

Judges

By Dr. Alan Cobb

Background

Through the leadership of Moses, God brought the descendants of Jacob (Israel) out of their slavery in Egypt. They could have gone directly into the Promised Land of Canaan, but out of fear they chose not to obey God. So they stayed in the wilderness for 40 years until all the males of that disobedience generation (those who were 20 years or older) had died (except for Joshua and Caleb who had tried to get the people not to be afraid and obey God).

After the death of Moses, Joshua led the people into the land of Canaan and led them in the conquest of the land. They were to completely drive out or kill all the inhabitants of the land because they were evil in the sight of God. In a covenant renewal at Shechem, God reminded the Israelites of what he had done for them, from the calling of Abraham to their entry into the land of Canaan. And he reminded them of all their victories over the people of Canaan and how those victories were because they followed him. (Joshua 24:1-13) Then Joshua challenged the people to fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Joshua warned them “If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.” (Joshua 24:20) And the people responded: “No! We will serve the Lord. ... We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.” (Joshua 24:21, 24)

Author

The Talmud indicates that Samuel was the author. There is evidence that the book was written after Samuel had anointed Saul as king because several times it uses the phrase “in those days Israel had no king.” (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) That doesn’t mean the author didn’t have written accounts of the events that he put together to write this history of the Israelites during the time period of the judges. If Samuel was the author, it is possible the intended reader and the purpose for writing the book was to remind Saul about how God treats disobedience and warn him that he needed to lead the people to follow God.

Date of Events

Depending on whose chronology you follow the beginning of the events in Judges could be anywhere from 1366 BC to 1461 BC. But figuring from creation, it would be 2504 AM (anno mundi – year of the world).

Theology of Judges

Every deliverance in the book of Judges is attributed to God who is the real Judge of Israel (and all nations). The “judges” of the book of Judges were not really judges as they didn’t hear disputes and give judgments about them. They were actually deliverers whom God used to bring the people back to him after he had used another people to discipline Israel for their disobedience. When the Israel disobeyed, God did what Joshua had said God would do. He judged them and allowed disaster to come upon them. When the people finally cried out to God, he raised up a deliverer (“judge”) to bring the people back from their idolatry and restore the authority of the Law. Then, God would again bless the people during the time of that “judge.” After the “judge” died, the people would again follow idolatry until God would again judge their disobedience.

Purpose

1. To present the historical information from the conquest of the land as told in Joshua up to the time of the first king.
2. To present the theological perspective that God was faithful to his covenant with Abraham even though the

people broke the covenant.

3. To remind the people that God is faithful and the One who is ultimately responsible for the welfare of Israel.
4. To stress to Saul the necessity of obeying God, understanding that blessing doesn't depend on his or the people's might or worthiness but upon God's faithfulness to bless those who obey him.

Application

If God raises up someone in every generation to battle against evil and bring his people back to obeying him, then we should look for whom he is raising up to bring us back to him.

Chapter 1

Verse 1 announces that the book of Judges will tell about what happened to the Israelites after Joshua died. Considering that the book of Joshua (24:31) and Judges (2:7) say that "Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him," that means there could be about twenty years time between the death of Joshua and the rise of the first "judge – deliverer." The rest of chapter one recounts Israel's failure to completely drive out all the inhabitants of the land as God had told them to do.

Verses 2 – 20. The tribe of Judah had some success driving out the Canaanites and Perizzites with the help of their brothers in the tribe of Simeon. They attacked and took the cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, Debir, Zephath, Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron and the territory surrounding them. But they did not drive out the people from the plains because they had iron chariots.

Verse 21 says that the Benjamites did not drive out all of the Jebusites living in Jerusalem.

Verses 22 – 29. The descendants of Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, took the city of Bethel, but they failed to drive the Canaanites out of other areas. Instead, the Canaanites were allowed to continue living in the areas. And when the Israelites became stronger, they still didn't drive the Canaanites out but pressed them into forced labor.

Verse 30 says didn't drive the Canaanites from their area but pressed them into forced labor.

Verses 31 – 32. The descendants of Asher didn't drive the Canaanites out but allowed them to live in the area.

Verse 33 says the descendants of Naphtali allowed the Canaanites to live in their area although they pressed them into forced labor.

Verses 34 – 36. The Amorites were able to confine the descendants of Dan in the hill country and didn't let them come down into the plain. They also tried to keep control of areas that the descendants of Joseph were supposed to suppress, but in those areas they became forced laborers for the Israelites.

Chapter 2

Verses 1 – 5. God meets the people and confronts them with their disobedience and states that because of it he will not drive their enemies out but will make them thorns in their sides and their gods a snare to them. This causes the people to weep and then offer sacrifices to God.

Verses 6 – 14. This recounts the information in Joshua 24:29-31 that the people followed God as long as Joshua and the elders with him lived. But after that, a generation arose that didn't know God or what he had done for the Israelites. This enumerates what the Israelites were doing wrong. They followed and worshiped

various gods of the peoples around them. So God handed them over to their enemies so that they were not able to resist them.

