**JUDGES**

**Introduction:**

In the Hebrew Bible, *Judges* is the 2nd book of the “Former Prophets;” it follows *Joshua*. The judges, except Samson, were tribal leaders and some were military heroes and even prophets (Deborah). They were not black-robed legal functionaries deciding points of law. Their main role was to lead Israel against its oppressors.

The book of *Judges* often has a bad reputation among modern Christians. It seems an embarrassment to church folk who often consider it the “worst” of the “bad” OT books, reflecting a vengeful/wrathful God. Some say: I like the loving God of the NT better. Indeed, the 3-year lectionary cycle includes only 1 passage from *Judges* (4:1-7- about Deborah).

Historically, *Judges* has been misused to support various political agenda. For example, some Puritan preachers used *Judges* to compare Christian English settlers with Israel and to argue native Americans, whom they identified with the pagan Canaanites, must be driven out/extinguished (if they were not converted). *Judges* also has been used to argue God has favorites, e.g., to support Crusades because He favors Christians over Muslims. But the judges raised up by God included non- traditional leaders, e.g., a woman, non-Israelites, a left-hander.

These views of *Judges* are too simplistic. On closer examination, one finds God and humans behaved consistently throughout Scripture, though writers’ perspectives and cultures differed over time. In *Judges* God was merciful, loving. Notwithstanding Israel’s disobedience and idolatry, when God’s people cried out, like a good father, He raised up deliverers to save His people from oppression.

It is true that *Judges* is a violent book, but today’s world is no less violent or unfair. *Judges* reminds God’s people today to remember their own need to be loyal first and foremost to God. When Christians prioritize things other than God, destructive behavior and consequences may follow as they did in *Judges.*

**Time Period:**  *Judges* appears to cover about 400 years, but the actual time covered was about half that. Some of the discrepancy resulted because more than 1 judge operated in the Promised Land at the same time, e.g., one countered Ammonite oppression in the east and another Philistine oppression in the west which was occurring at the same time.

*Judges* covered the period of about 1200-1020 BC- a time of transition- a difficult, unsettled time when Israel lacked central leadership. [Note:

- The exodus = c.1280,

- The conquest= c.1250-1200,

- The monarchy began = 1020.

At the beginning of the book, Moses and Joshua, the “servants of God,” were dead, and no single great leader had arisen to replace them. A sense of uncertainty prevailed; how would the tribes fare? The only thing the tribes shared was a common ancestry and religion, based on faith in One God, YHWH. By the end of the book, the tribes were fighting and killing one another.

**Author:** *Judges’* author(s) is unknown; however, most agree it is a compilation of ancient stories about Israelite heroes who rose to rescue their beleaguered tribes from oppression. Those stories were collected and edited later. Perhaps the oldest piece of writing in the OT is Deborah’s song, Jud.5.

Many modern scholars suggest *Joshua- 2 Kings* were compiled by “Deuteronomist” theologians/historians. The name refers relatively new scholarship that suggests that from the time of the Assyrian conquest of northern Israel (722 BC), through the Babylonian destruction of Judah and the exile (which began in 587 BC), through the Persian Empire (539-332), certain books of the OT were compiled from ancient oral traditions. Those theologians/historians believed the failure and disobedience of Israel (and its kings) to follow Torah brought about God’s divine judgment against His people and resulted in their subjugation by foreign oppressors. But they also recognized God was gracious and merciful. When Israel cried out, God raised a deliverer to save them from their oppressors. Deuteronomists urged God’s people to remain pure and separate from other nations/peoples and obey only God and Torah so they would be free and prosper.

Some believe early Deuteronomists compiled Chp.1-8 and 10-16 from traditions of the Northern tribes. Chp.9 and 17-20 were compiled after the Exile. Deuteronomist historian(s) were not worried about strict historical chronology, like modern Western historians; rather, they sought to draw lessons from God’s past actions to apply to their own times.

According to Deuteronomist theology, Israel’s suffering was the direct result of its faithlessness. Tribes were subdued by their pagan neighbors because Israel’s chose to accommodate their neighbors’ culture and worship the Baals (or other local deities). When Israel came under these oppressive systems, they cried out to God (though they did not always repent). Nonetheless, He had mercy on Israel and raised judges to save His people. *Judges*’ stories followed this formula:

* Sin= the Israelites “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord,”
* Punishment= “the Lord sold them into the hand of ---" (enemies),
* Distress & outcry= Israel “cried out to the Lord” (not necessarily repented),
* Deliverance= God raised up a deliverer/judge to rescue Israel and subdue the enemy, and
* A period of peace ensued= “The land rested.”

**Themes:** The central theme of the book is Israel suffered oppression and disaster when the people abandoned God, accommodated and intermarried with the indigenous populations and turned to their gods. But when Israel cried out, even if it did not repent, the Lord was merciful and raised up a deliverer.

Not coincidentally, the writer(s) of *Judges* used the sacred number 12= 12 tribes/12 judges, but it was not as simple as 1 judge/tribe. 5 judges, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon have been called “minor judges.” For them, no specific oppressor was named, and no detail was given about their exploits. Rather, they merely were called “judges of Israel.” The other 7 judges’ stories and exploits are told in varying detail. All were charismatic leaders through whom God worked to deliver Israel. [Hebrews 11 lists 4 of the judges, Gideon, Barak (but not Deborah), Samson, and Jephthah in the “OT heroes’ hall of fame.”]

The judges were from various tribes and had different backgrounds, flaws, and capabilities; yet, in response to the peoples’ cries, God raised each judge to save Israel at a particular time. According to *Judges,* during this uncertain and violent period, the “Spirit of the Lord came upon” Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson (and implicitly, upon each of the other judges), but it did not relieve them of their faults, many of which were quite serious.

The book’s picture of Israel is depressing. In all of Scripture no more vivid picture exists of the human tendency to go one’s own way, even for God’s people. Repeatedly, Israel deserted God to follow local gods with the inevitable result that God’s people suffered at the hands of their pagan neighbors. As a result, the people cried out for God’s help, and He mercifully sent a deliverer. For a while, all would be well in Israel until the old pattern of infidelity returned. Amazingly, God’s love and mercy was constant despite Israel’s unfaithfulness, which God certainly knew would be repeated.

