

## The History, Book 2

### The Book of Judges

The Hebrew name for the Book of Judges is *Shopetim*, meaning “judges, or ruling elders.” This book records the period from the death of Joshua to the time of the prophet Samuel. During this time, Israel was (theoretically) under the kingship of God, and led by a succession of human leaders called judges (hence, the name of the book). This was a dark and dismal period in the history of Israel, relieved occasionally by periodic flashes of righteous brilliance.

The Problem. With the death of Joshua, things with the people of Israel soon went sour. With the tribes spread out over the Promised Land, no longer in a single encampment, with a leader such as Moses or Joshua, they lost their vision of themselves as a united people with God as their King.

As the book declares four times, there was no human king in Israel; in two of these declarations, the dismal result is added, “...every man did that which was right in his own eyes<sup>1</sup>.” In fact, to hammer home the problem, it is with this statement that the entire book ends (21:25).

Time after time, the Israelites fell into rebellion and adopted the pagan gods of the people around them, with their heathen, idolatrous practices; and, time after time, they were then conquered and enslaved by the pagan kings around them. When their sin had gotten them into deep trouble that they couldn't handle, they would cry out to God, and He would graciously raise up a leader to rescue them. Then, after a brief period of peace and safety, they would again fall into sin, and the dismal cycle would be repeated.

They even fought against one another, in five internal wars. They were a mess!

The Judges. There were 14 judges during the period covered by this book; with the exception of one remarkable woman named Deborah, the judges were men. Actually, there were two more judges, men with dual functions: the High Priest Eli, and the Prophet Samuel, at the end of the period; but their stories are told in a subsequent book (I Samuel)<sup>2</sup>.

***NOTE:*** *The total length of the period of the Judges is difficult, if not impossible, to state with certainty; as a result, estimates vary widely, from*

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<sup>1</sup> Judges 17:6, 21:25.

<sup>2</sup> There is disagreement among Bible scholars as to the total number of the judges. For a chronological listing of the 16 judges of Israel, and their tribes, that I prefer, see the Dake Annotated Reference Bible, Judges 3, Footnote c.

*about 300 years to more than 400 years. Jephthah, a judge who lived near the end of the period, spoke of it as 300 years (11:26), but there were four more judges after Jephthah, whose periods are included in this book.*

*Some commentators believe that, because of the extreme disunity among the tribes of Israel during the period, there were, at times, periods of overlap, when portions of the Promised Land were governed by more than one judge at the same time. One thing about which we may be certain concerning the length of this period, is that we cannot know its length with certainty. Perhaps a safe estimate for the total period of the judges would be 350-450 years. To keep things as simple as possible, let's just say 400 years.*

**A. Author.** According to Jewish tradition, the author was the prophet Samuel, the last of the judges of Israel, who anointed Saul as the first king. Since the book covers a period of at least 300 to 400 years, no one person would have lived through the entire period; thus the author would have compiled records, kept by others, during the period of the judges.

**B. Place and Date.** It is clear that it was written during the reign of Saul, Israel's first king, for it refers to the period before Israel had a king<sup>3</sup>. And, it was written before David was king, because the Tabernacle is still at Shiloh when the book ends<sup>4</sup>. The Book of Judges was written somewhere in the Promised Land, about 1100 BC.

**C. Occasion.** Moved upon by God, the record of this dismal period in the history of the Israelites was probably recorded by scribes, and consolidated by the Prophet Samuel after the separated tribes were unified as one nation under King Saul.

**D. Theme.** The theme of Judges is the need for political unity and obedience to the Word of God. When "every man did that which was right in his own eyes," only apostasy, conflict, tragedy, and failure were the predictable results.

This entire book is a dismal lesson in human nature.

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## Prologue

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<sup>3</sup> Judges 19:1, 21:25.

<sup>4</sup> Later, when David is king, he will move the Tabernacle to Jerusalem and, eventually, recover the Ark of the Covenant and take it to Jerusalem.

Chapter 1 and the first 10 verses of Chapter 2 summarize the events of Joshua in conquering the Promised Land, and make it clear that most of the people of that generation, which had participated in the wandering and the conquest of Canaan, have died out. The Philistines were not entirely conquered because of their iron chariots, and they will continue to be a thorn in Israel's flesh; and the Jebusite fortress at Jerusalem will remain in the hands of the Jebusites, until finally conquered by King David. The rest of Chapter 2 (vv 11-23) summarizes the dismal pattern of the period of the Judges.

The entire Promised Land was never fully conquered and possessed by the Israelites until the time of David.

**NOTES:**

*a. It seems strange that a significant and unconquered portion of Jerusalem could survive in the hands of Pagans, in a hostile relationship with the Israelites, who occupied the rest of Jerusalem and surrounded the Jebusite fortress; but that is what the Bible record tells us.*

*The ancient name of Jerusalem was Jebus, and its people were thus called Jebusites. They built a small (not more than eight acres) fortress in Jerusalem, on virtually impregnable terrain. It was an elongated triangle, surrounded by valleys, on a hill with sheer rock escarpments, and with walls that were unassailable with the technology of that time.*

*The wall enclosed the great spring of Gihon, providing the Jebusites with water, and making them self-reliant. Although the Israelites conquered the rest of the city of Jerusalem, the Jebusite fortress was never conquered until besieged and conquered by King David, about 1000 BC. Modern time archeological discoveries indicate that the Jebusite fortress had existed for about 1,000 years before it was conquered by David<sup>5</sup>.*

*b. It is important to read the first two chapters of Judges, and I recommend it; but they are a summary of events already dealt with--events that preceded the period of the Judges. Highlights of our study will therefore begin with Chapt 3.*

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**E. Highlights.** Highlights of Judges include the following:

1. Othniel, the First Judge. (3:5-11)

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<sup>5</sup> II Samuel 5:6-9; I Chron 11:4-8. See also Unger's Bible Dictionary, "Jebusite, Jebusites," p 557.

The Israelites have adopted the pagan ways of the Canaanites around them, intermarried, and have been conquered. After 8 years of enslavement they cry out to the Lord; and Othniel, old Caleb's nephew and the hero of Hebron, is selected as Judge<sup>6</sup>. A winner to the end, he conquered those Canaanite kings who made trouble; and, under his leadership, Israel had 40 years of peace, until he died.

*NOTE: Old Caleb is one of my favorite people. He was one of the 12 spies sent by Moses to scout out the south-central portion of the Promised Land. The 12 returned saying that it was a beautiful and rich land, but 10 of them feared to re-enter it. Only two of the 12, Joshua and Caleb, dissented from the "evil report"; they said that with the Lord helping them, they could take the Promised Land, giants and all.*

*The failure of the 10 fearful, faithless, spies to trust the Lord cost them their lives, and forced the rest of the Israelites into 40 years of wandering<sup>7</sup>.*

*Forty years later, in Caleb's conquest of Hebron (whose defenders included at least three giants), Othniel, Caleb's nephew, led the assault on the fortress, and won Caleeb's daughter (his 1st cousin) as his reward<sup>8</sup>.*

## 2. A Fat King and a Left-Handed Judge. (3:12-30)

The 40 years of peace and prosperity end with Othniel's death. The people backslide again, and God uses Eglon, the obese King of Moab, to punish them. With help from Ammon and Amalek, he captures "the city of palm trees" (probably Jericho [Deut 34:3]) and enslaves the Israelites for 18 years. When they finally cry out to God for deliverance, He raises up Ehud, a left-handed Benjamite, as the second Judge<sup>9</sup>. Ehud makes a killing knife of the stiletto type, tricks Eglon into being alone with him, and kills him with the knife. Ehud then leads the Israelites into battle against the Moabite coalition, the enemy is destroyed, and the Israelites live in peace and prosperity for 80 years.

*NOTE: Verse 31 tells of one Shamgar, the son of Anath. We are told that he, armed only with an ox goad, slew 600 Philistine men (undoubtedly soldiers), "and he also delivered Israel." We are told nothing more about him, or how long the people of Israel remained free. Although he is not identified as a judge in this brief, one-verse biography, most commentators*

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<sup>6</sup> Joshua 14:6-15, 15:13-20.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 13 and 14.

<sup>8</sup> See also Joshua 15:13-17.

<sup>9</sup> Left-handedness seems to have been common in the Tribe of Benjamin. Later in the Book of Judges we read of the battle between Benjamin and the rest of the Israelites, in which 700 of the Benjamites were left-handed experts with the sling. Left handedness is a genetically recessive trait. Only in a tribe, or other such group, where many carry the gene for left-side dominance will left-handedness be a common trait.

*recognize him as the third judge of Israel because of the opening words, "And after him [Ehud] was Shamgar," his supernatural slaying of 600 Philistine men with an ox goad (this sounds like Samson, a later judge), the freeing of Israel, and the closing words, "...and he also delivered Israel."*

*He seems to have flickered in, between Ehud and Deborah, and flickered out, leaving only one verse as the record of him and his accomplishments. In fact, the incongruity of v 3:31 suggests that the compiler of the records went back to the end of Chapt 3, after this part of Judges was written, and inserted v 31 at the end of Chapt 3<sup>10</sup>. It definitely doesn't flow.*

### 3. Deborah, Jael and Barak; A Story of Two Strong Women and One Timid Man. (4:1-3)

After 80 years Ehud dies and (of course) the people again backslide. This time they are conquered by Jabin, a Canaanite king whose army, led by Sisera, has 900 chariots of iron.

a. Deborah Issues a Battle Order. After being oppressed by Jabin for 20 years, they cry out to the Lord for deliverance; this time the Lord raises up an amazing woman, Deborah, who is both Judge and prophetess. Her army commander is one Barak. Deborah sends for him and tells him that the LORD God has revealed to her that Barak is to raise an army of 10,000 to meet Sisera's army; and, she says, Barak will be given victory<sup>11</sup>. (4:4-7)

b. Barak Won't Go without Deborah.

Barak is afraid to attack Sisera and his 900 chariots of iron, for Sisera and his army are, in the natural, unbeatable<sup>12</sup>. An urgent meeting is convened to decide how to get rid of the Ark.

It would be comparable to the Ethiopians in 1941, armed only with spears, attacking Rommel's Afrika Corps with its hundreds of tanks<sup>13</sup>. Barak refuses to attack Sisera unless Deborah goes with him; she agrees to go, but warns him that he will get no glory for the victory, for God will deliver the vastly superior army of the enemy into the hands of a woman. That's OK with Barak, so he gathers only 10,000 fighting men (as he was told in prophecy by Deborah) and attacks the enemy's vastly superior force. God gives the Israelites victory, the enemy is completely wiped out, and Sisera,

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<sup>10</sup> The opening verse in Chapt 4, with the words "when Ehud was dead," just adds to the confusion about Shamgar. For clarification see 2:16, 5:6, and Unger's Bible Dictionary, 1966 edition, "Shamgar," p 1004 (the "5:16" in line 3 is a typo--the reference should be to Judges 5:6).