Verses 15 – 19. This tells what happened to the people. They went out to fight but God was against them for their disobedience, so they were in great distress. God would raise up a “judge – deliverer” who would save them from their enemies at that time because he had compassion on them. But when the “judge” died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than before. They did not give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

Verses 20 – 23. The result of Israel’s disobedience was that God used the nations that were left in the land when Joshua died to test the people and see whether they would walk in obedience.

Chapter 3

Verses 1 – 5. This lists the nations that were left to test the faithfulness of God’s people: Philistines, Canaanites, Sidonians, Hivites Amorites, Perizzites, and Jebusites. These peoples lived among the Israelites and intermarried with them. According to the genealogies of Genesis 9 and 10, all of these peoples, except the Perizzites, were descendants of Canaan who was cursed because his father, Ham, had told his brothers about the nakedness of their father, Noah. Many scholars believe that the term “Perizzites” referred to all the people in the area who did not live in a walled city.

Allowing those people to live in the land, intermarrying with them, and worshipping their gods were all ways that the Israelites disobeyed God and broke their covenant with him.

The rest of chapter 3 contains the stories of three of the judges.

Othniel

Verses 7 – 11. Othniel was the son of Kenez, Caleb’s nephew, so he is a descendant of Judah. He had led the attack to take the city of Debir (Kiriath Sepher). For that victory, Caleb gave his daughter Acsah to him in marriage.

Because the Israelites worshipped the Baals and Asherahs, God allowed the king of Aram (in the northwest part of Mesopotamia) to make them his subjects for eight years. When the people cried out to God, he raised up Othniel to lead them in battling and overpowering the Aramites. Then the area of Judah had peace for forty years until Othniel died.

Ehud

Verses 12 – 30. Ehud was a left-handed man of the Benjamite tribe. This time, because the Israelites did evil, God brought the Moabites, along with the Ammonites and Amalekites, against them so that they lost control of the city of Palms (Jericho). For eighteen years, the Israelites were subject to the Moabites, then they cried out to God and he raised up Ehud to deliver them.

Ehud made a sword, 18 inches long, and strapped it to his right thigh. Then he went to Eglon, king of the Moabites, under the guise of presenting tribute to him. After presenting it and sending the rest of the men accompanying him on their way back home, Ehud returned to Eglon supposedly with a secret message. Eglon dismissed everyone so that he and Ehud were alone. That’s when Ehud reached with his left hand for the sword on his right thigh. This maneuver would not have seemed dangerous as people were thought to be right-handed. So Ehud was able to draw his sword and plunge it into Eglon’s belly which was so large that it went completely in so that even the hilt was covered and yet it did not come out of his back. With Eglon dead, Ehud left the king’s private chambers and locked them so the staff thought he was using his private potty. By the time they finally unlocked the room and find him dead, Ehud had escaped and blew a trumpet to announce the king’s

death and that the Benjamites should attack. The Benjamites took control of the Jordan River and didn't let any of the 10,000 Moabites cross, but kill them all. After that, the Benjamites had peace for eighty years.

Shamgar

Verse 31. Shamgar is reported to be the son of Anath, but no one knows anyone of any tribe of Israel who was named Anath although there was a Canaanite deity by that name. Shamgar saved Israel by killing 600 Philistines using an ox goad, a long stick with a pointed end.

Chapter 4

Verses 1 – 3. After Ehud (not Shamgar) died, the Israelites again disobeyed God so he brought Jabin, a Canaanite king, against them for 20 years. The commander of his armies was named Sisera and he commanded 900 iron chariots. His headquarters was at Harosheth Hagoyim (smithy of the nations - Gentiles) and was probably called that because of the city's blacksmith / metal working trade. Because of his cruel oppression, the Israelite people finally cried out to God for his help.

Verses 4 – 10. Deborah was a prophetess and actually acting as a judge and deciding disputes, unlike the other "judges – deliverers." She has apparently had a revelation from God that he will use Barak, the son of Abinoam, who lives in the city of Kedesh in the area of the tribe of Naphtali, to deliver the people. So she sends for him to come to her and tells him the Lord's plan for him to take 10,000 men of Naphtali and Zebulun and go to Mount Tabor where God will give him into Barak's hands.

Barak won't go unless Deborah comes with him. So she agrees but tells him the honor of the victory will not be his because of this but that the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman instead. This would be a blow to his pride.

Verses 11 – 17. First, we're told about Heber, the Kenite, who is living near Kedesh where Barak is from. The Kenites were metal workers, possibly of the Midianite tribe like Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, who traveled into Canaan with the Israelites and lived with them.

When Sisera learns that Barak has assembled men at Mt. Tabor, he takes his 900 chariots and men and goes to the Kishon River after him. Deborah knows of this (possibly from God) and tells Barak to go down from Mt. Tabor against Sisera. Barak does and chases Sisera and his men all the way back to Harosheth Hagoyim, killing all the men except Sisera along the way. Sisera flees on foot to the tent of Heber, the Kenite because there were friendly relations between him and Jabin.