*Judges* includes some of the best-known stories in the Bible. The book is packed with humor, satire, and action, much of which often leaves modern reader uncomfortable. Attempts to explain ancient Israel’s violence and downright awful behavior fail miserably. Nonetheless, some interesting points emerge:

* Successful leadership arose by God’s initiative. Self-chosen leaders, like Abimelech, are portrayed negatively.
* Commentators suggest a bias existed against the northern tribes, who ultimately disappeared on their own or in the Assyrian conquest.
* The book strongly counseled against assimilation by the foreign powers in and around Israel. Co-existence led to loss of Israel’s unique identity as the people of God. *Judges* is a history of the errors of assimilation.
* The book notes the loss of tribal unity, e.g., Deborah chastised some tribes for their failure to enter the coalition. Tribal disunity was one of the reasons for the failures of this period.
* God’s sovereignty was upheld throughout the book, even as He dealt with weak and sometimes unworthy judges.
* Most of all, the issue was Israel’s identity as God’s people. God had mercy on them when they cried out to Him even though they always returned to the same unfaithful behavior.

**Women:** The portrayal of women in *Judges* is more sympathetic than ordinarily would be expected from the patriarchal orientation of ancient Israel. The 1st judge, Othniel, was married to Caleb’s daughter, Achsah. (Josh.15:15-19). She was the star of the story in *Joshua* because she demanded and received a useable dowry, land with ample water.

One of the judges, Deborah, was a woman, and another, Jael, killed the villain in that episode. Other women played surprisingly prominent roles in *Judges*, although as the book progressed, more abuses of women were seen. Scholar, Adrian Janis Bledstein, suggested the prophetess Huldah may have written all or part of *Judges*. (The Temple’s Huldah Gate was named after her. She prophesied in Jeremiah’s time shortly before the conquest of Jerusalem.)

**Prologue:**

Chp.1-5 bridge the gap between *Joshua* and the time unfaithful Israel became oppressed by surrounding nations. Israel cried out to God, and He raised Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar and Deborah. Chp.6-12 continue with other judges God raised up following the same pattern, and each time, Israel repeated the cycle of apostasy. Chp.13-21 end the book with the Samson stories and a sad epilogue.

Some commentators believe the prologue, Chp.1:1-3:6, was added later:

* Chp.1-2:5 - an overview of the conquest of the Promised Land from Israel’s perspective (different from *Joshua,* because in *Judges*, the authors admit Israel did not drive out the Canaanites from the land), and
* Chp.2:6-3:6 - the theological interpretation- God’s perspective.

The 1st part reveals Israel’s military failures; the 2nd demonstrates its religious failures. The 2 sections are parallel and complementary. They are highly stylized but are considered more accurate historically than *Joshua*. [In *Judges*, the process took longer and was far less successful than was portrayed in *Joshua*.]

Nonetheless, the book certainly is not comparable to a modern historical account and should not be read literally. The focus was theological. Israel’s enemies were not merely hated, death-dealing foreigners, they represented an unjust oppressive system that needed to be eliminated. God did not hate non-Israelites, but He hates idolatry and oppression. (The most successful judge, Othniel, may have been a Kenite, a foreigner descended from Edom/Esau, who allied with the people of Judah, worshipped only God, and became one of the heroes of the conquest.) Instead of overcoming the oppressive nations around them, Israel collaborated with them, leading to its progressive deterioration.

**Chapter 1:**

Joshua and Moses, Israel’s great leaders, were dead and no obvious successor had arisen. The tribes asked which should go into battle first for their land. Judah was chosen and together with its ally, the tribe of Simeon, they were generally successful in capturing their assigned territory, especially the hill country. But they could not take the plains because the Philistines had iron chariots, and the Israelites lacked iron technology. (Simeon’s land was surrounded by Judah and before long, Simeon was absorbed into Judah.)

The progression of conquest in *Judges* moved from south (Judah and Simeon) to north (Benjamin, Joseph, Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Dan, Naphtali - Reuben and Gad, plus half of Manasseh, settled east of the Jordan and promised to assist with the conquest.) The Kenites, a friendly group which included Moses’ father-in-law, moved south from Jericho, and settled in the territory of the Amalekites. Caleb, who may have been a Kenite, settled in Hebron within Judah’s territory.

Judah and Simeon defeated the Canaanites and Perizzites -2 of the 7 groups who traditionally inhabited Canaan. In so doing, Judah conquered 3 Philistine cities: Gaza, Askelon, and Ekron. (The Philistines were a consortium of 5 city-states. the 3 mentioned above, plus Gath, Goliath’s hometown, and Ashdod.)

Caleb took Hebron, the city Moses had given to Caleb, and in so doing killed 3 Anakites, the giants Moses’ spies had been so afraid of. (Anakites were said to have descended from the marriages that occurred before the days of Noah between fallen angles- Watchers- and mortal women.)

The last story of conquest in Chp.1 is the taking of Bethel by the “house of Joseph” (Ephraim and Manasseh). The story is much like that of Rahab where Israelite spies received help from a citizen of Bethel, whom they saved as promised. [The story departs from Deuteronomist theology, which would have required Israel to eliminate and separate from all native inhabitants of the land.)

The rest of Chp.1 contains short reports of the failures of the northern tribes to conquer their assigned territories. (*Judges* is decidedly pro-Judah.) At times, Israel defeated the people in the land but failed to drive them out, opting instead to make them slaves. Then, Israel struggled from those peoples’ influence.

In particular Dan, which in *Numbers* was the 2nd largest tribe, was the last tribe to receive a territorial inheritance. They were allotted a small area in the central coastal plain of the Promised Land between Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim and the [Philistines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philistines). Dan never was able to conquer the Philistines notwithstanding the efforts of their great hero/judge Samson. Ultimately, the tribe abandoned hope of settling on the fertile coastal plain and controlling the mountain passes between Jerusalem and the sea and migrated into the hill country north of Philistine territory, conquering [Laish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dan_(biblical_city)), and renaming it the city of Dan. Later in the Bible, references to the land of Israel often indicate, “from Dan (Israel’s far north) to Beersheba (Israel’s far south).”

**Chapter 2:**

The chapter begins (vs.1-5) with a theological interpretation of Chapter 1 and sounds an ominous note about Israel’s failure to follow God’s explicit command not to accommodate the indigenous peoples of the land and to destroy their places of worship. The chapter begins with a reference to “the angel of the Lord,” probably meaning God Himself, went from Gilgal, Joshua’s base, to Bochim (Weeping), identified in the LXX as Bethel.

Verse 6 began with Joshua’s death at the age of 110 and his burial in the land of his inheritance, the territory of Ephraim. The author engaged in a flash back remembering Joshua and his generation as having been faithful. But then a new generation arose, and the issue became, who would Israel worship and serve. The new generation did not “know” (had no experience or relationship with) God and they did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They began to worship Baal (the name meant “lord/master;” he was the Canaanite storm god- agriculture and the land depended on rain- and he controlled fertility) and Astarte (the female mother goddess and consort of Baal). (The language echoed *Exodus*- a new Pharoah arose who did not remember Joseph.) They violated the first commandment and failed to set God above all else.

