# When There Was No King

# (The Book of Judges)

by
Daniel J. Lewis

# When There was No King - The Book of Judges

Most Christians have only a vague knowledge of the Book of Judges gleaned from miscellaneous Sunday School stories about Deborah, Gideon and Samson. While such cursory knowledge is not to be discredited, it falls short of understanding the real function and purpose of the book. Initially, it is important to understand how the book fits within the larger scheme of the Hebrew Bible, and after that, to understand what the book may contribute in its own right.

# Introduction

## The Former Prophets

In the Hebrew Bible there is a collection of four scrolls called *The Former Prophets* consisting of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. (Samuel in the Hebrew Bible corresponds to the books 1 and 2 Samuel in the English Bible, while Kings in the Hebrew Bible corresponds to the books 1 and 2 Kings in the English Bible.) These four books are a history of the nation Israel from the time of the Israelite invasion of Canaan until the fall of the kingdom of Judah to Babylon in 586 BC. Far more than just a bare bones recollection of people and events, this history is a record of theological failure. It is no accident that later writers in the Old Testament read these narratives as a history of failure. In particular, the narratives of the Book of Judges come in for their share of credit in this dark history (see, for instance, Psalm 106:34-43).

Modern scholars often call the Former Prophets in the Hebrew Bible by the name Deuteronomistic History, because the nature of this history is theologically shaped by the theology of the Book of Deuteronomy, and especially, by the blessings and curses of the code near the end of the book (Dt. 27-28).[1]

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[1] Some scholars go even further, suggesting that the Book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History were composed relatively late at about the time of King Josiah. For further discussion, see the following section on Author and

Deuteronomy records the final speeches of Moses to the congregation of Israel prior to the people's entry into the land of Canaan. The content of these speeches parallel the style of ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties. Such treaties fell into semi-standard categories among the nations of Canaan and Mesopotamia. They included an historical prologue, a list of stipulations, a permanent record of the treaty, and a listing of the blessings for obedience and curses for violation.[2] In the case of God and Israel, Yahweh was the divine suzerain while Israel was his vassal. The blessings and curses in the covenant are spelled out vividly. If the nation was faithful to the covenant, Yahweh promised fertility, peace, and general favor (Dt. 11:13-15; 28:1-14; 30:15-16). If the nation broke covenant, they could expect disease, drought, invasion, devastation and exile (Dt. 11:16-17; 28:15-68; 30:17-18). Longevity in the land was entirely dependent upon covenant faithfulness (Dt. 4:25-28; 8:19-20; 28:36-37, 64-68).

There seems to be a single, dominant objective in the Former Prophets, and that objective is to understand the factors that led to the dissolution of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Why was Israel, the nation of God's people, a kingdom under judgment? Why had Jerusalem, the city of David, and Mt. Zion, the place where Yahweh had chosen to place his sacred name, been desecrated by the pagans and destroyed? Why had Yahweh allowed the destruction of the culture, religion, shrine, and political entity of the people he had called to be a great and vast nation, and above all, why had the Israelites lost control of the land that was to be theirs forever. The answers lie in the Book of Deuteronomy and in the theological history given in the narratives of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. If the Book of Joshua demonstrates the blessings of obedience, the Book of Judges details the cycles of oppression resulting from disobedience.

## Historical Setting

The period of the judges occurred after the Israelite exodus from Egypt but before the establishment of an Israelite monarchy. The attempt to coordinate biblical material with known history to arrive at firm dates becomes increasing less certain the farther one tracks backward beyond about the 9th century BC. In general, most scholars believe the period of the judges occurred roughly between about 1200 and 1000 BC. Certain issues frame this conclusion, both from indications within the Bible as well as from outside it. In the first place, the debate

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[2] G. Mendenhall, *IDB* (1962) 1.714-723.

about the time of the exodus is critical.[3] If one assumes an exodus date of *ca.* 1446 BC, then the period of the judges began much earlier than if one accepts the later exodus date of the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC.[4] Internal factors in the book seem to suggest that one must look at least to Iron Age I (1200-1000 BC), since the Canaanite enemies of the Israelites possessed "iron chariots", probably referring to chariots with iron-rimmed wheels (1:19; 4:3, 13). The transition from the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 BC) to the Iron Age, on the basis of archaeological evidence, is usually thought to have begun in about 1200 BC.[5]

Yet a further issue is how to take into account the tenures of the various judges. If one simply "does the math", assuming their tenures to be consecutive and the numbers to be non-schematic, the period of the judges may have lasted as long as four centuries.[6] 2 Kings 6:1 is frequently cited to indicate 480 years between the exodus and the fourth year of Solomon's reign. However, two factors mitigate this estimate. First, while the biblical text does seem to suggest that some of the judges were consecutive to each other, the book does not seem to require this in all cases. Judges 10:7, for instance, may suggest that Jephthah and Samson were contemporaries. Some of the judges seem to be regional rather than national figures, so it may very well be that some of the judges should be considered as contemporaries. Second, the frequent appearance of numbers such as "40" and "20" (3:11; 4:3; 5:31; 8:28; 13:1; 15:20; 16:31) might well be round numbers representing conventional ways of talking about generations. If they are schematic, then one cannot simply "do the math", since this may not have been the intent in the first place. In the end, the reader must tolerate some ambiguity concerning the length of the poeriod and the chronology of the book.

Still, virtually all agree that the period of the judges belongs to the end of the Bronze Age and the development of the Iron Age. While there was no sharp break

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[3] Contemporary non-conservative scholars generally doubt that the exodus even happened at all, at least in the way it is described in the Bible. They argue that these stories are about as historical as the stories of King Arthur, and in fact, would even include figures as late as David in this negative assessment, cf. P. Davies, "'House of David' Built on Sand," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 1994), pp. 54-55. The debate has become acrimonious, with "minimalists" (those who argue that biblical history is largely untrustworthy) and "maximalists" (those who believe the Bible contains reliable history) squaring off against each other, cf. "Face to Face: Biblical Minimalists Meet Their Challengers," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 1997), pp. 26-42, 66. Hence, the issue of precise dating might seem a minor point in view of this larger concern. Nevertheless, for those who take the biblical record seriously as containing accurate history, the issue of dating is important.

[4] The date of the exodus is beyond the scope of this study. However, a good summary of the various positions and contributing data is available in J. Walton, "Exodus, Date of," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Alexander and D. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), pp. 258-272.

[5] A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), pp. 295-296.

[6] To be exact, 410 years, so L. Wood, *The Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), pp. 11, 20 (footnote #38).

in the material culture between the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I, there were some significant changes, including a "building explosion" in the central mountains of Israel.[7] Many sites previously unoccupied were established as new farming communities. Of course, the defining characteristic of this transition was the change in metal technology, from bronze tools and weapons (bronze is an alloy of copper and tin, which increases the hardness and working properties of the metals) to iron tools and weapons (from the smelting of iron ore). While iron was much more widely available than copper, the melting point of copper is about 1100°, while iron is 1530° C. The 400° differential was huge in terms of ancient technology. While iron in somewhat primitive forms was known much further back than 1200 BC, it was in the period of 1200 BC and later that the technologies of quenched and tempered steel developed quickly.[8] Because iron was so much more widely available than copper, the development of iron technology "took metallurgy out of the palace, just as the alphabet had done for the art of writing."[9]

Equally important for the historical setting of the judges is the relationship of Egypt and its pharaohs to Palestine. From the middle of the 1500s BC and four hundred years thereafter, the land of Canaan was to greater or lesser degrees under the power of Egypt. After a pitched battle at Megiddo between Tuthmosis III and a coalition of Canaanites, the Egyptians defeated the armies of some 119 Canaanite city-states and assumed direct rule over Palestine.[10] An entire series of letters from various kings in Mesopotamia and Canaan to Pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenophis IV) were discovered at Tell El-Amarna, Egypt in the late 1800s dating to the 13th century BC. The majority of the 380 cuneiform tablets featured correspondence from Egyptian vassals in Canaan and Syria, such as, the kings of Shechem, Gezer, Gath-Carmel, Megiddo, Acco, Jerusalem, Debir, Hazor, Ashkelon and Lachish, among others. The letters indicate that Egypt garrisoned troops in Canaan, while regular Egyptian troops, accompanied by chariot corps, were dispatched to Canaan during special campaigns.

The kings of the Canaanite vassal cities served more-or-less as Egyptian mayors, and their offices were passed down through dynastic succession. Some Canaanite towns are specifically named in both the Amarna Letters and the Book of Judges (Shechem, Gezer, Hazor, Ashkelon, Jerusalem, Debir, Megiddo, Rehov

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[7] The number of settlements in the central Hill Country increased from less than thirty to over two hundred, cf. A. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 232.

[8] J. Muhly, "Mining and Metalwork in Ancient Western Asia," *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Sasson (rpt. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), pp. 1506-1517.

[9] Muhly, p. 1517.

[10] Mazar, pp. 232-233.

and Acco). The description of Shechem's governmental structure in Judges 9, for instance, parallels closely the details about Shechem in the Amarna Letters.[11] The Egyptian presence in Canaan is further demonstrated by two inscriptions, one from Seti I (*ca.* 1318-1290 BC) and the other from Ramesses II (1290-1224 BC). Also highly significant from this period is the campaign of Pharaoh Merenptah in Canaan (1237-1227 BC), who erected a victory stele boasting that he had conquered not only Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam, but also "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not".[12] This is the earliest non-biblical reference to Israel in the land of Canaan.

The curious references in the Amarna Letters to groups of the *'Apiru* (or *Habiru* or *Hapiru*), a class of people without permanent citizenship who were threatening the Canaanite city-states, has fueled debate over whether there is any etymological relationship between the name *'Apiru* and the name *'ibri* (Hebrews) or whether the name *'Apiru* might be a pejorative reference to the Israelites. The Canaanite kings pleaded for Egyptian relief forces to help them defend against these intruders. To date, there is not enough information to be certain of such an identification, but the possibility remains intriguing.[13]

## Canaan and Its Peoples

The Israelites were not the only outsiders to establish themselves in Canaan near the end of the Bronze Age. Another important group also migrating to Canaan was the Philistines, one of the groups described by the Egyptians as "the Sea Peoples". They first arrived in the eastern Mediterranean in the second half of the 13th century BC. Egypt's power over Canaan had weakened by this time, and the Sea Peoples exploited the vacuum. In Egyptian wall reliefs, this invasion is depicted as boatloads of assaulting foreigners who, according to Egyptian hieroglyphics at Medinet Habu, were defeated by Ramesses III (*ca.* 1198-1166 BC). Other Egyptian texts indicate that there were land forces in addition to the sea invasion.[14] After their defeat, the Philistines settled on the south coastal plain of Palestine. There, they concentrated themselves in a pentapolis of city-states

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[11] N. Na'aman, "Amarna Letters," *ABD* (1992) 1.174-181.

[12] Hoerth, p. 228. For the text of this inscription, see J. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1958), p. 231.

[13] N. Lemche, "Habiru, Hapiru," *ABD* (1992) 3.6-10.

[14] B. Wood, "The Philistines Enter Canaan: Were They Egyptian Lackeys or Invading Conquerors?" *BAR* (Nov/Dec 1991), pp. 44-89. In fact, a considerable debate has ensued as to whether the Sea Peoples came from the Aegean by boat or overland, cf. T. Barako and A. Yasur-Landau, "One if By Sea…Two if By Land: How Did the Philistines Get to Canaan?" *BAR* (Mar/Apr 2003), pp. 24-39, 66.

(Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ekron and Gath). Some archaeologists argue that it was the Philistines themselves who brought iron technology to Canaan, and in doing so, gained a military edge over Israel and the Canaanites.[15]

From where did the Sea Peoples come? The Bible clearly indicates the Aegean, where the terms Caphtor and Kerethites refer to Crete and Cretans respectively (cf. Ge. 10:14; Am. 9:7; Zep. 2:5; Eze. 25:16). Archaeological evidence also points to the Aegean, including Cyprus.[16] The Philistines tended to recreate in Canaan, especially in their pottery, their home environment of the Aegean.[17]

In addition to the Philistines, various other peoples belonged to the land of Canaan in the period of the judges. The Hittites, though their empire centered in Anatolia, earlier had extended their power into Syria. When their empire began to break up in the 13th century, Hittite emigrants may have moved as far south as Canaan.[18] The Bible lists various other people groups indigenous to the land and belonging to the broad term Canaanite (cf. Ex. 3:8, 17). Canaanite origins are obscure, but their presence is widely substantiated.[19] In the transjordan, the Ammonites and Moabites, also, figure in the history of the judges (cf. Jg. 3:12-14).[20]

## Date and Author

At the outset, it should be acknowledged that the biblical text offers no direct indication as to when or by whom the Book of Judges was composed. Jewish Talmudic tradition credits Samuel,[21] but this can be regarded as no more than a late guess. Modern historical-critical scholars assume that the ancient traditions of Israel were preserved orally until about the 10th century BC, when they were first codified in written documents by some unknown Israelite(s). The preponderance of narratives in Judges seem to relate to the southern part of Israel, and hence, it is

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[15] J. Muhly, "How Iron Technology Changed the Ancient World and Gave the Philistines a Military Edge," *BAR* (Nov/Dec 1982) pp. 40-54.

[16] V. Karageorghis, "Exploring Philistine Origins on the Island of Cyprus," *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1984), pp. 16-28.

[17] T. Dothan, "Ekron of the Philistines: Part I: Where Them Came From, How They Settled Down and the Place They Worshipped In," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1990), pp. 26-36.

[18] A. Kempinski, "Hittites in the Bible: What Does Archaeology Say?" *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1979), pp. 239-40.

[19] K. Schoville, "Canaanites and Amorites," *Peoples of the Old Testament World,* eds. A. Hoerth, G. Mattingly and E. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp. 157-182.

[20] R. Younker, "Ammonites," and G. Mattingly, "Moabites," *Peoples of the Old Testament World,* eds. A. Hoerth, G. Mattingly and E. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp. 293-333.

[21] *Baba Bathra* 14b.

speculated to have been written in the south. If this be the case, then the literary composition of the Book of Judges from preexisting materials would date no earlier than the time of the divided monarchy and perhaps as late as Judah's survival after the northern nation went into exile.[22] The theory is that the stories circulated independently, were eventually brought together, later edited in the period of Josiah, and perhaps edited further even later.[23]

Conservative scholars tend to be less confident about these broad assumptions, especially when they are connected to documentary theories of Pentateuchal composition that they doubt as well.[24] For one thing, virtually all scholars agree that parts of the Book of Judges exhibit some of the oldest forms of the Hebrew language in existence. This is especially true of the some of the personal names in the book.[25] Further, there is no *prima facie* reason why these traditions could not have been written down quite early, since the Amarna Period, which is even earlier, demonstrates a considerable degree of literacy in the cities from Ugarit to Egypt. In fact, one passage in Judges actually describes the composition of a list of officials in Succoth (cf. 8:14). Also, at least one passage suggests that at the time of composition the Jebusites still were living in Jerusalem (1:21), which puts the tradition earlier than the conquest of Jebus by David (cf. 2 Sa. 5:6ff.). The Canaanites, similarly, still lived in Gezer (1:29), which must be before the time of Solomon (cf. 1 Kg. 9:16).[26] Still, it must be conceded that some later elements also are to be found, such as, awareness of the destruction of Shiloh (18:31), which did not happen at least until the time of Samuel (1 Sa. 4). The repeating phrase, "In those days there was no king in Israel" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), presupposes a composition after the establishment of the monarchy. If the reference in 18:30 concerning the "captivity of the land" refers to the Assyrian or Babylonian exiles, then a very late hand indeed seems to be present.[27] In the end, a certain amount of ambiguity will have to be tolerated regarding the author(s) and date. Still, evangelicals are not categorically against the idea of an origin involving

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[22] R. Boling, *ABD* (1992) 3.1115-1116.

[23] B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 256-257 and O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 258-267.

[24] R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp. 682-690.

[25] Names in Deborah's Song (Jg. 5), for instance, contain roots that have parallels only in the late 2nd millenium BC and no later, cf. R. Hess, "The Name Game: Dating the Book of Judges," *BAR* (Nov/Dec 2004), pp. 38-41.

[26] E. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 169. Admittedly, however, these features could have been imbedded in an oral tradition earlier than a written form.

[27] The reading of this passage is disputed, however, and some are willing to emend the text from אֶרֶץ (= land) to אֲרוֹן (= ark), especially since it seems unlikely that the priests of Dan could have survived during David's reign, cf. H. Wolff, "Judges," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 3.378.

oral tradition, later codification, and subsequent redaction.[28]

## Literary Structure

The Book of Judges was composed in three easily indentifiable sections, a Preface (1:1—3:6), a History of the Judges (3:7—16:31), and Appendices (17-21). Each of these sections has an important role to play in the larger objective of the work as detailing the failure of the nation in their covenant with God and the tragic consequences determined by the Deuteronomic code.

## The Transition from Joshua to the Judges

At first glance, it would seem that the Book of Joshua describes a completely victorious invasion of the land of Canaan. Major cities were overthrown, and the land was divided up among the twelve tribes. However, even the Book of Joshua concedes that there were large tracts of land still outside Israelite control. While the initial invasion may have been successful enough (Jos. 11:23; 21:43-45), the continuing challenge remained of Canaanite enclaves that had not yet been subdued (Jos. 13:1-7; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12-13). The Deuteronomic code was quite clear in stipulating that complete annihilation of the Canaanites was required (Dt. 7:1-6, 16; 20:16-18), including the annihilation of any sympathizers who might lead Israel astray (Dt. 13:12-16). Yet when Joshua died, many of these enclaves remained.  The Book of Judges opens with the telling question:

> *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?*

Who indeed? The preface to the Book of Judges continues to modify this picture of ongoing struggle (1:1--3:6). Though effort was made to conquer the Canaanites, the Israelites were largely successful only in the mountains. In the plains, where the Canaanites possessed the military superiority of chariots against infantry, the Israelites were overpowered (Jg. 1:19). The various enclaves that remained, and there were many of them (Jg. 1:21, 27-36), stood as glaring evidence that the invaders had breached their covenant responsibility before Yahweh (Jg. 2:1-4).  Though dire warnings against Israelite treaties and intermarriages with the Canaanites had been issued (Dt. 7:3-4; Jos. 23:12-13), such treaties and intermarriages did, in fact, occur (Jg. 1:25; 3:5-6; 14:1-3).  These

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[28] W. LaSor, D. Hubbard and F. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 161 and A. Cundall & L. Morris, *Judges & Ruth [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL:  IVP, 1968), pp. 18-28.

treaties and intermarriages served to elevate the Canaanites to a position of theological acceptance, and this in turn threatened the very definition of Israel as the people of God.

This alien threat continued throughout the period of the judges. The judges themselves were essentially military leaders rather than magistrates (2:16). To be sure, the Hebrew title *shophet* means "one who decides or makes a judgment." Still, only Deborah is described as holding court (Jg. 4:5), and while other of the judges may have served in judicial roles, the emphasis in the Book of Judges is upon their military leadership rather than their role in hearing civil cases. The Hebrew verb *yasha'*, which means to save or to deliver, is frequently used to describe the work of the judges (cf. 2:16, 18; 3:9, 31; 6:14; 8:22; 10:1; 13:5).

## Yahweh War

Clearly, the Book of Judges is a book of war. However, the wars in the book are of a special kind, often called Holy War, or perhaps more appropriately, Yahweh War.[29] The concept of Yahweh War is based upon the fact that Yahweh himself is depicted as an *'ish milhamah*, that is, a "man of war" (Ex. 15:3). He is the one who had the power to win victories (Dt. 1:30; 20:1-4), and he is the one who declared war for Israel (Ex. 17:16; Nu. 31:3).

Every able-bodied male was expected to defend the clan's property and rights against an enemy. To be sure, there were some stated exceptions for those who were newly married or who had other domestic responsibilities (Dt. 20:5-9). Still, with no standing army, Israel's troops were made up of the ordinary citizens who laid down their plows and picked up their swords. This expectation for full collective response in the cause of Yahweh War underlies the lament in the Song of Deborah for the lack of response on the part of Reuben, Gilead (the tribal territory of Gad), Dan and Asher (5:15b-17). Sometimes, when a tribe was not summoned, its members became offended, as in the case of the Ephraimites (8:1). While often enough the muster for war was only issued to adjacent clans, sometimes the call went to the entire nation (19:29-30). High praise is given to the volunteers who eagerly responded to the call for arms (5:2, 9).

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[29] Though the term Holy War is used more commonly by biblical scholars, it has the disadvantage of implying that war was holy in itself and had moral or religious worth. Such an assumption would surely be too sweeping. The term Yahweh War is more appropriate, for it reinforces the fact that, while the wars themselves were religious in character, they were religious only insofar as they were directed by Yahweh himself and according to his war code, cf. P. Craigie, *ISBE* (1988) 4.1019.

The activity of Yahweh in war determined the psychological attitude of Israel as well as that of enemy.  Israel must trust in Yahweh and not fear (Ex. 14:13-14; Dt. 7:21; 20:3), and the enemy would lose courage (Ex. 15:14-16; 23:27-28; Dt. 2:25; 7:23; 11:25).  If Israel did not remain faithful to the covenant, the Israelite soldiers would experience the same fear as the enemies of Yahweh (Lv. 26:36-39; Dt. 32:30-31).

Thus, war in Israel had a clearly marked religious character. It included making vows to God (Nu. 21:2). In a military census, an offering was to be given to God for each soldier mustered (Ex. 30:11-12). When a soldier took up arms, he "stood before Yahweh" (Nu. 32:20, 27, 29, 32). It was clear that any success in a war venture was directly contingent upon the nation's faithfulness to Yahweh (Dt. 6:18-19; 11:22-25). When the army had been mustered for war, they were sent off by a priest who charged them with the solemn duty of war before God (Dt. 20:2-4). When the army was in bivouac, ceremonial purity was mandatory, since Yahweh himself moved in and about the camp as the divine leader in war (Dt. 23:9-14). During the conquest of Canaan and the period of the judges, Yahweh declared that the mission of Israel in war was to execute a form of judgment upon the wickedness of the Canaanites (Dt. 9:1-6).

To refuse to participate in Yahweh war was a serious breach of covenant responsibility, as was demonstrated by the clans at Kadesh Barnea. When ten of the twelve spies gave a discouraging report, the nation as a whole refused to engage in conflict, and it was only Moses' intercession on behalf of the people that prevented Yahweh from turning them over altogether (Nu. 14:1-25). As a judgment, God consigned the nation to sojourn in the desert until every one of the rebels had died (Nu. 14:26-35). When the people then tried to reverse God's decision and invade Canaan anyway, they were terribly defeated (Nu. 14:39-45). This failure at Kadesh was held up to succeeding generations as a warning not to fail in the responsibilities of Yahweh War (Dt. 1:19-46).

Torah envisions three possible results of Yahweh War. The first two concern enemies not within the boundaries of the Holy Land proper. Such a city under attack might be offered terms of peace in which its citizens could be enslaved rather than exterminated (Dt. 20:10-15). If, on the other hand, the enemy was within the borders of the Holy Land, the land given to the Israelites in a covenantal grant, then the procedure was to exterminate everything that breathed--men, women, children, and animals (Dt. 7:1-2, 16; 13:12-16; 20:16-18; Nu. 21:1-3). All such entities within the borders of Israel's inheritance were to be *herem*, that is, irrevocably given over to Yahweh by total destruction.