Verses 18 – 24. Jael, the wife of Heber meets Sisera and invites him into the tent. He is thirsty and tired, so he asks for something to drink and she gives him some milk. Then he lays down to sleep and asks her to keep watch at the tent opening and tell anyone who asks that no one is there. But, after Sisera is asleep, Jael takes a tent peg (spike) and drives it through his temple, instantly killing him. Then, when Barak comes by looking for Sisera, she invites him into the tent to see that she has killed him. So from that day, the Israelites grew stronger against Jabin until they destroyed him.

Chapter 5

This is a song of praise recounting what God has done for the Israelites using Deborah, Barak, and Jael. At the end of the song we are told that the land had peace for forty years.

Chapter 6

Verses 1 – 10. This tells us that, again, the Israelites turned from following God so he gave them into the hands

of the Midianites who oppressed them for seven years. Because of the oppression, the people hide themselves in mountain clefts, caves, and strongholds because they are afraid. When the Israelites cried out to God, he sent them a prophet who reminded them of what God had done for them and that they had broken their covenant with him.

Verses 11 – 24. The Angel of the Lord (pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus – Jesus is God’s representation in the physical realm) comes to Gideon, a member of the tribe of Manasseh, while he is threshing wheat. The fact that he is threshing in the winepress which is done at the base of the mountain (hill) rather than on top where the wind can separate the chaff from the wheat shows that he is afraid.

God addresses him as a mighty warrior, but Gideon doesn’t see himself as one and he doesn’t understand why God has allowed the Midianites to oppress the people. But God tells him to go in the strength he has and save Israel. Gideon protests that his family is the weakest in Manasseh and he is the least (not important) in his family. But God says that he will be with Gideon so that he will strike them down as if they were just one man. Gideon asks the Lord to give him a sign that it is really him talking and asks that he delay leaving until he can bring an offering.

Gideon brings an offering and God tells him to put the meat and unleavened bread on a rock and pour the broth on it. Then God touches the offering with the tip of the staff he is carrying and burns up the entire offering. When he then disappears, Gideon realizes it is God himself he has been talking to face to face, and he is afraid. But God tells Gideon not to be afraid because he won’t die. So Gideon builds an altar there to worship God and calls the place “Jehovah Shalom” which means “the Lord is Peace.”

Verses 25 – 40. That night God tells Gideon to tear down his father’s altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole. Then he is to build an altar and using the wood from the Asherah pole burn a mature bull from his father’s herd on it as a burnt offering. Gideon takes ten of his servants did what God told him. But they did it at night because he was afraid of what his father and the men of the town would do if they caught them. The men of the town awake to find what has been done to Baal’s altar and the Asherah pole and they are furious. When they investigate and find that it was done by Gideon, the son of Joash, they demand that he be brought out and killed. But Joash chides them saying, “Are you going to plead Baal’s cause? Are you trying to save him? ... If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone beaks down his altar.” So from that day Gideon is called Jerub-Baal, which means “let Baal.”

When the Midianites cross the Jordon and camp in the Valley of Jezreel, Gideon summons the people of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Napthali and they prepare to go against the Midianites. Gideon wants to be sure God is going to give him victory so he proposes a test. He puts wool fleece on the floor and wants it to be wet while the ground is dry the next morning. When it happens, he is still unsure so he proposes that the next morning the ground should be wet and the fleece dry. The next morning it happens just that way.

Chapter 7

Verses 1 – 8. Gideon and all his men (32,000) camp at the spring of Harod while the Midianites camp north of that in the valley near Moreh. There God tells Gideon that he has too many men and that they might boast in their own strength if he allows that many to defeat the Midianites. So he tells Gideon to let any that are afraid to return home, and 22,000 leave. But God says that is still too many so he has Gideon lead them to water and see how they drink. Those who put their head down to the water are to return home, so that when they leave Gideon is left with only 300 men. The men who drink with their heads to the water are showing that they are careless in the face of danger.

Verses 9 – 15. During the night, God tells Gideon to go against the Midianite camp, but he says if Gideon is afraid to attack, he should take his servant and sneak down to the camp and listens to what he hears. Gideson does and hears a Midianite tell his friend about a dream he had and then interprets it to mean that God has given the Midianites into Gideon’s hands. So Gideon returns to his camp and arouses his men to attack the

Midianites.

Verses 16 – 25. Gideon tells his men to take a torch in a clay pot in one hand and a trumpet in the other hand and go against the Midianites. He divides the men into three companies of 100 each and has them sneak down to three sides of the camp. Then, at his command, they are to blow their trumpets and break the clay pots. When they do this, God caused the Midianites to fight against each other. They the Midianites flee and the Israelites pursue them. The men of Ephraim are called out to intercept them at the Jordon River. There they capture the two Midianites leaders, Oreb and Zeeb, kill them and take their heads to Gideon.

Chapter 8

Verses 1 – 4. The Ephraimites want to know why Gideon has treated them disfavor by not calling them to the original attack on the Midianites. But Gideon soothes their hurt feelings by telling them that they did what he could not, because they had captured Oreb and Zeeb.

Verses 5 – 17. Gideon and his men are tired and hungry so they ask the officials of Succoth to give them some bread. But the officials refuse because two of the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, are still free and might seek to harm the town for helping Gideon. Gideon promises to repay their unkindness with thorns and briers after he has captured the kings. Then he makes the same request of the men of Peniel. They, too, refuse so Gideon promises to tear down their tower for their unkindness after he defeats the kings.