<sup>11</sup> Notice the reassuring identity of God in Deborah's command: YHWH Elohim, the Almighty GOD Who keeps covenants." But Barak is still afraid to trust the specific promise of victory by the LORD God.

<sup>12</sup> Heber the Kenite was probably descended from Moses' father-in-law (see Unger, "Hobab," p 494).

<sup>13</sup> Such a battle never occurred; but the analogy is, I hope, valid.

the sole Canaanite survivor, jumps down from his chariot (the horses must have been dead) and runs for his life. (4:8-16)

c. Sisera Loses His Head. Sisera flees to the tent of another remarkable woman, Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, and a pagan. She agrees to hide him; exhausted, he falls asleep, and she (literally) nails his head to the ground with a long steel tent pin! In Chapter 5 we will learn that, to finish the job she also cut off his head<sup>14</sup>. The Israelites kill the enemy to a man, apparently killing even King Jabin, and the victory is complete, thanks to two bold women and the power of God. (4:17-24)

d. Deborah's Triumphant Song. (5:26, 30)

Like Moses and Miriam at the Red Sea, Deborah sings a victorious song of praise to God. Her song occupies all of Chapter 5, and four verses are noteworthy. It is in v 26 that we learn of Jael's beheading of Sisera. In verses 28-30 Deborah imagines the thoughts of Sisera's mother, worried that her son has not yet returned, and composing in her mind the ideal scenario of her son's victory (which of course was not to be). His mother's idealized outcome includes "...have they not divided the prey, to every man a damsel or two?" This is an interesting insight into the morality of pagans. It seems a strange thing for a woman to wish that victorious soldiers would ravage helpless women, and think it a normal thing--especially for a mother to think this way; but such is the amoral thinking of pagans.

Chapter 4 ends, Chapter 5 is a victory song by Deborah and Barak, and the land had rest and peace for 40 years (5:31).

4. The Pagan Invasion. (6:1-10)

The Israelites backslide again (of course), and the pagans crowd in on them: Amalekites from the south (Sinai desert); Midianites from the southeast; and Arabs from the eastern desert. For seven years these pagan neighbors swarm in and out on camels, taking what they want; the Israelites are reduced to living in caves and burying their grain, olive oil, and other crops to hide them, especially at harvest time<sup>15</sup>. Their principal oppressors are the Midianites, descendants of Abraham and his second wife, Keturah<sup>16</sup>. After seven years of this, the people cry out to God and He sends a prophet

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<sup>14</sup> Some commentators contend that she did not cut off Sisera's head. The Hebrew verb used in the passage is "machaq" and it can mean "crush"; but the primary meaning is "smite off."

<sup>15</sup> There are no trustworthy records of Midian outside of the Bible. They were the first people to capture and domesticate wild camels, which gave them great mobility, in both peace and war.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 25:1-2. Moses lived among the Midianites for 40 years and married one, Zipporah. Zipporah's father, Jethro, was a priest of Midian who became an advisor to Moses.

(his name is not recorded) who tells them it's their own fault (which they must have known anyway).

**NOTE:** Repeatedly, in the Book of Judges, the Lord is identified as "the LORD God (YHWH Elohim)." This combination of two of the Lord's three primary names: the unique, all-powerful and all-knowing, self-existent One (YHWH), and the true and faithful One who keeps covenants (Elohim), was, it seems to me, necessary during the Period of the Judges. The unfaithful Israelites badly needed to be reminded, frequently, that YHWH is all-knowing, all-powerful, and able to deliver them from any enemy and provide for their every need. They also needed badly to be reminded, frequently, that Elohim is true, faithful, and always keeps his covenants. Why? Because the people consistently failed to honor Him as YHWH, serving instead pagan gods; and, they consistently failed to honor Him as the faithful keeper of covenants, by breaking their covenants with Him to enjoy "the pleasures of sin for a season"<sup>17</sup>.

5. Gideon, an Unlikely Hero. (6:11-16)

It is harvest time, and the Israelites know that the Midianites will be coming again to rob them of their harvest. An angel of the Lord (the angel of the LORD?) visits an obscure man named Gideon who is threshing his grain, addresses him as a "mighty man of valor," and tells him that he has been chosen to deliver Israel from the Midianites. Like Moses before him, Gideon complains that he's not up to it; again like Moses, the LORD tells Gideon that he can do it because He will be with him.

**NOTE:** The Midianites lived in the Arabah, the great desert between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. It is part of the Great Rift Valley, a great fault system that runs from northern Syria, through the Holy Land, under the Red Sea, and well into Southeastern Africa, a distance of about 4,000 miles. It runs southward, through Northern Israel, the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, the Dead Sea and the Arabah.

The Great Rift Valley is so visible that it can be clearly recognized from outer space. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River portion of the Great Rift Valley.

6. "Show Me a Sign." (6:17-24)

Gideon, not even sure that what he is experiencing is real, asks the angel (the LORD?) to wait while he prepares some food for his visitor. The angel has Gideon lay out the prepared food on a large rock, touches the food with the tip of his staff, fire comes out of the rock, consumes the food, and The

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<sup>17</sup> Hebrews 11:25.

Angel instantly disappears! This seems to have been a lesson for Gideon to the effect that God is all-powerful, and needs nothing that Gideon can provide. For me it proves that Gideon had a healthy heart, for otherwise the shock would have killed him! The LORD Himself then appears, says, "Peace be unto thee," and assures Gideon that he is safe. Gideon realizes that he has had an encounter with YHWH, yet has not died, and he builds an altar. Gideon names the altar YHWH Shalom; thus another of the compound names of God is revealed, meaning "The LORD our peace."

*NOTE: Gideon needs the peace of God! In the supernatural realm, he finds himself dealing with the YHWH, Creator and Master of the Universe, where one wrong move can cause the Earth to open up and swallow him. And, in the natural order of things, what he is doing is in complete opposition to his father, and everything that matters in his pagan religion!*

7. A Bold Move and a New Name. (6:25-32)

Instructed by the Lord, Gideon takes 10 servants, tears down his father's altar to Baal, cuts down the "grove" (apparently a cluster of poles in the form of phallic idols), builds an altar to the Lord on "this rock" (apparently the one from which the supernatural fire had come), and sacrifices a bullock to God, using the phallic poles for firewood. For fear of his father and those people around him, he does this by night.

In the morning, when what he has done is discovered, the men of the area around him want to kill Gideon; but his father, apparently repenting of his pagan worship, defends Gideon. In fact, he is so proud of his son that he gives him a new name, "Jerub-baal," meaning "he fought against Baal," "Let Baal plead [for himself]," or words to that effect. But this doesn't end the conflict.

*NOTE: Here is one of countless places where the Bible record is amazingly specific. Gideon is told to sacrifice "the second bullock" on God's altar. This is not explained; but it probably means that the bullock was one of a group kept apart and fattened for sacrifice, and the LORD didn't want the first in line to be offered--perhaps because it had already been consecrated to Baal by Gideon's father. The fact that the neighbors want to kill Gideon suggests that they were a pagan group, and Gideon's father was the leader, or priest, of the pagan group. At any rate, the irrational, passionate, desire of the neighbors to kill Gideon seems to have subsided.*

8. Gideon's Fleece. (6:33-40)

The armies of Midian, Amalek, and the people of the east (Arabs), gather in the Valley of Jezreel to make war against the Israelites. Emboldened by the Holy Spirit, Gideon sounds the trumpet and sends messengers to all of

his family (Abiezer) and to the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulon and Naphtali, to assemble for battle. Still a bit doubtful, he asks the Lord to give him a sign: he puts out a fleece (sheepskin) on the ground in the threshing floor and asks the Lord, if He will give Gideon the victory, to let there be dew on the fleece, but not on the surrounding ground. The next morning, the fleece is soaking wet, but the ground is dry. Gideon, still unsure, asks that the miracle be reversed, and it is<sup>18</sup>.

*NOTE: When Gideon checked the fleece after the first miracle of the dew, he wrung "a bowl full of water" out of the fleece; God left nothing to the imagination. The fleece was not just damp--it was soaking wet.*

#### 9. Gideon's Little Army. (7:1-8)

Gideon gathers his army at "the well of Harod." The Lord knows that if Gideon attacks the enemy with a multitude, the Israelites will think they did it in their own power. By sending home all those who don't want to fight, the army is reduced to From 32,000 to 10,000. They are still too many, says the Lord, and He puts them to a strange test, reducing them to 300, according to the way they drink water. The 300 are the ones who lift the water to their mouths and drink it "like a dog<sup>19</sup>."

*NOTE: Water was (and still is) so vital in that dry region that wells and springs were given names. This one, where the drinking test was given, is actually a spring, which bursts out of the very foot of Mount Gilboa, making a pool about 15 feet wide and two feet deep. It is about one mile east of Jezreel, where the enemy was gathered<sup>20</sup>.*

#### 10. A Prophetic Dream for a Pagan. (7:9-14)

That night, with the host of pagans encamped in the valley below, the Lord sends Gideon, and Phurah, his servant, on a reconnaissance mission inside the enemy camp. They overhear a pagan, telling his friend of a dream, which he interprets as a portent of victory for Gideon and a disaster for them. This is an extraordinarily gracious gift from God, and<sup>9+</sup> a great miracle, to give Gideon confidence that the Lord really will give him the victory<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> This is the origin of a practice by some Christians today, "putting out a fleece," by saying to the Lord, "If this is your will, please let (something specific) happen." This is not a safe practice unless one is **truly** led by the Spirit to do it.

<sup>19</sup> Some interpret this to mean that the LORD selected 300 weird ones; others believe that He chose those who were alert and watchful as they drank. The LORD did not explain Himself.

<sup>20</sup> See in this regard Unger's Bible Dictionary, "Harod," p 457.

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting that, in the dream, it is not a ferocious warrior, or a predatory lion or bear that symbolizes Gideon's army, but a loaf of bread. Gideon's army is as harmless as a loaf of bread without the direct intervention of the LORD. But the LORD was with Gideon, every step of the way, and gave him a great victory.