## Theological Themes in the Book

If the primary connection between the Pentateuch and the books of the Former Prophets is indeed a theological one, then it is appropriate to trace how the important theological themes carry through from the one to the other. The most important of these themes are the peoplehood of Israel, the concept of kingship, the concept of a central shrine, and the Holy Spirit inspired wars that punctuate the record.

### The Peoplehood of Israel

In the exodus, Israel became the covenant people of Yahweh. God took the twelve clans he rescued out of Egyptian slavery and molded them into a cohesive group on the basis of their common family ties and their common experience in his mighty redemptive acts (cr. Ex. 6:7). The Book of Deuteronomy grounds this concept of peoplehood in Yahweh' sovereign, loving choice (Dt. 4:37; 7:6-8; 14:2; 26:18-19).

This Deuteronomic ideal of a single people with a single God becomes the pervasive norm for the history of the Former Prophets and, of course, the Book of Judges. During the period of Joshua, the cause of conquest welded the clans into a tight-knit fighting community. During the period of the judges, with its terrible cycles of oppression and freedom-fighting, the same call to Yahweh War helped maintain unity. Later, kingship would serve toward the same end, but above all, the peoplehood of Israel was grounded in the sovereign choice of Israel during the exodus. Even in the early period of her history, Israel existed as a tribal league without statehood, a central government, a standing army, or administrative machinery of any sort, yet Israel still functioned as a people.

Essential to Israel's concept of peoplehood was the number twelve, going all the way back to the twelve sons of Jacob. The sacrosanct character of this number is evident throughout the Pentateuch in both literal and symbolic usage, and the preservation of the number-symbol continues through the Book of Judges. Israel always remains the twelve tribes, regardless of her constituency. Though by the time of the invasion and division of the land under Joshua the nation was actually thirteen tribes, due to the dividing of the Joseph clan into Ephraim and Manasseh (Jos 13-14), it is still always described as a nation with twelve tribes. Similarly, though the Manasseh clan was even further divided, so that it was alotted two land holdings straddling the Jordan River and not even adjacent to each other, Manasseh was still counted as only one tribe. The number twelve was preserved.

The preservation of the number twelve is important in the history of the judges, and various circumstances reflect the sanctity of this number-symbol. A gruesome call for Yahweh War was issued with twelve pieces of a woman's corpse sent throughout the various clans (19:29). When one tribe was on the verge of extinction during a particularly brutal civil conflict, a conflict in which all but six hundred Benjamites had been massacred (20:46-48) and the other clans had taken oath not to give any of their daughters to the Benjamites for marriage (21:1), a collective plan was formed to provide wives for the Benjamites so that "one tribe would not be cut off" (21:2-3, 6, 15). When the Simeon tribe eventually lost its clear distinctiveness due to having settled within the borders of the clan of Judah (Jos. 19:1, 9; Jg. 1:3, 17), this fact did not alter the sacred number twelve.

There were primarily three threats to the peoplehood of Israel, the internal tendancy to adopt the religious and cultural ideals of the Canaanite nations, the external threat of military control from the outside, and the north-south mentality that lurked barely beneath the surface and eventually, in the time of the monarchy, erupted into seccession by the north. While none of these forces destroyed the peoplehood of Israel, they seriously altered its character.

Originally, the threat of syncretism and assimilation was to be countered by the total annihilation of the Canaanites within Israelite borders (Dt. 7:1-2, 16; 20:16-18). The Deuteronomic code was unyielding. Laws forbidding intermarriage and treaties with the Canaanites were part of this protection system (Dt. 7:3-4). Dire warnings were issued about the dangers inherent from such intermingling (Jos. 23:12-13). Nevertheless, both marriages and treaties between Israel and the Canaanites occurred, and these in turn became threats to the peoplehood of Israel (3:3-5). When the Joseph clan attacked Bethel, they showed favor to a family of Canaanites because they had received from them military intelligence (1:25). Such a treaty was a direct violation of the code of Yahweh War. The consequences of intermarriage are vividly illustrated in the story of Samson (14:1-3ff).

In addition, the beginning of a north-south mentality among the tribes tended toward political fragmentation. One cause was, no doubt, geographical. During the period of the judges, the Plain of Esdraelon was largely in the hands of the enemy (1:27), thus effectively separating the northernmost clans from the others. Various other Canaanite city-states continued to coexist alongside the Israelites in this same vicinity (1:29-36). Further south, the Canaanite city-state of Jebus effectively separated the Judah clan from those clans farther north, since it controlled the major route between them (Jos. 15:63; Jg. 1:21). Apparently, there was some success in taking over a part of Jebus, probably the unfortified southwest hill (1:8), but this effort was only partially successful.

Another cause for north-south fragmentation was the establishment of a rival shrine in the north which competed with the Tent of Meeting in the south. Shiloh, in Ephraim, was the site where the Tabernacle was pitched after the original conquest (Jos. 18:1), and during the period of the judges, it seems to have served as an administrative center (21:12). Nevertheless, another shrine was built in the north by the migrating Danites (18), a shrine that remained from the time of the tribal league until the exile of the northern tribes in 721 BC (18:30-31). Later, Jeroboam I would make full use of this Danite shrine when the monarchy ruptured at the death of Solomon (1 Kg. 12:28-30). The north-south mentality continued into the time of Samuel and David, and upon the death of Saul, each side supported a claimant for the throne (2 Sa. 2:4-11).

**The Central Shrine**

The patriarchs worshiped at a variety of shrines in Palestine in more or less spontaneous ways (cf. Ge. 12:6-8; 13:3-4, 18; 21:33; 22:1-2; 26:23-25; 28:16-19; 31:51-54; 32:30; 33:19-20; 35:1, 6-7). However, during the exodus, Yahweh instructed Moses to erect a central shrine for the clans called the Tent of Meeting. The worship at this shrine was carefully regulated. The shrine was moveable, of course, but it became the dwellingplace of Yahweh in the midst of the people (Ex. 29:44-46; 40:34-38). This central place of worship becomes the background against which the Deuteronomic code stipulated that, after the conquest of Canaan, a permanent central shrine was to be erected for worship (Dt. 12). The Canaanites worshiped at many shrines, and the new order for Israel's worship was to be markedly differently (Dt. 12:4-5). All major religious ceremonies were to be conducted at this central shrine (cf. Dt. 14:23-25; 15:20; 16:2, 5-7, 11, 15-16; 17:8; 26:2; 31:11). No specific indication was given by Moses as to where this shrine would be built, and further, its construction was not to occur until the land had peace from war. Hence, during the Tribal League, no effort was made to erect one.[30]

At the time of the allotment of tribal lands under Joshua, the Tent of Meeting was pitched at Shiloh in the hill country of Ephraim, where it remained until the days of Samuel (cf. Jos. 18:8, 10; 19:51; 21:2; Jg. 18:31; 21:12, 19; 1 Sa. 1:3, 24; 2:14, 22; 3:21).[31] It may be that the Ark was separated from the Tent of Meeting for

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[30] It may be noted that in the Samaritan Pentateuch, a repeating reference to Shechem is found, and after Ex. 20:17, there is a command that indicates the permanent shrine was to be built on Mt. Gerizim.  These passages, however, are tendentious and almost certainly reflect editing in the interests of the Samaritan religion.

[31] Shiloh has been excavated, but other than the evidence that it was a sacred place for the Canaanites prior to its use by the Israelites, no direct material finds directly relate to the Tent of Meeting. The site had been abandoned by the

at least a short period, or perhaps the Tent itself was relocated briefly during the period of the judges (20:27). In any case, the establishment of a rival shrine, first in Ephraim and later by the Danites in northern Israel, was a serious breach of covenant responsibility. The story is rife with syncretism. While the recognition of Yahweh underlies the worship depicted (17:2b, 13), it is obvious that the shrine is a clear departure from Torah worship, both as to its location, the use of a carved image, a cast idol and an ephod, and the initial appointment of a priest outside the clan of Levi (17:1-5). There seems little doubt that the record of the judges included this account as a comment on the repeated departure of Israel from the ideal of a central shrine and the worship prescribed in Torah. Other evidences, also, exist in the Book of Judges about worship at places other than the centralized Tent of Meeting (2:5; 8:27; 11:31; 13:19-21, 23; 20:24-27; 21:2-4). While such places were not fully authorized, and while in some cases God seemed to overlook such lapses, in other cases such practices were dangerous, as in the case of Gideon (8:27). A permanent central shrine would not finally be established until the time of David and Solomon, and in the meantime, the Israelites continued to worship at the various high places in Palestine (1 Kg. 3:2).

**Kingship**

The Deuteronomic History is characterized by two distinct forms of politics, the politics of the Tribal League and the politics of the monarchy. The establishment of the Tribal League after Joshua's conquest made possible a shift from the semi-nomadic life of the Sinai desert to a nation of small farmers. Later, the establishment of a monarchy would make possible the shift from a nation of small farmers to a nation of both small farmers and urban classes in major cities.

The first hint of a future kingship in Israel came at the institution of circumcision as the covenantal ritual, when Abraham was promised that he would sire kings (Ge. 17:16, 20), a promise repeated to Jacob (Ge. 35:11) and implicit in Jacob's dying blessing upon Judah (Ge. 49:10). It is in the Deuteronomic code, however, that these hints became explicit. To be sure, it is permissive rather than mandatory legislation, but it clearly anticipates the future monarchy of Israel (cf. Dt. 17:14-15a).

If the possibility of a monarchy had roots in Torah, it must be frankly

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Canaanites during a drastic reduction of populated areas in Ephraim during the Late Bronze Age and not reoccupied until the Israelites did so in the 12th century BC. Then, during Iron Age I, there is clear evidence that Shiloh was destroyed by firein about 1050 BC, probably the destruction by the Philistines as described in the Bible (1 Sa. 4), cf. I. Finkelstein, "Shiloh Yields Some, But Not All, of Its Secrets," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1986) pp. 22-41.

conceded that there was still resistance to this idea. Israel was not eager to surrender the old order. The idea of a monarchy was consciously and firmly rejected in the days of Gideon, since it seemed to infringe upon Yahweh's divine kingship over the Tribal League (8:22-23). When Abimelech, one of the sons of Gideon's harem (8:31), established himself as a king through a deadly purge (9:1-6), the parable which was shouted from Mt. Gerizim by the one surviving son makes it plain that only a worthless bramble of a man, who had no useful employment, would aspire to kingship (9:7-21). Within three years, Abimelech's self-proclaimed kingdom was erupting with anarchy and treason. While trying to control his territory, Abimelech was killed when a woman dropped a millstone on his head from a tower. Any further efforts toward kingship ceased until the time of Samuel.

Still, in spite of the reluctance of Gideon and the aggrandizement of Abimelech, the Deuteronomic author of Judges did not view the absence of a king to be idyllic. To the contrary, the absence of a king was blamed for the general anarchy of the period, for there was a serious vacuum of leadership (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The final verse in the book concludes with the dismal statement, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."

**The Holy Spirit**

It seems to have been part of the standard profile of the judges that, when Yahweh chose an individual as leader, that person was endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower him/her for war. In the cases of Othniel (3:10), Gideon (6:34), Jephthah (11:29) and Samson (14:6, 19, 15:14) this same supernatural gift enabled the judges to perform great acts of power. While in other areas of the Old Testament the endowment of the Spirit resulted in prophecy and varied phenomena, in the Book of Judges the direct mention of the Spirit is confined to exploits in the context of Yahweh War. This characteristic has resulted in the description of the judges as "charismatic leaders," and in fact, it was quite possibly the people's deep respect for charismatic leadership that caused reluctance upon their part to tolerate a king. Kingship is traditionally controlled by dynastic concerns, and the role of God in dynastic succession is neither obvious nor immediate. While all the the judges are not directly described as Spirit-endowed, the reader is probably intended to understand that their exploits were divinely directed by Yahweh, the consummate Man of War.

# Failure and Judgment (1:1—3:6)

The Preface to the book (1:1--3:6) makes the transition from the time of Joshua to the period of the judges. It provides two windows through which to look at the covenant failure of the nation. The first window (1:1--2:5) offers a summary of the efforts to subdue Canaan and a brief description of the settlement of the Israelites in the mountains. The second window (2:6--3:6) describes the apostasy of the nation as its citizens indulged in the pagan religions of the Canaanites who still lived among them.

With the death of Joshua, the clans sought God as to who would begin the final conquest of Canaan. When Moses died many years earlier, he already had designated Joshua as his successor (Dt. 31:1-8, 14, 23), but Joshua left no such instructions. Though the form of consultation is not described, the reader probably should assume that this inquiry was made through the priesthood by Urim and Thummim (cf. Ex. 28:30; Nu. 27:18-21; Jg. 20:27; 1 Sa. 14:36-37; 23:9-12; 28:6; 30:7-8).[32] Surprisingly, the designated successor was a tribe, the clan of Judah, rather than an individual, (1:1-2). Since the Simeon clan also had inheritance in the south (Jos. 19:1-9), its members were invited to join the first advance (1:3).

## The Wars of Judah and Simeon (1:4-21)

The first target was the Canaanites and Perizzites in the territory allotted to Judah. The identity of the Perizzites, though it is used in 21 of the 27 biblical lists of pre-Israelite nations, is not entirely clear. Some scholars suggest the distinction between Canaanites and Perizzites was ethnic, Semitic versus non-Semitic, while others argue for a distinction between those in fortified cities as opposed to those in unwalled towns.[33] Whatever the case, the Perizzites were located in the hill country. Though they were defeated, the record later demonstrates that they were not annihilated as required by the covenant code (3:5; cf. 1 Kg. 9:20-21; Ezra 9:1). While the members of ten enemy military units were killed,[34] the leader (Adoni-

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[32] Such inquiries seem to have taken the form of casting lots with "yes" or "no" answers, or in some cases, no answer at all. The RSV translation of 1 Sa. 14:41 is instructive, where Saul prays, "If this guilt is in me or Jonathan my son…give Urim; but if this guilt is in thy people Israel, give Thummim." Still, the process of using this type of oracle is nowhere described, cf. I. Mendelsohn, *IDB* (1962) 4.739-740.

[33] S. Reed, *ABD* (1992) 5.231. Also, since the suffix *–izzi* also exists in the Hurrian language, it is possible that the Perizzites were Hurrians, cf. E. Speiser, *IDB* (1962) 3.242.

[34] The Hebrew term אֲלָפִים, usually translated "thousand", has a complicated semantic history and eventually became a technical term for a military unit. Though the same word is used for the number 1000, it may refer to units of considerably less, cf. Mendenhall, *JBL* 77 (1958) pp. 52-66.

bezek = My Lord is Bezek) was maimed but not summarily executed (1:4-6).[35] The amputation of his thumbs and toes, a barbarous mutilation that apparently he had perpetrated on others, would ensure that he could never again take up the role of a warrior (1:7). In the end, he died anyway. Still, the Judah and Simeon clans failed to obey the sacred *herem* by allowing him and some of his people to survive, the same failure that later would strip Saul of his kingship (cf. 1 Sa. 15).[36]

The attack upon Jerusalem, the same city mentioned in the Amarna Letters, was initially successful. However, the description of success must be balanced against the reference in 1:21 that the Benjamites did not drive out the Jebusites and a similar reference in Joshua 15:63 that the warriors of Judah failed as well. The capture of Jerusalem would later be credited to David (2 Sa. 5:6-16). So, what did Judah and Simeon conquer? Boling and others suggest that they conquered only the unfortified southwest hill.[37] If so, their conquest amounted to little more than sacking the city and burning the unprotected areas. Less likely is the interpretation that this was a full conquest with the assumption that the Canaanites took it back later.

The next target included the central hill-lands of Judah rising to some 3000' in elevation, the semi-arid steppe to the south called the Negev, and the western foothills separating the mountains from the coastal plain called the Shephelah (1:9). Hebron and Debir were the principle cities, and both Joshua and Judges record the incident in which Acsah, Caleb's daughter, was given in marriage to Caleb's nephew and granted a territory in the Negev (presumably as a dowry) with the necessary springs for such a semi-arid area (1:10-15, 20; cf. Jos. 15:13-19).

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[35] The location of Bezek is unknown.

[36] Something should be said about the current theories of conquest. While the biblical record clearly describes a military conquest both in the Book of Joshua and the Book of Judges, modern historical-critical scholars have offered alternative theories based on the scarcity of historical and archaeological evidence supporting such a conquest. The immigration theory, while it assumes that the Israelites came to Canaan from the outside, suggests that the central hill-lands were sparsely populated. The Israelites gained the upper hand here, but were unable to do so in the more heavily populated, lower plains, cf. J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), p. 186. Two additional theories also have become well-known, the peaceful infiltration theory (where the Israelites emerged from within Canaanite populations rather than from the outside, gradually gaining a separate identity and settling in the unsettled areas of Canaan, eventually infiltrating the whole) and the peasants' revolt theory (where again the Israelites were themselves lower class Canaanites who revolted against upper class Canaanites). These negative evaluations of the biblical story of conquest affects the Book of Joshua more than the Book of Judges, and in fact, some would argue that the narratives in the Book of Judges are rather dramatically corroborated by archaeological evidence, while the narratives in Joshua are not, cf. W. Dever, "Israel, History of (Archaeology and the 'Conquest')," *ABD* (1992) 3.555. To attempt to address this issue is beyond the scope of this study, but suffice it to say conservative scholars are unconvinced by this negative assessment and offer suggestions for reconciling the biblical account with archaeological and historical data, cf. Hoerth, *Archaeology*, pp. 215-216. As has been said more than once, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

[37] R. Boling, *Judges [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 55-56.

Acsah's boldness is reflected in the LXX, which says "she nagged him", and if a possible cognate be granted between the Hebrew verb and an Akkadian root, she may have been impudent as well.[38] Her husband, Othniel, became the first judge. It is not without interest to note that Caleb (and also Othniel) were Kenizzites (cf. Nu. 32:12), an Edomite clan (Ge. 36:11). As such, the elevation of an Edomite to prominence demonstrates both the ethnically mixed character of early Israel as well as its virtual classless social structure. Moses' relatives through his wife's father, who were semi-nomads,[39] settled near Jericho (City of Palms, cf. 3:13) and Arad in the Negev (1:16).

Together, the warriors of Judah and Simeon destroyed Zephath and the coastal plain cities of Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron, which later would become centers of Philistine population (1:17-18). Though they were successful in the central hill-lands, however, they were unable to maintain any permanency in the lowlands. Foot warriors against chariotry with iron-rimmed wheels were no match (1:19). Though Caleb was successful in Hebron, the Benjamites were unsuccessful in Jerusalem, also called Jebus (1:20-21; cf. 19:10-11).

## The Wars of Ephraim and Manasseh (1:22-29)

The two Joseph tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, attacked Bethel, using the same stratagem of spies that had been employed earlier at Jericho (1:22-25; cf. Jos.2). They spared their informer, who later relocated in Hittite country, but destroyed Bethel. This Canaanite city contains archaeological evidence of destruction (1:22-26). Bethel, of course, was the site named by the patriarch Jacob (cf. Ge. 28:16-19). The greatest number of Iron Age I Israelite sites to be identified by archaeologists are in these tribal territories of Ephraim and Manasseh, where "the settlement process was intensive".[40]

Still, as successful as Ephraim and Manasseh were in the hill-lands, they were

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[38] The verb צנח (= to clap, to attract attention) may be related to the Akkadian *sanahu*, and if so, it may be translated "she broke wind" (so NEB). However, Boling observes that this derivation, first suggested by S. R. Driver, has not won wide acceptance, cf. Boling, p. 57.

[39] The Qenites, a clan that not only included Moses' father-in-law but also Jael in the war of Deborah (cf. 4:17; 5:24), were semi-nomadic dairy herders in the vicinity of Arad. Jael is praised as a tent-dweller (as opposed to a house-dweller), and when asked for a drink, she offered milk. There also may be a connection between the term *qeni* and the occupation of metal-smithing, cf. Boling, p. 57.

[40] Mazar, p. 335. The distinction between Canaanite and Israelite sites depends primarily on settlement structure, and especially, the remains of the four-room house, cf. V. Fritz, "Israelites & Canaanites: You *Can* Tell Them Apart," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 2002), pp. 28-31, 63 and S. Bunimovitz and A. Faust, "Ideology in Stone: Understanding the Four-Room House," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 2002), pp. 32-41, 59-60.

not so successful in the coastal plain or the broad valley of Jezreel (1:27). The Canaanites remained firmly entrenched in the major cities of the wedge-shaped plain running from Mt. Carmel to the Jordan, Megiddo, Taanach, Ibleam and Beth Shan.[41] Though the fortunes of the Israelites rose and fell, the Canaanites were not expelled (1:28-29). If the intricately carved knife handle discovered in Megiddo from about the 13th or 12th century BC depicts Israelite captives brought before the Canaanite king of Megiddo, then the Israelite fortunes must have suffered significantly at some periods.[42]

## The Wars of the Northern Tribes (1:30-33)

The tribes allotted territory to the north of the Jezreel valley, Zebulun, Asher and Naphtali, were equally unsuccessful. Though the Israelites were able to subject some of the Canaanite groups to forced labor, they were not able to dislodge them. The city names of Beth-Shemesh (lit., "House of the Sun") and Beth-Anath (lit., "House of Anath", Anath being the Canaanite fertility goddess and consort of Ba'al) testify to the resilience of Canaanite culture. That the people of Asher and Naphtali "lived among the Canaanites" (1:32b, 33b) is equal but opposite with the earlier situation at Gezer, where the Canaanites "lived among" the Ephraimites (1:29). Obviously, the Asherites and Naphtalites were even less successful than their brothers further south.

## The Wars Along the Central Coast (1:34-36)

The territory allotted to the Danites along the central coast also remained largely in the hands of the Amorites, and unlike the situation for the tribes of Asher

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[41] During the Late Bronze Age, Megiddo was conquered by Thutmosis III of Egypt after a seven month siege in about 1479 BC. Egyptian dominance over Megiddo probably continued until the 12th century. Several Amarna tablets originated from Megiddo's king. A large assembly of some 382 carved ivories testify to its prestige. Canaanite Megiddo was not destroyed until about 1130 BC, cf. D. Usshishkin, "Megiddo," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. E. Meyers (New York: Oxford, 1997), 3.463-464.   Taanach, about 5 miles southeast of Megiddo, had existed since about 2700 BC, cf. A. Block, "Taanach," *OEANE* (1997) 5.149. Ibleam had been an important city in the Bronze Age as attested by Egyptian archival material, cf. *ABD* (1992) 3.355. Beth Shan lay at the intersection of two major roads, the north-south road along the Jordan Valley and the east-west road through the Jezreel valley. Like other cities in the Jezreel valley, Beth Shan was under Egyptian domination in the Late Bronze Age until it was destroyed and rebuilt in Iron Age I, cf. A. Mazar, "Beth Shean," *OEANE* (1997) 1.306-308. Dor, on the Mediterranean coast about 12 miles south of modern Haifa, was occupied by a series of peoples, including Egyptians, some of the Sea Peoples, Canaanites and Phoenicians, cf. E. Stern, "The Many Masters of Dor," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1993) pp. 22-31, 76, 78.