The kings are at Karkor with only 15,000 men because they had already lost 105,000 of the 120,000 men they originally had. Gideon sneaks around behind them and attacks from a direction they didn't suspect, routing the entire army and capturing the kings. Gideon then returns to Succoth with the kings tied up, and asking a young man from there who the leaders are. Then he punishes them with thorns and briers for their taunting refusal to help him. Gideon then goes to Peniel and tears down their tower just as he promised and also killed the men of the town.

Verses 18 – 21. Gideon asks the kings what kind of men they had killed at Mt. Tabor. They try to get on his good side so he will spare their lives by saying, "Men like you, each one with the bearing of a prince." But Gideon isn't impressed by their flattery and tells them that those were his brothers and if they had spared their lives, he would spare theirs. So he tells Jether, his oldest son to kill the kings. But Jether was afraid so he wouldn't do it. The kings taunt him about not having the strength of a man because he wants someone else to do his killing. So Gideon stepped forward, killed them, and took the ornaments from the necks of their camels.

Verses 22 – 27. When it says the Israelites asked Gideon to rule over them, that probably means the tribe of Mannasseh and perhaps one or more of the tribes that he led into battle against the Midianites were asking him to establish a kingly line. I doubt that it was the entire nation of Israel. Gideon responds by refusing on behalf of his entire family, saying that only God will rule over them. But he did ask for a gold earring from each of their share of the plunder of the Ishmaelites. That says the Midianites were descendants of Abraham's first son with Sara's handmaiden, Hagar. They gladly agree and the weight of the gold he collects is 1,700 shekels (about 43 pounds). Gideon takes this gold and makes it into an ephod (a breastplate) which he places in his hometown of Ophrah. This becomes a snare to the people because they bow down before it in worship, which means they are disobeying God's command not to have any other gods before him. They were probably only using it as a focus of what God had done for them as they worshiped him at the beginning, but eventually it became the object of worship instead of God. That is something that the Church has to be careful about when they use the cross, or a particular style of worship, or anything else as the focus of their worship of God. It can become the object of worship instead of God himself.

Verses 28 – 35. So the land enjoys peace to forty years until Gideon dies. But, because they are already in the habit of worshiping Gideon's ephod, it is an easy step to go back to worshiping other gods like Baal-Berith, the fertility god. And they soon forget that they were so thankful to Gideon and his family for leading them in

victory over the Midianites that they wanted to make he and his family into a line of kings ruling over them.

Chapter 9

Verses 1 – 6. Abimelech, one of seventy sons of Gideon (Jerub-Baal – let Baal contend), proposes to the people of Shechem that he be king rather than let any, or all, of his brothers rule because his mother (a concubine) was one of them. The people agree that this would be good, so they give him 70 shekels of silver (1 ¾ lbs) from the temple of Baal-Berith (a fertility god). Abimelech hired “reckless adventurers” (thugs) to be his followers (gang). He went to his father’s home and murdered his brothers on a single stone, but his youngest brother, Jotham, escaped. Then, the people of Shechem and Beth Millo crown Abimelech king at the pillar in Shechem which was the place where Abraham made a covenant with God. Shechem is also the place where Joshua held a covenant renewal for the Israelite people before he died. So Abimelech tried to have the appearance of God’s blessing while disobeying God’s commands not to have other gods before him, not to murder, and not to covet.

Verses 7 – 21. Jotham comes out of hiding to confront the people about choosing Abimelech as king. From Mount Gerizim he tells them a parable (the first in the Bible) about trees seeking a king to rule over them. Mount Gerizim was the place in Joshua 8:30 – 35, from which blessings were spoken over the Israelite people if they would obey God. Mount Ebal was a nearby mountain where cursings were spoken over the Israelite people if they disobeyed God. Jotham is pronouncing a curse upon the people from the mount of blessing because the people have not acted honorably and in good faith toward Gideon and his family.

Verses 22 – 49. After three years governing the area, God sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the people as a means of avenging the crime of murder against Gideon’s family just as Jotham had cursed the people. The citizens set up men to ambush and rob everyone who passes by Shechem. Then many of the Shechemites begin to follow Gaal and his brothers and they curse Abimelech during a grape harvest festival to their pagan god. When the governor of the city hears what they have done, he informs Abimelech and suggests he bring men and lie in wait for him to come out of the city in the morning. Abimelech does what he suggests and when Gaal exits the city, he brings his four company of men down out of the mountains and valley. Gaal sees it and warns the governor who incites Gaal to fight against Abimelech whom he has cursed at the festival. Gaal does go into battle and loses. The next day, Abimelech fights against the rest of the people in the city when they come out to work in the fields and continues the battle against the city until he captures it. Then he kills all the people and destroys the city, throwing salt over the land so it is unusable. Some of the people of Shechem, hearing about the battle, flee to the tower stronghold of the temple of El-Berith. Abimelech and his men cut wood from Mount Salmon, piles them up against the temple stronghold, and set it afire so about 1000 men and women die there.