***NOTE:** Knowing in advance (of course) that Gideon would destroy the pagan altar and grove, that he would refuse to become a king, and that he would remain faithful as Judge of Israel for the rest of his life, the LORD went to remarkable extremes to convince and encourage him. He sent a prophet to remind the people that they were being afflicted because of their disobedience and paganism. He sent an angel (perhaps the LORD Himself) to declare that Gideon is “a mighty man of valor” (this was news to Gideon!). He caused supernatural fire to consume the food Gideon had prepared. He personally directed Gideon to destroy the pagan altar and grove, and to build an altar to Him and sacrifice the “second bullock” upon it. He spoke to Gideon and promised that Gideon will conquer the Midianites because He will be with Gideon. And He performed the miracle of the fleece, not once but twice, for Gideon, rather than rebuking him for his unbelief.*

*No other judge of Israel was given so much gracious reassurance in order to persuade him to believe, obey and succeed.*

11. A Great Victory for a Strange Army. (7:15-25)

Gideon, filled with confidence, divides his army into three groups of 100 each and encircles the enemy. Each man has a trumpet and a clay jar with a lamp inside. In the middle of the night, just as the enemy has set its middle watch, on Gideon's signal, the 300 Israelites all blow their trumpets and break the jars, revealing the lights, and shout, “The sword of the LORD and Gideon<sup>22</sup>.” In the darkness, seeing lights all around them, and hearing the trumpets and shouting, the enemy soldiers are struck with such fear and confusion that they panic, killing one another as they flee. All the Israelites have to do is pursue them, killing them as they run.

Gideon sends word throughout the tribe of Ephraim to join the battle and capture the crossing sites in the Jordan. They succeed except for two Midianite kings and 15,000 men. The two princes of Midian are captured and executed, and the victory is almost complete.

12. Mopping Up. (8:1-13)

Gideon and his little army of 300 have pursued the surviving pagans beyond the Jordan River. His men are tired and hungry, and he asks the leading men of Succoth and Penuel for food. The men of these towns refuse, knowing that 2 surviving Midianite kings of the invading horde,

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<sup>22</sup> The middle watch (12 midnight to 4:00 AM) is the only watch that is entirely in darkness; and sentries tend to be most nervous and vulnerable when they first assume the watch.

Zebah and Zalmunnah, with 15,000 warriors are waiting in Karkor. They will soon regret their refusal to feed Gideon's little army<sup>23</sup>.

The battle has already cost the invaders 120,000 warriors; the 15,000 that Zebah and Zalmunnah have, waiting in Karkor, are all that is left of the invading pagan horde. Gideon, undaunted by being outnumbered 50 to one, presses the attack, killing the remaining 15,000 invaders and capturing their kings, Zebah and Zalmunnah.

And, with plenty of help from the LORD, Gideon accomplished all of this **before daylight, and didn't lose a man!**

13. Gideon Takes Care of Some Loose Ends. (8:14-21)

Gideon leads his small army back across the Jordan River toward home, but on the way he has some loose ends to take care of. He stops at Succoth and punishes the eldership there with thorns and briars, teaching them a lesson in hospitality.

He then proceeds to Penuel, where he also had been refused food for his weary men. There he beat down the tower, as he had promised, and he and his men "slew the men of the city"<sup>24</sup>.

There remain two kings, Zebah and Zalmunah, to be dealt with. Because they had previously slain the brothers of Gideon at Mt. Tabor, Gideon killed them and took the valuable ornaments that were hung around their camels' necks.

***NOTE:** This previous event when Gideon's brothers were murdered "at [Mount] Tabor" is not found anywhere in the Bible. Matthew Henry (1662-1714) believed that it took place earlier in Gideon's life when the Israelites were hiding their food, oil and wine in mountainous caves to protect them from the Midianites. That makes perfect sense to me. Perhaps the compiler of Judges thought that the explanation was so obvious as not to need spelling out.*

14. Gideon Refuses To Be a King. (8:22-23)

The Israelites ask Gideon to be their king, and to establish his own royal line. He refuses, and reminds them that "the LORD [YHWH]." is their King.

15. Forty Years of Peace under Gideon (Who Proves Not To Be Perfect). (8:24-28)

The following five verses are a bit troubling. It appears that Gideon's virtuous restraint is overcome by the sight of all of the gold and other

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<sup>23</sup> Karkor was a place east of the Jordan River; its precise location is unknown today.

<sup>24</sup> It is unlikely that Gideon's army killed all of the men of Penuel; it is much more likely that they killed the leading men of that city, but we are not told.

jewelry taken from the Midianites (plus the valuable jewelry he had already taken from the necks of the camels of the two kings he had killed). He asks for the golden ear rings his soldiers had taken from the Midianite dead<sup>25</sup>. The 300 soldiers readily comply, and the value of the ear rings, plus other captured jewelry, is enough to make Gideon a rich man<sup>26</sup>.

Although Gideon never turned away from the LORD, it appears that he was somewhat corrupted by wealth; and, verse 27 tells us that he made an ephod out of the purple material worn by the two Midianite kings. The ephod was kept in Ophrah, Gideon's home town, and the people seem to have come to worship the ephod. Thus, "...all Israel went thither a-whoring after it, which thing became a snare unto Gideon and to his house<sup>27</sup>." As Finis Jennings Dake summarized verse 27, "Here we have the regrettable blot on the life of Gideon<sup>28</sup>."

Thus was the invading horde wiped out, two Midianite kings put to death, and the Midianites are never again a threat to Israel. The Israelites were "in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon."

#### 16. The Death of Gideon and the Predictable Aftermath. (8:29-35)

Verse 30 tells us that Gideon had 70 legitimate sons, by his many wives<sup>29</sup>. But the very next verse (31) tells us that he also had a concubine in Shechem, and that she also bore him a son whom Gideon called Abimelech; he will be the source of much tragedy. Verse 32 tells us that Gideon died, "in a good old age," and was buried in the tomb of Joash, his father, in Ophrah, Gideon's home town.

Much trouble lies ahead.

As soon as Gideon was dead things went sour: the people turned away from YHWH, and returned to paganism, worshipping Baal-berith (ironically, the pagan "god of covenants"). They forgot the LORD, Who had miraculously delivered them from their enemies; neither did they show kindness to the family of Gideon, who had led them to victory and freedom.

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<sup>25</sup> Verse 24 makes it clear that the Midianites were descended from Ishmael, the first son of Abraham by Hagar, his Egyptian concubine, and that it was their custom to wear golden ear rings.

<sup>26</sup> It is almost impossible to make accurate estimates of dollar values recorded in shekels, because a shekel is a unit of weight--not value; suffice it to say that it was a fortune for Gideon, plus the kings' purple garments, which were very valuable.

<sup>27</sup> During this time the Tabernacle, the valid place for ephods, was at Shiloh, where it will remain for about 150 years, until it is moved by King David to Jerusalem.

<sup>28</sup> The Dake Annotated Reference Bible, Judges 8:27, marginal note i.

<sup>29</sup> Verses 30 and 31 of Chapt 8 present one of the problems in Chapt 7-9. They say that Gideon had 70 legitimate sons and one illegitimate son, while 9:5 clearly suggests that he had 70 legitimate sons, all of whom were slain. This problem will never be made clear this side of Heaven; but it is dealt with in **NOTES b. and c.** following Highlight 17.

As the great 17th Century scholar Matthew Henry summarized it, "[it is] No wonder if those who forget God [also] forget their friends."

The dismal cycle of rebellion, bondage and liberation continues.

***NOTE:** For what it may be worth, the two men in the Bible recorded as having the most legitimate sons are Gideon (here) and King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, about 350 years later. Ahab's wife was the evil Jezebel, who was so wicked that her name has been added to the English language to describe an extremely wicked, scheming, self-serving, dishonest woman<sup>30</sup>.*

#### 17. Abimelech Makes His Move. (9:1-6)

With the death of Gideon, there is the predictable power vacuum, for he did not choose and anoint his successor, nor did God intervene in the situation. Perhaps the fact that Gideon had many wives and 70 legitimate sons caused him to decide to leave the choosing of his successor to his many children. As usual, there is no mention of his daughters, who must have been numerous.

There seems to have been no struggle among his legitimate sons to assume Gideon's position; but he has an illegitimate son with one of his servant girls, a concubine, who lives in Shechem. The name of this illegitimate son, which will become synonymous with evil, is Abimelech; and he definitely wants to be a king<sup>31</sup>. God chooses not to intervene.

Abimelech goes to Shechem (where his mother's family seems to have considerable influence) and asks the men of her family to support his move to become king. He convinces them that it is a good idea, and they give him 70 pieces of silver from the local pagan temple of Baal-berith. With this money he hires a small army of miscreants, and leads them in a genocide in which they slaughter 69 of Gideon's 70 legitimate sons<sup>32</sup>. Gideon's youngest son, Jotham, escapes the slaughter by hiding. Then the men of

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<sup>30</sup> Ironically, although she was a Sidonian pagan, her Hebrew name means "chaste."

<sup>31</sup> There are only four men in the Bible named Abimilech, and one of the four, High Priest in the time of David, may be a transcription error, intended to be "Ahimelech" (Unger, Abimelech, p 5). The word may be a general title of royalty, as in "Pharaoh" among Egyptian royalty, and not a proper noun. We cannot be sure. Unger refers to him as "King of Shechem" which, if true, would make him king of a very small kingdom.

<sup>32</sup> Here we have a problem, because "vain and light persons" doesn't have the meaning that it had when the records of the Judges were written. Matthew Henry (ca 1700 AD) called them "the scum and scoundrels of the country." For this gentleman, scholar and devout Christian, this is harsh language indeed.

Shechem, including the men of the Millo, the citadel of Shechem, gather to declare Abimelech king<sup>33</sup>.

The extent of Abimelech's kingdom seems to be a matter that has never been resolved; but there seems to have been no other king in Israel, or any other aspirant to be a king, at that time. Abimelech will reign, for three bloody years, over a part of the region which will later be called Samaria. Verse 22 of Chapter 9 describes his kingdom simply as "Israel;" but the actual extent of Abimelech's kingdom is unknown. It should have been clear to them all that YHWH was their king; but they continued to disregard this vital truth.