[42] The knife handle depicts a Canaanite king returning victorious in battle leading nude captives, obviously circumcised, and identified as Shosu, a semi-nomadic people sometimes thought to be early Israelites, cf.  Rainey and F. Yurco, "Can You Name the Panel with the Israelites?" *BAR* (Nov/Dec 1991), pp. 54-61 and M. Coogan, "10 Great Finds," *BAR* (May/Jun 1995), p. 41.

and Naphtali, the Danites were not even able to "live among them". Rather, they were forced back up into the hills. In the end, as will be detailed in chapters 17-19, the Danites would eventually pull up stakes altogether and migrate to northern Galilee. Only afterward would the Ephraimite clan descended from Joseph be able to control this area (1:35).

Again and again this summary is punctuated with the failure of Israel to dislodge the many enclaves of Canaanites, a fact that demonstrated a breach of covenant responsibility and created a permanent weakness.

In addition to their failure to dislodge many of these enclaves, the Israelites also made provisional treaties with some Canaanites. Earlier, Joshua had made a treaty with the Gibeonites, and even though he was deceived, and though the treaty was made carelessly, he was bound to honor it (Jos. 9:14-15, 22-27). Now, other similar treaties were made (1:23-25), and these treaties were a direct violation of the covenant code. This summary of the failure of conquest climaxes with the incident at Bokim taken up in chapter 2.

## The Bokim Judgment (2:1-5)

When the Angel of the LORD (מַלְאַךְ יְהֹוָה = messenger of Yahweh) left Gilgal, the site of the initial military encampment from which Joshua had launched the conquest a generation earlier (cf. Jos. 5:9-10; 9:6; 10:6, etc.), and appeared at Bokim (the Hebrew word *bokim* means "weepers"), his appearance signified the nation's covenantal failure. At Gilgal, just after the supply of manna had stopped, the Angel of the LORD had appeared to Joshua in the form of a man to assure him that the conquest of the land would be led by the hosts of Yahweh (Jos. 5:10-15). Now, a few years later, this same figure moved from Gilgal to Bokim to announce the Israelites' failure to keep the covenant code of conquest (2:1-3). The name Bokim symbolized to the nation its covenantal failure.

The Angel of the LORD is a unique figure in the Hebrew Bible, functioning not merely as an angel of the general class of angels, but more as a personal representative of Yahweh himself, so much so that at times he is virtually indistinguishable from Yahweh (cf. Ge. 16:10, 13; 31:11-13; Ex. 3:2-6; Jg. 6:11-24). The judgment he pronounced upon the Israelites for their covenant failure was surely a sentence from God! Because of their failure, God now bluntly declared that he would allow the enclaves of Canaanites to remain as goads to the

Israelites,[43] ongoing reminders of their covenant failure and perennial temptations toward religious syncretism.

The pronouncement, though couched in the language of judgment, also affirmed Yahweh's faithfulness to his covenant promises. Even if Israel was unfaithful, Yahweh would remain faithful. Still, this divine faithfulness was double-edged, since it involved both blessing and cursing.     After the divine pronouncement, the messenger of Yahweh left, while the people grieved over their failure, naming the place "Weepers" (Bokim). There they offered sacrifices (2:4-5).

## Summary of the Cycles of Oppression and Deliverance (2:6—3:6)

Virtually all scholars see a literary seam between 2:5 and 2:6, marked by the abrupt transition in which 2:6 harks back to the close of the Book of Joshua (cf. Jos. 24:28-29). This seam suggests that the section 1:1—2:5, which also begins with a statement about Joshua's death (cf. 1:1), is from an independent tradition and was joined to the larger text as a preface to provide significant background material. Clearly, Joshua's campaigns were perceived as a first stage of conquest. However, far from being a total subjugation of the Canaanites, Joshua's work only began the process. It now remained for the individual tribes to evict the Canaanites from the territories that had been allotted to them by Joshua (2:6). Though the people were faithful to God during the life of Joshua and the other leaders of his generation, his death marked the beginning of a downward slide (2:7). His corpse was buried at Timnath Heres (= Portion of the Sun) in the central hill-lands of Ephraim (2:8-9).[44]

After the death of Joshua and the warriors of his generation, the new generation failed terribly. The nation abandoned Yahweh repeatedly in order to serve the Canaanite fertility gods (2:10-13, 17-19). In accordance with the Deuteronomic curses, Yahweh turned the nation over to its Canaanite enemies (2:14-15). The phrase, "Israel did evil in Yahweh's eyes" (3:7-8, 12; 4:1-2; 6:1; 8:33-34; 10:6-8; 13:1), becomes the hallmark of the Tribal League, and inevitably,

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[43] The Masoretic Text does not have the term "thorns" or "goads", but the addition of this word is consonant with Jos. 23:18 ("thorns in your eyes"). The LXX has "adversaries".

[44] It is debated whether the discrepancy between Jg. 2:9 and Jos. 19:50; 24:30 (Timnath-serah vs. Timnath-heres) is intentional or a scribal transposition of letters. If the former, then Timnath-heres (Portion of the Sun) has been intentionally changed to Timnath-serah (Portion Left Over), suggesting that Joshua received an allotment only after all the tribes had received theirs, so Boling, p. 72. If the latter, than a scribe later accidentally transposed the final consonants, so. A. Cundall, p. 67.

such covenant violations led to the wrath of Yahweh, the divine suzerain.

Canaanite religion was a perennial temptation to the Israelites for their enitre history between their entry into the land and their exile. When Yahweh announced "their gods will be a snare to you" (2:3b), it was a prediction to be fulfilled again and again. The Decalog given to Moses on Sinai had clearly stated, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3; Dt. 5:7).[45] Nevertheless, Canaanite mythology and religious practice was ever surrounding the Israelites, and they found its attractions to be irresistible.

The nature of Canaanite religion is now much better known due to the discovery of the ancient library of mythological texts at Ugarit, Syria (modern Ras Shamra).[46] The pantheon of West Semitic deities included El, the highest god, who reigned as king of the gods and served as the patriarchal father of the seventy sons of the gods. His icon was the bull, a symbol emphasizing power. Depictions of El show him as a god with horns, seated on a throne, and wearing gray hair and a beard symbolizing his wisdom. El had a female consort, the goddess Athirat, and her icon was a stylized tree (the "Asherah" in the Bible). El, even though the determiner of fates, was distant and passive with respect to the affairs of humans. It was Ba'al (= lord or owner) whose activity most directly affected humans, since as the thunder god he controlled the weather, which in turn controlled the fertility of the land. Ancient Ugaritic texts describe him as "the rider of the clouds." While the term Ba'al functions both as a title and a proper name, Hadad is his proper name. Ba'al lived on Mt. Zaphon near Ugarit, a sort of "Mt. Olympus" for the Canaanites. Ba'al also had a consort, his sister Anat, who was the goddess of sexuality and war. In Canaanite mythology, yet another god, Mot, the deity of the underworld, gained control over Ba'al. Ba'al's death was mourned by the gods, but soon Anath longed for her deceased lover, sought out Mot, attacked and killed him, and resurrected Ba'al from the underworld. Ba'al and Anath had sexual intercourse, resulting in the birth of a bull-calf. Their fertility, in turn, affected the

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[45] It now is popular among historical-critical scholars to deny that Israel was monotheistic until about the time of the exile. Rather, the religion of Israel is perceived to be evolutionary and not substantially different than that of its Canaanite neighbors, cf. O. Keel and C. Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. T. Trapp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), pp. 2-3. Against this, the biblical text regularly asserts that the Israelites departed from their basic monotheism, but the biblical text also contends that this was a departure from the original commands given to Moses, not the evolutionary development of a religion. That there is iconography now available through archaeology demonstrating Israel's lapse into Canaanite religion need not require that Israel's religion was evolutionary, but instead, fits admirably with what the Bible itself says—that the Israelites repeatedly forsook their loyalty to Yahweh alone.

[46] For more extensive treatment than what follows, see H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. J. Sturdy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), pp. 124-176 and J. Day, "Canaan, Religion of," *ABD* (1992) 1.831-837.

fertility of the land.

Canaanite worship of Ba'al and his consort involved sacrifices to the gods, including child sacrifice. Also, sacred prostitution by both males (*qedeshim*) and females (*qedeshot*) served as a sort of imitative magic, mimicking the coupling of Ba'al and Anath and aiming toward the general fertility of the land. The so-called "high places" (בָּמוֹת) were sacred sites for such prostitution, and Asherim (terra cotta female fertility figurines) and stone pillars (phallic symbols) were characteristic features at these sites.

When the Book of Judges says that the Israelites "served the Ba'als and the Ashtoreths", following the various gods of the surrounding peoples (2:10-13), it almost certainly indicates that the Israelites engaged in the rituals of the high places so severely condemned in the Deuteronomic code (cf. Dt. 4:15-19, 25-28; 7:5, 16; 12:2-4, 29-31; 13:1-18; 16:21-22; 18:9-13; 27:20-23). The expression that the Israelites "prostituted themselves to other gods and worshipped them" is more than just a metaphor (2:17)! Such covenant violation began the cycle of oppression and deliverance that repeats itself throughout the book. As judgment for their disobedience, Yahweh allowed the Canaanites to oppress the Israelites (2:13-15). Yahweh, the Man of War who should have led the Israelites in their wars against the Canaanites, now opposed them. During such times of oppression, God appointed deliverers or "judges" who led the various tribes in wars of independence (2:16).

The term שֹׁפְטִים (judges), while in some cases may indeed include the role of the magistrate (cf. 4:5), more frequently refers to military leaders or deliverers. Still, the Israelites no more listened to their judges than they did to Yahweh (2:17). As with Joshua and the elders (cf. 2:7), 10, as long as the judge lived the people remained faithful to the covenant (2:18). The death of the judge, however, quickly meant the degeneration of the Israelites into religious syncretism (2:19). Hence, Yahweh determined that he no longer would assist the Israelites in their wars of conquest (2:20-21). Instead, the Canaanite nations would be allowed to remain as tests of covenant loyalty (2:22-23; 3:4) and as adversaries for combat training (3:1-2).

The list of remaining nations included the five cities of the Philistines in the south coastal plain (Ekron, Gath, Ashkelon, Gaza and Ashdod, cf. Jos. 13:2-3), the Canaanites (especially those in the Jezreel Valley), the Sidonians (Syrians on the north coast), the Hivites (other non-Semitics from the north, cf. Ge. 10:17), the Hittites (remnants of the Anatolian empire), the Amorites (possibly semi-nomadic

peoples),[47] the Perizzites (see discussion under 1:4) and the Jebusites (living in Jerusalem or Jebus). The Israelites lived among all these peoples (3:3, 5), intermarried with them (3:6a), and participated in their religion (3:6b). Israel was unable to maintain either purity of race or purity of faith.

| The Judges of Israel | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Judge** | **Opponent** | **Reference** |
| Othniel | Cushan-rishathaim of Aram | 3:7-11 |
| Ehud | King Eglon of Moab | 3:12-30 |
| Shamgar | Philistines | 3:31 |
| Deborah/Barak | Jabin, king of Canaan, and Sisera, his general | 4-5 |
| Gideon | Midianites | 6-8 |
| *Abimelech** | Kills his seventy brothers, becomes king in Shechem | 9 |
| Tola | | 10:1-2 |
| Jair | | 10:3-5 |
| Jephthah | Ammonites | 10:6—12:7 |
| Ibzan | | 12:8-10 |
| Elon | | 12:11-12 |
| Abdon | | 12:13-15 |
| Samson | Philistines | 13-16 |
| Eli | Philistines | 1 Sa. 1-4 |
| Samuel | Philistines | 1 Sa. 7-13, 15-16 especially 7:15 |

*Abimelech was not strictly a judge, nor did he deliver the Israelites from any Canaanite entity. His story functions as a commentary on the tendency toward kingship and the negative reactions against it.

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[47] For a fuller treatment of the possible origins of the Amorites, see G. Mendenhall, *ABD* (1992) 1.199-202.

# The History of the Judges (3:7—16:31)

The second major section of the book, the History of the Judges, describes a repeating cycle of apostasy, oppression, repentance, deliverance, and temporary peace.  Again and again the Israelites demonstrated their vacillation and faithlessness to Yahweh's covenant.  This covenant-breaking pattern led to the nation's repeated oppression as military superiority shifted back and forth between Israel and the various Canaanite nations.  Of course, such oppressions were largely local, that is, in most cases they involved a few of the Israelite clans at a time rather than the subjugation of the entire land of Palestine. Nevertheless, such encroachments were a serious religious matter under the articles of Yahweh War, and all of the clans were expected to respond. Various tribes of Israel were oppressed by Cushan-rishathaim of northwest Mesopotamia (3:7-8), Eglon of Moab (3:12-14), Jabin of northern Canaan (4:1-3a), the bedouin clans of Midian and Amalek (6:1-5, 33), the Ammonites (10:6-9) and the Philistines (13:1).  In each case, because of Israel's distress and repentance, Yahweh sent a judge to rescue the nation (3:9-10, 15, 31; 4:3b-10; 6:6-12, 34-35; 10:10-16; 11:29; 13:2-5). Following the deliverance, there usually was a time of temporary peace before the cycle began all over again (3:11, 30; 5:31b; 8:28).

Altogether, there were twelve judges, six of them described in varying detail (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson) and six in brief notations (Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon).  In addition, two other persons of note figure in this history,  One was Barak, a military leader who worked closely with Deborah, and the other was Abimelech, a leader who unsuccessfully attempted to establish the first Israelite monarchy.

Thus, as the announcement at Bokim made clear, the failure of the Israelites to dislodge the Canaanites resulted in a shifting of the divine purpose from extermination to coexistence.  The appearance of the Angel of Yahweh at Bokim to announce the fatal nature of this covenant failure was cause for great grief (Jg. 2:1-5).  It meant that the ideal of creating an unadulterated population of Israelites in Palestine was no longer within the divine purpose.  Instead, Yahweh intended to leave these enclaves of Canaanites as troublers of the Israelites.  These pagans would test them, serve as instruments of divine judgment against them, and continue as sparring opponents for toughening the Israelites in the disciplines of holy war (Jg. 2:11-15, 20-23; 3:2). The eventualities that had been clearly spelled out in the Deuteronomic code would now become a historical reality (Dt. 28:25-26, 43-48).

## The First Cycle: Othniel in Southern Judah (3:7-11)

The first and second cycles occurred in south. The narrative begins with the stereotypical "the Israelites did evil in the eyes of Yahweh" (3:7). God's judgment upon them was to allow a northern king to subdue them for eight years (3:8), Cushan-Rishathaim[48] of Aram Naharaim (the area of Syria between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers). Othniel, whom the reader met earlier as the husband of Acsah (cf. 1:12-15), was Israel's first judge (3:9).

The juxtaposition of Othniel, whose territory was in southern Judah (cf. 1:12-15; Jos. 15:16-19), with an oppressor from eastern Syria has produced a logistical question: why should a pagan king from eastern Syria raid a relatively small group of Israelites so far to the south, and further, why would he establish a vassal relationship with such a group so far out of his range of control? Of course, it is not beyond possibility that a northern king might raid far beyond his southern border, but a vassal relationship with such a far-flung entity seems extraordinary if not unlikely. Some scholars have suggested a textual emendation[49] in which Cushan-rishathaim may originally have been Cushan rosh Teman (= Cushan chief of Teman, a town in Edom), while Aram-naharaim may originally have been Edom-naharim (Edom of the two rivers).[50] Others have suggested a misdivision of the unpointed Hebrew text[51] and offered an alternative division yielding the name "Fortress of the Mountains" (which, unlike readings like Aram or Edom, is not geographically specific).[52] At present there is no satisfactory answer to this question.

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[48] Masoretic scholars pointed the Hebrew text of this name as a dual ("two" or "double"), and this pointing, coupled with a root within the name for the word "wicked", yielded a name meaning Cushan of Double-Wickedness, cf. *ABD* (1992) 1.1220.

[49] Textual emendations are suggested changes in the consonants of the Hebrew text based upon such things as the absence of vowel-pointing in the original and the similarities of letters that can easily be confused. A scribal omission of one of two adjacent letters which are similar or identical sometimes occurred (haplography). In some cases, emendations of the Hebrew text are warranted based upon different textual traditions that offer alternatives (i.e., the Masoretic Text as compared with the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Dead Sea Scrolls, etc.). In the present case, however, there is no alternative textual tradition for the emendations suggested, so they can only be regarded as more speculative.

[50] Cundall and Morris, p. 73. The unpointed MT is: כושן רשעתים (= Cushan Rishathaim) and ארם נהרים (= Aram Naharaim). The unpointed suggested emendations are: כושנ ראשתימן (= Cushan, head of Teman) and אדם נהרים (= Edom Naharaim). Of these, the second is more plausible than the first.

[51] Early manuscripts did not always have clear word divisions, so the first task of a reader or translator is to distinguish the proper words by dividing the letters appropriately. Sometimes, words can be divided in more than one way to yield distinct meanings. By analogy, for instance, the English consonants "godisnowhere" might mean "God is nowhere" or "God is now here," depending upon context.

[52] Boling, p. 81. Here, the unpointed MT is ארם נהרים. The suggested redivision of the consonants is ארמן הרים. In early versions of the unpointed Hebrew Text without spacing between words, these two versions would appear identical.

The reader probably should assume that this oppression was local to southern Judah, since Othniel, the deliverer, was from that area. The pattern that would typify all the cycles yet to come was now established:

*The Israelites do evil in the eyes of Yahweh by serving other gods.*

*Yahweh sends a pagan nation to oppress them as a judgment.*

*The Israelites cry out to Yahweh in distress.*

*God raises up a deliverer, empowered by the Spirit.*

*The oppressor is defeated.*

*The people have rest for a period.*

In this case, the divine Spirit "came upon" Othniel, Caleb's younger brother, inspiring him to lead the volunteers in a war of liberation (3:10). The verbal expression "he judged Israel, and he went to war [MT]" probably carries the idea of mobilization. This action of the Holy Spirit is similar to what one finds not only with respect to judges but also to prophets (1 Chr. 12:18; 2 Chr. 15:1; 20:14; 24:20; cf. Nu. 24:2). It seems to refer to a temporary infusion of empowerment for a specific task. The fact that Othniel was "Caleb's brother", Caleb having served as one of the original ten spies sent to Jericho (cf. Nu. 13:1-2, 6), suggests that this occasion was not long after Joshua's death and early in the period of the tribal league. After Othniel had broken the yoke of Cushan, there was a period of rest for a whole generation lasting until Othniel's death (3:11).

## The Second Cycle: Ehud in Benjamin and Ephraim (3:12-30)

It is unclear whether or not the second cycle overlaps the first or is subsequent to it. Othniel's war represented southern Judah's territory in the Negev, while Ehud's war represented a part of either northern Judah or Benjamin or southern Ephraim or all three. Ehud was a Benjamite (3:15), and the volunteers came from Ephraim (3:22).

This time Israel's covenant disobedience resulted in a judgment imposed by Eglon, the warlord of Moab in the transjordan (3:12), acting in coalition with the transjordan Ammonites and Amalekites (3:13). Moab and Ammon, of course, were the descendents of Abraham's nephew, Lot (cf. Ge. 19:36-38).[53] Hostilities

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[53] For more details on the history of both Moabites and Ammonites, see Hoerth, Mattingly and Yamauchi, pp. 293-333.

between Israel and the Amalekites began during the sojourn in the desert (cf. Ex. 17:8-13; Dt. 25:17-18) and would continue throughout the period of the judges (6:3, 33; 7:12; cf. 12:15) and into the early period of the monarchy (cf. 1 Sa. 15:2-3).[54] This coalition captured Jericho (City of Palms, cf. Dt. 34:3) to the west of the Jordan and put the nearby Israelites into vassalship for eighteen years (3:14). As vassals, the Israelites were compelled to pay tribute to their overlord. Ehud ben Gera, a Benjamite, was chosen to carry the tribute (3:15). He was left-handed,[55] a trait shared by many Benjamites (cf. 20:17) and an irony as well, since the name Benjamin means "son of my right hand" (cf. Ge. 35:16-18). Being left-handed could be an advantage in hand-to-hand combat, especially when most warriors were trained with blade and shield against the more typical right-hander. Wearing a short, two-edged dagger hidden on his right thigh, Ehud delivered the tribute without incident to the obese Moabite king (3:16-17).[56] After starting for home,[57] he doubled back on the pretext of delivering a private message to Eglon, who by that time was ensconced in his own private upper room (3:18-20). After shutting everyone else out, Eglon prepared to receive Ehud's private message, only to discover that his message-bearer was an assassin who ran his dagger deep into the belly of the fat king, sinking the blade until it pierced his anal sphincter (3:21-22).[58] Locking the doors from the inside, Ehud then escaped by means of the *misdaron*, a term of uncertain meaning (3:23).[59] (The NIV's "porch" is a guess.) Eglon's servants were reluctant to breach the security of the locked doors, but after waiting an embarrassingly long time, assuming their lord was relieving himself, they finally unlocked the upper room to find him dead (3:24-25).

The uncertain meaning of *misdaron*, Ehud's avenue of escape, has been

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[54] The Amalekites seem to be associated with transjordan and southern Canaanite peoples, where they occupied fringe areas of land adjacent to the more sedentary populations, cf. *ABD* (1992) 1.169-171.

[55] The actual Hebrew expression is not the usual word for being left-handed, but rather, an expression that means "bound of his right hand". Traditionally, this may be a periphrastic way of saying he was left-handed, but it also might suggest, at least at first glance, that he had a handicap or deformity. Perhaps better, the Benjamites may have done what the Spartans did later—bound the right arms of their younger children to force them to become ambidextrous. By binding the right hand, it forced children to become dexterous with their left hand, cf. B. Halpern, "The Assassination of Eglon: The First Locked Room Murder Mystery," *BR* (December 1988), pp. 34-35.

[56] Eglon's obesity was of such proportions that the foot and a half dagger (literally, the length of a cubit), when it was finally plunged to full length in the king's abdomen, was completely hidden by the layers of fat (3:22).

[57] The "idols", mentioned again in 3:26, possibly refers to a Canaanite sacred place containing inscribed stones documenting Moab's sovereignty and embossed with a divine figure guaranteeing the validity of the vassal-suzerainty treaty between Israel and Moab, cf. J. Gray, ed., *Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1967), pp. 263-264.

[58] The translation of Baruch Halpern is "out 'it' came at the anus" (3:22), cf. B. Halpern, pp. 34, 36.

[59] This word is a *hapax legomenon*, that is, a term that appears only once in the Bible. Hence, its means cannot be compared to other usages.

suggestively illuminated by Baruch Halpern.[60] Taking his cues from the language that Eglon was "covering his feet" (3:24), a euphemism for defecating by squatting with one's robes lying loose on the ground or floor (cf. 1 Sa. 24:3), Halpern suggests that the two terms used, the עֲלִיָּה (= upper room) and the מִסְדְּרוֹן (= *misdaron*) refer respectively to a small second story toilet, constructed over beams, and the clean-out room below. Ehud entered the upper chamber where Eglon was "sitting in the chamber atop the beams, which was his alone" (3:20, Halpern's translation). After the assassination, Ehud wriggled out through the hole leading to the clean-out room, possibly after removing a stone toilet seat,[61] and thence, into the portico, where he safely passed the unsuspecting courtiers waiting for their lord. He escaped to Seirah (an unknown location). He mustered the volunteer army from Ephraim with a *shophar* blast and led them in a revolt against their Moabite oppressors (3:26-28), securing the Jordan fords near Jericho. They successfully killed a large Moabite force against them,[62] turning the tables, and forcing Moab into vassalship to themselves (3:29). The land had peace for two more generations (3:30).