This behavior provoked God to great anger, and He let Israel suffer the consequences of its own choices. [Deuteronomists abhorred idolatry and felt it the worst sin.] Israel had been called to worship only God, but it chose other alternatives. So, the people experienced the consequences of their disobedience.

God declared He had been faithful to His covenant, but Israel had not. Therefore, He would not drive any of the existing inhabitants of the land whom Joshua had not conquered before he died. [Moderns focus on God as love and recoil at the idea of divine judgment and punishment. But the message here was divine love could not be indifferent to sin/idolatry which broke the relationship between the people and God. Since Israel knew nothing about warfare, it could not survive if God withdrew from them- or as here- if they withdrew from God.]

God allowed those nations to remain to test Israel to see whether it would keep God’s ways. The nations would be Israel’s adversaries, and their gods would be snares for Israel. Its actions had consequences. Israel’s collaboration with the surrounding nations led God to withdraw His support of Israel. God’s people were the reason His ancestral promise was not fulfilled.

**Chapter 3: Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar**

As Chapter 3 began, God had left the pagan nations Joshua had not yet eliminated in the Promised Land to test the Israelites. In part, He did it to teach Israel warfare, because to that point, they had no battle experience. Among the nations that remained were the 5 Philistine city-states, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Instead of driving them out, which they were not equipped to do, the Israelites “forgot the Lord,” intermarried with the pagan nations, and began to serve their gods. (In later episodes, the Israelites will “abandon the Lord.”) The Israelites

When Israel did this evil, God’s anger burned, and He gave Israel into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim, king of the Aram Naharaim for 8 years. [Almost nothing is known about Cushan or his people. His name may have been a royal title, like Pharoah, but it also was symbolic-Cushan = “of the double wickedness.”]

Israel groaned and cried out to God. Even after their lack of faith, Israel’s distress evoked God’s pity. He had mercy on them and sent them a deliverer, Othniel. [With each of the judges except Samson, Israel cried out and the Lord sent a deliverer, but note, it does not say Israel repented.]

In other words, God changed His mind and extended undeserved grace to Israel. God could not help but be faithful, but His people could not resist being unfaithful. [This pattern continued from *Exodus*, where God freed His people from oppressors, and it proceeded throughout Scripture, not just in *Judges.]* God’s grace saved Israel notwithstanding its disobedience. [ Hence, *Judges* is not strictly a picture of retributive justice as would be expected from Deuteronomist historians. God acted to restore the relationship with Israel.]

So, God empowered Israel’s first judge was Othniel, son of Caleb’s younger brother. The book does not provide much information about Othniel or about what he did, but he appears to have been exemplary in every way (as opposed to the last judge, Samson, who was a truly flawed human). Othniel was a military hero from the far south of Israel, who had appeared in Josh.15:15-19 in a fairy tale like romance where he won the hand of Achsah, Caleb’s daughter, by capturing the Canaanite city of Debir.

Othniel’s ancestry probably was Kenizzite. [Caleb and other Kenizzites had allied with Judah during the Exodus and thereafter.] His home base was near Hebron in the far south of Judah, but his battles were in Mesopotamia to the north and east of Israel. [At the time Deuteronomist historians were writing, Assyria and Babylon were the oppressive powers against Israel, so they may have chosen this opponent because that was Israel’s opponent in their time.]

Othniel did not act on his own power. The Spirit of the Lord came on him and God, through Othniel, overpowered Cushan. Then, “the land rested” for 40 years. What a beautiful picture of total peace- for humans and for nature.

**Ehud:**

After 40 years, again “the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.” [The text does not indicate exactly what Israel did; however, it appears they began to accommodate the ways and worship of the surrounding nations.] So, the Lord gave Israel into the hands of Eglon, king of Moab, and his allies, the Ammonites and Amalekites. (All 3 groups lived primarily east of the Jordan and were bitter enemies of Israel throughout history.) At this point, they had conquered Jericho, the City of Palms, which was west of the Jordan in Israel proper.

Israel was subject to Moab for 18 years. Eglon was very fat; his name meant “fat calf,” perhaps a reference to his fate. Again, Israel cried out and God gave them another deliverer, Ehud. His name meant “loner” and he single-handedly saved Israel from its enemies with a daring feat of bravery and cunning.

Whereas few details were provided about Othniel and his exploits, Ehud’s story is colorful and replete with satire and humor- almost slapstick. Ehud was a Benjaminite, and like many of his tribe, he was left-handed, an advantage in a sword fight. He fastened a short, 2-edged sword (about 1½ feet long) to his right thigh under his clothes. (Eglon’s guards would not search the right side for a weapon, only the left side, where most people carried a weapon was searched.)

Israel sent Ehud with tribute to Eglon at Jericho. After delivering it, Ehud and those who had carried the tribute went away as far as Gilgal, near certain sculptured stone idols. Ehud then turned back to give the king a secret message from God. Eglon did not suspect treachery, so he sent all his attendants away. Ehud approached Eglon in his upper room, and Eglon rose to hear his message. Ehud took his sword from his right thigh with his left hand and thrust it all the way into Eglon’s belly. Ehud did not pull out the sword and Eglon’s fat closed over it. Ehud then locked the door to Eglon’s room and left via the porch. Eglon’s servants returned, saw the locked door, and respectfully waited outside, believing Eglon was going to the bathroom. After waiting an embarrassing amount of time, the servants broke down the door and found Eglon dead.

Meanwhile, Ehud escaped. He gathered the Israelites at the ford of the Jordan so no one could cross back into Moabite territory. Ehud and Israel killed 10,000 Moabites- no one escaped. Then, the land rested for 80 years, a very long period. [Oppression brought violence; God acted to bring rest and peace.]

**Shamgar:**

After the rich tale of Ehud, only one sentence was allotted to Shamgar, Israel’s 3rd judge and 1st of the “minor judges.” (Minor judges may have been added so the total would be 12 judges.) All that is disclosed is he killed 600 Philistines with an oxgoad (an iron-ripped stick used to prod cattle). And “he too saved Israel.” Shamgar was another hero who defeated Israel’s enemies single-handedly. The story is reminiscent of the later tale of Samson.