Verses 50 – 57. Next, Abimelech goes to battle with the city of Thebez, but the people flee to their city tower for safety. Abimelech storms the tower to set it on fire, but a woman drops a millstone from the tower and it hits him on the head, cracking his skull. So that it could not be said that a woman had killed him, Abimelech had his servant take a sword and kill him. Thus God brought the curse Jotham spoke upon the people of Shechem and upon Abimelech because of their wickedness and treachery.

Chapter 10

Verses 1 – 2. This simply tells that Tola led the people for 23 years and that in a time of peace he did nothing noteworthy. He didn’t lead the people in doing evil, but he also didn’t lead them in following God and driving out those who did evil in disobeying God.

Verses 3 – 5. This tells that Jair led the people for 22 years and although he prospered, he did nothing to lead the people in obeying God and driving out those who did evil in disobeying God.

Verses 6 – 16. After these two leaders did nothing to lead the people closer to God and remove the worship of other gods, the people turned to worshipping the pagan gods of those around them. So, God hands them over to the Philistines and Ammonites who oppress them for 18 years until the Israelites cry out in their distress to God for mercy. They admit they have sinned by worshipping pagan gods. When God suggests that they let the gods they have been serving help them, they respond by restating that they have sinned against God and that they accept whatever he chooses to do to them in judgment, but they appeal to his mercy to save them. Then they back up their appeal by ridding themselves of the pagan gods and starting to obey God.

Chapter 11

Verses 1 – 3. Jephthah is the son of Gilead and a prostitute. For that reason, his brothers, the sons of Gilead and his wife, didn't consider Jephthah worthy of receiving any of Gilead's inheritance when he died. So, when they were all grown up, they drove him away from the family and city where they lived. So Jephthah fled to the area known as Tob (just SE of the Sea of Galilee) and settled there. When it says "adventurers" gathered around and followed him, it means that he became the leader of a band of men who lived by taking / stealing / robbing or otherwise taking advantage of other people and their difficulties. Today he would probably be called a gang leader on the city streets or a corporate raider on Wall Street.

Verses 4 – 11. Some time later, the Ammonites (descendants of Lot and his youngest daughter – Gen 19:38), who lived in the area east of the Jordan River from the Jabbok River to the Arnon River, began to battle and try to take the land of the Gileadites. The elders of Gilead went to Tob and asked Jephthah to come and be their commander to lead them in battle against the Ammonites. Jephthah reminds them that they were the ones who drove him out of town and asks why they are turning to him now. They won't be put off by his reminder, but again ask him to lead the fight and declare that he will become the leader of all who live in Gilead. Jephthah isn't sure that they really mean what they say about him becoming their leader, so they vow before God to make him their leader. So he returns to Mizpah with them where they all make a vow before God that he will be leader over them. Mizpah means "watchtower" or "lookout" and the place they went is probably the tower that Jacob and Laban set up just north of the Jabbok River as a watchtower of peace between them (Gen 31:45). This would be a meaningful and sacred site for the Israelite people and a place to which they would go (other than to the Tabernacle which was located at Shiloh) so they could seek the Lord's guidance or include him in something they were doing.

Verses 12 – 28. The first thing Jephthah does is send messengers to the Ammonites asking them why they are attacking (a diplomatic effort). The Ammonites reply that they want to take back the land that was taken from them when Israel came out of Egypt and first went into the land west of the Jordan River. Jephthah replies by recounting the history of that time. First, the Edomites (descendants of Esau – Jacob's twin brother) and Moabites (descendants of Lot and his older daughter) would not allow the Israelites to cross through their land on the way to Canaan, so they travelled all the way around the territory on the east side and camped on the north side of the Arnon River. At that time, the land north of there was ruled by Sihon, king of the Amorites (descendants of Emor, the fourth son of Canaan – Noah's grandson through Ham). The Israelites asked for permission to go through the land but Sihon came out and fought them instead. God allowed the Israelites to defeat the Amorites and capture all the land from the Arnon River to the Jabbok River and from the desert on the east to the Jordan River. Thus it became the first of the land that belonged to Israel and was given to Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh. (See Num 14 – 21) So Jephthah asks what right they have to the land since God took it from the Amorites and gave it to the Israelites. And then he reminds them that Balak, the son of the king of Moab didn't quarrel with the Israelites living in all the towns along the Arnon River and from Aroer (on the Arnon River) to Heshbon (due north of Aroer and directly east of Jericho and the Jordan River) and for 300 years didn't try to take the land. So, he states that Gileadites haven't wronged the Ammonites and says that God will be their judge. The Ammonites don't even bother to respond to these messengers which indicates they are not going to stop fighting to take the land.

Verses 29 – 33. So the Spirit of God comes upon Jephthah leading him to advance against the Ammonites. Jephthah, wanting to win God’s favor so that the Israelites would be victorious over the Ammonites, decides to make a vow that if the Lord will give them victory, he will sacrifice as a burnt offering to God whatever first comes out of the door of his house to meet him when he returns. This was an unnecessary because the Spirit of the Lord had already come upon him and lead him to advance against the Ammonites, so it was obvious God was on his side and that he would win. (It was also a foolish vow as we will see in the next section.) God does give the Ammonites into Jephthah’s hands and he devastated twenty towns from Aroer (along the Arnon River) to Abel-Keramim (near Rabbah NE of Heshbon). Notice that the Ammonites were not wiped out, only subdued.

