in the war.’ Hence some put the speech into the mouth of Benjamin, as though the Israelites meant, We will say in your names, in your persons, as your attorneys, so to speak, ‘Grant them to us,’ etc. But this is rather forced. Others, therefore, follow the Peschito, and read, ‘*because* THEY received not each man his wife,’ etc., which makes very good sense, but has not MS. authority. *Ye did not give*, etc., *i.e.* you need not fear the guilt of the broken oath, because you did not *give* your daughters, so as to violate the oath (ver. 7), but they were taken from you by force. The A.V. gives the probable meaning of the passage, though it is somewhat obscure.”

*(xvii) Finale (21:25)*

***25 In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.***

The Hebrew text reads literally: “Every man did that what was right in his own eyes.” There was no recognition of moral absolutes. That means that God was actually left out of the picture.

Israel’s problem was the absence of a final and central authority, which established and executed absolute rules. The fact that this authority is called “king” suggests that the book was written in the days when Israel had become a monarchy; or at least when the realization had been revived that Israel was a theocracy in which the king ruled by the grace of God.

The problem was not ultimately the absence of a monarch to rule the nation. Gideon had stated: “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you.”<sup>98</sup> It was the absence of an ultimate reference point of moral and ethical standards that caused the people to set their own standard. The modern term for this is “situational ethics.” If man’s moral behavior is not related to God’s absolutes, it qualifies as sin. People who do as they see fit do not live up to God’s standards.

God’s holiness and glory is the reference point for each human life. We cannot reach God’s glory, but we should set our compass on it. It has been said that sailors cannot reach the stars, but they set their course on them in order to reach their destination. If we do not set our course on God’s glory when we are going through life on earth, we will not reach our destination when life on earth is over.

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<sup>98</sup> Judg. 8:23