No tribe is given for Shamgar, but he was called the son of Anath, the name of a Canaanite war goddess and consort of Baal. He probably was a non-Israelite Judge. (*Judges* illustrates that God’s people were not only of the house of Israel. And See: Rahab, Jael, and others.) Nonetheless, Shamgar apparently was well known in Israel. He is mentioned in Deborah’s song in Chp.5.

**Chapters 4, 5: Deborah (Barak and Jael)**

The text returns to Ehud’s death without mentioning Shamgar. [Some claim

Ehud, who fought Moab on the east of Israel, and Shamgar, who fought the

Philistines on the west, lived at about the same time.]

The story of Deborah is told twice. Chp.4 is in prose and Chp.5 in poetry, “Deborah’s Song.” Each probably had a different author(s).

Chp.4 is told with artistry, power, well-drawn characters, dialogue, and plot, without losing sight of God’s activity on behalf of Israel. Deborah declared God’s word and it came true. Chap.5 is an epic poem written in an elevated tone. It is full of praise for the divine and human participants of the war against Midian. God is central. Scholars indicate Chp.5 is a 1st-hand account of the Battle of Megiddo and is one of the oldest parts of the Bible, dating to 1125 BC.

Again, Israel followed the pattern of apostasy, oppression, and cries to the Lord, who had given them into the hands of Jabin, king of Hazor, a Canaanite. His commander, Sisera, had a huge army with 900 chariots.

After 20 years of Canaanite oppression, Israel again cried out to God, and again, God had mercy on His people and raised up a deliverer. The judge was an unlikely choice- a woman. The first 4 judges God chose for Israel were not what one would expect. Othniel was a Kenzite, not an Israelite by birth although probably an ally; Ehud, a left-hander (considered inferior); Shamgar was a non-Israelite; and now a woman. None of them was a natural born Israelite male.

The prophetess Deborah was a fiery, charismatic Ephraimite wife and mother. She also was the leader of Israel at the time she became Israel’s 4th judge. Deborah sat under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim and people came to her there for judgment (dispute resolution). The text does not say God raised Deborah as a “deliverer.” She already was in place, and she may have been the only “judge” who performed judicial functions instead of being merely a military leader.

Deborah summoned Barak (meaning lightening although he was not) from Naphtali and told him God had commanded him to go with 10K men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun to Mt. Tabor on the NE edge of the plain of Jezreel - one of the main routes from Egypt to Mesopotamia along the Way of the Sea.

Deborah declared God had promised to lead Jabin’s army under Sisera and his chariots to the Kishon River, where He would give the enemy into Barak’s hands. Barak was not sure about this and said he only would go if Deborah went with him. She agreed but responded he would not have the honor of killing general Sisera. Since he had been unwilling to go without her, God would give Sisera’s life to a woman.

Deborah and Barak went to Kadesh, called up 10K men of Zebulun and Naphtali, and went to Mt. Tabor, a 1300-foot peak in a flat valley at the boundary of Naphtali and Zebulun. [Chp.5 indicates the tribes of Benjamin and Issachar also went with Barak against Sisera, and notes God would not forget Dan and Reuben who failed to join the fight.] Accordingly, Barak commanded 6 tribes, Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh, Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali. 4 tribes were chastised for failure to respond to the call: Reuben, Gad/Gilead, Dan, and Asher. The southern tribes, Judah and Simeon were not mentioned. The confrontation was huge with 6 Israelite tribes and the well-armed military of the confederated Canaanite tribes with chariots.

Meanwhile, Heber and his clan, Kenite descendants of Hobab, Moses’ brother-in-law and Sisera’s ally, had camped near Kadesh. [The Kenites homeland was in the south part of the Judean wilderness, but this clan had gone north and allied with non-Judeans.]

When Sisera heard Barak was at Mt. Tabor, he took his men and chariots to the Kishon River. Deborah told Barak to go against them because God would deliver them into his hands that day. Barak complied and prevailed. All Sisera’s troops were killed, but Sisera abandoned his chariot and men and fled on foot. [Chariots getting stuck in the mud may have reminded Israel of Egypt.]

Chp.5 provides more detail about how God caused Israel to win the battle. Israel was on high ground in the hills when Sisera came with his men and chariots. Sisera’s troops camped by the river, which was dry in the summer, but it had flooded when God sent an unseasonable storm and flash flood. The chariots stuck in the mud and were useless. Sisera’s men abandoned their chariots and fled into the hills where every single one of them was slaughtered.

Sisera escaped and ran to Heber’s tent. Heber was not there, but his wife, Jael, was. Sisera expected her to be friendly, but some Kenites believed in YHWH and helped Israel. She went out and invited Sisera into the tent and hid him. (Some accuse Jael of violating contemporary customs of hospitality, but he never should have approached her. A single man going into a tent with a married woman was highly improper. Then he jeopardized her life by telling her to stand guard and lie to any Israelite who inquired about him. She also could have feared rape by a soldier when she had no one to defend her.)

Sisera told Jael he was very thirsty and asked for a drink. She gave him milk and he went back into hiding. Thereafter, Sisera went to sleep. Jael picked up a tent peg and hammer and drove the peg through his temple, killing Sisera. [Chp.5 declares Jael was the “most blessed of women.”] Barak pursued Sisera, and when he arrived at Jael’s tent, she showed him Sisera’s dead body.

God defeated the numerically and militarily superior force. He fulfilled His promise, but in a surprising way. Then the land had peace for 40 years.

Chp.5, the poem/Deborah’s Song, reflected the historical situation of Israel between 1200-1020 BC. Israel lived in the highlands outside the Philistine city- states. [The Philistines came from the Greek island of Crete and had more advanced government and technology than Israel.] Israel was composed of extended family units working together to subsist at the margins of Canaanite control. The Israelites were peasants living in small villages against the urbanized, more advanced Canaanites. Israel needed the contribution of every man and woman to survive. The Canaanites threatened Israel’s existence. Deborah’s Song celebrated the establishment of God’s justice. It was about God’s triumph.

**Chapter 6- 8**: **Gideon**

Israel returned to its same apostate patterns; indeed, this story expanded on the fickleness of God’s people. The theme of the story emphasized God’s sovereignty and urged Israel to trust God, but they did not. The story began and ended with Israel worshipping idols. Moreover, this was the first story where Israel’s deliverer was flawed, vulnerable, and frightened.

For 7 years, Midianite raids threatened Israel’s central area. [Midianites were descendants of Abraham and Keturah. Moses married a Midianite, but in other contexts, Midian was Israel’s enemy.] Israelites had to hide from the Midianites in mountains and caves. When an Israelite sowed a field, Midianites, their allies the Amalekites, and other people of the east destroyed the crops and took their livestock raiding as far as Gaza near the Sea.