**NOTES:**

*a. The seizure of power by the slaughter of 69 of the 70 legitimate heirs, and the survival of the youngest by hiding, to later become a problem for Abimelech, is reminiscent of the seizure of the throne of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) by wicked Athaliah, about 400 years later.*

*Wicked Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, was the only woman to rule over either the Northern or Southern Kingdom during the years of the divided Kingdoms. She had all of the male heirs to the throne (her own grandsons) murdered, excepting only the youngest, a baby whom she overlooked. Hidden and reared in the Temple by the High Priest and his wife, the baby became a child-king, and wicked Athaliah was put to death outside the city wall (II Kings 11; II Chron 22-23).*

*b. How Many Legitimate Sons Did Gideon Have? One of the difficulties in Chaps 8 and 9 (at least for me) has to do with the number of legitimate sons born to Gideon by his many wives. The chief villain in the two chapters is Abimelech, Gideon's illegitimate son, born to his concubine, a servant girl in Shechem.*

*The references to Gideon's sons in the two chapters say plainly that, after the death of Gideon, his 70 legitimate sons (those born to his wives), continued to live in Ophrah in peace, with none aspiring to succeed Gideon as Judge (and definitely not as a king). We are told nothing about the political aftermath following the death of Gideon; but, spiritually, we are told that upon the death of Gideon the people quickly returned to paganism (8:30-35).*

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<sup>33</sup> **a.** A millo was a fortification within a town or city, often in the form of a tower. It was the place to which the people could go for protection from invaders; "men of the millo" were probably warriors assigned to its defense.

**b.** Could anything good come of this power struggle, begun in selfish ambition, accomplished by deception and mass murder, and funded from the treasury of a pagan temple dedicated to Baal? Never!

*c. How Many of Gideon's 70 Legitimate Sons Did Abimelech Slaughter?*

*In 9:1-6 we are told of the unlawful seizing of power by Abimelech who, with hired assassins, slaughtered his 70 ("three score and ten") legitimate half-brothers. And, although we are told clearly that the youngest legitimate son, Jotham, escaped the slaughter of his brothers by hiding (vv 5, 21), the number of murdered legitimate sons of Gideon in the rest of the passage continues to be given as 70 (vv 9:24, 56).*

*And so, here is the problem. In his usurpation of power, did Abimelech slaughter 69 of his legitimate half-brothers? Or was the correct number of his fratricidal slaughter 70? I cannot find a commentator who will touch this textual problem; even the great Matthew Henry deals with it by ignoring it. Either I have missed something, or the commentators agree that there is no apparent explanation for this in the text, and they pass it by as if it were not there.*

*And so, since there is no explanation in the text, and because Jotham seems to be still alive at the end of the Chapt 9, I must assume that the number of the slain as Abimelech seized power was 69, with the 70th half-brother, Jotham, hidden and overlooked. And, as we are about to see, this survivor was able to prophesy, from the top of Mt. Gerizem (9:7-20), the downfall and death of Abimelech, which soon came to pass.*

18. Jotham's Parable of the Trees. (9:7-21)

When Jotham, the surviving legitimate son of Gideon, hears of Abimelech's being declared an illegitimate king in Shechem, he climbs to the top of Mount Gerizim. From the heights of Gerizim, Jotham shouts a prophecy, in the form of a parable of trees and brambles, to the men of Shechem, in the valley below, between Mount Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. The parable, comparing useful and desirable trees (Gideon's legitimate sons) with brambles (Abimelech and his hired assassins), is greatly offensive to Abimelech and his followers, and Jotham flees to a place of safety<sup>34</sup>.

**NOTES:**

*a. The town of Shechem was situated in the narrow valley between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal (today it has spread far out of the valley, to the southeast). A man shouting from the top of Mt. Gerazim can be clearly heard and understood in Shechem below. The episode recorded in 9:7-21 is **not** an exaggeration.*

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<sup>34</sup> At the end of the Exodus and the 40 years of wandering, Moses commanded that, when the Promised Land was occupied by the Israelites, the blessings of the Law should be shouted from the top of Mount Gerizim, and the curses of the Law be shouted from the top of Mount Ebal, opposite Gerizim (Deut 27:11-28:6). These prophetic utterances could be heard clearly and understood in Shechem below.

*b. Mount Gerizim will become the center of worship of the Samaritans. They were (and still are) a mixture of the Jewish remnant who fled Shechem and hid, avoiding Assyrian captivity, and the Assyrians who were sent there to replace the Jews who were taken into cruel Assyrian captivity.*

*In the time of Jesus the Samaritans practiced a form of Judaism based entirely on the Pentateuch, with their holy place and priesthood on Mt Gerizim; they still do, with a Passover service once a year. A small population of them continues to occupy the area on and around Mt Gerizim today, and worships there, as their ancestors did in the time of Jesus.*

*Since no Assyrians have contributed to the gene pool for about 2,700 years, but Jews are still contributing to the gene pool, there is little left of the Assyrian heredity.*

*c. Jacob's well, where Jesus witnessed to the Samaritan woman, is still there, about a mile southeast of the entrance to the valley of Shechem; but it has suffered much from attempts to preserve it. It is now covered by an Eastern Orthodox church, and seldom has any water in it.*

#### 19. Trouble for Abimelech. (9: 22-29)

After Abimelech had reigned for three years in Shechem, the LORD seems to have had enough of him. He allowed an evil spirit to intervene in the relationship between Abimelech and the men of Shechem, bringing suspicion and strife. The morality and the political situation at this point become a bit murky, and we are not told of the extent of the area over which Abimelech is king. To establish himself as king over all of Israel, in just three years, would require an extensive system of communication, God's blessing, and selfless morality on the part of Abimelech; and Abimelech has none of these things. He seems to have been king over a limited area, with his headquarters at Shechem; but we are not told much about it, and his reign is brief and confused<sup>35</sup>.

The men of Shechem (apparently the leading men of Shechem), in fear of having the guilt for the murder of Gideon's sons laid on them, turn against Abimelech<sup>36</sup>. Evil spirits are good at stirring up such strife.

**A Dizzying Succession of Betrayals.** The rest of Chapter 9 consists of a dizzying succession of betrayals and self-serving, short-term allegiances.

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<sup>35</sup> Merrill F. Unger refers to Abimelech as "King of Shechem" a small kingdom indeed (*Unger's Bible Dictionary*, p 6, [3]).

<sup>36</sup> There is little likelihood that Abimelech and his 70 malefactors could have carried out their murderous plan without the knowledge of the leading men of Shechem, especially since money from the pagan temple was involved; and these same leading men hastened to make Abimelech king when he returned from the slaughter of his brothers. Yet such was the way of the ancient world; and little has changed today.

Abimelech is away when the men of Shechem turn against him. Ambushes are set for him in the mountains, and the ambushers pass the time by robbing those who pass by.

Meanwhile a man named Gaal comes to Shechem, and the men of Shechem "put their confidence in him." Having accepted Gaal as their leader and protector, the people of Shechem are happy. They pick and crush their grapes, make their wine, and go into their pagan temple to celebrate. They eat and drink and curse Abimelech.

Gaal becomes over-confident, boasts of his power, and challenges Abimelech to attack; Gaal has definitely underestimated Abimelech.

Meanwhile, word is sent to Abimelech of his rejection by the men of Shechem; and, it seems, he stops to think it over.

20. Abimelech Returns, and He Is Not happy. (9:30-45)

There is confusion in Shechem as to who is in charge. Gaal and his men are there; but not everyone in the city is happy about it. Zebul, prince of the city, is still loyal to Abimelech and is offended by Gaal. He sends word to Abimelech, advising him to return secretly, by night, and hide in the fields outside of Shechem, to ambush Gaal and his men. Abimelech takes the advice of Zebul, and waits, in ambush, for the men of Gaal to come out.

The next morning Gaal leads his men outside of Shechem to do battle with Abimelech, is defeated, and the forces of Gaal retreat to the city and close the gates. The following morning the battle is resumed. Loyalties, and the matter of who is in charge, are so fluid and quickly changing that it is a bit difficult to keep it straight; but it seems that Zebul maintains his personal loyalty to Abimelech. Perhaps it saved his life--we are not told.

By the end of the second day Abimelech has defeated the forces of Gaal, and conquered ("beat down") Shechem, and "sowed [the ruins] with salt<sup>37</sup>."

21. A Tale of Two Strongholds, and the Death of Abimelech. (9:46-57)

The survivors of Shechem flee to the stronghold in the pagan Temple of Baal-Berith, and lock themselves in<sup>38</sup>. This is told to Abimelech, and he leads his men to the forested hill of Zalmon<sup>39</sup>. He takes an axe, cuts a bough from a tree (presumably a dead, dry, flammable one) and tells his men

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<sup>37</sup> The ultimate destruction of a town or stronghold of an enemy was to destroy it, perhaps burn it, and then sow it with salt, covering the ground with salt so that no plants could grow there for a very long time unless the salt-saturated soil is removed.

<sup>38</sup> Like so much in the Book of Judges, we are not told the exact nature of the stronghold in Shechem, except that it was associated with the pagan temple. Verses 46 and 47 clearly imply that it was in the form of a tower, but we are left wondering.

<sup>39</sup> The identity and nature of this "mount Zalmon" are unclear, but it seems to have been a forested hill near Shechem. Martin Luther rendered it a kind of "black forest."

to do the same. They return to the fortification in the pagan temple, pile the branches against the stronghold, and burn it down. About 1,000 people of Shechem, men, women and children, die in the flames<sup>40</sup>.

From there Abimelech leads his little army to Thebez, and conquers it. But within the city there is a strong tower, and the people of Thebez flee there and bar the door. They then climb to the top of the tower where they have accumulated a supply of large stones, their defensive weapons. Abimelech crowds the base of the tower, intending to burn it like he had done at Shechem, but it was his last mistake.

An un-named woman of Shechem at the top of the tower drops a piece of a broken millstone on Abimelech, and scores a bullseye on his head, breaking his skull. Knowing that he is fatally injured, Abimelech asks his armour-bearer to draw his sword and kill him so that he won't be remembered as having been slain in battle by a woman<sup>41</sup>. His armour-bearer finishes him off, and his army scatters to points unknown.

And so, the curse of Jotham, shouted from the top of Mt. Gerizem, returned on the heads of the people of Shechem, and Abimelech (in his case, literally), for the slaughter of the 69 legitimate sons of Gideon.

We are not told what became of Jotham, the surviving legitimate son of Gideon. It is probably safe to assume that he lived happily ever after, as an example of righteousness to the unfaithful Israelites around him.