Verses 34 – 40. When Jephthah returns home victorious, the news of the victory has preceded them, and his daughter (his only child) come out of the house playing a tambourine and dancing to celebrate her dad’s victorious return. Only then does Jephthah realize the foolishness of the vow he made before going into battle. And he grieves because he has made a vow to the Lord which he cannot break.

There are great differences between expositors about what Jephthah’s vow was and whether it meant that his daughter was killed and burnt as a sacrifice to God. Some say that is exactly what is meant and what was done. Others say his vow wasn’t to sacrifice as a burnt offering whatever came out of his house but that he, at the time of the vow made a burnt offering to God, or that he intended to make a burnt offering after he returned and that he was dedicating to the service of God whatever came out of his house when he returned, whether it was a person or an animal.

Numbers 30:2 says, “When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.” So, if Jephthah really did vow to sacrifice as a burnt offering the first thing that came out of his house when he returned, then it would seem that he would have to do what he vowed or come under the wrath of God. But wait! Leviticus Chapter 1 specifies that a burnt offering has to be an unblemished male animal of the herd (cattle) or the flock (sheep / goats), or it has to be a dove or young pigeon. And Leviticus 18:21 says, “Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God.” And Leviticus 20:2 – 3 says, “Any Israelite or any alien living in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech must be put to death. . . . for by giving his children to Molech, he has defiled my sanctuary and profaned my holy name.” Obviously, God does not allow human sacrifice. Now if you are thinking about Abraham taking Isaac up to mount Moriah to sacrifice him, remember that God used that as a test of Abraham’s faith and stopped him before he could actually sacrifice Isaac.

Jephthah seems to know the Torah since he practically quotes the history of Israel’s coming into the land from it when trying to use diplomacy to stop the Ammonites. So why would he make such a rash vow to sacrifice whatever first comes out of his house to meet him. Surely he would have thought it would be his wife or daughter and he would have known human sacrifices were not allowed by God. That is why many expositors say he intended to dedicate whatever came out of his house to god’s service and that the burnt sacrifice was either sealing his vow before the battle or would seal the dedication after the battle. So many expositors take his vow to mean that his daughter would be dedicated to God and thus would never be able to marry. And they use what is told in the remainder of Chapter 11 as proof of that because she mourns that she will never marry and because it says she was a virgin.

But wait!! There is still more to consider. Leviticus Chapter 27 tells how something that has been dedicated to God by a vow can be redeemed. Verse 5 says, “If it is a person between the ages of five and twenty, set the value of a male at twenty shekels and of a female at ten shekels.” And the rest of the chapter tells how to redeem other things that have been dedicated to God. So if Jephthah’s vow only dedicated to God what first came out of his house, he could have redeemed it, whether it was a person or animal.

So we will always have a perplexing end to this part of Jephthah’s story. Why did he make a rash vow? What did he really vow – the dedication of what came out of his house or to sacrifice it as a burnt offering? And why

didn't he redeem what he had vowed if not redeeming meant his daughter had to live as a virgin for the rest of her life? And the answer is that we will never be able to answer those questions.

Chapter 12

Verses 1 – 7. After subduing the Ammonites, Jephthah is faced with dissension and threats from the tribe of Ephraim (the brother of Manasseh, the ancestor of the Gileadites). Jephthah answers their threat to burn his house down over his head by saying that he called for their help when he went against the Ammonites but that they had refused. We don't find out about that before this time in the story. Obviously, the Ephraimites are not impressed with his words because they call the Gileadites renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh. Essentially, they are calling the Gileadites traitors. So Jephthah calls his people together and they fight the Ephraimites. The Ephraimites live on the west side of the Jordan River, so the Gileadites take control of the crossing point so no one can cross without their approval. And to determine who is an Ephraimite and who isn't, they ask them to say "Shibboleth" which means "a stream." The Ephraimites must have had a speech problem which didn't allow them to say the "sh" sound, so when they tried to say it, the word sounded like "Sibboleth" (without the "h"). Anyone who couldn't say the word correctly, was killed and in that way they avenged themselves against the Ephraimites.

Jephthah only lead his people for six years before he died.

Verses 8 – 15. Here we are told of three more "judges" or "leaders." The first is Ibzan who lived in Bethlehem. He had thirty daughters whom he gave in marriage to men outside of his clan, and thirty sons for whom he brought in women for them to marry that were from outside the clan. If marriage outside his clan means with people who were not Israelites, then he disobeyed God. If outside his clan means people from the other tribes of Israel, then he didn't disobey God but he showed that he didn't respect his own tribe. And he led the people for seven years before he died and nothing is said that indicates he did anything of any importance.

The second "judge" is Elon from the tribe of Zebulun. Again, nothing is said that indicates he did anything of any importance. He just led for ten years and died.