## Notation on Shamgar (3:31)

A single brief notation completes the cycles of oppression, war and deliverance in the south. Shamgar ben Anath followed Ehud. His name is itself suggestive, since Shamgar is by derivation Hurrian (a non-Semitic people group scattered throughout Mesopotamia and Syria), and his father's name is the same as the goddess consort of Ba'al.[63] Was Shamgar a mercenary? Was he a convert to the faith of Israel? Intriguing as these possibilities may be, no firm answer can be given. A later notation adds that during his period "the roads were abandoned" (5:6), suggesting that the caravan routes were disrupted and public travel was unsafe. His judgeship is associated with the time of Jael (5:6), who also appears in the Deborah stories, suggesting that this oppression was contemporaneous with what happened in the north. Shamgar, using an ox goad (a metal-tipped plow staff of about eight feet),[64] dispatched a large number of Philistines who encroached into the hill-lands from the coastal plain. The fact that he used a farming implement and

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[60] Professor in Jewish studies at Pennsylvania State University and co-director of excavations at Megiddo.

[61] A similar stone toilet seat has been discovered in Jerusalem's excavations, a square stone device bored with a circular hole and placed over a deep cavity, cf. Halpern, p. 41.

[62] The number of 10,000 seems abnormally high (3:29). If, as suggested earlier, the number for 1000 has been confused with a term meaning "military unit" (see footnote #34), then the number of casualties would have been considerably less.

[63] Boling, p. 89.

[64] R. Boling, *ABD* (1992) 5.1156.

the later reference to Samson using a donkey's jawbone (15:15) as well as his bare hands with which to fight might connect with the later description of the Philistines as overlords who deprived their subjects of weaponry (cf. 1 Sa. 13:19-22).

It is of secondary interest that in some recensions of the LXX, the verse about Shamgar appears after 16:31, probably because both the Samson stories and the Shamgar notation concern the Philistines.

## The Third Cycle: Deborah in Galilee (4-5)

While the first and second cycles occurred in the south, the third cycle occured in the north. The text begins with a chronological statement, "And Ehud died…" (4:1). Here, the cycle began all over again—covenant unfaithfulness, oppression, the plea for Yahweh's help, God's choice of a judge, deliverance and peace. Yahweh was fully in control. Oppression was due not merely to the superiority of the Canaanites, but to the fact that "Yahweh sold them [the Israelites]" (cf. 2:14; 3:8; 10:7).

The reader encounters two distinct literary forms describing the cycle, one in prose (chapter 4) and the other in poetry (chapter 5). This literary feature is similar to the prose narrative (Exodus 14) and the accompanying poetic song (Exodus 15) about the crossing of the Red Sea. In both cases, the poetic form is usually considered to be the earlier account because of archaic Hebrew and ancient names.[65]

### The Narrative

The oppressor in this case was Jabin of Hazor. Hazor, located in upper Galilee, begins appearing as a major Canaanite city as early as the 19th and 18th centuries BC.[66] By the time of Joshua, it was regarded as the "head" of the Galilean northern city-states (Jos. 11:10). The reader immediately faces a tension between the account in Judges and the narrative of Hazor's destruction by fire in Joshua 11:10-13.[67] In the Joshua account, the king also is called Jabin, who was executed,

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[65] Hess, pp. 38-41 and R. Boling, *ABD* (1992) 2.113. Even though the prose version was composed later, the poetic section is generally considered to be roughly contemporaneous with the event, cf. D. Harvey, *IDB* (1962) 1.809.

[66] The name appears both in Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts from this period, and later, in the Amarna Letters, cf. A. Ben-Tor, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. E. Meyers (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997) 3.1.

[67] That Hazor was destroyed by a fiery conflagration in about the 14th or 13th century BC (dated from pottery remnants and Carbon 14 tests), no one can now seriously doubt. Excavations there have uncovered a thick layer of ash and charred wood with estimated temperatures exceeding 2350° Fahrenheit. The statuary of the city was deliberated defaced by the

all the citizens annihilated, and the city burned. In the Judges account, Jabin appears very much alive, rules as the king of Hazor, and exerts sovereignty over the Israelite clans in the north.[68]

In the first place, not too much should be made of the name Jabin, which appears to be a dynastic name typical in the ancient Near East.[69] More to the point, did the Canaanites regain control of Hazor and rebuild it? Certainly the rebuilding of a city on the ashes of a previously destroyed site was common practice in Canaan, especially if the site was strategically defensible. That Hazor, in fact, was rebuilt and reoccupied is equally clear, but the dating of this rebuilding and reoccupation cannot as yet be determined from archaeological investigation.[70] Our assumption, until more data is forth-coming, is that Joshua destroyed Canaanite Hazor, perhaps as much as a century earlier, the city later was rebuilt by Canaanites and occupied by a descendent of Jabin (also called Jabin), and rose to prominence during the period of the judges.

If Jabin was the nominal head of a confederacy of Canaanites, Sisera of Harosheth *Hagoyyim* (= Harosheth of the Nations) was the military enforcer, fielding a huge chariot corps (4:2b-3). The precise location of Sisera's city-state has not yet been identified, but it must have been in the vicinity of Mt. Tabor in the Jezreel Plain (cf. 4:2, 13, 16).[71]

The judge anointed by God to confront this threat was the prophetess Deborah (whose name means "bee"), the only judge actually described with administrative civil duties (4:4-5). She presided over an open-air court in the central hill-lands. Summoning Barak (whose name means "lightning"), she became the mediator for God's call to war near Mt. Tabor and the Kishon River against Sisera's army (4:6-7). Reluctant to answer this call, Barak only agreed to go if Deborah accompanied him (4:8), but her chiding response was that the victory would be credited to a woman because of his hesitance (4:9-10).

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invaders. Archaeology has not yet been able to confirm that this destruction was by the Israelites (for instance, could it have been by the Sea Peoples?), but the current excavator believes the evidence is mounting in favor of the Israelites, cf. A. Ben-Tor, "Excavating Hazor: Did the Israelites Destroy the Canaanite City?", *BAR* (May-June 1999) p. 39.

[68] Historical-critical scholars often suggest that the two accounts were simply confused, but such an explanation seems too simplistic. Would a compiler of such material not have noticed this tension, which is obvious, and not sought to resolve it?

[69] For instance, a cuneiform inscription dating to the 18th or 17th century BC—several hundred years earlier than the period of the judges—has been uncovered at Hazor bearing the name Jabin, cf. Hoerth, *Archaeology*, p. 230, footnote #8.

[70] A. Ben-Tor, "Excavating Hazor," *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1999), pp. 30-31.

[71] M. Hunt, *ABD* (1992) 3.62-63.

Critical to the story is the introduction of another clan, this time not from among the Israelites but from the Edomites (cf. Ge. 36:11). The Qenites, mentioned earlier in connection with Othniel and Caleb (cf. 1:13) and descended from relatives of Moses,[72] apparently were in sympathy with the Canaanites, except for one family, who withdrew from the clan settlement (4:11). The others, however, were quick to inform Sisera that Barak was mustering an Israelite army (4:12-13). At Deborah's urging, Barak mustered his infantry at Mt. Tabor, drawing Sisera toward the marshy area southeast of Megiddo, a terrain that would be unfavorable for a chariot corps. When the Israelites began to advance, God routed Sisera, who abandoned his chariot and fled on foot (4:14-15). The narrative account simply says Sisera was routed "by the sword", but the poetic account adds that a sudden thunder storm and flash flood of the Kishon River also figured in the defeat (5:4-5, 21). The marsh, with additional flooding, would have become a veritable quagmire. Between the mud, which neutralized Sisera's chariots, the Israelite infantry who now had the advantage, and the flashflood, Sisera's entire army was wiped out (4:16).

Sisera, fleeing on foot for his life, passed the tent of the Qenite Heber, and because the Qenites were generally sympathetic to the Canaanite hegemony, he felt safe to seek shelter and nourishment there (4:17). Jael, Heber's wife, gave him a skin of milk and allowed him the chance to sleep, agreeing to stand guard (4:18-20). While he slept, she nailed him to the floor (lit., "into the ground") through the temples[73] with a tent peg and mallet (4:21). When Barak arrived in pursuit, she showed him Sisera's corpse (4:22). This victory was the beginning of the end for Canaanite supremacy in the north (4:23-24).

This is now the second occasion in which a significant factor in Israel's deliverance involved outright deceit. First, Ehud deceived Eglon, and now Jael deceived Sisera. The Bible offers no moral comment on such deception. To be sure, treachery is regularly a part of warfare and insurgency. At the same time, the Bible does not seek to justify Jael's action, even though the Israelites regarded her as a heroine. More important to the biblical author, the incident serves as a fulfillment to Deborah's prophecy, "Yahweh will hand Sisera over to a woman."

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[72] The precise relationship between Hobab and Jethro (cf. Ex. 3:1) is not clear. On the one hand, the consonantal root *htn* can be vocalized as either *hoten* (= father-in-law) or *hatan* (= brother-in-law), cf. NIV footnote. On the other hand, Moses had more than one wife (Ex. 2:21; Nu. 12:1), so he naturally had more than one father-in-law, cf. *ABD* (1992) 4.20.

[73] Actually, the Hebrew word here is debated, and outside the passage here and in Jg. 5:26, it appears elsewhere only in Song 4:3 and 6:7. By etymology, it means "thinness", hence the idea of the temples as the thin part of the skull, cf. L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2001) II.1288.

## The Song

A considerable volume of literature has been produced concerning the poetic account, both because it is thought to be the older of the two,[74] composed very near the event itself,[75] and also because of the perceived liturgical character of the poem, which suggests a possible usage in the assembled liturgy of the tribes for worship.[76] The fact that this poem was composed and sung as a song is in itself important. Songs are primarily oral media, carefully written. They are designed to be used more than once, and the musical line as well as the poetic cadence aids the memory. Songs were composed for mourning and lamentation, celebration, and in this case, to commemorate a war event. The Song of Deborah takes the form of a heroic ballad.[77]

The song progresses through several strophes and with two primary types of parallelism, synonymous and climactic.[78] The introductory lines focus on the

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[74] Scholars not only agree on the antiquity of this poem, many regard it as one of the two or three oldest passages in the entire Hebrew Bible, cf. L. Stager, "The Song of Deborah: Why Some Tribes Answered the Call and Others Did Not," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1989), p. 52.

[75] The difficulty of the Hebrew in the poem is demonstrated by the fact that in Origen's recension of the LXX, he simply transliterated into Greek letters various Hebrew words which he did not know how to translate. Of the 30 verses in the poem, some 22 of them have at least one word—sometimes the key word!—the meaning of which can only be conjectured, cf. J. Soggin, *Judges [OTL]*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), pp. 92-93.

[76] The liturgical interpretation largely stems from the work of Arthur Weiser, who suggested that the opening phrase בִּפְרֹעַ פְּרָעוֹת should be rendered "when the flowing hair was let loose" (so NRSV, NEBmg, NASBmg) rather than the more traditional "when princes take the lead" (RSV, NIV, NAB, NASB). This rendering became his departing point for the view that the Song of Deborah was used as a covenant renewal ceremony featuring the Nazirite vow, cf. A. Weiser, "Das Deboralied," *ZAW* 71 (1959) pp. 67-97. In this reading, the poem addresses not merely the current war with the Canaanites, but also the revelation of Yahweh in the original covenant during the exodus and a ceremony for covenant renewal.

[77] There is no indication in this song regarding musical accompaniment, even as simple as the tambourines used in Miriam's Song of the Sea (cf. Ex. 15:20-21). However, musical instrumentation is depicted in wall-drawings in Canaan more than 5000 years ago. An Ugaritic song with musical notation exists from as far back as 1400 BC, cf. H. Shanks, "World's Oldest Musical Notation Deciphered on Cuneiform Tablet," *BAR* (Sept/Oct 1980), pp. 14-25. Since the mid-20th century and later, archaeologists have discovered a number of ancient musical instruments from Canaan, including cymbals (Beth Shemesh), the handle of a sistrum or rattle (Beth El), a painted vessel with a lyre player (Megiddo), a bell (Megiddo), a pottery figure holding a tambourine (Tel Shikmona), a bronze figure of a woman playing a lute (Beth Shean), and a pottery stand with figures playing pipe, tambourine and lyre (Ashdod), among others, cf. B. Bayer, "The Finds That Could Not Be," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1982) pp. 20-33. Hence, it is not unlikely that this song had instrumental accompaniment.

[78] Hebrew poetry works primarily along the lines of parallel ideas which are juxtaposed in couplets. In synonymous parallelism, the idea in the first line is matched to the idea in the second line so that the two are similar if not identical. In climactic parallelism, the poetic lines are stair-stepped so that while there is repetition, the succeeding lines add new details that build toward a climax. Hebrew poetry also has rhythm, and most of the lines in the Song of Deborah are three-beat meters, though a few are four-beat meters. Parallelism of thought generally transfers across reasonably well in translation, but as will be obvious, the phonetic rhythms of three and four beats can only be appreciated in an oral reading in the original language. For a full discussion of Hebrew poetry, see W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A*

volunteerism of the tribes as they commit themselves to Yahweh war, a theme that will resurface several more times in the poem (5:2, cf. 5:9, 13-15, 18). When Israelite princes take the lead in the call to war and the people respond to this lead, it is an event, not simply to praise the people, but to praise Yahweh! The war effort stems not merely from human desire for territorial expansion; it is divinely called and divinely guided. To respond to the leaders' call is to respond to Yahweh's call.

The direct address in 5:3a, "Hear this, you kings!," is a rhetorical device performing a speech-opening function. While it addresses "kings" and "rulers", it serves to build tension and arouse focused attention in the listener.[79] The address to kings and rulers is one of defiance, for these potentates represent the enemies of God's people. The song itself is sung to Yahweh, though the audience is privileged to listen in (5:3b).

The direct address to Yahweh quite intentionally recalls his descent to the holy mountain in the exodus and his accompaniment of Israel from Sinai through Edom on the east side of the Dead Sea in the people's trek toward Canaan. Notice the striking parallelism with a stanza in Psalm 68:

**Judges 5:4-5**

*O Yahweh, when you went out from Seir,*

*when you marched from the land of Edom,*

*the earth shook, and the heavens poured,*

*the clouds poured down water.*

*The mountains quaked before Yahweh, the One*

*of Sinai, before Yahweh, the God of Israel.*

**Psalm 68:7-8**

*When you went out before your people, O God,*

*when you marched through the wasteland,*

*the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain,*

*before God, the One of Sinai, before God, the*

*God of Israel*

This language of Yahweh's warlike presence, leading the people into their wars of judgment and conquest in the land of Canaan, is the ground of holy war. Once in Canaan, however, the Israelites faced determined opponents who would not surrender their hegemony easily. The Canaanites controlled the major trade routes during the days of Shamgar and Jael so that Israelite caravans,[80] making their

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*Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1986).

[79] Watson, p. 154.

[80] An alternative to the vocalization of the term אֳרָחוֹת (= roads) is אֹרְחֹת (= caravan) and may be justified (so RSV), cf. Koehler & Baumgartner, I.87.

way across the Plain of Jezreel, were forced to use secondary paths (5:6).[81] So severe was the oppression that the unwalled villages of the Israelites were wide open to the forays of their enemies (5:7a).[82] The divinely appointed judge called to answer this threat was Deborah, an Israelite mother.[83]

Israel's covenant violation by religious syncretism lay behind the Canaanite oppression (5:8a).[84] The Israelites were reduced to an army without weapons,[85] possibly along the lines of what later would happen from oppression by the Philistines (5:8b; cf. 1 Sa. 13:19-21), and this in turn may bear upon the fact that Shamgar was forced to use nothing more than an ox goad in his war with the Philistines (cf. 3:31). The exclamation, "My heart is with Israel's princes" (5:9a), expresses empathy for the extremity to which the Israelites had been reduced. Once more, the eager willingness of Israel's leaders to follow Deborah's call to war is upheld as cause for praise to Yahweh (5:9b).

So, with no weapons and no safe travel on the roads, how does one muster an army in response to Deborah's call? The answer lay in the ballads sung at wells and springs, where the riders of roan[86] donkeys and foot-travelers, perhaps caravan owners and their attendants, listen to the lyrics of singers who recite antiphonally[87] in verse the history of Yahweh's wars (5:10-11a). As has been observed by others, the drawing of water is women's work in the ancient Near East, so the "singing" of war songs at the watering holes may have been done by the women of Israel, perhaps mobilized by Deborah herself. From this surreptitious call to arms, the

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[81] I regard the interpretation of Collins, in which he asserts that it was the Israelites who were "successfully plundering the caravan routes," to be alien to the context, cf. J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 206. Much better is Soggin's interpretation, in which he stresses that it was the Canaanites who made it impossible for the Israelites to cross the Plain of Jezreel except by devious routes, thus effectively separating the northern clans from the central clans of Israel, cf. Soggin, pp. 97-98.

[82] Here, the major translation options are "warriors" (AB) or "peasantry" (RSV) or "village life" (NIV), again depending upon vocalization.

[83] The unpointed Hebrew verbal forms of "I arose" and "you arose" are nearly identical, cf. NIV footnote, so because Deborah is addressed later in the 2nd person (5:12), some translations opt for the 2nd person here (so RSV).

[84] The Hebrew here is particularly difficult. Quite literally, it reads: "One chose new gods, then bread (or "warfare", depending upon the pointing) the gates." Various emendations have been offered to make sense of these puzzling lines, including "God's sacrifices ceased, barley bread was spent," "Deaf were the young warriors of God; at an end was war at the gates," "They chose new gods, gods which they had not known of old," cf. J. Gray, "Song of Deborah," *Ascribe to the Lord*, ed. L. Eslinger & G. Taylor (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1988), pp. 427-429. Regardless of the ambiguity, it seems clear enough that these lines intend to describe the extremity to which the Israelites were reduced.

[85] The prose account speaks of "the sword" (cf. 4:16b), but this may be no more than a figure of speech.

[86] Used only here, lit., "tawny" or "yellowish-red", cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 305.

[87] The use of this expression in Ugaritic, which is cognate with Hebrew, suggests antiphony, cf. Boling, *Judges*, p. 111.

warriors of Israel assembled at the city gates, the civic center of their walled communities (5:10b).[88]

The call to "Awake!"—to arouse oneself for war—now addresses Deborah and Barak by name, Deborah to break out in war songs and Barak to lead the troops to victory (5:12). The survivors of the Canaanite oppression (those "left") eagerly responded to Deborah's war song, joining themselves to their tribal leaders (5:13). Then follows a list commending the willing volunteers and chiding to those who did not respond to the muster. Ephraimites[89] and Benjamites came, as well as warriors from Makir[90] and leaders from Zebulun. Soldiers from Issachar responded (5:15a), though the men of Reuben heard the call, considered it, but elected to stay home in their sheep camps (5:15b-16). The repetitive, "There was much searching of heart," serves as censure for their reluctance to respond. Also refusing to join their brothers were the transjordan tribes of Gad in Gilead (5:17a), Dan on the central coast (5:17b), and Asher on the north coast (5:17c). The potent interrogative, "Why?", addressed to Dan, carries the force of "how could you possibly not respond?" Compared with the warriors of Zebulun and Naphtali, who put their very lives at stake, the refusal of Dan to join their fellows smacked of cowardice (5:18). In all, ten of the clans with land inheritance are mentioned, six responding to Deborah's muster and four declining. The only clans not mentioned were Levi (who may actually have been involved, since priests typically sacrificed and blessed the troops before their departure) and Judah and Simeon, who perhaps were too far to the south. Why did some tribes respond and others decline? At the very least, this mixed response points out that the clans of Israel were not yet fully unified. Another possibility is that the Isrraelite tribes who were most independent of the Canaanite economy responded, while those who more dependent upon interaction with the Canaanites feared the economic repercussions that would certainly follow.[91]

Now comes the description of the battle. The Canaanite coalition engaged the Israelite forces at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo (5:19). The several locators

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[88] Or, alternatively, they went down against the gates, that is, the walled cities of their enemies.

[89] The Hebrew Text reads of the Ephraimites that "their root [was] in Amalek." Later, the territory of Ephraim is described as being "in the hill country of the Amalekites" (cf. 12:15). The LXX, however, reads "into the valley", and some translations follow it (so RSV, NEB, NAB).

[90] Makir represents the tribe of Manasseh, since he was Manasseh's oldest son (cf. Jos. 17:1-2).

[91] This is the suggestion of Lawrence Stager, who observes that the tribes who responded were the ones who developed terraced farming in the mountain slopes, thus affording them more independence from the local Canaanite economy. The clans who did not respond were either maritime tribes (Dan and Asher) or pastoralists (Reuben and Gad), both of whom depended greatly upon trade with the sedentary Canaanite communities, cf. Stager, pp. 62-64.

offered for the site of conflict, including Mt. Tabor, the Kishon River, and Harosheth Haggoyim (cf. 4:7, 12, 14, 16), all are located in the Jezreel Valley. Taanach was a long-established Canaanite town, and it first appears in Egyptian written records in the 15th century BC.[92] That the "stars fought…against Sisera" is a poetic synecdoche for the thunderstorm and flashflood—a way of saying that the elements of the heavens were the decisive factor in the victory. (5:20-21a). There is surely a heavy irony here, in that Ba'al, the Canaanite god of thunder and rain, was supposed to be in control of the weather. Like the later contest between Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al on Carmel, the true Lord of the elements is Yahweh, who used the storm against the worshippers of Ba'al. Further, the Israelite victory in battle was due to Yahweh himself, not to the prowess of the Israelite army. Deborah's exultant victory cry, "March on, my soul; be strong!", punctuates the narrative, and with 5:7 and 12 extols her as the "initiator, leader, and victor" (5:21b).[93] Though the Canaanites fled in their chariots, their attempt at escape was futile, just like their hopes to gain the spoils of war (5:22; cf. 5:19b).

Now follows a curse upon a family who showed cowardice by their noninvolvement (5:23). Meroz is an unknown people group, and it is unclear whether the name represents an Israelite clan or a non-Israelite sympathizer. The latter seems more likely. Presumably the Meroz family, like Jael the Kenite, lived in the vicinity of the conflict, and both would be directly affected by the outcome. Meroz and Jael are intentionally juxtaposed, the one held up for scathing censure and the other for heroism. That the curse upon Meroz comes from the Angel of Yahweh reinforces the fact that this was a war directed by God himself. This figure first appeared to Joshua as the commander of Yahweh's army (Jos. 5:13-15), later at Bokim to rebuke the Israelite failure (Jg. 2:1-5), and now to curse those who refused to join. Jael, in contrast to Meroz, is extolled as the most blessed of semi-nomadic women (5:24). Though she violated the customs of ancient Near Eastern hospitality, her treachery in killing Sisera in the cause of Yahweh war is passed over. At his request for water, she gave him curds, the normal drink for shepherds (5:25). The poetic account does not describe Sisera asleep, but it may be assumed, and while he was unaware, she shattered his skull (5:26-27).

The song closes with a taunt directed at Sisera's mother (5:28-31). In the ancient Near East, the mother of the king was the "first lady",[94] and the description of her vigil as she awaited the return of her son is dripping with mockery. Deborah,

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[92] *ABD* (1992) 6.287.

[93] Boling, *Judges,* p. 113.