***NOTE:** The compiler of the Book of Judges will not give us a break! He drags this bewildering contradiction, about the number of legitimate sons of Gideon who were murdered, all the way to the very last two verses (56-57) of Chapt 9! But, for my part, I still consider the actual number of slain sons of Gideon to be 69. We will have to ask Jotham about the contradiction when we get to Heaven,*

## 22. Forty Five Years of Righteous Peace, and then Rebellion. (10:1-18)

After the sordid reign of wicked Abimelech, Gideon's son, who murdered 69 of his brothers and declared himself to be a king, there follow two righteous judges in succession, Tola and Jair, and the land enjoys a total of 45 years of peaceful righteousness under their leadership. Jair had 30 sons

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<sup>40</sup> Some believe that the branches were green, creating more smoke than flame, thus killing the Shechemites with smoke inhalation. There is a great deal about this sordid story that we simply do not know.

<sup>41</sup> The flawed nature of Abimelech's character is on full display here. At the point of death, facing eternity, his primary concern is that he not be remembered as having been killed in battle by a woman. People already know that he is a self-serving, shallow, murderer; and, we may be sure, word will quickly spread as to his being killed by a woman, whatever the armour-bearer did. After all, you and I know it.

who ruled over 30 towns, called "Havothjair" (encampment of Jair), and peace reigned.

After the death of Jair, however, the people again backslide into paganism and God allows the Ammonites to attack and afflict them. Sorely afflicted, the people finally cry out to the Lord to save them; He, in righteous derision, tells them to call on the pagan gods they have been serving and ask them to deliver them. The pagan gods are (of course) no help. The people then put away the false gods, and the LORD, in His infinite mercy, decides to help them.

*NOTE: Here, in v 16, is a beautiful illustration of the patience of God with his sinning creations, and his constant love for us, even when we turn from Him and embrace sin. We may ignore or reject Him and his love for us; but He never ceases to love us; and He grieves for the self-destructive things we do, in our rejection of his love.*

23. Jephthah Becomes Judge. (11:1-11)

Jephthah, the illegitimate son of Gilead, is cruelly driven from Gilead by his half-brothers because he is the son of their father, Gilead, but not the son of their mother, for he was born to another woman, a harlot. Apparently a natural leader, Jephthah goes to the hills, in the land of Tob, and gathers a warrior band about him<sup>42</sup>. The Ammonites go to war against Israel, and the people of Gilead, in trouble that they cannot handle, beg Jephthah to help them and be their leader. After reminding them of the cruel way that they have treated him, to which they readily confess, he accepts, and becomes their judge.

**NOTES:**

a. It is important not to confuse the Ammonites with the Amorites. The Ammonites, with whom Jephthah is about to go to war, were an ancient tribe, descended from Ammon, one of the two illegitimate sons of Lot with his daughters (Gen 19:30-38). The Amorites were still a force to be dealt with when Joshua arrived to occupy the Promised Land, but were a much more ancient tribe, descended from Canaan, whose most famous king was Hammurabi, whose code of laws discovered in 1901 in the ruins of the Babylonian palace at Susa, is the oldest such code (complete) yet found<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Tob was in a remote area, east of the Jordan River, about 13 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee, in the border area between Syria and Ammon. We will see reference to this area again in II Sam 10:6, 8, as "Ish-tob" (man of Tob). Its modern name is Taiyibeh.

<sup>43</sup> For more on Hammurabi and his famous code of laws see "The Amorites, Their King Hammurabi, and His Code of Laws" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

*b. The way the people of Gilead have treated Jephthah is a perfect parallel to the way the children of Israel have consistently treated the LORD since leaving Egypt and entering the Promised Land. In v 11, where it is recorded that Jephthah "uttered all his words before the LORD," the meaning of the statement is not explained. It probably means that Jephthah was calling the LORD to remembrance of the way his half-brothers have treated him, and the promise that the men of Gilead had made to him.*

*c. Giliad was a hilly, forested, region, running north and south between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee, with the Jordan river as its western border. At one time trees grew there, from which a healing balm was made. Jeremiah used this as a metaphor in his lament over the final destruction of Jerusalem (Jer 8:20-22): "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?"*

*Today monks in Jericho make and sell a "balm of Gilead"; but the trees from which it was made in Jeremiah's day are probably extinct.*

24. The Exchange of Reasoning between Jephthah and the King of Ammon. (11:12-28)

War with the forces of Ammon seems unavoidable, but Jephthah sends a message to their king to ask him why he is preparing for war with the Giliadites. The Ammonite king replies that it is because the Israelites took the land from his ancestors when they came up under Moses, after being freed from Egypt 300 years before. Jephthah replies that they were conquered because the Ammonites and Moabites refused to allow the Israelites to pass peaceably through their land, on the way to Canaan. He asks why, then, if this was wrong, has not their pagan god, Chemosh, restored the land in the 300 years since the Israelites took it?

This conversation is going nowhere, so Jephthah prepares for war with Ammon.

25. The Strange Affair of Jephthah's Daughter. (11:29-40)

For reasons unknown, Jephthah vows to God that if he is given victory over the Ammonites, when he returns home after the battle he will offer up, as a burnt offering, "whatsoever cometh forth from the doors of my house to meet me." At first reading this seems to be a strange vow. Did he keep his sheep and cattle in his house? The answer is that he probably did. People often did that in that part of the world; and, in some places, it is still done today. At any rate, word of his victory precedes him, and when he gets home his daughter, his only child, comes running out to meet him, dancing for joy. He is horrified, remembering his vow; but she accepts her lot,

asking only that she be given 2 months with her friends, "to bewail my virginity." At the end of two months, her father "did with her according to his vow."

**NOTE:** *How can we understand this troubling passage?*

*Learned men have puzzled over this passage for about 3,000 years. Some believe that he killed her, and offered her as a burnt offering; but this cannot have happened. Human sacrifice, so common among pagans, is repugnant to the Lord, is unknown among God's people anywhere else in Scripture, and such sacrificing of one's children to a pagan god is specifically forbidden in the Law<sup>44</sup>. It seems that the sacrificing of one's child to the LORD is so obviously wrong that He found it unnecessary to specifically forbid it in his Word.*

*How, then, can we understand this passage?*

**Consider the following:**

a. *First, the Hebrew word translated "and" in his vow (v 34) can also be translated "or." Thus he could have vowed, concerning what (or who) first came out his door would "surely be the LORD's" or (not "and"), will be offered up "for a burnt offering." Thus, if his daughter was first out the door she would be consecrated for service to the LORD; but, if an animal came out first (perhaps a family pet, but more likely one of several head of livestock kept in the lower part of the house)), then that animal would become a burnt offering.*

b. *The daughter, first out of the door, must be "given to the Lord." It seems clear that she would then become a consecrated, nun-like servant of the LORD for the rest of her life<sup>45</sup>. As evidence to support this interpretation we have the wording about "bewailing her virginity." This seems to mean that she will be bewailing her **perpetual** virginity as a consecrated woman, thus never able to marry, be a mother, and produce grandchildren for her father. This would have been particularly grievous--for her, and for Jephtha, because she was Jephtha's only child.*

c. *The wording of v 39, that afterwards "she knew no man," clearly implies that she survived the event, and it strongly supports the explanation that she was to become a life-long, consecrated, celibate woman of God<sup>46</sup>.*

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<sup>44</sup> Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-5.

<sup>45</sup> Our English word, nun, has interesting origins. It is derived from the Latin "nonna" meaning one dedicated to the care of children. Thus from it we get "nun" meaning a woman with a life-long commitment to the Church, especially its children. The word "nanny," meaning a governess, or other woman who cares for the children of others, has the same origin.

<sup>46</sup> Of course, if she were dead, the statement "and she knew no man" would be just as valid; but this does not satisfy the rest of the evidence against her being sacrificed.

**Conclusion:**

*Thus it seems to me that the daughter, after enjoying two months of normal life with her friends, was not killed and burned as an offering; rather, she spent the rest of her life, in some way, as a consecrated, unmarried, woman of God<sup>47</sup>.*

26. The World's First Password, and the death of Jephthah. (12:1-7)

The wicked Ephraimites, who have refused to help Jephthah in his fight against Ammon, are now offended, claiming falsely that they weren't allowed to take part in the spoils. They are so offended that they are going

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<sup>47</sup> For a thorough explanation of this interpretation see the Dake Annotated Reference Bible, marginal notes on vv 34-40.

to kill him, which is irrational, and a greedy over-reaction, at best<sup>48</sup>. They cross over the Jordan to attack Gilead, so Jephthah gathers the men of Gilead, and they defeat the Ephraimites in an unnecessary civil war.

When the fleeing Ephraimites attempt to cross the Jordan and return home, Jephthah is thinking way ahead of them. The fords (crossing sites, where the Jordan can be waded) are already guarded by Jephthah's men of Gilead. The men of Ephraim, in their attempt to escape, claim to be from other tribes; but the warriors of Jephthah know of a peculiarity in the speech of the tribe of Ephraim: they cannot pronounce the "sh" sound. Therefore, each man attempting to cross is challenged to say "shibboleth" (Hebrew for an ear of grain); all who pronounce it "sibboleth" are exposed as the enemy Ephraimites, and killed--an astonishing 42,000 of them--at the crossing sites<sup>49</sup>! This may be the very first use of a password in human history; although there may have been others, none is to be found in the Biblical record.

We have adopted "shibboleth" from the Hebrew into the English language, where today it means a password the enemy cannot pronounce, or a test or criterion in variations of pronunciation for distinguishing members of a group.

Jephthah rules Israel as Judge for six years, dies and is buried near an unknown city in Gilead ("one of the cities of Giliad").

#### 27. Three Righteous Judges After Jephthah. (12:8-15)

Jephthah is followed by three judges who are also righteous: Ibzan of Bethlehem, Elon of Zebulun, and Abdon of Pirathon.

After Abdon dies the Israelites backslide again, and are oppressed by the Philistines for 40 years.

**NOTE:** *One would think that, sooner or later, the people of Israel would catch on and remain faithful to the almighty YHWH who can protect them and Who delights in blessing them; but they never did.*

*I will not presume to explain their irrational behavior in rejection of the LORD and embracing of paganism; but part of the attraction is that paganism is ultimately sexual in its outworking, and sex is an easy thing to sell. Also, paganism has few restrictions on personal behavior, and that is appealing to our sinful nature.*

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<sup>48</sup> Their false over-reaction is probably rooted in guilt, greed, or both.

<sup>49</sup> In World War II, Marines in the Pacific often used words containing "l" as passwords, for the Japanese could not pronounce "l," sounding it like "r" (as in "Ohrsmobirre" and "Chevroray").

28. Samson, a Strange-but-Mighty Judge, Delivers Israel. (Chapter 13)

Once again, after the Israelites have sold out to paganism and have been oppressed by the Philistines for 40 years; the Lord has pity on Israel and provides a mighty, but strangely imperfect, deliverer. His name is Samson.