This time, when the Israelites cried out, the angel of the Lord appeared to

Gideon while he was threshing wheat in a small, enclosed winepress. Ordinarily, wheat was threshed on a hilltop so the chaff would be blown away naturally, but Gideon was trying to thresh while hidden down in a winepress. The angel told Gideon he was going to deliver Israel. A sarcastic discourse ensued. Like Moses, Gideon protested that he was from the weakest clan, Manasseh, and he was the youngest member of the clan. The angel replied, as with Moses: I will be with you.

Gideon began to suspect his guest, the angel, was God. So, he asked for a sign. Gideon prepared a meal and offered a sacrifice. Fire immediately consumed the offering and Gideon was afraid because he had seen God face to face. He fell on his face, and God responded: Peace be with you.

God told Gideon to use his father’s bull and pull down his father’s altar to Baal and the Asherah pole next to it. Then, Gideon was to build an altar to YHWH and sacrifice another of his father’s bulls on it. Gideon was afraid to do it during the day, so he did what the angel had directed at night. In the end, Gideon was fearful but obedient even against his family.

The next day, the townspeople saw what Gideon had done. They wanted to kill him, but his father Joash was conflicted about harming his son. He cleverly asked the townspeople: Are you going to fight for Baal? Let him fight for himself. (Because of that, Gideon, whose given name meant “hacker,” received a second name, Jerubbaal, “let Baal contend.”) The theme here: Who will be Israel’s God?

Now Israel was ready for battle against Midian. Baal’s altar was destroyed, and YHWH’s altar has been established. The Midianites, Amalekites and people of the east crossed the Jordan with 135,000 men. Gideon sounded the trumpet to call his clan, the Abiezrites and sent messengers to all Manasseh (his tribe), plus Asher, Zebulon, and Naphtali. A total of 32,000 foot soldiers from Israel met him

at the hill of Harrod (meant “trembling”).

Gideon still was afraid, so he tested God. He placed a fleece overnight on the threshing floor overnight. If the fleece was wet in the morning but the ground around it was not, he would believe God would give him victory. That occurred; however, wool holds moisture. The ground could have dried before the fleece. Hence, Gideon tested God again to do the reverse. The next morning dew was all over the ground, but the fleece was dry. Gideon knew the Lord was with him.

But God knew Gideon still was unsure, so He gave Gideon a test. He told him to go with his servant, Purah, to spy on the Midianite camp that night. They went down to the valley floor and saw the Midianites were thick as locusts and they had countless camels. Then they overheard one man telling another about his dream. A cake of barley (the symbol of Israel- a poor man’s grain) tumbled into the Midianite camp; it hit a tent, which fell, turned upside down, and collapsed. The man’s companion said that was Gideon; God has given him Midian. God allowed Gideon to hear the truth from his enemy’s mouth; the oracle spoken by Israel’s opponent convinced Gideon. He was ready to go to war.

Originally, Midian’s army was 4 times as large as Gideon’s. Plus, they had multitudes of camels. They were the world’s first-known camel-riding cavalry, which had stormed in from the Arabian Desert. Fighters on camels had great advantages over foot soldiers:

* Camels can sprint at 40 mph, twice as fast as the best runners,
* They can cover 5 times the distance a person can walk in a day, and
* They can cruise at 25 mph for an hour.

It was time for battle, but now, God wanted to assure everyone knew it was

His victory alone. With 4-1 odds the Israelites may have bragged they had won it themselves. So, God had to diminish Israel’s forces.

To accomplish this troop reduction, God told Gideon to let those who were afraid go home. Of his 32,000 men, 22,000 left, leaving 10,000 men. God said that still was too many. So, He told Gideon to take his men to the spring. All who drank with their hands were to be dismissed. Those who laid on the ground and lapped the water were to remain and fight. This latter group numbered only 300 men. Now Gideon’s fighting force was 500 times smaller than Midian’s.

That night it was time for battle. In the middle of the night, Gideon divided his force into 3 groups of 100 each and stationed them around the outskirts of the Midianite camp. He told each of his men to take a trumpet in their right hand and a jar with a lighted torch inside in their left. (This seems to have required more than 2 hands, but…) When Gideon blew his trumpet and smashed his jar, all his men were to do the same and to shout “for the Lord and Gideon.” The sudden noise in the middle of the night put the enemies to rout (a picture like Jericho but much more vivid).

YHWH was fighting for Israel by spreading so much panic among the enemies no Israelite had to use a weapon to put the Midianites to flight. The Midianites fought each other and then fled. The Israelites standing around the outside of the camp picked up weapon and killed the fleeing Midianites.

Apparently, they fled in 2 directions. Some went to nearby towns; others crossed the Jordan heading home. Now, Gideon recalled the 3 tribes he had first summoned (Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh) to pursue the enemies. Then he called Ephraim, the most powerful of the central and northern tribes to stop those who were fleeing via the Jordan (fords)- cut off their retreat. Ephraim captured and executed 2 Midianite princes, Oreb (raven) and Zeeb (wolf), and sent their heads to Gideon, who had crossed to the east side of the Jordan.

Then, the first note of discord is raised among Israel’s tribes. (It will crescendo by the end of the book.) Ephraim had been the dominant tribe in the region. They were furious Gideon had received the power and prestige of victory without inviting them to join the battle. Cleverly, Gideon averted violence with some agile diplomacy assuring Ephraim of their superiority.

The 2nd campaign (mopping up) began. Gideon crossed the Jordan with his 300 men famished and exhausted. 2 unruly Israelite villages, Succoth and Penuel, refused to give his men food and rest. So, he brutally subdued them with deadly Israelite on Israelite violence.

Then, he engaged in a final battle against Midian. Again, he and his 300 men surprised and panicked what was left of the Midianites and they captured and executed 2 more Midianite kings. The difference between the 1st and 2nd campaigns was dramatic. The 1st fight was to free Israel from oppression. The 2nd was a personal vendetta with Gideon seeking revenge for the death of his brothers. Gideon no longer was acting on God’s instructions. It was a reminder of how quickly God’s people went their own way after God delivered them.

Gideon had a good moment, however. The people wanted to make him king, saying, “for *you* have delivered us from the hand of Midian.” (God had reduced the force because he was concerned the people would take full credit for the victory. Now they were giving that credit to Gideon, not to God.) Gideon refused the dynastic kingship saying God was Israel’s only king.

But he could not resist some benefits from the fight, so he asked each person to give him one gold earring from their booty. With the huge amount of gold he received, Gideon made a gold ephod (generally an ephod was a priestly garment, but in *Judges*, it was an idol.) The ephod/Baal idol was placed in a sanctuary in Shechem where God’s central sanctuary had been.