The third "judge" is Abdon. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys so that indicates he was wealthy and used his wealth to indulge his children and grandchildren. Nothing else is said to indicate that he did anything of note. Since he is buried in Ephraim after he dies, that would indicate he was an Ephraimite.

Chapter 13

Verses 1 – 7. Seven times Israel has rebelled against God and fallen into apostasy by worshipping pagan gods. This time it is the Philistines which God uses to punish and oppress Israel for 40 years. The Israelites were their own worst enemy. Without the people recognizing their disobedience and crying out to God for help, God seems to decide that now was the time to start bringing them back to himself. So the Angel of the Lord (Jesus – see 13:22, Jesus is the way God interacts with the physical universe) appears to a woman who was sterile and could not have children, and tells her that she is going to have a son and that he is to be a Nazirite from birth and will begin the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines. The woman tells her husband, Manoah, what God has told her.

To be a Nazirite meant he would be different, separated, and set aside for God's use. He was not to drink wine or fruit of the vine and not even eat grapes or raisins. (Num 6:1) He wasn't to come near or touch a dead body, whether animal or human because that would make him unclean before the Lord. (Num 6:6 – 7) And he wasn't to cut his hair. (Num 6:5) Why? In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes "Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him." (1 Cor 11:14) Having long hair for a man was an act of humility and self abasement that he was taking shame upon himself.

Verses 8 – 25. Manoah asks God to send the angel back to tell he and his wife how to raise the son they are to have. God answers his prayer and appears to them. He reiterates the requirement that she is not to eat anything of the grape vine nor anything that is unclean. Manoah wants to prepare a meal for the “visitor,” but he declines, saying he will not eat any of their food. So Manoah asks him to remain while he prepares a burnt offering to God. The Angel remains and Manoah asks to know his name. To which he replies, “It is beyond understanding (or is wonderful).” Manoah takes a young goat and a grain offering, and sacrifices the goat on a rock. That would include setting the offering on fire. While Manoah and his wife watch, the Angel of the Lord ascends in the flame. That causes Manoah and his wife to fall with their faces to the ground in worship. When the Angel doesn’t reappear to them, Manoah cries out that they are doomed to die because they have seen God. But his wife says, if God had wanted to kill them, he wouldn’t have accepted the offerings nor would he have told them what he had. In the course of time, she gives birth to a son and they name him Samson, which means “Sunshine.” The boy grows and the Lord blesses him. When it says that the Spirit of the Lord begins to stir him, that indicates the Lord is beginning to move him to do the work of freeing the people from the rule of the Philistines.

Chapter 14

Verses 1 – 7. Samson doesn’t listen to the advice of his parents about not taking a wife from the Philistines. Thus Samson dishonors them. On his way to Timmah with his parents to see about getting the Philistine woman as his wife, they are attacked by a young lion. Since Samson was with his parents when the lion charged at him, he must have run off into the vineyards with the lion chasing him out of the sight of his parents. Then, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, he turned on the lion, and he was able to tear it apart. You might wonder if this broke his Nazirite vow, why would God send his Spirit upon Samson to kill the lion. Remember, God said in verse 5 that Samson would begin the deliverance from the Philistines. That meant he would be used by God to kill Philistines and thus touch dead bodies. Here, chasing the lion and killing it protected Samson’s parents, even though it meant touching a dead body. God knew there would be situations that would break a Nazirite vow so he made provisions for how the person could be restored and continue with his vow (Num 6), but Samson didn’t do that. Instead, he tried to hide that he had broken the vow. But that wasn’t his only breaking of the vow.

Verses 8 – 20. On his way back with his parents to marry the Philistine woman, Samson leaves he parents to go thru the vineyard where he killed the lion. He sees the carcass, but doesn’t pass by. He not only touches the dead lion, but he sees honey bees have made a hive in it, so he reaches in, takes some honey and eats it. Now, he not only has touched something unclean, he has also eaten something unclean. Both break his vow and he again hides it from his parents. This is the wedding, and all the guests are Philistines so he's with the wrong crowd. The riddle he gave was based on his experience with the lion. There's no way they could figure it out without knowing what had happened. So they go to his wife to get her to entice him to give up the answer. They threaten to kill her and her whole family. That's when she turned on the tears, and got her answer. When the men of the town give him the correct answer to his riddle, Samson gets mad, calls his new wife a heifer (cow), and then goes out, kills 30 Philistines to pay off the debt, and goes storming back to his parents’ home without his wife.

Chapter 15

Later that year, Samson goes to the house of his wife’s parents, probably because he wants to take her to his home now. But the girl’s father won’t let him and says he has given her to Samson’s best man at the wedding because he thought Samson hated his daughter when he stormed out without her. He offers her younger sister to be Samson’s wife. But Samson replies that he really has a reason to get even with the Philistines. So he goes out, catches 300 foxes, ties their tails together, fastens a torch to each pair, and turns the foxes loose in the Philistines’ grain fields so that not only is the grain burned but also the vineyards and olive trees. When the Philistines learn who did this and why, they respond by burning the man and his daughter to death. So Samson

goes out and kills many more Philistines and then goes and hides in a cave. In retribution, the Philistines go out to make war against the people of Judah, so 3,000 men from Judah go to the cave to get Samson and turn him over to the Philistines. Samson agrees to let them bind him and take him to the Philistines, but when they get there and the Philistines approach, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him, he breaks loose, takes the jawbone of a donkey and kills 1,000 Philistines. Then, as he rests, he asks God if he is now to die of thirst. So God provides water to refresh him.