**NOTE:** *Samson stands alone, among the judges of whom we have a record, in that he did the amazing things which he did, **alone**. He never called together an army, nor did he ask even one man to help him; **he always acted alone**.*

a. An Amazing Visitation.

A barren woman, wife of one Manoah of the tribe of Dan, is visited by "the angel of the LORD" (almost certainly the pre-incarnate Christ) and told that she is to bear a child who will be a Nazarite from his conception, and one who will deliver Israel from the Philistines. She is also told that she must, herself, eat or drink nothing of the grape vine, nor drink strong drink, and must eat no unclean thing. Her husband, who had missed the visit, prays that the angel will come again, to tell them how to deal with the child. The angel returns, refuses to tell Manoah his name, but accepts a burnt offering and makes a uniquely amazing departure into the flames<sup>50</sup>!

As predicted, the woman bears a son and calls him Samson. The child grows and the LORD blesses him; and, at times, the Holy Spirit comes upon him; and, at these times, he does remarkable things. God is preparing him. **NOTE:** *The mother of Samson was a remarkable woman of God. Like Abraham's wife, Sarah, she was barren when the LORD chose her to play a significant role in human history; yet, unlike Sarah, we not only do not know where she is buried, we do not even know her name! This faithful, godly, woman is known only as "his [Manoah's] wife," "the woman," etc. This fascinates me. We will surely know her name in Heaven, where she will undoubtedly occupy a special place of honor.*

b. Samson's Aborted Marriage. (Chapter 14)

Samson, ever a source of worry for his parents, sees a Philistine girl and wishes to marry her. He travels to her home to see her, and at a vineyard along the way, a lion attacks him. The Spirit of the LORD comes mightily upon him, and he kills the lion with his hands as easily as if the lion were a young goat. He tells no one about this. After talking with the Philistine girl, he decides to marry her and she agrees.

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<sup>50</sup> The interpretation, that the angel is almost certainly the pre-incarnation Christ, is strengthened by the fact that He accepted worship. Manoah was certainly convinced (13:20-22)!

His parents reluctantly agree to the marriage, and they put on a wedding party for him at the bride's hometown<sup>51</sup>. On the way, Samson finds a beehive in the dried carcass of the lion he had previously killed. He eats some of the honey as he travels, and gives some to his parents. His parents meet the young woman and make arrangements for the pre-nuptial party.

Later, at the party (which goes on for seven days) Samson states a riddle about the lion and the honey, promising to give 30 garments "and sheets" to anyone who can solve his riddle. By terrible threats the Philistines force the bride to get the solution from Samson and give it to them; she does, all 30 of the men claim the prize, and Samson is furious. He goes to the Philistine city of Ashkelon, kills 30 other men, takes their garments, and pays off his bet. He goes home angry, and the girl's father, to spite Samson, gives her to one of the 30 "friends" at his party, as his wife. Samson is not aware of this betrayal, but he is about to find out, and in a particularly cruel way. Now Samson is going to be **really** angry!

*NOTE: The Hebrew word rendered "sheets" in v 12 presents a problem for translators and commentators. The great 17th Century commentator Matthew Henry writes expansively about this passage before, and after, v 12, but steps gingerly over the promised reward as "a shirt and a coat," without explanation, and goes on being expansive about the part of the passage that he does understand.*

*I have labored over the Hebrew word ("saw-deen") rendered "sheets" in v 12, examined the Hebrew Dictionary, 13 translations, and several commentaries, and everyone seems to be uncomfortable with the word. The literal meaning is "wrapper, a fine linen sheet." It seems to have been a fine linen undergarment, worn by the wealthy, under their fine outer robes.*

c. Samson's Revenge. (15:1-8)

Samson returns with a gift to consummate his marriage, only to learn that she has been given to one of his 30 "pals"--in fact, the one who was to be what we call today "the best man." It is the time of the wheat harvest, and the fields are dry. Samson catches 300 foxes, ties them in tandem by their tails, with a firebrand between their tails, and releases them in the Philistine wheat fields. Why so many? Probably because he could not be sure which way they would run, and he wanted to burn a large number of wheat fields<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> At this point it appears that Samson and the woman are engaged, but not yet married. This party is comparable to what is traditionally called the rehearsal dinner, for which it is customary that the groom's father (or the groom) bear the expense; but this party lasted 7 days and nights.

<sup>52</sup> At a glance, this seems awfully cruel; a careful reading, however, reveals the firebrand burning **between** their tails. The cords tying the tails together would have burned up quickly and released the foxes, perhaps

The aggrieved Philistines, knowing about the insult to Samson, and recognizing it as the reason for the loss of their wheat, burn the woman and her father to death in their homes<sup>53</sup>! Samson smites them, "hip and thigh with a great slaughter," and retires to the wilderness<sup>54</sup>.

*NOTE: The Hebrew word, "shew'al," rendered "foxes" here can also mean "jackals." It occurs seven times in the OT, once in the singular and six times in the plural, and is always rendered "fox(es)." It is never rendered as "jackal" in the Authorized Version, although it could be--it seems to be just a matter of flipping a coin. Both foxes and jackals existed in ancient Israel, but the word "jackal(s)" never appears in the Authorized Version. Today "jackal(s)" seems to be fashionable, and is commonly used in the modern versions.*

*Maybe the AV translators chose "fox(es)" because they knew something 400 years ago that we don't know; I wouldn't bet against them.*

d. The Amazing Battle of the Jawbone. (15:9-20)

The Philistines declare war on all of Judah (although Samson was not of that tribe--he was of the tribe of Dan), and 3,000 men of Judah, totally intimidated by their nearby Philistine masters, go to Samson<sup>55</sup>. He allows them to tie him up and deliver him to the Philistines, at a place in Judah called Lehi ("jaw bone") but when the Philistine army charges him with a roar, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him and the ropes with which he is bound break "as flax that was burnt with fire<sup>56</sup>." Freed, but weaponless, Samson picks up a jawbone of an ass (a virtually useless weapon--perhaps this is the point) and kills 1,000 Philistines (Samson seems to have killed all of the Philistines; if not the survivors fled).

Samson renames the place Ramath-Le hi ("lifting up of the jawbone"). He is thirsty after his extreme exertion, complains to the Lord, and refreshing water flows supernaturally from the discarded, bloody jawbone

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leaving them with singed tails, but not burned to death. Once released, they could easily outrun the fires they started.

<sup>53</sup> This seems like an extremely cruel over-reaction; but we must remember that the Philistines were pagans. In pagan cultures life is cheap--they readily sacrificed even their own babies; and our culture, formerly Christian, is quickly becoming like the pagans, with millions of unborn babies cruelly sacrificed by abortion, every year, to the god of convenience.

<sup>54</sup> The meaning of "hip and thigh" as used here is a Hebrew metaphor for "a great slaughter"; yet I have found no source that explains the expression's origin. A good guess is that since men wounded in hip or thigh cannot run, so that none escaped Samson's attack. At any rate, the use of "hip and thigh" makes it clear: he wiped them out.

<sup>55</sup> The tribe of Judah surrounded Philistia, and was the nearest tribe of Israel to the Philistines. Although the land of Judah was huge compared with the small coastal land of Philistia, the men of Judah lived in fear of the Philistines. Little Philistia was never conquered until the time of King David.

<sup>56</sup> The location of ancient Lehi is unknown today.

**NOTES:**

*a. There are various opinions about the source of this water; like so many other things about Samson, this is strange. However it happened, it was supernaturally supplied, and God was glorified in the provision. Samson renamed the place twice, in rapid succession; his second name, En-hak-kore ("the caller's fount"), seems to have been the one that stuck. The place was still called that in the time of the writing of Judges (v 19).*

*b. Between vv 17 and 19 Samson renames, the place of the jawbone twice; and, apparently, he does this in less than one hour--maybe in less than five minutes. I have wondered about this (we must admit that this, like other things that Samson did, is a bit unusual). Maybe it was just his ego that prompted the first name, and his profound gratitude for the water that prompted the second name. We must admit, however, that his manner in requesting the water was a bit cheeky; and it was completely in character for Samson.*

*There is some really interesting symbolism here: e. g., why a jawbone, a very low-density, essentially worthless, weapon (even a "new" one). And why did God supernaturally provide the water for Samson from a bloody jawbone of an ass? These things are interesting (and not without significance--they fascinate me); but I will leave them to be pondered by the reader who enjoys pondering such things, and we will move on.*

*e. Samson and the Unfortunate City Gates. (16:1-3)*

Samson goes to Gaza, sees a harlot that looks good to him and "visits" with her. Word gets around the walled city, and the men of Gaza are excited; they are sure that they have Samson trapped inside the city, with the gate closed and barred. Pleased with themselves, they wait at the gate, certain that they will catch him in the morning. At midnight Samson decides to leave and arrives at the city gate and finds it, as was customary at night, closed and locked. It consists of two huge doors that meet in the center, fastened with a large bar. But this is not a problem for Samson--he merely rips the gate posts out of the ground, doors, bar and all; and, not only that, he then carries the gate up to a high hill near Hebron, 40 amazing miles from Gaza! This is an amazing feat of strength! The rulers of Gaza not only fail to capture him, but now they have to build a new gate. And, in Samson's decidedly imperfect eccentricity, God is again glorified.

*NOTE: There were plenty of available women in Judah; so, why did Samson continue to go into Philistia, where he consistently got into trouble with their women? Perhaps it was because of the utter immorality of the pagan Philistine women, compared with the godly women of Judah. The last*

*Philistine woman cost him his vision and his life; and, according to the reasonable assumption of Herbert Lockyer (All the Women of the Bible, p 44), it also cost Delilah, who betrayed him, her life. Perhaps it was a lesson for the rest of us; at any rate the answer is one of the mysteries still locked in the limitless mind of God.*

f. Samson Meets His Femme Fatale. (16:4-14)

Samson falls for another Philistine beauty, and one can almost hear his parents saying, "Oh, Samson, why can't you just marry a nice Jewish girl and settle down?" But no--that was not Samson's way; it appears that he never married (after the near-marriage at Timnath), and left no offspring.

The lords of the Philistines hear of Samson's dalliance with the woman, whose name is Delilah. They offer her a large bribe to find out how they can capture Samson, and tell it to them. Three times she begs Samson to tell her the secret of his strength, and how he can be captured; and, three times, he gives her a false answer and the assassins fail (and probably die).