Though he was not king, Gideon accumulated a fortune, plus a very large harem (He had 70 legitimate sons). He ended his life at a ripe old age in Ophrah where he started it, but now, he was an affluent prominent man instead of a frightened young man trying to hide while he threshed at the bottom of a winepress. This was an unusual conclusion for a Deuteronomist historian.

Gideon was greatly blessed even though he fell far from obedience to God. Moreover, the land rested for 40 years even though Israel had fallen into serious Baal worship. [They fell even further after Gideon’s death.]

**Chapter 9: Abimelech**

Gideon was a very flawed judge. His son Abimelech was not a judge at all. This story does not follow the typical pattern in *Judges*. Here, the Israelite leader is the oppressor, a brutal illegitimate ruler.

Gideon had 70 sons with his numerous wives and 1 son, Abimelech, by his concubine in Shechem. Gideon was in Ophrah. The story is set in Shechem and is a total contrast to Josh.24 where Israel entered its covenant (*berith*) with YHWH. Now, Israel covenanted with Baal and served Baal-berith- the Baal of the Covenant. At the end of the story, Shechem was destroyed. Archaeologists have found it was destroyed in the time of *Judges*.

For the 1st time an Israelite was crowned king, but he was not the kind of king referred to in Deut.17:14-20- a man chosen by God, who did not lift himself above his brothers and whose primary role was to read and obey the Law. Abimelech siezed power on his own initiative, killed his brothers, and ignored YHWH and Torah.

Appealing to his kinship with the elders of Shechem, his Shechemite brothers (through his mother), Abimelech asked them to grant him their support for a coup. They agreed and killed all his brothers except one on 1 stone. The lone survivor, Jotham, the youngest brother, hid and cursed the lords of Shechem, who had killed his brothers. The curse is in the form of a poem set forth as a typical ancient Near East fable.

Abimelech ruled for 3 years, but the rest of the chapter is a fulfillment of Jotham’s curse. Retribution from God befell the evildoers. God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the elders of Shechem. (See: Saul and the lying spirit that caused Ahab’s death.) The tale is one of violence and brutality with all the evildoers dying awful deaths, including Abimelech, who was hit in the head by a millstone thrown from a tower by a woman. To avoid having been killed by a woman Abimelech asked a young man to finish him off.

**Chapters 10:1-5, 12:7-15: Minor Judges**

The continuing downward spiral in Israel continued with greater chaos and violence and more flawed deliverers. Little is said about the minor judges.

10:1: After Abimelech, Tolah of Issachar, who lived in the hill country of Ephraim, ruled for 23 years. The text gives him 2 verses.

10:3: Then Jair the Gileadite ruled for 22 years. He had 30 sons who rode 30 donkeys (signs of royalty/nobility) and had 30 towns in Gilead. This is evidence of affluence and status, but he only received 3 verses in Scripture.

12:8: After Jephthah (see below), Ibzan of Bethlehem was judge for 7 years. He had 30 sons and 30 daughters, all of whom he married to spouses from other clans- perhaps trying to extend his influence. He received 3 verses.

12:11: Then Elon, the Zebulonite ruled for 10 years- 2 verses.

12:13: Abdon, the Pirathonite, had 40 sons who produced only 30 grandsons. They rode 70 donkeys, and he judged for 8 years.

**Chapter 10:6-11:40; 12:1-7: Jephthah**

The themes of divine justice and mercy continued, as did Israel’s downward spiral. For much of this story God was in the background. Jephthah spoke *of* God, but not *to* Him. His victory was eclipsed by his disastrous vow that led to the death of his daughter. The final story involves a massive slaughter of Israelites by Israelites.

Jephthah was both a minor judge and a charismatic military leader, though the latter seemed secondary. As with Gideon, the early part of the story was sympathetic to Jephthah, but he fell into a deadly vow and slaughtered tens of thousands of Ephraimites. Jephthah judged for 18 years, primarily with the Israelites beyond the Jordan in Gad/Gilead, the land of the Amorites- later the land of Ammon. [Although the text referred to 2 enemies, the Philistine reference applied to Samson; this chapter related primarily to Gilead (east of the Jordan and assigned to Reuben, Gad and ½ of Manasseh). Both actions could have occurred about the same time on opposite sides of the Promised Land.]

The typical *Judges* scenario was followed, but it was expanded. Israel was listed as having worshipped far more gods of other peoples. Israel’s cry was greater. This was the only time in *Judges* where Israel repented. Also, God initially refused to send a deliverer, telling the people to let the other gods they worshipped deliver them. For the 3rd time, God indicts Israel for breaking the covenant, but this is the most comprehensive time.

Israel responded to God by putting away its idols and begging Him for help, but that repentance seemed superficial, especially given later events. But God no longer could bear Israel’s suffering. Like a good father, He was torn between judgment and mercy. Finally, mercy prevailed.

The elders of Gilead, not God, chose Jephthah. God confirmed the choice when the Spirit came over him. Jephthah was the son of a prostitute and became a mighty warrior. He was driven from his father, Gilead’s, home by his legitimate brothers. He surrounded himself with outlaws and went raiding for a livelihood.

Ammon made war against Israel and the elders of Gilead tried to hire Jephthah to protect themselves. He agreed to do so only if they agreed to make him head (permanent civil leader) and commander (temporary military leader) if the Lord gave him victory. They agreed and ratified the agreement before YHWH at the Mizpah sanctuary (east of the Jordan).

Jephthah showed himself to be a shrewd, successful negotiator. So, he began protracted negotiations with the Ammonite king. His speech was intended to justify Israel’s position, but it did not deter Ammon from war.

As he was on his way to war, Jephthah made his fatal vow attempting to bargain with God. He needed the victory to restore his status in Israel and he was ready to sacrifice a human life to obtain it. He did not think about his daughter. So, Jephthah vowed that if God gave him Ammon, he would offer to the Lord whoever first came out of the house to greet him from his victory, as a burnt offering. Then, the Lord gave him a massive victory.

Jephthah went home and the first person to greet him was his beloved only child, his daughter, who came out dancing to meet him. He was devastated. He told his daughter that she had brought him low. (Blame the victim.) She recognized the vow was irrevocable, but she did not accept the blame for it, saying, “you have opened your mouth.” (In every instance, but this one, Biblical texts condemn human sacrifice or God intervened to stop it, e.g., Issac.)