[94] Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth,* p. 292.

the victor, was a "mother in Israel"; Sisera's mother, the vanquished, was a mother in Canaan. The suggestion of her attendants that Sisera was "finding and dividing spoils" already had been deflected by the earlier statement that the Canaanite kings "fought…but carried off no silver, no plunder" (cf. 5:19b). The language of plunder and rape, typical consequences of war, is vivid. The song closes with a final prayer calling for the destruction of Yahweh's enemies and the strength of those who love him (5:31).

## The Fourth Cycle: Gideon in Central Israel (6-8)

After the stereotypical "forty years" of respite (5:31b), the cycle now began once more with Israelite covenant disobedience and the consequent oppression. This time the oppressors were the desert semi-nomads called the Midianites (6:1). Midian, a son of Abraham through Keturah (Ge. 25:1-4), was the ancestor of a people from the Arabian desert south of Edom. Moses' wife, Zipporah, had been from a family of Midianite shepherds (Ex. 2:15-21), and later, Moses even invited the Midianites to join the Israelites in their quest for the promised land (Nu. 10:29-32). Later still, a Midianite woman, daughter of a chief, was part of the debacle at Baal-Peor, where the Israelites lapsed into a pagan fertility rite (Nu. 25), creating an irreparable hostility between Israel and Midian. Moses' final act of war before he died was a campaign of extermination against the Midianites (Nu. 31).

This checkered history leads to the final conflict between Israel and Midian in the time of Gideon. If earlier the iron-wheeled chariot had given the Canaanites the military edge in the lowlands, now the use of camels for lightning cavalry raids gave the Midianites the edge as they invaded the very core of Israelite holdings (cf. 6:5b).[95] Recent archaeological surveys reveal the emergence of Midianites in towns and villages east of the Gulf of Aqaba from about the 13th century BC and into the early Iron Age. As a desert people, their raids into central Palestine were more along the lines of periodic "tax-collecting" expeditions intended to supplement the inadequacy of their farming resources in the desert, and in fact, this is precisely the description one finds in the Gideon narratives.[96] The Israelites no longer were able to protect their homes and farms in the open areas, but were forced to sustain themselves in mountain dens (6:2). The object of the Midianite invasion and their

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[95] According to Albright, the effective domestication of the camel occurred in about 1100 BC. Camels do not appear in Egyptian texts, and only rarely are pictured in monuments. Camel bones are absent in Bronze Age deposits in Palestine. While limited camel domestication may have occurred earlier (cf. Ge. 24), the camel first is documented as a domestic animal in cuneiform and monumental inscriptions in about the 11th century BC, cf. W. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), pp.164-165.

[96] G. Mendenhall, "Midian," *ABD* (1992) 4.816-817.

cohorts[97] was not so much territorial expansion as the robbery of crops and animals (6:3-6). Typical of nomadic invaders, they lived off the land, bringing with them their own livestock to devastate the Israelite farms.

When the Israelites pled with God for help, he gave them two divine responses. The first was a message from an unnamed prophet, who charged them with the covenant violation of worshipping the gods of the Amorites (6:7-10).[98] This is now the second prophet in the Book of Judges, Deborah being the first. The other response was the appearance of the Angel of Yahweh at Ophrah, where he summoned Gideon ben Joash to deliver the Israelites. At the time, Gideon was beating out wheat in a wine press, obviously hiding his grain from the invaders (6:11). (Usually, by contrast, threshing was done on some promontory, where the wind could blow away the chaff.) Gideon's improvisation was inconvenient, if necessary, and it suggests that his harvest was meager! Gideon was a member of the Manasseh clan, the half-tribe whose holdings were to the west of the Jordan River (cf. Jos. 17:2).

## Gideon's Call

This is now the third appearance of the Angel of Yahweh in the Book of Judges (cf. 2:1ff.; 5:23). As the commander of the war effort (cf. Jos. 5:13-15; cf. Nu. 22:23), this angelic theophany both spoke for Yahweh (6:12) and spoke as Yahweh (6:14), a fluidity that appears in other such descriptions, also.[99] He greeted Gideon as a "mighty warrior," a title which at the time surely is an irony, since it would take some significant effort to convince Gideon to go to war at all!

Gideon's protest was that if God was with the Israelites, why were they under Midianite oppression (6:13)? Apparently, he had not understood or had not taken seriously the message of the prophet. The angel's response was for him to "go in the strength you have", which is always God's way (6:14). Personal inadequacy is never a sufficient excuse for not answering God's call, for God himself supplies the difference (6:15-16). God does not merely call people who are equipped; he equips those he calls! Gideon, dimly recognizing that this summons must be from

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[97] Midianite cohorts are named as Amalekites (who also figured in the Ehud wars, cf. 3:13) and "sons of the east", all people from the transjordan and southward.

[98] The worship of Amorite deities probably serves as a summary of Canaanite worship in general. Historically, there is evidence that religious traits all over the ancient Near East had origins in Amorite culture, including the various myths about Ba'al, cf. G. Mendenhall, *ABD* (1992) 1.202.

[99] The *mal'ak Yahweh* (= messenger of the LORD) holds in tension the fact that God cannot be seen yet can manifest himself (cf. Ge. 16:7-14).

God, asked for a sign of authenticity, and the angel waited for him to prepare a *minhah* (= free-will offering, Lv. 2:4) of a goat and a large quantity of flat bread (which, in such an extreme time, must have been dear).[100] When the offering had been placed on a rock, the angel touched it with his staff, causing it to be consumed in flame. Then the angel disappeared (6:17-21). At last, Gideon fully realized the import of this confrontation, confessing that he had been face to face with God (6:22). With the assurance that he would not die from this encounter, he constructed an altar, naming it Yahweh-Shalom (6:23-24). That the altar endured for succeeding generations suggests that it was of substantial construction.[101]

That night, God further instructed Gideon to prepare a sacrifice using the second bull of the family herd.[102] He was to demolish his father's pagan shrine and build a legitimate altar to Yahweh, using the wood of the Asherah pole as fuel (6:25-26).[103] The mixing of Yahwehism and Canaanite religion is explicit, not only from the fact that Gideon's father maintained a pagan shrine, but even from the fact that his father's name, Joash, was a compound using Yahweh's name (= Yahweh has given). Gideon obeyed, but he did so at night for fear of family and community (6:27). Still, the demolished shrine would hardly go unnoticed, and in the morning, when inquiry was made, his father was urged to give Gideon up for execution for his rash action (6:28-30). Joash wisely argued that if Ba'al were really a god, he would do something about it himself (6:31-32). Hence, Gideon gained a reprieve and was nicknamed JeruBa'al (= let Ba'al prosecute).

Soon, the Midianites and their cohorts invaded again, crossing from the transjordan into the Israelite heartland and camping in the broad Plain of Jezreel (6:33). Endowed with the divine Spirit, Gideon summoned the volunteer warriors from Manasseh by the blast of the shophar,[104] and they were joined by other warriors from neighboring tribes (6:34-35).

Now, however, Gideon had second thoughts. Earlier, he had asked the Angel of Yahweh to produce a sign and "wait" for him (6:17-18). Then, he demonstrated

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[100] An ephah of flour constituted about a bushel.

[101] A number of ancient stone altars have been discovered by archaeologists, including ones from Arad, Beersheba, Dan, Hazor, and Megiddo. Typically, they include horns of 1/8 spheres on the four corners , cf. Z. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 169-174, 188-189, 214, 225-226.

[102] Possibly referring to the older bull, which if so, would be a concession so as not to eliminate the best breeding stock, cf. Boling, *Judges,* p. 134.

[103] Asherah poles were cultic representations of the goddess, probably a stylized tree or a lopped trunk. The verbs typically used with the Asherah pole are "made", "cut down" and "burnt", N. Wyatt, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, K. van der Toorn, B. Becking & P. van der Horst, eds., 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 101.

[104] Or, ram's horn

his hesitance by obeying God's commands, but at night because he was afraid (6:17). Subsequently, he was endowed with the divine Spirit, but now, he asks for yet another sign, and when it was given, yet another as well (6:36-40). Gideon does not exactly shine as a "mighty warrior", and the fact that he was called such must be considered a deliberate irony (cf. 6:12). In the end, it will be God who is the true Man of War (cf. Ex. 15:3), not Gideon!

**Gideon's War**

The actual conflict occurred in the southern end of the Jezreel Valley. Gideon and his volunteer army bivouacked at the Spring of Harod (= trembling), while the Midianite cavalry camped below them (7:1, 14).[105] If Gideon was a reluctant warrior, Yahweh intended to make it even more pronounced that the victory was not due to human prowess. He reduced the army twice, first by sending home the fearful, who comprised 22 of the 32 original units,[106] and then by separating out those who lapped water from their hands from those who knelt to drink (7:2-8).[107] In the end, Gideon was left with a very small force indeed.

The attack was ordered at night, but before the attack, Gideon was instructed that if he were still fearful, he could spy on the enemy camp and would be afforded a sign of encouragement. Gideon, the "mighty warrior" indeed was still afraid, so he took advantage of the offer. In so doing, he overheard a conversation between two enemy sentries about a dream featuring a barley loaf (symbolizing the Israelite farmers) and a tent (symbolizing the nomadic Midianites). From the obvious meaning of the dream, he finally screwed up enough courage to go back and order his men to advance (7:9-15). Dividing them into three companies, he instructed them to take shophars and empty jars into which they placed burning torches

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[105] The traditional site of the spring is Ain Jalud, while it is generally agreed that the Hill of Moreh is Nebi Dahi. The topography of this region fits the biblical description admirably, cf. *ABD* (1992) 4.904.

[106] The numbers here are extraordinarily large for the times. By comparison, for instance, King Mesha of Moab's muster consisted of only 200 warriors, cf. J. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1958), p. 210. Similarly, in the Amarna Letters, the Canaanite kings had only a few hundred men in their armies, and these city-states were supposed to greatly outnumber the Israelites (cf. Dt. 4:38; 7:1; 9:1; 11:23, etc.). At Qarqar, a battle between the superpowers of Egypt and the Hittites, both armies together only amounted to about 20,000 soldiers, cf. G. Wenham, *Numbers [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981), p. 62. For the possibility that the term "thousand" should be taken to mean "military unit" (i.e., twenty military units), see footnote #34.

[107] Though frequently interpreters perceive that the final division of volunteers concerned which were the most alert, they disagree over the nature of the test itself. One side argues that the ones lapping like a dog from their hands were the more alert to an attack from the front, while the other side, based upon similar accounts in other ancient Near Eastern literature, argues that those kneeling to drink were more alert to an attack from the rear, cf. Soggin, p. 137 and Boling, *Judges*, pp. 145-146 and J. Myers, *IB* (1953) 2.738-739. It is instructive to observe that Josephus considered the final group chosen to be the ones most afraid, cf. *Antiquities of the Jews*, 5.6.3 (216-217).

(7:16). At the edge of the Midianite camp, just about 10:00 PM after the sentries had been relieved,[108] they blew the shophars, smashed their jars, and began a concerted war cry. The sudden flash of light, the shrill blast of the shophars, and the piercing battle cries threw the Midianites into total chaos. Normally, a shophar was a signal representing an entire unit of soldiers, and three hundred shophars, all signaling at once, sounded like an overwhelming army (7:17-21). In the darkness, the Midianites struck out at anything that moved—and what moved were their fellow Midianite soldiers (7:22a)! It was a glorious route! The Midianite soldiers began to run for their lives, fleeing toward the Jordan valley (7:22b).[109]

Now, other Israelite volunteers from nearby clans joined the pursuit until they were able to control the watering places along Midian's line of flight and the Jordan fords (7:23-24).[110] The initial summons had been to the clans of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, and even though most of these warriors had been sent home, they doubtless were eagerly watching the outcome. Now, with the enemy in full route, they joined their comrades for the finish. Even Ephraim, whose warriors were not part of the original muster, joined in an independent action. They captured two Midianite captains,[111] executing them both by beheading, and brought the grisly trophies to Gideon (7:25). Then ensued a dispute in which the Ephraimites felt slighted because they were not summoned for the initial muster (8:1). Gideon, however, responded with a folk-saying, "Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer (Gideon's family)?" Whether this saying was already a current proverb or was composed on the spot is unclear, but it served to extricate Gideon from a delicate situation (8:2). The Ephraimite capture and execution of the two leaders was so far the most impressive blow struck (8:3).

**The Pursuit into the Transjordan**

With the Midianite army in full flight, Gideon and his men pressed their pursuit into the transjordan (8:4). By the time they reached Succoth, a transjordan city just north of the Jabbok tributary,[112] his warriors were faint with hunger. The

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[108] The night, which began at 6:00 PM, was divided into three watches of four hours each, cf. Jubilees 49: 10, 12.

[109] These locations are unknown, but they are likely toward the Jordan valley, since the Midianites would naturally flee toward the transjordan from which they came. This becomes almost a certainty from 7:24, where the Israelite soldiers gained control of the Jordan fords.

[110] Fords build up where tributaries join the main river course and deposit enough silt to create sandbars. There are quite a number of known fords of the Jordan, and Beth Barah is the one below Beth Shan, cf. *ABD* (1992) 3.957.

[111] The names Oreb and Zeeb mean "raven" and "wolf" respectively.

[112] *ABD* (1992) 6.218.

citizens of Succoth, however, were not interested in assisting Gideon, nor were the citizens of nearby Peniel, even though both were within Israelite territorial allotments (8:5-9). Obviously, the transjordan Israelites believed Gideon's foot-soldiers had little chance of overtaking the Midianites kings escaping on camels,[113] and if the enemy kings were not captured, the transjordan citizens probably surmised that they would be the first to experience harsh reprisals for aiding Gideon. Gideon could only threaten them with later punishment for their stinginess.

Their doubts notwithstanding, Gideon overtook the two Midianite kings at *Qarqor* (=ground), an unknown site,[114] where they bivouacked with the remnant of their army (8:10). In a surprise attack, Gideon once more routed the Midianite army and captured both kings (8:11-12). On his return, Gideon managed to extract from a young citizen of Succoth a written list of the names of the city elders of Succoth, probably on an ostracon (8:13-14).[115] With list in hand, he fulfilled his threat by punishing them for their inhospitable attitude (8:15-17). While this story is an aside to the main narrative, it describes Gideon's vengeance on those who refused to help him. Precisely how he punished them "with desert thorns and briers" is not clear. Some scholars connect this passage with Amos 1:3, where Damascus is censured for the war crime of threshing Gilead by driving sledges over them. If that is what was done here, then it was a cruel and unusual reprisal to drive sledges or carts over the bodies of the elders while they were stretched out on thorns and briars.[116] In addition, he pulled down the fortress tower at Peniel and executed its citizens.

Turning to the captured Midianite kings, he asked them about an earlier incident at Mt. Tabor, where they killed some Israelites (8:18). Presumably this action, which is unrecorded in the Book of Judges, had occurred prior to the

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[113] The question, "Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna?", can be taken in two ways. Metaphorically, it can simply refer to their capture, but more literally, it might also refer to mutilation. (The reader will recall the mutilation of Adoni-Bezek earlier in the book, cf. 1:6.) Furthermore, the names of the two kings have meanings that directly connect with the story line, Zebah (= sacrifice) and Zalmunna (= refuge refused). Because of this connection, many scholars suggest that these may have been artificial names given to the two (unnamed) chiefs in retrospect, cf. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 309.

[114] Various suggestions have been made for this location, but none can be fixed with certainty, cf. *ABD* (1992) 4.6.

[115] The earliest alphabetic tablets date no later than the mid-13th century BC, and while we do not know the precise form which this writing took, it is certainly not a stretch for a young man of Succoth to be literate, cf. W. Whitt, "The Story of the Semitic Alphabet," *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Sasson (1995 rpt. Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 2000), 4.2385.

[116] Soggin, pp. 149-150. Both the LXX and the Syriac versions, with a slight emendation of the Masoretic Text, read "threshed" rather than "taught" in 8:16.

narrative about the present war. Upon discovering that the victims were members of his own family (which he probably knew anyway),[117] Gideon ordered his young son execute the two Midianite kings (8:19-20). When the boy was reluctant to do so in cold blood, Gideon killed them himself (8:21). Their chiding words to him, "As is the man, so is his strength," may have sealed their fate, but nonetheless, Gideon clearly overstepped his boundaries by taking a personal oath of vengeance (cf. Ex. 20:7; Dt. 5:11), since vengeance belonged to Yahweh alone (cf. Dt. 32:35). As trophies of this execution, Gideon removed the crescents from their camels necks.[118]

## Gideon's Offer of Kingship

The Israelite response to Gideon's successful war venture induced some of the clans to offer him a kingship. The reader probably should assume that this offer came from the clans directly involved in the war, that is, Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, Naphtali and perhaps Ephraim. While the title מֶלֶךְ (= king) is not used, the verb מָשַׁל (= rule, govern) probably implies the same thing, particularly since it was envisioned in terms of a dynasty (8:22). While ostensibly Gideon flatly refused (8:23), and in fact, did so on the proper grounds that "Yahweh will rule over you" (cf. 1 Sa. 8:7), there are factors that mitigate his refusal. In the first place, he collected a large harem (8:30), a practice that usually was associated with prominent leaders or kings.[119] Second, he named his son by his Shechemite concubine Abimelech (= my father is king), surely a suggestive title (8:31)! Perhaps most impressive, he used the gold booty from the war[120] to perpetuate the Ophrah shrine built by his father (8:24-27). Out of the gold earrings, he constructed a tunic (ephod), an elaborate priestly-type vestment that, if it were patterned after the tunic of Israel's high priests, would have included semi-precious stones inscribed with the names of the clans of Israel (cf. Ex. 28:6-14). Such a garment, at the very least, implies supererogation. After his death, certainly, his sons as well as

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[117] The term "sons of my mother" marks the brothers as uterine, which makes them of closer relationship than might be assumed by the general word "brother" in a polygamous society, cf. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 312.

[118] The term שַׂהֲרֹנִים (= little moons) were amulets probably connected with the astral cults, cf. Koehler and Baumgartner, 2.1311 and Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 312.

[119] Roland de Vaux, for instance, observes that in the books that cover the entire period of the monarchy, not a single case of polygamy is found among commoners except Samuel's father, at the beginning of the period, cf. *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions* (rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 1.25.

[120] The earrings he collected from the warriors, amounting to 1700 shekels of gold (if the light shekel, about 40 pounds; if the heavy shekel, about 75 pounds), was no small donation! The fact that the booty was associated with the Ishmaelites (cf. 9:24) as well as the kings of Midian (cf. 9:26), both Arabic groups descended from Abraham (cf. Ge. 16:15; 25:4), reinforces the earlier statement that the Midianite invasion was a coalition of desert peoples (cf. 6:3).

the citizens of Shechem seem to consider his family to be dynastic rulers (cf. 9:1ff.). Boling is quite correct to say that while Gideon refused the offer of the throne, he demanded the trappings of leadership that tended toward the same thing.[121] Some scholars even suggest that Gideon's "no" was an ancient Near Eastern convention that really amounted to "yes".[122] Even worse, the ephod became a vehicle for false worship (8:27). How they did so is not explained, but the language "all Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it" suggests a connection with Canaanite religion in some way, if not with the fertility cult, then at least through the notion of priestly divination. Still, the Midianite threat was now over and remained so during Gideon's lifetime (8:28). The people were allowed the stereotypical "forty years" of respite.

Upon Gideon's death (8:32), the terrible cycle began again. This time the Israelites once more lapsed into the worship of the Canaanite Ba'al. In Shechem between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal, where earlier the clans had called out across the valley to each other in the liturgy of covenant blessings and curses (cf. Dt. 11:29-30; 27), the locals established a temple to Ba'al-Berith (= lord of the covenant, cf. 9:4).[123] Here, also, Joshua had established the confederacy of the twelve tribes in a covenant ceremony (Jos. 24:25-26). For Israelites now to connect their tribal confederacy and covenant with the Canaanite gods of El and Ba'al is astounding. It is not unlikely that the Ba'al-Berith shrine already had a history under the Canaanites, and the Israelites merely took over some of these traditions and combined them with their own.[124] Such syncretism, of course, meant that the Israelites "did not remember Yahweh," and in fact, they failed to show proper respect to Gideon's memory. As flawed as he was, Gideon still did "good things" for Israel.

## Abimelech's Kingship in Shechem (9)

The final notations about Gideon (8:29-31) serve as a preface to the debacle involving his son, Abimelech. Already there has been reason to question Gideon's sincerity in refusing the kingship offered him, but if Gideon was disingenuous, his son Abimelech had no compunctions about pursuing kingship aggressively. As a son of Gideon's Canaanite concubine,[125] his primary loyalty was to his mother's

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[121] Boling, *Judges*, p. 161.

[122] Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, pp. 227-228.

[123] Later, it is called the temple of El-Berith (= god of the covenant), cf. 9:46

[124] For further possibilities along these lines, see M. Mulder, "Baal-Berith," *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. K. van der Toorn, B.Becking & P. van der Horst, 2nd ed. (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 141-144.

[125] While the text does not stipulate that Gideon's concubine was a Canaanite, it is likely, since she was a resident of

family in Shechem (9:1). All indications are that Shechem still was a Canaanite controlled city. The question posed by Abimelech to its citizens, "Would you rather have Gideon's sons (i.e., Israelites) rule over you or would you rather have me (i.e., your own flesh and blood)?", presuppose its Canaanite identity (9:2).

Shechem had a long history, appearing first in the biblical narratives in the period of the patriarchs (cf. Ge. 12:6; 34:1-31; 35:4; 37:12-14). Excavations at Shechem have identified no less than twenty-four occupation strata on the main tel.[126] The city is mentioned in Egyptian texts, including the Amarna Letters, which indicates that Shechem was one of the cities facing the Hapiru in the 14th century.[127] Abandoned for a time, settlement was resumed in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1450 BC), and in fact, a temple newly constructed and used on into Iron Age I may well be the Ba'al/El-Berith shrine mentioned in the Judges narratives (9:4, 46).[128] Though Shechem is nowhere described as being conquered by Joshua, a covenant renewal ceremony was held near there in the pass between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (Jos. 8:30-35), which presupposes either that by then it was under Israelite control or that at least its citizens were not antagonistic. The Shechemites are described as the "men of Hamor" (9:28; cf. Ge. 34), which appears to linke them with the Hivites who lived there. For Gideon to marry a Hivite, of course, would have been a serious breach of covenant law, since the Hivites were marked for annihilation (cf. Dt. 20:17; cf. Jg. 3:5-6).

After Abimelech's overture to his uncles in Shechem, they reviewed his offer with Shechem's leading citizens[129] with the result that they decided to accept him as their king (9:1-3).[130] Their gift of tribute to him, probably weighed out in shekels,[131] enabled him to hire a gang of mercenary thugs[132] to serve as his enforcers (9:4). With their help, he embarked on a terrible purge in which he executed all Gideon's sons but one (9:5). The fact that this bloody deed occurred "on one stone" suggests that he offered them as human sacrifices (cf. 1 Sa. 14:33-34), presumably to his patron god, Ba'al Berith. This act prompted the citizens of Shechem and Beth

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Shechem (8:31) and did not relocate her home to Gideon's town of Ophrah (6:11; 8:32), even though she bore him a son.

[126] J. Seger, "Shechem," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. E. Meyers (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997) 5.21.

[127] W. Moran, ed., *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992), pp. 332-333.

[128] Seger, 5.22.

[129] Lit., "the ba'als (= lords) of Shechem", probably a reference to the city elders.