**NOTE:** *Delilah's 3rd attempt to learn the source of Samson's strength is another of those passages in Judges that leave us wishing for more detail. Samson lies to her, telling her that he will lose his great strength if she weaves his seven locks of hair into the fabric she is weaving. After he goes to sleep, she does just this and fastens the edge of the fabric, with his hair woven into it, to the wall. She wakes him as a signal to waiting assassins; but he rips his hair loose, along with Delilah's fabric and part of the loom.*

*We are not told what became of the assassins; but it is safe to assume that they either fled or were killed.*

g. Samson's Disabling Haircut. (16:15-21)

Delilah's nagging finally gets to Samson, who obviously knows what she is up to, and he foolishly tells her the truth. She lulls him to sleep in her lap, a Philistine cuts off his hair, and he is captured. It appears that he is so accustomed to his great strength that he thinks he can meet any challenge, with or without the hair; but he is wrong--the Spirit of God has left him. It appears that even Delilah attacked him ("...and she began to afflict him...), making her a very willing accomplice in his betrayal and torment. He is captured, bound in chains, blinded, and put to humiliating work pulling a gristmill, around and around in an endless circle, like an ox.

**NOTES:**

a. *How did Samson sleep through all of this, including the fatal haircut? He would not have been drunk from wine or strong drink, for that would have violated his Nazarite status as surely as cutting his hair. Matthew Henry, referring to Josephus, suggests that the woman had drugged him. I*

agree. Supporting this rationale is the fact that this evil woman, discovering that she had succeeded in robbing Samson of his supernatural strength, afflicted him herself (v 19)<sup>57</sup>.

**b.** Samson is generally thought of as an extreme example of God's willingness to use an imperfect, sinful person (which Samson definitely was) as his implement. However, no less an authority than Matthew Henry, (1662-1714), saw Samson as a type of Christ, and his reasoning may change one's view of Samson from simply having been "God's bad boy." After all, Samson made it into God's "Faith Hall of Fame" in Hebrews 11, in the same verse as Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, David, Samuel and all of the prophets<sup>58</sup>.

Samson as a Type of Christ. Matthew Henry's reasoning is more expansive than what can be repeated here, but it includes the following:

(1). He "appeared in the likeness of sinful flesh, that he might condemn and destroy sin in the flesh"(Rom 8:3);

(2). Samson pulled down Dagon's temple as Christ pulled down Satan's kingdom;

(3). When Samson died, he gained by his death a victory over the powers of darkness.

(4). As Christ stretched out his arms on the cross and gave a fatal shake to the gates of Hell, Samson stretched out his arms between the pillars and gave a fatal shake to the temple of Dagon and the powers of the Philistine leaders (as Christ who "through death, destroyed him that had the power of death..." [Hebr 2:14-15]).

**h.** Samson's Final Feat of Strength. (16:22-31)

The Philistines enjoy their domination of Samson, but fail to consider that his hair is growing back<sup>59</sup>. They gather in the temple of their god, Dagon, for a great celebration of their victory over Samson, and they bring him in to amuse them. All of the important people are inside the temple to Dagon, and there are about 3,000 ordinary Philistine men and women on the roof; somewhere in that vast crowd, it is reasonable to assume, is Delilah. He is tormented, and they laugh; but the Lord is setting them up for ultimate destruction.

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<sup>57</sup> I have found no commentator who attempts to explain the fact that Samson's hair was in "seven locks." The Hebrew is no help, meaning literally, "ringlets or locks of hair." As a Nazarite, his hair could not be cut; so it is a reasonable guess that he kept it in seven braids (seven is the Biblical number of completion) in order to control it.

<sup>58</sup> Hebrews 11:32.

<sup>59</sup> The re-growing of his hair alone was not enough it seems, to give him supernatural strength; it was also necessary that the Spirit of the LORD come upon him. Thus, Samson's final prayer was for supernatural strength.

Samson asks a boy to show him the great pillars that hold up the building.



**And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein.**

**Judges 16:30**

Samson prays for supernatural strength ("just this once"), pushes the two columns apart, the building collapses, and all are killed, including Samson<sup>60</sup>. In his final feat of strength, which causes his own death, he kills more Philistines than in all his battles before; and his family takes his body back home for burial.

Samson had been Israel's judge for 20 years.

### A Closing Thought

In his commentary on Judges, David Guzik, in reflecting on Samson, has written: *The cycle of sin, bondage, repentance, deliverance, blessing, and sin again continued in the history of Israel. Into these times was born the next Judge of Israel, Samson. In this sense Samson was truly a man of his times. He was a study in contrasts, a man of great strengths and great weaknesses. In this, he was a picture of Israel's history--of great highs and lows. Samson is also an important example of unfulfilled potential. Though he did great things for God, it is staggering to consider what he **might** have done and been for God.*

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### The Last 5 Chapters

The remaining chapters of the book (Chapters 17-21), out of chronological order, describe events that took place when there was no judge in Israel. This was probably soon after the death of Joshua, because: (1) they describe the settling of a portion of the tribe of Dan in the north of Canaan; (2) it is a time when Jerusalem is still dominated by the pagan fortress of Jebus; and (3) it is a time when Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, was High Priest.

These chapters, especially the last three, illustrate the selfish, sinful behavior of which man is capable when he is without godly leadership, "doing that which is right in his own eyes." It is not known why these last five chapters are out of chronological order; but they are so sordid that one might wish that they had been left out completely. Herein is a vivid illustration of what Calvin called "the total depravity" of unredeemed man.

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<sup>60</sup> It is tempting to hope that the lad who helped him, after Samson had lied to him (v 26), escaped alive; maybe we can ask when we get to heaven..

Perhaps that is why this awful reminder is saved for a last lesson, never to be forgotten: the evil of which we are all capable when not serving and obeying God.

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## 28. Do-It-Yourself Religion in Ephraim. (Chapter 17)

A man named Micah of the hill country of Ephraim, in the far north of the Promised Land, steals money from his mother, money that she had set aside to buy idols dedicated to YHWH. This, of course, is a contradiction, an abomination to YHWH, and an obvious violation of the First and Second Commandments; but both mother and son seem oblivious to this contradiction<sup>61</sup>. He confesses, she praises him, gives him part of the money anyway, and he sets up his own little temple, dedicated to the pagan gods **and** to YHWH. He mixes in aspects of true worship, including an ephod and teraphim, and consecrates one of his sons as his home-made priest. An unemployed Levite from Bethlehem wanders by, looking for a job, and Micah hires him to be his priest (the son, presumably, is then demoted to Assistant Priest), and Micah is delighted to have a real Levite as his household priest. In all this abominable confusion, Micah thinks YHWH will now bless him!

***NOTE:** The matter of the land given to the tribe of Dan, and the expansion of the tribe into the extreme northern edge of the Promised Land, can be bewildering; I am tempted to say that it can be maddening. Since we are about to plunge into this part of Bible history, I will begin with a brief summary of the probable sequence of events.*

*Since the Danites could never conquer the Philistines and occupy their portion of the Philistines' seacoast land, they decided to consider conquering the northern-most part of the Promised Land. They sent five soldiers to investigate the possibilities of settling part of the tribe in the far north (Israel's "panhandle"), surrounded on three sides by pagan nations. There the five scouts find the city of Laish in the lush upper end of the Great Rift Valley, below Mount Hermon, at the headwaters of the Jordan River. The worship of the people there is a strange mixture of paganism and the*

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<sup>61</sup> This mixture of the worship of YHWH and pure paganism is fascinating! Although that part of the Promised Land had not yet been settled by Jewish believers, these people had somehow been exposed to the true worship of YHWH, and mixed it freely with their paganism. This is reminiscent of the practices of Jacob's wife, Rachel,

worship of YHWH. The scouts return to their superiors and recommend that the tribe of Dan expand into that northern-most area of the Promised Land.

Six hundred Danite soldiers go next and prepare the way, killing the peaceful inhabitants of Laish and burning the town. They take the Levite priest, with all of his sacred objects, both pagan and holy, (he is glad to go with them) and return to their home country where they report all that has taken place.

Then a portion of the Danites goes to the ruins of Laish and builds a city on the ruins; they name their new city, Dan.

The city of Dan becomes the headquarters of the expansion of the tribe of Dan into the far north. As the northernmost significant city in Israel, Dan gave rise to the expression "from Dan, even unto Beersheba (the southernmost city in Israel)," meaning all of Israel, from north to south. See the first such use of this expression in the Bible in the first verse of Chapt 20.

#### 29. The Cruel Settlement of Dan. (18:1-10)

The tribe of Dan, the last to have its territory assigned, had been assigned an area in the center of the Promised Land, including part of the coastal plain, occupied by the Philistines. Because they were never able to conquer the Philistines in the coastal region of the portion assigned to Dan, and the rest of the area assigned to them was too small for them, they sent scouts, looking for more land<sup>62</sup>.

In the hill country of Ephraim, at the head-waters of the River Jordan, below Mt. Hermon, they find Laish, a desirable place occupied by complacent pagans who will be easily conquered. In the process they come across Micah's home<sup>63</sup>. They are impressed with his home-grown temple, and the displaced Levite acting as Micah's priest<sup>64</sup>. They recognize the Levite as an Israelite by his accent, and they ask the young Levite to ask the Lord if they should proceed with the reconnaissance of the country<sup>65</sup>. The Levite tells them that YHWH will go before them, and they continue.

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<sup>62</sup> By failing to conquer fully the land assigned to them, and by taking the easier way to obtain land in the north, they left intact the Philistines, who would plague and oppress the children of Israel for 300 more years.

<sup>63</sup> The Sidonians seemed to have a reputation for being complacent and un-warlike, for the people of Laish are described as "careless, after the manner of the Zidonians [Sidonians]."

<sup>64</sup> This episode of seeking to know the will of GOD is a vivid illustration of the entire period of the Judges: mixing paganism with the worship of YHWH.

<sup>65</sup> The Danites recognize the Levite by his accent. This is interesting, but nothing else is told us about it.

The scouts complete their reconnaissance and return to the south, to those who had sent them. They report what they have found and urge the people of Dan to occupy that far-northern land.

30. The Invasion of the North Country by the Tribe of Dan. (18:11-26)

Six hundred warriors from Dan gather and organize in an encampment on the border with Judah<sup>66</sup>. With the five scouts to guide them, the 600 warriors travel to the far north, and come to the house of Micah. The scouts tell the warriors about the Levite priest and the sacred objects (both holy and pagan). The warriors go to the house of the Levite, with its holy (and unholy) objects; they like what they see, and they hijack the objects in Micah's little temple, Levite and all. As the Danites travel toward Laish, Micah and a gathering of unhappy local men overtake the Danites to reclaim their Levite and the sacred objects. Seeing, however, that they are outnumbered, they turn back<sup>67</sup>.