His (unnamed) daughter asked only to be given 2 months to wander the mountains with her friends to mourn her virginity. [In ancient Israel one of the most awful things that could happen to a person was to die childless. Here it happened both to Jephthah and his daughter because of his vow.] She returned 2 months later, and Jephthah fulfilled his vow.

The Ephraimites went to Jephthah and asked why he had not called on them to fight Ammon with him. Jephthah responded that he had called, but they had not come; hence, he went without them. The Ephraimites began a verbal altercation which appeared to have damaged Jephthah’s pride. The result was Gilead fought Ephraim and won.

Gilead took the ford(s) of the Jordan. Winning the battle with Ammon was not enough for Jephthah. Whenever an Ephraimite tried to cross the Jordan, the Gileadites asked him to say “shibboleth” (meaning stream). Ephraimite dialect prevented them from correctly pronouncing “sh,” so they failed the test and were killed. 42,000 Ephraimites were killed at the Jordan ford(s).

Jephthah judged for only 6 years. Even after his victory, nothing was said about the land resting.

**Chapters 13-16: Samson**

These stories resemble folklore. They are outrageous and filled with humorous antics and hyperbole. Yet, Israel, the underdog adored telling (and perhaps embellishing) stories about one of their people who bested their conquerors. The traditional *Judges* formula recurs, but it is truncated. Israel sinned and was conquered, but the people did not cry out to the Lord.

Samson was an anomaly among an already unlikely group of judges. He was not a military leader or a deliverer; he was a muscular, bawdy, amoral character. Samson’s attacks on Philistines were not motivated by a desire to protect Israel but for revenge or for a woman. Nonetheless, God used Samson’s escapades to harass the Philistines. Indeed, the hiddenness of God’s actions with Samson was a theme. Rather than reciting explicit encounters between Samson and God, everything in his life and death suggested God was involved with him.

The people had been subject to the Philistines for 40 years, but even at the end of the story, Israel’s independence was not restored. The Philistines were Israel’s most serious continuous threat to and during the time of David. They were Sea People, probably from the Aegean, who settled on the Mediterranean coast. Their name, Philistine, led to the area being called Palestine.

The story is set around Beth Shemesh and the Temple of the Sun. Samson’s name is derived from the Hebrew word for sun. Samson was consecrated from the womb, but he ignored God except twice- to call for water when he was desperately thirsty and to seek vengeance and death when he was blinded, enslaved, and humiliated by the Philistines.

Before his birth, the angel of the Lord appeared to an unnamed woman and announced she would have a son and he would begin to deliver his people from the Philistines. Samson was destined to be God’s agent. He was to be a Nazarite. (Usually, a person took a Nazarite vow for a temporary period; Samson was to be a Nazarite for life. His mother even followed the vow during pregnancy.)

The woman told her husband, Manoah, of the angelic visitation, but he would not believe her. He wanted to hear it from the angel himself. So, the angel came and underscored what the wife had said. (She was another strong woman in *Judges*.) The man offered the angel food, but the angel told him to make a sacrifice to God. When the fire was lit for the sacrifice, the angel ascended with the smoke. Manoah believed.

In due course, Samson was born. He was the only judge God specifically blessed. (13:24). Then, the Spirit of the Lord began to stir in him (though it was hidden). All this created an expectation that Samson would be a man of God with pious parents and a miraculous birth. But Samson had little interest in YHWH or in resisting Philistines, per se, but he did like their women.

Samson went to Timnah and saw a Philistine woman he liked. In accord with ancient custom, he asked his parents to go to her parents to contract for them to marry. His parents objected, but finally they relented. On their way to Timnah to negotiate the marriage, Samson saw a lion. God’s Spirit empowered him, and Samson ripped the lion apart barehanded.

On his way to the betrothal ceremony, Samson found a honeycomb in the lion’s carcass. He took the honey, but he told no one where he had found it. At the feast, he asked a riddle: “What is sweeter than honey?

What is stronger than a lion?”

The winner would receive 30 linen garments and 30 formal garments, but no one could guess the answer.

Some of the men were able to coax his betrothed to get the secret out of Samson. She did. When the guests answered the riddle, Samson was furious! The Lord gave Samson superhuman strength and he went to Askelon, one of the 5 cities of the Philistines, and murdered 30 men to take their garments and pay his bet- not to deliver his people from the Philistines.

Samson’s enraged exit from the betrothal feast led her father to believe he had abandoned her, and he gave the woman to Samson’s friend. Later, Samson went to visit his betrothed and he learned she had been given to his friend. Now, he felt justified in seeking revenge on the Philistines. He took 300 foxes, tied lighted torches between their tails, and set all the Philistine crops on fire.

When the Philistines heard Samson had done this and why, they burned the woman and her father to death. Vengeance led to vengeance. Samson then slaughtered many of them and then withdrew to a cave in the Judean Wilderness. The Philistines went to Judah and demanded Samson. 3000 men of Judah went out to Samson and told him the Philistines were their overlords and they asked for him.

Samson consented to the Judeans tying him up and taking him to the Philistines as long as the Judeans would not kill him themselves. When Samson reached the Philistines, the ropes dissolved from his hands, and he grabbed the jawbone of a donkey laying nearby. With that jawbone, Samson killed 1000 Philistines. [The ridiculousness of the weapon underscored that God was at work.]

But Samson was very thirsty by that time, and he cried out to God for water. So, God opened a spring, and he drank. Samson led Israel for 20 years.

Then, Samson went to Gaza, another of the 5 Philistine cities, and consorted with a prostitute. The city must have been a walled one because the men of the city decided to hide in waiting until the next morning. The city gates would have been closed at night and they could capture Samson at the gate when he left the next day. But Samson left in the middle of the night. As he went, he took down the gate and carried it to Hebron (25 miles away).

Samson then met and fell in love with Delilah. By that time, he was a national security threat; therefore, the lords of the Philistines and offered Delilah money to find out how to destroy him. 3 times she begged him to divulge the secret of his strength and 3 times he lied about it. Each time she did what he said would be fatal to him and each time the Philistines jumped out to capture him, but Samson repulsed them. Finally, after tremendous nagging, Delilah learned the secret of Samson’s strength. She cut his hair and the Philistines over-powered, blinded, enslaved, and humiliated him. They put him in chains and treated him like an animal grinding with a mill stone in prison.

Thereafter, the rulers of the Philistines’ 5 cities assembled to sacrifice to their god, Dagon, and to celebrate their capture of Samson. They brought him out of prison to entertain them and perform. Samson asked a servant to put his hands on the support pillars of the temple. 3000 people were on its roof watching him perform. Then Samson prayed to God for strength to get revenge for his eyes. He braced himself with one hand on each pillar and with a huge burst of strength cried out, “Let me die with the Philistines.” The temple collapsed and more Philistines died than had in any of his past exploits.