[130] While the Hebrew word "king" is not used as yet (though see 9:6), the verb here "to reign" is the same as used in the previous offer to Gideon (cf. 8:22-23).

[131] No unit of weight is given in the Hebrew text, but most translators assume the units to be shekels.

[132] Lit., "men empty and reckless"

Millo[133] to assemble beside the Great Tree and Pillar[134] in Shechem and formally crown Abimelech king (9:6).

Jotham, Gideon's only surviving son, heard about Abimilech's coronation, and climbing the slope of nearby Mt. Gerizim, which flanked the valley of Shechem, he shouted out a fable of protest (9:7-20).[135] Protest fables or morality stories featuring animals and/or plants appear at various times in the Old Testament (e.g., 2 Kg. 14:9-10; Eze. 17), and here the story line features a forest, an olive tree, a fig tree, a vine and a thistle bush. Jotham, of course, intended to flee for his life, but he offered this fable as his parting shot. The elements in the fable represented features associated with Abimelech's kingship.  Various fruit bearing plants all declined the offer of kingship which the forest (the citizens of Shechem) offered. None of the respectable trees wanted to go "waving over" the forest, a derogatory sarcasm aimed at presumptuous self-arrogation. The olive tree refused to give up its oil, since it was used for sacred and honorable purposes, such as, anointing meal offerings (Lv. 2:1), priests (Lv. 8:2, 12) and guests (Ps. 23:5). The fig tree declined, because it would mean giving up its role as a provider of a central food staple. The grape-bearing vine refused, because it would mean giving up its role of providing wine, the common household beverage also used in libations to God (cf. Ex. 29:40).[136] It is probably not advisable to attempt precise historical parallels to these offers (unless one wishes to follow the rabbinical interpretation that they refer to offers made to Othniel, Deborah and Gideon). The story of Gideon is the only one with a clear precedent. Nevertheless, the general application is clear enough—that to give up a useful position of dignity and influence within the community to "wave over" others as a king was presumptuous and arrogant.

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[133] Beth Millo (= house [on an] artificial fill) may have been the large earthen terrace underlying the Ba'al-Berith temple. The term "millo" is derived from Akkadian, meaning "fill", and denotes an artificial earthwork or embankment, cf. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, pp. 317-318. The acropolis of Middle Bronze Age Shechem was filled to a level of about four meters to create a level platform, and on this surface, a building with thick walls flanked by two towers was erected. After the Middle Bronze city was destroyed, Late Bronze reconstruction was built on the ruins of the former, cf. L. Toombs, "Shechem (Place)" *ABD* (1992) 5.1181-1182.

[134] The great tree and pillar has been interpreted in more than one way. On the one hand, the tree possibly was a symbol of the Canaanite goddess Anat, while the pillar could have been the phallic symbol of Ba'al, cf. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 318. On the other hand, the great oak and pillar of Joshua's renewal ceremony many years earlier (cf. Jos. 24:25-26) would still carry covenant symbolism. Either way, whether Abimelech was crowned under the auspices of the Ba'al cult or was drawing upon the Israelite traditions of covenant renewal (or even both), his coronation was a travesty.

[135] Later, the fable will be called "a curse" (9:57b).

[136] The NIV translates אֱלֹהִים as "gods" rather than "God," following some recensions of the LXX (so also, RSV, NEB, NAB), but this rendering is not at all conclusive in view of the fact that wine was stipulated in the Torah for certain sacrificial purposes. Other translations read "God" (so KJV, NASB, ESV).

Finally, lacking any acceptance from respectable candidates, the forest opted for a thistle bush or bramble, a scrub thorn that produces nothing of value, is useless for lumber, and chokes out any genuine fruit-bearing plants. The bramble not only accepted their offer, he immediately issued a threat if they did not accept him!

Now follows the climax of the fable. Earlier, Jotham had prefaced the fable with the words, "Listen to me…so that God may listen to you" (9:7). Now, he brings this preface to bear upon the actual choice of the Shechemites: if they have acted honorably and fair, especially with respect to Gideon and his family, then let God bless them, but if they have acted dishonorably, the thistle bush itself would be their undoing and both they and he would perish! As his final words echoed over the valley, Jotham took to his heels to escape certain death at the hand of his half-brother (9:21).

The remainder of Abimelech's story is the denouement to the fable. All happened just as Jotham had suggested. Within three years, God sent a bad influence[137] which estranged the Shechemites from Abimelech (9:22-24). Abimelech, apparently, did not maintain his court in Shechem itself.[138] In his absence, the Shechemites turned to banditry, robbing caravans and travelers who sought to use the Shechem pass between the mountains (9:25). Abimelech, for his part, appointed a governor, Zebul, to oversee the city (cf. 9:28, 30). With Abimelech at some distance, yet another new leader, Gaal ben Ebed (= loathsome son of a slave),[139] moved in and quickly gained the support of the Shechemites, probably due to his claim of being a descendant of the "sons of Hamor", the ancient Canaanite ancestry (9:26, 28). In a ritual wine-ceremony in honor of Ba'al-Berith, Gaal ben Ebed led the Shechemites in a curse against Abimelech and Zebul (9:27-28), urging the citizens that if they would follow him, he would oust Abimelech and his governor (9:29).

Zebul dutifully reported this mutiny to Abimelech, suggesting that Abimelech should lay an ambush by night (9:30-33). Following this advice, Abimelech deployed his mercenaries in four units, and as Gaal ben Ebed stood at the city gate the next morning,[140] Abimelech and his men began their assault (9:34-35). At

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[137] Lit., "an evil spirit", recalling a similar incident in the life of King Saul (cf. 1 Sa. 16:14) and a similar one in the life of Ahab (1 Kg. 22:19-23).

[138] Later, Abimelech is said to have been in Arumah (9:41), probably Khirbet el-'Ormah, about five miles east of Shechem, cf. H. Thompson, *ABD* (1992) 1.468.

[139] This may have been a pejorative nickname.

[140] The impressive east gate of Shechem dates to the Middle Bronze Age (strata XVI and XV), and though it was

Gaal's surprise at the approaching soldiers, Zebul taunted him with the words of his own curse (9:36-38). Stung by Zebul's jibes, Gaal led the Shechemites into a disastrous open field combat resulting in many casualties and his own banishment (9:39-41). The next day, Abimelech deployed his men against the citizens of Shechem, who apparently believed that he had withdrawn. He caught them in the fields, cutting off their retreat back to the city walls (9:42-44). He slaughtered the exposed citizens and razed the city, "sowing" it with salt,[141] while the remaining Shechemites escaped to the citadel tower on the acropolis (9:45-46).

With the survivors making their last stand in the fortress tower, Abimelech directed his mercenaries to cut branches from a neighboring slope (probably either Mt. Gerizim or Mt. Ebal) in order to burn the tower (9:47-48). The defenders, trapped in the tower, succumbed in the ensuing conflagration (9:49).

Next, Abimelech marched against Thebez, presumably a settlement in alliance with the Shechemites but not mentioned in the text until this point (9:50).[142] Thebez also had a citadel tower, and its citizens quickly retreated there (9:51). Abimelech determined to do to the defenders in the Thebez tower what he had done to those in the tower of Shechem—to burn them out—but when he approached the tower to fire it, a woman threw[143] an upper millstone, hitting him in the head and fracturing his skull (9:52-53). So as not to be scorned for being killed by a woman, Abimelech urged his armor-bearer to finish him off (9:54). His death marked the end of this premature attempt at kingship. Abimelech's bloody purge was avenged, and the Shechemites received their just due as well (9:56-57a).

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destroyed, it was reconstructed in the Late Bronze Age and lasted into the Iron Age, cf. Toombs, 5.1182-1183.

[141] The "salting" of the city has no other Old Testament parallel. Some scholars suggest it was an act symbolizing the irreversible destruction of the site based on parallels in the curse formulae of other ancient Near Eastern treaties, cf. Soggin, p. 190. Others point to a similar act centuries later in the Third Punic War, when the Romans plowed the ground of Carthage with salt to ruin its cultivation potential. Abimelech's destruction of Shechem is supported by the archaeological record, with significant evidence of burning and heaps of debris from about the close of the 12th century BC, cf. Toombs, 5.1184.

[142] If this is to be identified with Tubas, as is probable, Thebez lay some 13 miles to the northeast, cf. E. Dyck, *ABD* (1992) 6.443.

[143] The NIV translators possibly assumed that the stone referred either to one of the large, rotary millstones, often four to five feet in diameter and powered by donkeys, or the conical shaped upper millstones of black basalt that stand about two feet high or the round millstones about a foot in diameter and about two inches thick. Hence, even though the Hebrew text clearly says the woman "threw" the stone (שׁלך), the NIV translators opted for the verb "dropped". It is more likely, however, that the "upper millstone" did not refer to any of these larger stones (all of which would be difficult if not impossible to throw), but rather, to a saddle quern, a loaf-shaped stone used by hand for grinding meal. Such stones are commonly attested in both Bronze and Iron Age sites, and, weighing only about four to nine pounds, could effectively be "thrown", especially if most of the distance was downward, cf. D. Herr and M. Boyd, "A Watermelon Named Abimelech," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 2002), pp. 37, 62.

Two final notations are noteworthy. First, this is the first time in the Abimelech narrative that the Israelites are mentioned directly (9:55). The reference implies that Abimelech may have had some sympathizers among the Israelites, or at the very least, that some Israelites joined him in the campaign against Canaanite Shechem and its allies. Second, Jotham's fable is now perceived to be a curse (9:57b). Though Jotham was hardly a prophet, his fable was prophetic nonetheless.

## Notation on Tola (10:1-2)

Like Shamgar, the notation on Tola's judgeship is brief, mentioning only that he was from the clan of Issachar and that he "saved" Israel, but with no details of his campaign. His name and the names of his father and ancestors are found elsewhere in the Issachar genealogies (cf. Ge. 46:13; Nu. 26:23; 1 Chr. 7:1). From Shamir in Ephraim (location unknown), Tola "judged" Israel twenty-three years.

## Notation on Jair (10:3-5)

Jair, the third of the minor judges after Shamgar and Tola, was from Gilead in the transjordan. His judgeship lasted twenty-two years. Again, virtually nothing is known of his career save the intriguing notation that he had thirty sons (which presumes that he also had a harem), each of which rode a donkey. Riding a donkey rather than walking was a sign of dignity, and there is no mention of Canaanite oppression. Perhaps the riding of donkeys implies a time of peacefulness. Jair's sons had jurisdiction over thirty towns in transjordan Gilead called the "settlements of Jair" (Havvoth Jair).

## The Fifth Cycle: Jephthah in the Central Transjordan (10:6—12:7)

The stereotypical introduction to the fifth cycle describes the Israelites not only lapsing into the Ba'al cult, but also, the cults of other surrounding nations (10:6). Syria (Aram) participated in the Ba'al cult, where Hadad was Ba'al's proper name and his consort was Atargatis. In addition, the Arameans also worshipped the astral deities of Shemesh (the sun god) and Shahr (the moon god).[144] Sidon, on the Phoenician seacoast, also venerated the typical Canaanite pantheon. Moab and Ammon, in addition to the Canaanite pantheon, had regional deities, Chemosh in Moab with his consort Ashtar[145] and Milkom in Ammon. In the Aegean, the homeland of the Philistines, the primary deities had been female, but

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[144] Ringgren, pp. 154-158.

[145] The well-known Moabite Stone names Chemosh no less than 12 times, cf. Pritchard, pp. 209-210.

with the immigration of the Philistines to Canaan in the Sea Peoples' invasion, their female pantheon was replaced by the more typical Canaanite male pantheon, and Dagon became the primary Philistine god, though the Philistines also worshipped Baal-zebub, Ashtoreth and other deities.[146] This violation of covenant faithfulness to Yahweh resulted in oppression both from the west (Philistines) and the east (Ammonites) for eighteen years (10:7). While the most serious oppression seems to have been in the central transjordan region of Gilead (10:8), the transjordan Ammonites also raided on the west bank (10:9).

Under this distress, the Israelites now confessed their unfaithfulness and pled with Yahweh to save them (10:10), but he replied that though he had saved them in the past from the Egyptians and Amorites (during the exodus, cf. Ex. 14; Nu. 21:21-35), the Ammonites and Amalekites (in the days of Ehud and Deborah, cf. 3:13; 6:3), the Philistines (in the days of Shamgar, cf. 3:31), and the Sidonians and the Maonites (10:11-12),[147] now they should try calling on the gods and goddesses of their neighbors whom they had stooped to worship (10:13-14)! How this divine communication came to them, we are not told, but it well could have been by a prophetic oracle by some unnamed prophet. In any case, they no longer had a legitimate claim on Yahweh. Still, this divine response was not so much a total rejection as it was a test of their sincerity. So, the Israelites pled even more urgently, and they backed their repentance by discarding the trappings of Canaanite religion and turning back to Yahweh alone (10:15-16a).[148] Finally, Yahweh no longer could tolerate their distress. As a later poet would say, God's anger lasts only for "a moment", but his favor lasts a lifetime (Ps. 30:5).

At the first hint of Israelite resistance, the Ammonites mustered their army and camped in Gilead, the territorial inheritance of the tribe of Gad (10:17a). Earlier, during the Deborah campaign, the Gadites had declined to join their comrades (cf. 5:17a), but now they faced severe distress themselves. The Israelite army bivouacked at Mizpah (10:17b).[149] The leaders of Gilead (probably referring to the Gadites) determined that whoever would lead them against the Ammonite army would become the nominal head of the clan (10:18). While Jephthah would

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[146] T. Dothan, *ABD* (1992) 5.330-331.

[147] The latter two peoples are obscure, because there is no record of a conflict between them and Israel. However, the Sidonians may simply be a more general reference to northern Canaanites, while the LXX reads Midianites rather than Maonites, and if so, then the reference is to the invasions during the days of Gideon (cf. 6:2).

[148] While the Hebrew text does not include the qualifier "alone" or "only", the LXX does!

[149] The attempt to identify Mizpah (from a root meaning "to guard" or "to watch") suffers from too many candidates. There was a Mizpah in Benjamin, one in Moab, one in Judah, and one in the transjordan. The later site, mentioned earlier in Ge. 31:48-49, may be the one intended here, cf. P. Arnold, *ABD* (1992) 4.879-881.

have been a logical candidate, since he already was recognized as a warrior (11:1a), the fact that he was the child of a public prostitute (as opposed to a concubine)[150] incurred disfavor from his half-brothers, who expelled him from the clan (11:1b-2). Removing himself to Tob, a steppe region to the northeast (cf. 2 Sa. 10:6, 8), Jephthah marshaled a following of mercenaries, much like Abimelech had done earlier (11:3; cf. 9:4).[151]

## Jephthah's War

When the Ammonites attacked, the Gileadite elders had a change of heart and appealed to Jephthah (11:4-6). Jephthah's distrust of their overture was apparent, and the elders only convinced him after they swore an oath upon Yahweh's name that he truly would be given full command (11:7-11).[152] Assured by their oath, Jephthah sent a messenger to the Ammonite king asking what provoked the Ammonite attack, and the answer was that the Israelites had taken over the transjordan between the two rivers that demarcated Ammonite territory, the Arnon gorge to the south, where the perennial stream flows into the Dead Sea, and the Jabbok to the north, where it drains into the Jordan (11:12-13). The unnamed Ammonite king seems to have been referring to the transjordan wars that began in the time of Moses (cf. Nu. 21:21-35; Dt. 2:16-37), but in fact, his claim was flawed. First, the traditional territory of the Ammonites was further north and east,[153] and the geographical indicators seem more appropriate to the territory taken from the Amorites (cf. Jos. 12:1-6; 13:15-28).  Second, the Israelites had been specifically forbidden to annex Ammonite territory under Moses (cf. Dt. 2:19, 37), though later Joshua allotted to the Gadite clan "half the Ammonite country" (cf. Jos. 13:24-25). No doubt fluctuating borders and border wars stretched backward for a long period, but in any case, the Ammonite claim was at best only partially true.

Jephthah responded by pointing out this discrepancy, and he rehearsed the travel narrative of the Israelites in the exodus as they journeyed up the transjordan while carefully skirting the territories of Edom and Moab (11:14-18). When Sihon

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[150] The reference to his father as Gilead, which was also a clan name, may mean that his actual father was unknown. He was simply a "son" of the region, cf. Boling, *Judges*, p. 197.

[151] The same word רֵיקִים (= reckless or unprincipled men) is used in both cases.

[152] There is an interesting play on the words קָצִין (= commander, cf. 11:6) and רֹאשׁ לְכֹל (head over all, cf. 11:8, 9). The elders first asked Jephthah to be their field commander in war, but as the discussion progressed, it was advanced to "head over all," which probably implied a position of authority over the clan after the war, cf. Boling, *Judges*, p. 198.

[153] R. Younker, "Ammonites," *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, A. Hoerth, G. Mattingly and E. Yamauchi, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp. 296-297.

of the Amorites attacked them, they fought and defeated him, annexing his territory, which now was the land in dispute (11:19-22). The Israelites had occupied this area for a considerable time,[154] and whatever the Ammonite king's claims, his cause for war was inadequate (11:23-27).

The reference to Chemosh has generated substantial discussion, since Chemosh was the territorial god of the Moabites, not the Ammonites. Some have conjectured that the entire story is about the Moabites rather than the Ammonites, but better is Boling's hypothesis that the issue concerned ancient claims to sovereignty that may have preceded even the exodus. As such, the Ammonite king made his claims in the name of ancient Moabite sovereignty over this territory, which antedates even the Amorite control. Since the Ammonites emerged later than the Moabites and probably were formerly under Moabite sovereignty, the Ammonite king may have been depending upon this ancient claim. Though complicated, this makes sense of the reference to Chemosh.[155]

In spite of Jephthah's attempt at diplomacy, the Ammonite king continued to prosecute the war (11:28). Empowered by God's Spirit, Jephthah advanced against the Ammonites (11:29).[156] Before the engagement, however, Jephthah vowed to Yahweh that if he were successful, he would offer as a holocaust the first thing to emerge from his home (11:30-31). Advancing against the encroaching army, Jephthah defeated the Ammonites and crushed twenty Ammonite towns (11:32-33). The victory, as the narrative makes clear, was due to Yahweh, for it was Yahweh's Spirit that came upon Jephthah, and it was Yahweh who "gave them [the Ammonites] into his hands".

## Jephthah's Rash Vow

Sacred pledges to God (or the gods) are common enough in the Old Testament and in fact throughout the whole ancient Near East, and many such vows took the bargaining form made by Jephthah. Such promises were conditional, depending upon whether or not God answered the petitioner's request, and hence, they always appear in an "if/then" structure. The object of a vow often was a

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[154] The 300 years may be simply the sum of all the years of oppression so far (cf. 3:8, 11, 14, 30; 4:3; 5:31; 6:1; 8:28; 9:22; 10:2, 3), which add up to 301 not counting the years of Ammonite oppression (cf. 10:8). If this number is taken more along representational lines, it may mean merely seven or eight generations. It might also be a generalization by Jephthah, cf. Cundall & Morris, pp. 145-146.

[155] Boling, *Judges*, pp. 203-204. An alternative, of course, is that Jephthah simply got his facts wrong, Cundall & Morris, p. 144-145.

[156] For a map showing the place names and the battle plan, see Y. Aharoni and M. Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 65.

sacrifice. Vows were voluntary, but once made, they were sacrosanct (cf. Nu. 30:2; Dt. 23:21-23).

Jephthah's vow to sacrifice to God the first thing emerging from his house after the successful battle may actually have envisioned a human sacrifice from the beginning, though this is not entirely clear.[157] Whether his intent or not, the first one emerging from his home after the battle was his daughter, his only child, celebrating his victory (11:34). In consternation, he exclaimed that he could not retract his vow, and after allowing his daughter two months to mourn her maidenhood and lost chance for marriage, "he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin" (11:35-39a).

So what did Jephthah actually do? The two statements side-by-side, "He did to her as he had vowed" and "she was a virgin", have given rise to a furious discussion. Did he really burn her as a human sacrifice? (If so, why does the Bible not give a stern moral censure to such an act?) Did he only refuse to allow her marriage so that in remaining a perpetual virgin for her whole life she became a sort of "living" sacrifice? Josephus, while allowing that human sacrifice was "neither conforming to the Law nor acceptable to God", understood that Jephthah indeed burned his daughter.[158] The rabbis in the Talmud agreed, though they also pointed out that the Torah offered an alternative of monetary value for vows concerning human beings (cf. Lv. 27:2-7), and since Jephthah did not take advantage of this possibility, they preserved a tradition that Jephthah "died a horrible death, being dismembered limb by limb."[159] Many modern scholars also agree that Jephthah killed his own daughter.[160] Others, especially in light of the absence of censure and punishment (see especially He. 11:32), doubt that he actually murdered his own child, but instead, consigned her to an isolated life as a

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[157] The Hebrew הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא (= "the one that comes out", or more literally, "the comer-forth who comes forth") can be rendered "*whatever* comes out" (JPS, NIV, KJV) or "*whoever* comes out" (RSV, NAB). Some translators are even more direct in rendering it as the "first person to come out" (JB), thus implying that Jephthah expected a human being. Others leave it ambiguous as the "first creature that comes out" (NEB). Scholars are divided. On the one hand, some suggest that due to the construction of the four-room house, the first thing expected to emerge would be an animal, not a human, cf. Boling, *Judges*, p. 208. The front entrance of four-room houses led from a courtyard flanked by side rooms that served as a stable for animals, cf. S. Bunimovitz and A. Faust, p. 35. On the other hand, the phrase "to meet me" (לִקְרָאתִי) seems to imply intentionality, which in turn might suggest a human person, cf. S. Landers, "Did Jephthah Kill His Daughter?" *BR* (Aug. 1991) p.30.

[158] *Antiquities* 5.7.10.

[159] Landers, p. 31.

[160] Good examples are P. Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 104-106; Cundall & Morris, pp. 148-149; Soggin, p. 215; H. Wolf, "Judges," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 3.455-456.

virgin.[161] The conclusion remains ambiguous.

Annually, the tragedy of Jephthah's daughter was mourned (11:39b-40). At the very least, this means that her childlessness and isolation became a broad symbol of the tragedy that could befall a young woman of Israel. If Jephthah actually murdered his own daughter, the symbol was even more potent. If, as some would suggest on the basis of an alternative translation of the term לְתַנּוֹת (= to repeat, to narrate), these young women assembled annually for four days to speak to and console her, then she obviously must have remained alive.[162]

## The Conflict with Ephraim

Hardly had Jephthah's war with the Ammonites concluded when he faced a new opponent, this time from the clan of Ephraim in the cisjordan. It will be remembered that the Ephraimites, while they participated in Deborah's war in the north (cf. 5:14), had complained during Gideon's war that they had not been summoned (cf. 8:1) and apparently had engaged in an independent action of their own (cf. 7:24b-25). Now, they felt snubbed again. Fording the Jordan, they threatened to burn Jephthah out (12:1). Jephthah, for his part, contended that the Ephraimites had indeed been summoned in the muster but had refused to come (12:2-3)! The Ephraimites responded by insulting Jephthah's army (12:4b). This stand-off of words led inevitably to armed conflict, and it is the first (but not the last) occasion of civil war in the period of the judges. Jephthah's army routed their fellow Israelites and captured the Jordan fords that the Ephraimites had controlled since the time of Gideon (12:4-5a; cf. 7:24). They restricted the Ephraimites to the west bank (or else cut off their retreat when they were trying to escape back to the west bank). Using the simple artifice of dialect, they killed any Ephraimite who tried to cross the river (12:5b-6).[163] Forty-two units of Ephraimite soldiers were killed.[164]

Jephthah's judgeship was not long, a mere six years (12:7).