31. The Sordid Conquering of the North Country by the Danites. (18:27-31)

The Danite warriors go to Laish, slaughter the people, and burn the city. They build a new city, on the ashes of Laish, and name the new city "Dan" after the founder of their tribe, Dan the son of Jacob (Israel). Laish, and its peaceful people, are no more.

They set up a place of worship and put Jonathan, son of Gershom and grandson of Manasseh, as high priest, and his sons as priests. One would hope that the Levite, who was the original (if paganized) representation of YHWH in the far north, also served as a priest. As is so often the case in Judges, however, we are told nothing more about what became of him.

We would hope that the tribe of Dan in the far north cleansed their worship of the paganism, but it appears that they didn't. Verse 30 seems to say that they continued to worship the pagan images from the house of Micah until the Assyrians carried them away into captivity. Verse 31 is difficult to interpret, and seems to contradict v 30. Verse 31 could be taken to mean that the northern Danites continued to mix paganism with the valid worship of YHWH until they were carried into bondage by the Assyrians (while the southern section of the tribe worshipped YHWH at the Tabernacle at Shiloh).

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<sup>66</sup> The place of encampment was still called "Mahanedan" (Camp of Dan) at the time of the writing of Judges.

<sup>67</sup> Like much of the Book of Judges, some important things must be inferred from the circumstances, or are mentioned in only part of a sentence. The Danite invaders have their families with them (v 21b).

***NOTE:** The Talmud (early medieval interpretation of the OT) asserts that the proper reading substitutes "Moses" for "Manasseh" in v 30; and interpreters as conservative as Merrill Unger lean toward the Talmud's interpretation. I, however, will leave this additional confusion to be sorted out by the glorious MESSIAH, when He returns in the Second Advent and straightens all such things out at the end of all things as we know them.*

*We will shake our heads, hoping to clear our thinking, and move on.*

32. A Despicable Levite and His Unfortunate Concubine. (19:1-10)

Of all the stories in the Bible, this is the one I most dislike. An un-named Levite from the hills of Ephraim takes a concubine of Bethlehem in Judah; however, she is not happy with the arrangement and runs away to her father. The Levite travels to Bethlehem to recover her, and her father (who must have been lonely) convinces the Levite and his party to stay with him for about a week. During this time things were apparently straightened out between the Levite and his concubine.

But only multiplied horrors await them.

33. Looking For a Place to Spend the Night. (19:11-21)

On the way back the Levite and his concubine stop to spend the night in Gibeah, in the tribe of Benjamin, the birthplace of King Saul. There is no one in Gibeah who will take them in for the night, and the Levite sits down in the street. As darkness falls, an old man, a native of the hill country of Ephraim, returns to the town from working in the fields. He asks the Levite of his situation and, hearing that the man and his party have no place to spend the night, invites them to stay with him, and they gladly accept. It seems to be a perfect solution to the Levite's problem; but only horrors lie ahead.

34. A Night of Uninterrupted Evil in Gibeah. (19:22-30)

In a scene reminiscent of Lot in Sodom, homosexuals of that city gather, beat on the door, and demand to have the Levite. In an unbelievably craven, despicable, illustration of cowardice, the homosexuals are first offered instead the virgin daughter of the host, and then the Levite's unhappy concubine<sup>68</sup>! The homosexuals, however, aren't interested in girls--they still demand the Levite; but the despicable Levite forces his concubine outside, locks the door, and the homosexuals rape, sodomize and beat her all night. This craven Levite apparently sleeps peacefully behind a locked door, while

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<sup>68</sup> A similar, despicable, offer of his daughters was made by Lot when the angels visited Sodom (Gen 19:1-11).

his innocent concubine undergoes unimaginable suffering and, finally, about dawn, she will be delivered from her suffering by death!

Toward morning, as light begins to banish the darkness, the cowardly sodomites leave the poor girl lying, helpless, in the street, and disappear<sup>69</sup>. With her last strength, she crawls to the doorstep and collapses, with her bloody hands on the threshold. When the craven Levite opens the door and sees her lying there, naked, beaten, bloody and ravaged, and apparently unconscious, he shows no compassion for her. Instead, he merely orders her to get up, for it is time to leave!

This is really difficult to believe! One can almost hear him saying, "Get up, honey, and clean yourself up; it's time to go." She doesn't respond (she is apparently dead), so he ties her ravaged body across an ass, returns home, and cuts her body into 12 pieces (one hopes that she was already dead when the cutting was begun). He sends one piece of her to each tribe of Israel, apparently asking for vengeance.

Those who saw the evidence of this multiplied tragedy said that no such thing had been heard of, from the time of the Exodus to the present. And things in this unbelievably sick situation are only going to get unimaginably worse.

***NOTE:** This despicable, cowardly, self-serving Levite will have much to answer for when he stands, trembling, before the glorified CHRIST on the Great White Throne, on the day of final judgment (Rev 20:10-15).*

35. Gathering for War, but Still Seeking a Peaceful Cleansing of the Evil Sodomites in Gibeah. (20:1-17)

There is a general passion throughout Israel for vengeance against the men of Gibeah (it seems to me that her "protector" was equally guilty, but he was not accused). Four hundred thousand warriors assemble in the vicinity of Shiloh, where the Tabernacle was in that time. The wicked Levite is questioned about the death of his concubine, and he tells them what was done to her (omitting any mention of his own guilt).

The Israelite warriors, united in their cause, send messengers throughout Benjamin, demanding the guilty sodomites so that they can be executed and Israel thus peacefully cleansed of their sins. The men of Benjamin foolishly refuse to deliver up the guilty sodomites of Gibeah, and gather there, where the terrible crime was committed, for war. The total strength of the Benjamites is 26,000, plus 700 from wicked Gibeah itself. Within the army

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<sup>69</sup> Jesus, in explaining spiritual realities to Nicodemus, said "...men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (Jn 3:19). This was true in the time of the judges, was true in the 1st Century, and is still true today.

of Benjamin there are 700 men (not the 700 from Gibeah mentioned above), all left-handed, who are experts with the sling<sup>70</sup>.

36. Bloody Civil War. (20:18-48)

Out of all other alternatives, but still reluctant to go to war with a tribe of their own nation, the leaders of Israel go up to the Tabernacle at Shiloh to ask the Lord what they should do. The LORD tells them to fight, and that the tribe of Judah should attack first.

The 1st Day. The men of Judah attack; and they are defeated by the Benjamites, losing 22,000 soldiers.

The 2nd Day. The people of Israel set themselves in a formation for battle, as they had done the 1st Day. Their leaders go up to Shiloh, weeping, and ask the LORD if they should again attack the forces of Benjamin. The LORD says that they should "Go up against him."

So the army of Israel attacks and again they are defeated, with the soldiers of Benjamin killing 18,000 Israelite soldiers. The people of Israel go, weeping and fasting, up to the Tabernacle at Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant is, and where the High Priest is Phinehas, grandson of Aaron. They ask the LORD if they should attack again, and the LORD says "Go up," and promises that He will deliver the Benjamites into the hands of the army of Israel.

After dark, the Israelites set liers-in-wait (ambushers) around Gibeah.

The 3rd Day. The Israelite soldiers set themselves in attack formation, as they had on the two preceding days. The warriors of Benjamin come out of Gibeah, and are drawn away from the city. They find and kill about 30 soldiers of Israel. The rest of the Israelite soldiers who can be seen retreat, drawing the Benjamite soldiers still farther from the city, into the highways.

The soldiers of Israel, plus those concealed, rise up and attack the Benjamites, 10,000 soldiers of Israel. The battle is intense, but the LORD, as He had promised, smites the Benjamites, killing 25,100 warriors.

The concealed soldiers of Israel rush upon Gibeah, and kill those of the city with the sword. As pre-arranged, the Israelite soldiers in Gibeah set the town on fire. When the Benjamites see that their city is on fire they turn their backs on the battle and flee toward the wilderness. Other Benjamites (foolishly) come out of the surrounding towns, but the soldiers of Israel overtake and surround them, and 18,000 Benjamites are slain.

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<sup>70</sup> According to the late Finis Dake, all left-handed men mentioned in the Bible are from the tribe of Benjamin ( Dake Annotated Reference Bible, Judges 20:16, marginal note d).

Six hundred Benjamite soldiers escape into the wilderness, but the Israelite soldiers seek them out and kill them. After extinguishing the Benjamite army, the Israelites seek out and kill all surviving men of Benjamin in the surrounding towns, and their livestock; and the towns are burned<sup>71</sup>.

The army of Israel is utterly victorious, and the tribe of Benjamin is on the brink of extinction.

37. Wives for the Remnant of Benjamin. (Chapter 21)

After the fury and passion of battle subsides, the Israelites realize that they have nearly obliterated one of their tribes, and they regret it. Now the problem is that there is a need for wives for the surviving men of Benjamin, but the other 11 tribes have taken an oath not to give their daughters to them as wives.

In an episode typical of the terrible period of the judges, their solution is to slaughter everyone in Jabesh-gilead except for 400 virgin girls, and give them to the men of Benjamin<sup>72</sup>. They do just that, but they still need 200 more wives, so a plan is made for the rest of the surviving men of Benjamin, still in hiding in the forest, to kidnap 200 virgins when they come outside the city to dance during an annual festival at Shiloh<sup>73</sup>. The Benjamites do just that. In this way there was no violation of the oath not to provide wives for Benjamin (v 18). This seems to satisfy the need, and the future of the tribe is saved.

***NOTE:** The tribe of Benjamin is definitely in the role of villain here, and was almost wiped out. Had the tribe been completely obliterated, we would never have had the great apostle Paul, who established the first Gentile churches and wrote about 65% of the New Testament. He was descended from those 600 wicked survivors of the tribe of Benjamin, and their unhappy wives, kidnapped and forced into marriage.*

*The closing verse repeats 17:6, the root cause of all the terrible things done in that awful period: "...and every man did that which was right in his own eyes."*

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And so ends the dismal Book of Judges.

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<sup>71</sup> This final cleansing of the Benjamites was quite an exclamation point at the end of the Israelite victory!

<sup>72</sup> Jabesh-giliad was chosen for this wife raid because that city, beyond the Jordan River, had provided no soldiers for the war against the tribe of Benjamin. Its exact location is uncertain, but it was probably within the Tribe of Gad. At least there was some rationale in this wicked enterprise.

<sup>73</sup> Shiloh, about 20 miles north of Jerusalem, was the location of the Tabernacle in the time of the Judges.