Ultimately, he was buried in the tomb of his fathers. He led Israel 20 years.

**Chapter 17-21**: **Epilogue**

This section has been called the “book of weeping.” It may be a later addition to the book reflecting the further, total deterioration of Israel. The section asked the question: How can peace and justice be achieved among humans who have lost their moral and covenantal compass and do only what is right in their own eyes- being a law unto themselves.

The Israelites had learned to fight during the conquest of the Promised Land, but by the end of Judges, they were fighting each other. Indeed, they almost killed the entire tribe of Benjamin, Saul’s tribe. [The negative portrayal of Benjamin may reflect a pro-Judah, pro-David Deuteronomist perspective.)

As *Judges* ended, the author repeatedly noted, “In those days, Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.” This was a recipe for disaster and that is what happened. 12 rotations of the cycle had occurred, and 12 deliverers had come and gone, but Israel was consumed in sin.

Samson’s almost total disregard for his Nazarite status had served as a model for Israelites to do as they wished. The life of the people of Israel had fallen apart but God sent no more judges. Progressive deterioration had progressed at least since Gideon, and it was about to reach a crescendo. Terror reigned on all sides even with no external enemy. Israel was its own enemy.

Later, Israel’s kings demonstrated the same kind of idolatry and self-assertion that caused Israel’s self-destruction under the judges. But just as God remained merciful and faithful during the judges’ time, He was long-suffering and merciful to His people thereafter. Ultimately, He sent the One, true Deliverer and Savior, Jesus.

The book concludes with 2 events of weeping and violence:

**Chapters 17 & 18-** A man named Micah (meant- who is like YHWH?) stole

1100 shekels (the amount the Philistines paid Delilah to deliver Samson) from his mother. After admitting to the theft, his mother said she had dedicated the money to make an idol. Micah took the money, made an idol, an ephod, and teraphim (household gods), built a shrine, and made 1 of his sons a priest. Then, a Levite from Bethlehem agreed to become Micah’s private priest-for-hire. He practiced a mix of Hebrew and pagan rituals, including idol worship.

In those days, the tribe of Dan (the name is similar to the Hebrew word for justice) was seeking a place to settle because they had not displaced the Sidonians in the land God had given to them. Like a reverse story of the spies who scouted the Promised Land for Moses, the Danites sent spies to scout the land where Micah lived. They went to Laish, where they saw happy, trusting people living safely like the Sidonians on good land.

So, 600 Danites went to Laish to conquer it, but first they stopped at Micah’s house. They took the priest, the idol, the ephod and the teraphim, as well as Micah’s children, livestock, and other possessions. They then went to Laish, attacked the city, killed its inhabitants, and burned it to the ground.

They rebuilt the city and named it Dan. There they set up their idols. [1 man’s idol had become a god for a whole tribe.] Their priests for this explicit idolatry were Moses’ grandson and great-grandsons. [Later, Dan and Bethel would become the cultic centers for the northern kingdom, Israel.]

**Chapter 19-21**- The final story in *Judges* is a tale of terror reminiscent of that of the 2 men Lot entertained in Sodom. Any sense of decency in Israel had unraveled and the rape of 1 woman led to that of 600 women.

While traveling, an unnamed Levite and his concubine/common-law wife reached Jebus/Jerusalem, but the Levite did not want to stop there because it was not an Israelite city. The Levite decided to go on to Gibeah, a Benjaminite city, which they reached as night was falling. They sat in the city square, but no one took them in- a huge breach of hospitality. [Levites were supposed to be given extra hospitality because they had received no inheritance in the land.]

That evening an old man from Ephraim (not from Benjamin) arrived from the fields and invited the Levite to his home. While they were having dinner, some wicked men of the town pounded on the door demanding that the old man send out the Levite so they could have sex with him. The old man tried to dissuade the evil men. Finally, he offered them his own virgin daughter and the Levites concubine/wife. [The issue was not homosexuality but lack of hospitality, which in ancient times favored men- mistreating women was not as bad.]

The Levite was complicit in the evil. He sent his concubine out to the men and went to sleep. They took her outside and abused her all night. As day broke, she crawled back to the house and fell reaching for the threshold of the door. Next morning, the Levite opened the door, stepped over her body, and said, “Get up; let’s go.” She was unconscious (or dead), so he heaved her on a donkey and left for home. The Levite was totally self-absorbed and unfeeling.

When he arrived home, the Levite took a knife and cut the concubine’s body into 12 parts, which he sent all over Israel. [Saul cut up 2 oxen and sent the pieces to rally Israel, but this was far more outrageous. Hopefully, she was dead.] The Levite had no concern for his wife; he was complaining about his own humiliation/dishonorable treatment.

In response, all Israel (400,000 armed men) assembled at Mizpah to purge the evil from Israel. They asked the Levite to recount what had happened. He said, the men of Gibeah surrounded the house intending to kill him. They raped his concubine and she died. He sent around parts of her body to demand satisfaction for this disgraceful act.

The Israelites demanded that the Benjaminites turn over the offending men to be killed, but the Benjaminites refused to do so. So, the Israelites asked God whether they should go against Benjamin (which they already had decided to do). God said yes (probably via the Urim and Thumin). After a couple of days of large casualties, the Israelites defeated the Benjaminites with an ambush. They killed everyone, including livestock, and burned the city to the ground. Only 600 men of Benjamin were able to escape.

Israel had done to its kinsmen what they had not done to the indigenous people of the Land. They nearly wiped out an entire tribe of Israel, but they failed to conquer the peoples the Land God had given them. Indeed, they lived with and married those people.

After the massacre, Israel grieved for their brothers and went to Bethel for prayer, offerings, and fasting. What could they do? They had taken an oath that none of their daughters would be given in marriage to Benjaminites. But they also had taken a vow that any tribe which had not assembled at Mizpah would be killed. They learned no one from Jabesh Gilead had come. So, they sent 12,000 soldiers to Jabesh Gilead and slaughtered every man, woman, and child, except 400 virgin girls, whom they took to their camp at Shiloh in Canaan and offered to the surviving Benjaminite men. But they still were 200 girls short.

They realized an annual festival was about to occur at Shiloh. They told the remaining men of Benjamin to hide at the festival and when the girls went out to dance, they should rush out, seize one, and make her his wife. That occurred.

The book ended: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit“- a sad phrase that had been repeated several times, especially in the Epilogue.