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[161] Landers, pp. 31, 42.

[162] So, Landers, p. 42.

[163] The difference between s*hibboleth* or *sibboleth* (= "ear of corn" or "flood") is not in the meaning but in the pronunciation of the words. Probably the development of both the spirant ("s") and sibilant ("sh") forms of the letter *sin/shin* (שׁ/שׂ), attested in various other ancient Near Eastern languages, had not reached the cisjordan at this early period, cf. Boling, *Judges*, pp. 212-213.

[164] See footnote #34 for the term "military unit".

## Notation on Ibzan (12:8-10)

The compilation of judges' records now includes brief descriptions of the final three so-called "minor" judges. Ibzan's locale was Bethlehem, but no tribal affiliation is given. Bethlehem in Judah, of course, is well known, but there also existed a Bethlehem in the north (cf. Jos. 1915-16). If one adopts the interpretive schematic that the narratives of the judges attempt to locate one judge in each tribe, a notion that is admittedly unclear, then northern Bethlehem may be more likely.[165] Josephus, on the other hand, clearly favored Bethlehem in Judah.[166]

Like Gideon (cf. 8:30) and Jair (cf. 10:4) before him, Ibzan was obviously a polygamist, and the marriage of his sons and daughters to non-clan members was, in all likelihood, an attempt to increase his influence in as wide a circle as possible. Presumably, lacking any censure to the contrary, these intermarriages were within the other Israelite tribes.

## Notation on Elon (12:11-12)

Elon of Zebulun had no distinctive features other than that his name, in unpointed Hebrew text, is the same as the name of the town Aijalon. Presumably, the one was named after the other.

## Notation on Abdon (12:13-15)

Abdon, also, appears to have been a polygamist. The number of sons and grandsons are indicators of wealth and influence.

## The Sixth Cycle: Samson in the Southwest Coast (13-16)

The final cycle describes the threat to Israel from the segment of Sea Peoples who settled along the southwest coast of Palestine, the Philistines, who arrived in the latter half of the 13th century BC. Earlier in the brief notation about Shamgar, the Philistines had threatened Israel (cf. 3:31), and later, they were mentioned

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[165] Following this schema, the twelve judges and their clans would be:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Othniel (Judah, 1:11-15; 3:10) | Gideon (West Manasseh, 6:11; cf. Jos. 17:2) | Ibzan (Asher, 12:8) |
| Ehud (Benjamin, 3:15) | Tola (Issachar, 10:1) | Elon (Zebulun, 12:11) |
| Shamgar (Reuben or Simeon, ?) | Jair (East Manasseh, 10:3) | Abdon (Ephraim, 12:15) |
| Deborah/Barak (Naphtali, 4:6) | Jephthah (Gad, 11:1) | Samson (Dan, 13:2) |

cf. *IDB* (1962) 2.1020-1021.

[166] *Antiquities* 5.7.13.

briefly in the Jephthah stories (cf. 10:6-7). Now, the Philistine threat was clearly becoming more concerted as these newcomers began to expand their hegemony into the Israelite hill-lands. An entire generation served the Philistine overlords (13:1). By about 1150 BC, the Philistines had secured their independence from Egyptian control following the reign of Rameses VI and formed a pentapolis of five military cities: Gaza, Ashkelon and Ashdod on the coast and Ekron and Gath in the Shephelah.[167] Each of these "royal cities" controlled a number of neighboring villages (cf. 1 Sa. 6:18; 27:5), and each royal city was ruled by a *seren* (lord, prince),[168] who together formed a consortium of equals. Until the time of David, the Philistines would be the most concerted threat to Israel's independent existence. By the time of Saul, their control over neighboring peoples seems to have been based on a monopoly of the iron industry (cf. 1 Sa.13:19-21), and if this monopoly extended backward into the period of Samson, it goes a long way toward explaining why Samson's war with the Philistines was conducted in bare-handed combat and with such primitive weapons as bones.

One other preliminary issue concerns dating the Samson narratives. Since the migration of the Danites to northern Galilee (taken up in chapter 18) can be approximated reasonably well by archaeological data to about 1150 BC,[169] the question arises as to whether Samson's career was before or after this migration. Since Samson always is depicted as acting alone and he never issued any tribal muster for volunteer warriors, it sometimes is conjectured that Samson's family was the one remaining Danite clan in the south-central coastlands after the larger body had removed themselves to the north.[170] This may well true, but certainty is not possible.

## Samson's Birth and Calling

Samson's birth was preceded by an angelic annunciation to his childless parents, first to his mother and then to his father. Annunciation stories tend to follow a stereotypical pattern featuring the appearance of an angel or theophany, the announcement of the birth, some indication of the future accomplishments of the child, and a sign of authenticity (cf. Ge. 16:7-13; 17:1—18:15; Lk. 1:5-20, 26-

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[167] T. Dothan, *ABD* (1992) 5.326.

[168] In the Old Testament, this title appears some 22 times and only with reference to the five Philistine city-states, cf. K. Schunck, *TDOT* (1999) X.352.

[169] Stratum VI has been identified as the first Danite occupation at Tel Dan in the north, cf. J. Laughlin, "The Remarkable Discoveries at Tel Dan," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1981), p. 29.

[170] Cundall &n Morris, pp. 153-154.

38).[171] Here, the wife in a Danite family (cf. Jos. 19:40-41) was confronted with the news that, even though sterile, she would have a child who was to be a Nazirite from birth, a champion who would begin Israel's deliverance from the Philistines (13:2-5). The woman herself was to prepare for this birth by accepting the regimen of the Nazirite. The Nazirite was a person pledged under a vow to a special level of separation and dedication to God. Especially, three primary abstentions were required: no consumption of any fermented beverage or any product from grapes, no cutting of the hair, and no contact with corpses (Nu. 6:1-8; cf. Am. 2:11-12). Presumably, such vows usually were made for a specified period of time, but in rare cases, Nazirite vows could be made for life, as would be true of Samson, and later, of Samuel and John the Baptist (cf. 1 Sa. 1:11, 28; Lk. 1:15).

When the woman described this annunciation to her husband, he prayed that the strange visitor would return, not only to confirm his wife's story, but also to provide further instruction for the child's upbringing (13:6-8). The angel did indeed return, instructing Manoah just as he had Manoah's wife (13:9-14). When Manoah offered to prepare a hospitality meal, the angel refused, suggesting instead that they offer to God a holocaust offering (13:15-16). When Manoah inquired as to the messenger's name, he was abruptly refused with the reply, "It is [too] wonderful" (13:17-18)![172] Then Manoah prepared both a holocaust and a grain offering, and while the offering burned, the messenger ascended into the heavens in the flame (13:19-21). Though Manoah was fearful that he and his wife would die because they had "seen" God, his wife persuaded him that the actions of the angel indicated favor, not harm (13:22-23). In time, their son was born as predicted, and they named him Samson (13:24a).[173] As he grew up, the Spirit of Yahweh began to move upon him (13:24b-25).[174]

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[171] R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 155-159.

[172] The NIV opts for the dynamic equivalency, "It is beyond understanding" (cf. Job 42:3; Ps. 131:1).

[173] Much has been made in some quarters about the possible connection between the name Samson and the worship of the sun, in which the warrior's name appears to be a diminutive form of Shemesh (= the sun) and approximates to "Little Sun," cf. *ABD* (1992) 5.950. Though not directly mentioned in the Judges narratives, the town of Beth-Shemesh (= House of the Sun), a shrine to the sun-god, was located near the places named in the Samson stories, such as, Zorah, the Valley of Sorek, and Timnah, cf. S. Bunimovitz and Z. Lederman, "Beth-Shemesh: Culture Conflict on Judah's Frontier," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1997), p.43. Additionally, there is a phonetic similarity between the name Delilah and the Hebrew word for night. Some scholars see these connections as more than incidental and have hypothesized that the Samson narratives are based on solar mythology. Such an approach seems unnecessary and probably says more about the interpreters than it does about the Samson stories.

[174] The verb פעם means "to push" or "disturb", hence the NIV rendering "to stir", cf. Koehler & Baumgartner, 2.952.

**Samson's Marriage**

At Timnah,[175] Samson met a young Philistine woman whom he wanted to marry (14:1-2). Over the objections of his parents, who were dismayed that he wanted to marry a non-Israelite,[176] Samson persisted (14:3). Mixed marriages, of course, were strictly forbidden by Torah (cf. Ex. 34:16; Dt. 7:3), and earlier the Judges narrator singled out this practice as especially egregious (cf. 3:5-6). Marriage seems to have occurred at a relatively early age and was arranged by the parents (often without the consultation of either the girl or the boy, though this case was different).[177] Here, the biblical narrator explains that Samson's attraction was prompted by God as a means of creating enmity between the Philistines and the Israelites (14:4). The narrator makes no moral comment on God's action to incite Samson's attraction toward a woman who was clearly off-limits. It may be that God's use of such an attraction should not be taken to legitimate the attraction itself.

When Samson and his parents went to Timnah to begin making marriage arrangements, he encountered an attacking lion,[178] which he killed with his bare hands under the power of God's Spirit (14:5-7).[179] He did not share the encounter with his parents, while his attraction to the Philistine girl only increased. When later he went for what was presumably the betrothal feast,[180] he saw that the lion carcass had become a nest for honey bees, and he retrieved the honey and shared it with his parents, again without telling them about its origin (14:8-9). This becomes the initial incident in which Samson began breaking his Nazirite vow, which forbade him to touch a corpse.

Still later, at the marriage drinking feast, Samson again treated his Nazirite

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[175] Biblical Timnah has been identified as Tel Batash in the Shephelah. Here, a number of east-west valleys bisect the low hill country, including the Sorek Valley where Tel Batash has been excavated, cf. G. Kelm and A. Mazar, "Excavating in Samson Country," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1989), p. 38.

[176] The description "uncircumcised Philistines" will be a repeating one in the biblical narratives. Circumcision was widely practiced in the ancient Near East, either by slitting the foreskin or removing it altogether, and it was known in Egypt, Syria and Palestine from as far back as the 3rd millennium BC, cf. R. Hall, *ABD* (1992) 1.1025. The Philistines, who came from the Aegean, did not practice circumcision, hence, the common description "uncircumcised Philistines", which probably functions as a pejorative label.

[177] R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), I.29-30.

[178] Palestinian lions were common until about AD 1300, cf. *IDB* (1962) 3.136.

[179] Lit., "the Spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him", using the transitive verb צלח (= to rush toward), cf. Koehler & Baumgartner, 2.1026.

[180] Marriages were two-stage events, betrothal and home-taking. In this case, after the first stage, the young woman still continued to live in the home of her parents, but her husband had periodic visiting privileges (cf. 15:1), cf. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 348.

vow cavalierly.[181] (His vows forbade his drinking anything fermented.) At the feast, he propounded a riddle for his groomsmen as a test of wits during the week-long festivities, and he wagered with them for thirty sets of clothes (14:10-13).

Out of the eater came something to eat,

Out of the strong came something sweet.

Because this was a mixed marriage, the groomsmen were themselves Philistines, not Israelites, and they accepted his wager (14:14). When they could not solve the riddle, they prevailed upon Samson's wife, who manipulated him with tears until he told her the answer (4:15-17). By the end of the last day, they gave their answer, also in the form of a poetic riddle, though the meaning was more or less obvious (14:18).

What is sweeter than honey? (implied answer, "nothing")

What is stronger than a lion? (implied answer, "nothing", but perhaps a double

entendre, meaning Samson himself, who killed the lion)

Samson's retort was stinging, and it implied that they had seduced his wife in order to solve his riddle.[182] Once again, the Spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him, empowering him to kill 30 Philistines at Ashkelon (about 20 miles away on the seacoast), stripping them, and giving the clothes to the Timnah groomsmen in order to pay off his bet (14:19a). Because the answer to the riddle was given at sunset on the last day of the marriage feast, when the marriage should have been consummated, the final marriage act may never have been completed.[183] In any case, Samson's pledged wife was given in marriage to Samson's Timnite "friend", probably the best man (14:20). Furious, Samson returned home (4:19b).

## Samson's Vengeance

In the spring,[184] Samson returned to Timnah to exercise his conjugal privilege, but his wife's father turned him away, explaining that she had been married to another, offering instead her younger sister (15:1-2). The expression "you hated

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[181] The Hebrew term מִשְׁתֶּה quite literally means a drinking bout and comes to mean "feast" by association. If the term is credited with its full force, then Samson also violated his Nazirite vow here.

[182] The expression "plowed with my heifer" might imply sexual relations, cf. Kelm and Mazar, p. 39. Also, the verb פתה in 14:15 (= "coax", NIV) is sometimes used to described seduction (cf. Ex. 22:16).

[183] So Cundall & Morris, p. 166.

[184] Wheat harvest is in about late May in the Shephelah and coastlands.

her" may be idiomatic for divorce.[185] In a rage, Samson now felt he had just cause for personal revenge, and he caught 300 jackals,[186] tied them tail to tail, and fixed burning torches to their tails, sending them through the partly harvested grain fields. He destroyed the entire wheat crop as well as the grapevines and olives (15:3-5). When the Timnites discovered that their entire season was ruined, they wreaked vengeance upon Samson's inlaws, burning them to death (15:6), and Samson responded by attacking and killing an unspecified number before escaping to a cave hideout in the mountains of Judah (15:7-8).[187]

The Philistines pursued Samson to Lehi (= jawbone), Judah (location unknown), calling for the Judahites to give him up. The warriors of Judah, for their part, seemed willing to accept Philistine hegemony with quiet acquiescence. They confronted Samson and chided him for inciting the anger of their overlords (15:9-11). Upon their assurance that they would not take action against him themselves, Samson allowed himself to be bound and delivered over to the Philistines (15:12-13). As the Philistines taunted him, the Spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him, empowering him to snap the ropes like burnt flax. Grabbing the jawbone of a recently slaughtered donkey for a weapon, he lashed out at the Philistine mob, killing an entire unit (15:14-15).

When the killing fury had subsided, Samson celebrated his victory with a poetic couplet using puns on the homonyms for "donkey" and "heap" (15:16). Puns, of course, do not work in a second language, but some translators have tried to capture the feel of the pun in English:

> *With the jawbone of an ass I have piled them in a mass.* (Moffat)

> *With the red ass's jawbone I have reddened them right red.* (C. F. Burney)

> *With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkey's of them.* (NIV)

> *With the jaw-bone of an ass I have flayed them like asses.* (NEB)

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[185] The infinitive absolute in Hebrew, "hating, you hated her", is some sort of intensive expression, and if it is comparable to Dt. 24:3, where the same verb is used, it might refer to divorce, cf. Boling, *Judges*, pp. 234-235.

[186] The Hebrew term is broader than our English word for fox and includes any of several widely distributed carnivores of the Vulpes genus and somewhat smaller than wolves, cf. *IDB* (1962) 2.323.

[187] The meaning of the expression that Samson slaughtered them "leg on thigh" ("hip and thigh", KJV) is unclear. It may have been an idiom known to the ancients but unknown to us. The NIV's dynamic equivalency "viciously" is a guess based on context.

More literally, Samson's couplet reads, "With the jawbone of a donkey, heap, two heaps (or heaps upon heaps)." Throwing his weapon aside, Samson named the place Jawbone Hill (15:17). Once more, the use of a dead donkey's jawbone becomes a violation of Samson's Nazirite vow, though in the extremity of the situation, this detail might be passed over.

Overcome with thirst, Samson now prayed for sustenance. His great strength was matched only by his great weakness (15:18), but God opened a small hollow from which a spring of water gushed,[188] and Samson was able to quench his thirst at what came to be named the Spring of the Caller (15:19). The statement that Samson "judged" Israel for twenty years must be taken in the context of the whole collection of narratives. Certainly his leadership does not seem to have included any judicial function nor even a mustering of the Israelite warriors. Samson worked alone throughout. Nevertheless, his tenure is duly noted.

## Samson's Downfall and Death

Samson's antagonism toward Philistine men seems to have been matched only by his attraction to Philistine women. At Gaza, one of the Philistine cities a few miles south of Ashkelon, he spent the night with a prostitute (16:1). When the citizens discovered that he was in the city, they concealed themselves in the city gate alcoves, intending to ambush him in the morning when he came out (16:2). A new type of city gate had been introduced as early as the Middle Bronze Age, and it remained in use for a considerable length of time. It was rectangular, symmetrical, and flanked by two huge towers. The passageway, sometimes straight but sometimes built with a bent axis, was divided by pilasters into guard chambers. Heavy gates were fixed between the innermost and outmost pilasters. In the chambers were steps leading to second floor guard towers. These gate-types have been excavated from such cities as Hazor, Megiddo, Shechem, Gezer, and Beth-Shemesh, among others.[189] After locking the gates, the Philistines waited out the night in the guard chambers. Samson, however, did not stay the night. He left sometime before dawn, and discovering that he was locked in, grasped the gates, posts, bars and all, and carried them off to a hill-crest near Hebron, a distance of nearly 40 miles, and mostly uphill (16:3)!

The next episode also involved a Philistine woman, this time Delilah in the

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[188] The hollow place was in Lehi, but since Lehi means Jawbone, the KJV translators rendered the phrase in 15:19, "But God clave an hollow place that was in the jaw, and there came water thereout." This is clearly a mistake. It is the geographical site, not the donkey's jawbone, where the spring continued in Lehi "until this day".

[189] Mazar, pp. 205-208.

Valley of Sorek, much nearer Samson's home (16:4). The Philistine lords saw this as an opportunity, and they convinced the woman (or perhaps intimidated her) into working in their behalf to discern the source of Samson's great strength (16:5). Obviously, it was superhuman. The five tyrants promised her the exorbitant price of 5500 units of silver (1100 each, presumably in shekels). So, Delilah set to work on Samson.

In a series of encounters, she coaxed him to reveal the source of his incredible strength, and Samson, for his part, seemed willing enough to play along, offering her various answers that might seem plausible to a superstitious person, yet all of them false: tying him with seven lengths of fresh gut (16:6-9), tying him with new rope (16:10-12), weaving the seven locks of his uncut hair into fabric on a vertical loom (16:13-14).[190] Each time Samson came closer to the truth. On the first occasion, he once more tampered with his Nazirite vow by allowing himself to be bound with fresh gut from a slaughtered animal. Perhaps the fact that nothing negative happened on this occasion emboldened him to tell Delilah that if she would shave his head, the secret of his strength would be discovered, and perhaps he thought that on this occasion he would escape as well (16:15-19). This time, however, his strength was gone. His hair was the last symbol of his vow. Already he had touched corpses and drank fermented wine, but he had left his hair uncut. Now, the last sign of his vow had been completely shattered. The cutting of a Nazirite's hair, in the Torah code, symbolized his "discharge from active duty" (cf. Nu. 6:13-21).[191] When he awoke bound, Samson shook himself as before, thinking to escape. He placed such low moral value on his vow, and he had broken it so many times already, that he had come to believe his strength was his own. He did not discern that the Spirit of God, which had empowered him, was now gone (16:20). The Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes, and took him bound to Gaza, where they set him to grinding grain, the work of women, slaves and animals (16:21). There in the mill his hair began to grow (16:22).

The Philistine lords, during a celebration of their patron deity, Dagon,[192] paraded Samson as their great trophy, placing him between the twin columns that upheld the roof (16:23-25). While no remains of this temple have yet been

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[190] Weights for a vertical loom have been discovered from as far back as the Early Bronze Age. A two-beam vertical loom for tapestry is depicted in Egyptian tomb paintings from about 1450 BC, and the tapestry motifs are Syrian, suggesting that such looms were known in Palestine as well, cf. D. Collon, "Clothing and Grooming in Ancient Western Asia," *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, J. Sasson, ed. (rpt. Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 2000), I.504.

[191] Boling, *Judges*, p. 250.

[192] Dagon, the divine ruler of Philistine lands, was popular also in Syria and Mesopotamia. He was believed to be Ba'al's father, cf. L. Handy, *ABD* (1992) 2.1-2.

uncovered at Gaza, at Tell Qasile on the Philistine northern border (founded by the Philistines in the 1ˢᵗ half of the 12ᵗʰ century BC) three superimposed structures were discovered, the first examples of Philistine temples. The temple in Stratum X consisted of a main hall and an antechamber with motifs similar to Aegean temples (the Sea Peoples homeland), and its roof was supported by two cedar-wood columns standing on round stone bases.[193] Also, the remains of a large hall were excavated in Ekron (Building 350), and it also contained pillar bases a few feet apart.[194] The general attributes of these temples match quite well the literary description in Judges.[195] "We can easily imagine Samson standing in such a Philistine temple, arms outstretched, straining to topple the columns and destroy the temple with his enemies and himself inside."[196]

Here, after being guided to the pillars by the boy leading him (16:26), Samson began his last prayer, which contains all three primary names/titles for God, *Yahweh*, *Elohim* and *Adonai* (16:28). With the roof full of spectators and the temple crowded with them as well (16:27), Samson pushed the columns over, collapsed the roof, and killed himself and many of the Philistines—more here than all the others he had killed earlier (16:29-30).[197] His burial by members his own family was near his birthplace, concluding the 20 years of his judgeship (16:31).

# Appendices (17-21)

The final major section of the book, the Appendices, recounts two unconnected incidents of the period, both demonstrating the general internal disorder of the times. In this section, no less than four times the narratives explain that, "Israel had no king," and/or "Everyone did as he saw fit" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The first incident tells of the kidnapping of a Levite by the clan of Dan as the Danites were migrating from central to northern Palestine, a story painted against the backdrop of syncretism and idolatry. That the Danites migrated north in the first place was due to their failure at Yahweh War. They had not yet been able to establish a land holding in the coastal plain (18:1). The second incident

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[193] A. Mazar, "Qasile, Tell," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed.E. Meyers (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 4.374-375 and T. Dothan, *BAR* (Jul/Aug 1982), pp. 32-35.

[194] T. Dothan, "Ekron of the Philistines: Part I: Where They Came From, How they Settled Down and the Place They Worshiped In," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1990), pp. 30-31.

[195] Soggin, p. 255.

[196] T. Dothan, *BAR* (Jul/Aug 1982), p. 35.

[197] Once again, the elusive number "thousand" (see footnotes #34) is difficult to assess. Recensions of the LXX reads "700".

recounts a civil war that nearly exterminated the Benjamites, a war instigated by a corporate attempt at sodomy and a devastating gang rape.

A common assumption by historical-critical scholars is that these appendices were not originally a part of the judges record but were added later based on independent oral or written traditions. The contents of this section, both in style and substance, are quite different from what preceded it. The repeating reference that there was no king "in those days" seems to presuppose that the compiler of the material is looking backward from the time of the monarchy (i.e., "the Israelites formerly had no king, though now they do"). Finally, there are two time markers in the text, one a reference to the period the Tent of Meeting was at Shiloh and the other to the exile of the northern kingdom of Israel (cf. 18:30-31). The suggestion that this material circulated independently before it was included with the other narratives certainly is not impossible, perhaps even likely, but there is no way to demonstrate such a conclusion with certainty.

## The Danite Migration (17-18)

That the Danites were unable to dislodge the Canaanites in their allotted territory seems clear enough (cf. 1:34; 18:1). However, it was the new threat of the Philistines that probably pressed them to relocate altogether. The account of this relocation commences with the story of a maverick Ephraimite, Micah, who, unknown to his mother, stole from her a large collection of silver.[198] Because she pronounced a curse upon the thief, he decided to give it back. The curse was then countermanded by a blessing, and when the stolen wealth was returned, Micah's mother urged him to use a portion of it to create a private idol, an egregious violation of the covenant code (17:1-4; cf. Ex. 20:4, 23; Dt. 4:16; 5:8).[199] In addition, Micah also created a shrine (lit., "a house of God or gods) as well as a priestly ephod[200] along with some other household idols (17:1-4).[201] Obviously, the story is rife with dishonesty, superstition, syncretism and idolatry, a striking example of how morally decadent the times had become. The narrator offers the

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[198] As with other passages in Judges, no actual unit of weight is given, though the shekel is most likely to be in view.

[199] It is not entirely clear whether Micah created two idols, one carved and one cast, or only one idol which in some way was both carved and cast. The language in 17:3, "a carved image and cast idol" (פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה), can be taken either way. In 17:4, however, there appears the singular pronoun form (וַיְהִי,"it was…in the house of Micah"). Some translators preferred the plural idea (so KJV, NASB, NIV) and some the singular (so RSV, RV, ESV, NAB, ASV).

[200] See the similar incident in the life of Gideon (cf. 8:27).

[201] The term תְּרָפִים, which appears some 15 times in the Hebrew Bible, probably refers to figurines or household gods, cf. T. Lewis, "Teraphim," *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Van der Toorn, Becking and Van der Horst (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 844-850.

first of his four comments assessing this decadence: Israel had no king, no moral leader who could give unified direction to the nation. Further, each person became a moral law to him/herself, bypassing the Mosaic code handed down from the past (17:6).

A traveling Levite[202] passed this private shrine erected by Micah. As a Levite, the clan designated to assist the priests (Nu. 1:50-53; 3:32), he had no tribal allotment (cf. Jos. 14:3-4; 18:7a; 21:3-42). Bethlehem, the town of his origin, was not one of the towns designated for Levites, hence in 17:7b he is called a גֵּר (= resident alien). Micah agreed to pay and board him if he served as his priest, to which the young Levite agreed (17:7-12).[203] Though all Levites were not by definition priests nor under any circumstances should they have been associated with a syncretistic shrine, the fact that this one agreed to perform priestly service at just such a shrine equally demonstrates the general anarchy of the times. Micah, for his part, took the arrival of the young Levite to be a sign of Yahweh's favor (17:13). Once more, the narrative is punctuated with the observation, "Israel had no king" (18:1a).

Unable to occupy the territory allotted to them (Jos. 19:41-48), the Danites sent five spies northward to seek a more fruitful possibility (18:1b-2a). On their way, they spent the night with Micah and his Levite, because they recognized the young Levite's voice or possibly his dialect (18:2b-3). They determined to use his priestly services as an oracle to determine if their venture would turn out successfully, and the Levite assured them they had Yahweh's approval (18:4-6). Traveling as far north as Laish,[204] the five Danite spies saw the people in this town living in rural security but observed that they had minimal connections with other city-states, and hence, were vulnerable. (18:7).[205] Returning to their clans, they

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[202] Later, this Levite is named as Moses' descendent via Gershom (cf. Ex. 2:22; 18:3). In the texts of the LXX and the Vulgate (cf. 18:30), the reading is clearly "Gershom ben Moses", and most translators follow this reading (so NIV, RSV, NAB, ESV, NEB). However, some follow the Masoretic Text, which reads "Gershom ben Manasseh" with a suspended letter *nun*, which appears to have been a scribal insert to turn the name Moses into Manasseh and so avoid an embarrassment in Moses' family line (so KJV, NASB).

[203] The Hebrew expression וַיְמַלֵּא אֶת־יַד (= and he filled the hand), which appears in both 17:5 and 12, is a technical term for filling the hand of the one to be ordained with the sacred portions of the first sacrifice, cf. Ex. 29:31-34. Hence, the NIV employs the word "installed", while other translators use "ordained".

[204] Laish in northern Galilee is mentioned not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in Egyptian execration texts (along with Hazor) and in the royal archives of Mari, Mesopotamia, where a shipment of tin was sent to Laish. The Joshua record gives the name as Leshem (Jos. 19:47), but this is either a corruption of the name or else a phonetic variable deriving from synagogue readings, cf. D. Manor, *ABD* (1992) 4.130.

[205] Much earlier, the city of Laish had been heavily fortified during the Middle Bronze Age with walls and a huge, mudbrick, arched gateway flanked by guard towers, cf. J. Laughlin, "The Remarkable Discoveries at Tel Dan," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1981), pp. 20-29. By the Late Bronze Age the archaeological record seems to indicate an absence of

reported that Laish was ripe for the plucking (18:8-10).

Six hundred Danite warriors, prompted by the spies' report, marched northward, passing once more by Micah's house (18:11-13). They convinced the Levite to join their expedition, and they took him along with the ephod and the gods of Micah's shrine (18:14-21). It seems apparent that the Danites expected pursuit, for they put the livestock and children at the front, where they would be shielded from a rearguard attack. Micah, who must have been absent when the Danites absconded with his gods and his Levite, now rallied some supporters to pursue the Danite militia, coming up to them and shouting at them because of his stolen goods (18:22-24). The man who once had stolen his mother's treasure trove now was the victim of theft himself! The Danites, however, were fully armed and too strong for Micah and his neighbors, so there was little to do but let them go (18:25-26).

Upon their arrival in the north, the Danites attacked Laish and burned it, slaughtering all the citizens (18:27-28). They then rebuilt the city and renamed it Dan, their clan name,[206] while they established a shrine for Micah's stolen idols, setting up the Levite and his sons as a line of priests (18:30).[207] This Danite shrine continued to exist until the exile of the northern kingdom to Assyria.[208] Later in Israelite history, it would be adopted by Jeroboam I as one of the two shrines for the northern kingdom after its secession from Judah and the dynasty of David (cf. 1 Kg. 12:26-30; 2 Kg. 10:29; Am. 8:14). Micah's idols survived for a long time as

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fortifications, cf. H. Shanks, "Avraham Biran: Twenty Years of Digging at Tel Dan," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 1987), p. 16. Perhaps this is why the Danites found the citizens of Laish so vulnerable. In any case, the remnants of the Late Bronze city were largely displaced by the incoming Israelite settlers, so little record is left of this occupation other than a tomb containing some Mycenaean imports, p. 14. Biran, the archaeologist heading the Dan excavation, puts the Israelite conquest of Laish at about the 14th century BC, which if correct, would place it rather early in the Judges narratives.

[206] There is archaeological evidence of a significant cultural transition between Strata VII and VI marked by the appearance of collar-rimmed jars and storage pits, both of which are presumed to be Israelite, cf. Shanks, p. 15-16 and D. Ilan, "Dan," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. E. Meyers (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 2.109. The appearance of undecorated collar-rimmed jars, oval in shape with a thick, folded rim and a neck or "collar" between the bell of the pot and the lip, has been generally regarded as distinctive of the Israelite material culture, cf. Mazar, *Archaeology*, pp. 346-348. Pits are a common characteristic of early Israelite occupation, and at Dan there have been discovered many such pits, and no less than 20 in a single area. Scholars debate the use of these pits, and the suggestions are wide-ranging, including such possibilities as digging for building materials, latrines, compost mills, rubbish pits, cisterns, grain storage, and the reclamation of chalk for agriculture. Grain storage seems at present to be the best possibility, cf. J. Currid and J. Gregg, "Why Did the Early Israelites Dig All Those Pits?" *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1988), pp. 54-57.

[207] See footnote #202 regarding the reading "Geshom ben Moses".

[208] The Hebrew Text clearly reads "captivity of the land", presumably referring either to the deportation by Tiglath-Pileser III in ca. 733 BC or the more complete deportation by Sargon II in ca. 721 BC. Some have suggested a textual emendation to "captivity of the ark", though this suggestion is doubtful, see footnote #27.

well, and they were used as alternative oracles to the Tent of Meeting when it was pitched at Shiloh until it was destroyed in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century BC by the Philistines in the time of Samuel (18:31; cf. 1 Sa. 4; Je. 7:12; Ps. 78:59-60).

Dan became the northernmost border of Israelite occupation, and together with Beersheba in the south, the two sites defined the limits of the conquest. The repeating phrase, "from Dan to Beersheba" became an idiomatic expression referring to the whole of Israel (cf. Jg. 20:1; 1 Sa. 3:20; 2 Sa. 3:10; 17:11; 24:2, 15; 1 Kg. 4:25; 1 Chr. 21:2; 2 Chr. 30:5).

## The Civil War with Benjamin (19-21)

Though the civil war between the House of David and the House of Saul is better known (2 Sa. 2-4), it was preceded by yet an earlier civil war between Israelite clans. This earlier war nearly concluded with the extermination of the Benjamite clan. It began with a terrible incident that befell a traveler and his concubine who spent the night in Gibeah of Benjamin, a village that later would become the military base of Saul, Israel's first king (cf. 1 Sa. 13:15; 14:2). The woman was raped, tortured, murdered and dismembered, and the atrocity was so horrific that the incident erupted into full scale war.

The timing of this civil war can only be approximated by a single time-marker, the reference in 20:28 to Phineas, the grandson of Aaron, who was still living (cf. Ex. 6:25; Nu. 25:7, 11). This suggests the episode was early in the period of the judges.

### The Outrage at Gibeah

The story begins, once more, with the observation that Israel had no king, a condition ripe for anarchy (19:1a). Here again, the reader encounters a traveling Levite, though presumably a different individual than the one who accompanied the Danites to the north. He had taken a concubine[209] from Bethlehem-Judah, but the woman left him and went back home (19:1b-2).[210] Her husband traveled

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[209] In general, a concubine was essentially a slave girl, acquired by purchase, captured in war or taken in payment for a debt, who bore children. If she had sons her status increased, though she was never the equivalent of a free wife, cf. O. Baab, *IDB* (1962) 1.666. In this text, however, there is exceptional language that does not generally appear in association with the term פִּלֶגֶשׁ (= concubine), such as, "to take a wife", "father-in-law", and "son-in-law", which in turn suggests a marriage-like relationship, cf. *TDOT* (2001) XI.550.

[210] The Hebrew verb indicates prostitution (followed by the NIV, NASB, NAB, etc.), but some recensions of the LXX and Old Latin versions say she "became angry with him" (followed by RSV, NEB). The latter seems to fit more naturally in the context, since the woman went home. It seems less likely that she would have gone home if she were

southward "to speak to her heart", and, with the blessing of her father, he stayed with her family for three days (19:3-4) before announcing his intention to return home to Ephraim. Persuaded to stay yet an extra couple days, the Levite finally left in the afternoon of the fifth day (19:5-10). Traveling northward, the Levite, his concubine and a servant passed Jebus (an ancient name for Jerusalem), but the Levite declined to stop because the citizens were Canaanite (19:11-12; cf. 1:21). Gibeah in Benjamin was only a few miles further north,[211] so they traveled on until they reached it just about sunset (19:13-14). The first note of alarm appears when no one invited them into a home for the night, a gesture that would have been expected given the hospitality customs in the Near East (19:15).[212]

Finally, an elderly Ephraimite living in Gibeah came through the city gate from his labor in the fields. He saw them, questioned them about their situation and invited them into his home (19:16-21).[213] Shortly, the local hellions[214] surrounded his house, pounding on the door and demanding homosexual relations with the visitor (19:22).[215] Unwilling to cast out the traveler, the resident Ephraimite offered his own daughter and the stranger's concubine, and the Levite concluded by

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resorting to prostitution.

[211] The precise location of Gibeah has been debated, with two possible sites vying for acceptance, cf. P. Arnold, *ABD* (1992) 2.1007-1008.

[212] Bedouin traditions from antiquity include the sacred obligation to nourish and protect travelers, cf. J. Koenig, *ABD* (1992) 3.299-300.

[213] Again there is a small discrepancy between the Hebrew text and the LXX. The former reads that the Levite was going to the "house of Yahweh" (followed by NIV, KJV, ESV), while the LXX reads he was going to "my house" (followed by RSV, NASB, NEB, NAB).

[214] Lit., "sons of Belial", a term appearing some 27 times in the Hebrew Bible. The term is clearly associated with death and hell in Ps. 18:5-6, where the NIV translates the term Belial as "destruction". Consequently, the term "sons of Belial" may more or less approximate to "hellions" or "hell-raisers", cf. T. Lewis, *ABD* (1992) 1.654-655.

[215] The expression "to know him" is a Hebrew euphemism for sexual intercourse, and the incident here parallels the event at Sodom described in Genesis 19:5. Those who adopt a gay apologetic generally attempt to empty this euphemism of its sexual implications, either minimizing them or rejecting them altogether. As such, they suggest that the situation was one of violence, but not necessarily homosexual violence, and that the sin was inhospitality to strangers, not sexual immorality, cf. J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), pp. 94-95. Modern defenders of the gay apologia follow this same line, asserting that "neither Genesis nor Judges 19 tolerate violence, abuse, or murder but neither do they condemn homosexual orientation or homosexual behavior," cf. J. Harold Ellens, "Homosexuality in Biblical Perspective," *Pastoral Psychology* (vol. 46, No. 1; Sept. 1997), pp. 43-44. The problem with this interpretation is that it flies in the face of the entire Deuteronomic framework, which consistently proscribes homosexual behavior, cf. R. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), pp. 91-97. While there is no doubt that ancient Near Eastern hospitality customs are central to this story, it is exegetically irresponsible to argue that homosexual eroticism was not also a constituent part, cf. S. Niditch, "The 'Sodomite' Theme in Judges 19-20: Family, Community and Social Disintegration," *CBQ* 44 (1982) pp. 368-369. Gagnon's conclusion is to the point: "Rather than argue that the narrators of the twin stories of Sodom and Gibeah would have changed their perspective on homosexual intercourse had they only had a modern understanding of sexual orientation, it is more plausible to say that it probably would not have made any difference to them," p. 97.

thrusting his concubine out the door, where the men of Gibeah violated her throughout the night, leaving her to crawl back to the doorstep (19:23-26). In the morning, the Levite callously called upon his devastated concubine to get up so they could resume their journey, but she could not answer. Picking her up, he put her on his donkey and started for home (19:27-28).[216] When he reached the hill-country of Ephraim, he dismembered her corpse, limb from limb, and sent the pieces to the twelve clans of Israel (19:29).[217] The utter horror induced upon everyone who saw these gruesome objects was indescribable (19:30), and if they were perceived in any way analogous to Saul's later dismembering of oxen and sending the pieces to the tribes, this act was tantamount to a call for war (cf. 1 Sa. 11:7). The memory of this horror was not soon forgotten, for it was recalled centuries later by the prophet Hosea (Ho. 9:9; 10:9).

## The Attack Upon the Benjamites

All the clans of Israel, from north to south,[218] Cisjordan to Transjordan, sent warriors to Mizpah,[219] responding to the Gibeah outrage (20:1-2).[220] At Mizpah, the Levite rehearsed what had happened at Gibeah and how he came to dismember the body of his concubine and send pieces of her corpse to the twelve clans (20:3-7). The response was visceral and immediate: no one would return home until

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[216] It is unclear in the Hebrew text whether the woman was now dead or alive. The LXX is more specific, since it says, "…for she was dead". Phyllis Trible ideologically connects this abused woman with Christ himself, for like him, she was "oppressed and tortured, [but] she opens not her mouth", p. 79.

[217] It is unclear whether by this time the distinction between Judah and Simeon had disappeared or was intact. If the former, then the twelve clans probably would have included both half tribes of Manasseh.

[218] The migration of Dan, in all likelihood, had not yet occurred, but by the time of the codification of this narrative, the expression "Dan to Beersheba" had become the commonplace designation for all Israel, north to south.

[219] The Mizpah mentioned here probably is different than the one mentioned in 10:17 (see footnote #149). The Mizpah here is probably the one on the border between Ephraim and Benjamin (cf. Jos. 18:26) and more than likely the one later associated with the career of Samuel (cf. 1 Sa. 7:5-7, 16; 10:17, etc.).

[220] The sheer numbers bear special comment. The number 400,000 swordsmen from the clans (20:2, 17) and 26,000 opponents from Benjamin (20:15) seem extraordinarily large for the period (see comments in footnotes #34 and #62). Some scholars have suggested that the Hebrew term "thousand" (*'eleph*) is a consonantal synonym for the term "a fully armed soldier" (*'alluph*), cf. R. Clark, "The Large Numbers of the Old Testament," *Journal of the Transaction of the Victoria Institute*, 87 (1955), pp. 82-92 and J. Wenham, "The Large Numbers of the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin*, 18 (1967), pp. 19-53. If this lead is followed, then the event consisted of 400 fully armed warriors from the clans, 26 soldiers from Benjamin and 700 slingers. These seem to be much more reasonable numbers for the times. The casualties in the first attack (20:21) would be 22 (not 22,000) and in the second attack (20:25) some 18 casualties (not 18,000). On the third day (20:29, 34) an ambush was set with 10 soldiers (not 10,000), for as John Wenham has cogently asked, "Could 10,000 men take up their positions undetected?", cf. J. Wenham, "The Large Numbers of the Old Testament," *Eerdmans Handbook of the Bible*, rev. ed., D. and P. Alexander, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 191-192. The losses described in 20:31 can be taken at face value, i.e., 30, since the term for "thousand" or "fully armed soldier" is not used. Later casualties would be 18, 5 and 2, not 18,000, 5,000 and 2,000 (20:45-46). The remaining 600 (20:47) can be taken at face value.

reprisals had been dealt by a levy of warrior representatives from all the tribes against Gibeah (20:8-11). The levy was to be arranged by lots (possible Urim and Thummim, cf. footnote #32), and a supply chain for the army also was appointed. First, the army contacted the Benjamites, urging them to give up the offenders from Gibeah, but the Benjamites remained loyal to their clansmen, preparing to fight in their defense (20:12-17).[221] At Bethel, where the Tent of Meeting was pitched at the time (cf. 20:26-28),[222] the army sought Yahweh's indication of who would lead the attack, and Yahweh indicated the tribe of Judah (20:18). In the first conflict, the Benjamites were victorious (20:19-21). Encouraged by a divine oracle, they engaged the Benjamites once more, only to be defeated a second time (20:22-25). Disheartened and confused, the army and the people fasted, prayed and offered sacrifices, urging Yahweh to hear their plea through the mediation of Phinehas,[223] Aaron's grandson (20:26-28). This time God replied that he would give them victory!

The third attack seemingly began as before, and though the Benjamites at first seemed to prevail, the apparent retreat of the Israelites was a ruse to draw the Benjamites into a staged ambush. In the end, the Benjamites were severely defeated (20:29-36a). The victory was credited to Yahweh, and the ambushers razed the city of Gibeah, executing its citizens (20:36b-37). The Benjamites who attempted to escape toward the desert were cut off (20:38-46), though some that fled toward the escarpment called Rimmon[224] were able to make a stand and survive for four months (20:47). The Israelite army, without resistance, then razed the cities of Benjamin, burning them, executing their citizens and killing their animals (20:48).[225]

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[221] Like Ehud earlier (cf. 3:15), each of the Benjamite slingers was "bound of his right hand" (see footnote #55).

[222] The Tent of Meeting seems to have moved from Shechem (Jos. 8:30-35; 24) to Shiloh (Jos. 18:1; 22:12) to Bethel (as indicated here) and then back to Shiloh (18:31; 1 Sa. 1:9; 3:15).

[223] Phinehas' name, which is Egyptian, means "southerner" or "Negro", a term referring to the south of Egypt, probably Nubia, and implying someone who is black, cf. J. Spencer, *ABD* (1992) 5.346. Perhaps Aaron, like his brother Moses, married a black woman, cf. Nu. 12:1.

[224] Lit., "Pomegranate Rock", probably the same inaccessible escarpment where Saul camped with his army in 1 Sa. 14:2 (though the NIV translates it as a 'pomegranate tree'). Here, a huge cave pitted with many smaller caves and holes resembles a split pomegranate, an ideal hideout for escaping soldiers, cf. P. Arnold, *ABD* (1992) 5.774.

[225] It has seemed apparent to many readers that the account of this battle may be a composite of two traditions brought together by an editor. There are two descriptions of the muster (20:1-2 and 20:14), for instance, and two descriptions of the ambush and final battle (20:29-36a and 20:36b-45). Such repetitions may suggest two pre-existing accounts of the conflict, cf. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, pp. 379-381 and J. Crossan, "Judges," *JBC* (1968) I.161.

**The Survival of the Benjamite Clan**

The final episode in the civil war concerned the sanctity of the twelve tribes. At Mispah, before the battle with the Benjamites, the other Israelites had taken oath not to intermarry their daughters with Benjamite sons (21:1), and further, that any tribe not responding to the call for war was to be exterminated (21:5). With the depletion of the Benjamite population, in which virtually all the clan members were executed except the ones who escaped to Rimmon, the risk of losing this tribe altogether seemed imminent. Deeply troubled at this prospect, the tribes wept and prayed and sacrificed (21:2-4, 6-7). Apparently, there was no answer from God, and they were left to their own devices.

Upon investigation, they discovered that no representatives had responded to the muster from Jabesh-Gilead (21:8-9), a site in the northern Transjordan not far from Beth Shean (cf. 1 Sa. 31:11-13). Why this clan did not respond is unknown, but the oath against just such a failure proved decisive. The assembly sent an armed contingent against this town with the instructions to exterminate all males and all females who were not virgins (21:10-11). When the slaughter was complete, the warriors captured 400 virgins, taking them as prisoners of war to Shiloh (21:12).

Meanwhile, the rest of the assembly contacted the surviving 600 Benjamites holed up in the Rimmon escarpment, offering terms of peace and the assurance that the virgins of Jabesh-Gilead would be given them to replace the loss of their wives by extermination (21:13-14a). The link between the town of Jabesh-Gilead and the Benjamites due to these intermarriages would remain strong up into the time of Saul (1 Sa. 11:1-11; 31:11-13). Still, 400 virgins for 600 warriors left a significant shortfall. To secure even more wives, the assembly determined that the Benjamite warriors should kidnap virgins celebrating a festival in Shiloh (21:14b-21).[226] They agreed that if the girls' fathers should protest, they would argue that the families of Shiloh also were under the same ban of not giving their daughters to the Benjamites, but since the girls were kidnapped, the Shiloah families could not be accused of breaking the ban (21:22). Upon this doubtful rationalization and by this doubtful method the Benjamites ambushed the dancing Shiloh girls and abducted enough wives for themselves with the approval of the rest of the clans (21:23-24). The fathers in Shiloh were not in a position to protest, since they faced an armed

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[226] There is no indication as to what festival is in view. It is only described as the "festival of Yahweh" (21:19). Because of the dancing, some have speculated that it was a reenactment of Miriam's dance at the Red Sea to commemorate the Passover (cf. Ex. 15:20-21). Others, because of the ambush from the vineyards, suppose that it may have been Succoth (Tabernacles) in the time of vintage harvest.

company that had just slaughtered an entire village in Gilead!

The Judges narratives end with a final, abrupt repetition (see 17:6; 18:1; 19:1): *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit* (21:25). This observation anticipates the narratives in 1 Samuel, the call for a king, and the eventual rise of David.