Chapter 16

Verses 1 – 3. Oh how the plot thickens. He is looking for trashy women, and they aren't hard to find. Satan never tells us what will really happen if we follow what he tempts us to do. Sin has a blinding, desensitizing effect. Sexual sins are unique! Their consequences go on and on. Forgiveness is still possible, but the consequences continue.

Verses 4 – 22. Now Samson is dwelling in Delilah's tent and she tries to learn the secret of his strength. He toys with her, telling her lies [tie me with thongs / tie me with new ropes / tie my hair in locks]. But each time when the Philistines come to get him, he breaks free. Notice with each lie he gets closer to the truth. Finally Samson caves in and tells her the truth. He breaks the final part of his Nazirite vow. Now it's too late, the point of no return. And here is the saddest verse (20) "He did not know that the Lord had left him." When you continue to play around with disobeying God, you reach a point that you don't even know how far from God you are. Samson is weak because he has dishonored his parents, deserted his Nazirite vow, and defiled his purity so that he is deluded about his power, all because he disobeyed God. Consequently, when the Philistines come to get him Samson is unable to fight them. They seize Samson, gouge out his eyes, bind him with bronze shackles, and make him take the place of a donkey or ox, pushing the stone that grinds grain.

Verses 23 – 31. Some time later, the Philistines gather for a great feast and a sacrifice to Dagon, their god. They think Dagon has delivered their enemy, Samson, into their hands so they bring him to the temple so he can be paraded before them in shame. But, during this time, Samson's hair has been growing back and Samson has recognized his disobedience of God – he has repented. So as he is standing between two pillars of the temple, he asks God to give him strength just once again so he can avenge himself on the Philistines and die with them. God grants his request. Samson pushes on the two pillars he is standing between, causes them to fall and the entire temple falls on the Philistines gathered there. And with that effort, he kills more Philistines than he did in the rest of his life (and remember, he killed 1000 all at one time and killed many more in other battles).

Chapters 17 – 21 Overview

Chapters 1 – 2 recounted that the Israelites had not done what the Lord had told them to do and drive out all the people in the Promised Land. Chapters 3 – 16 showed how the Israelite people, with God's help through the leadership of an individual and sometimes in spite of a leader's do-nothing leadership, dealt with problems God allowed to come upon them because they didn't drive out all the people from the Promised Land. The period of these judges / leaders was about 300 years. Chapters 17 – 21 are not in historical sequence after the time of Samson. Unlike the previous chapters which show the external conflicts, these show the internal problems that occurred during the time of the judges.

Chapter 17

Verses 1 – 6. A woman of Ephraim has had 1100 shekels (about 28 lbs) of silver stolen from her by her son who has heard her utter a curse about it. Her son, Micah, returns the silver to his mother. She blesses him for returning it, dedicates it to the Lord, and gives a silversmith 200 shekels (5 lbs) of the silver to have cast into an idol which Micah places in his house. Micah also has an ephod and some other idols made and then installs one of his sons to be a priest in his homemade temple shrine. Note verse 6, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." That is a summary statement of the internal problems that Israel had during the

days of the judges. Although appearing to be worshippers of Yahweh (God), Micah and his mother are really idolaters, making images and household gods in defiance of God's commands, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them." (Ex 20:3 – 5a)

Verses 7 – 13. A Levite, whom we discover in 18:30 is named Jonathan and is the descendant of Moses, is traveling around looking for a town in which to stay. Remember that the Levites were not given part of the Promised Land as their inheritance, but they were given 48 cities spread throughout the land. (Num 35; Josh 21) Micah invites him to stay with him to be his personal priest and he will provide food, clothing, and 10 shekels of silver each year for him. The Levite agrees so Micah installs him as his priest and considers that now the Lord will be good to him since he has a Levite as his priest. Aaron was the first High Priest and his descendants were to be the only descendants of Levi who presented offerings and made sacrifices to God. (Num 18:7) Compare Micah's thoughts with what Moses gave as the Lord's command in Deut 12:13 – 14. "Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. Offer them only at the place the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you." [Everyone did as he saw fit.]

Chapter 18

Verses 1 - 6. The tribe of Dan was given the territory to the NW of Judah, near to the Philistines. (Josh 19:40 – 48) But they were not able to take the land because of the strength of the Philistines. So they sent 5 warriors to explore the Promised Land and find a territory in which they could settle. They enter the hill country of Ephraim and spend the night at Micah's house. They recognize the voice of the Levite that Micah has as his priest and ask why he is there. The Levite tells them what Micah has done for him and they ask him to inquire of God whether their journey will be successful. The priest replies that their journey has the Lord's approval. It would be interesting to know if their journey really had the Lord's approval since the priest of whom they ask the question is not following God's commands. He is using an idol in his worship, participates in Micah having household gods, and presumably is making offerings at a place other than where the Tabernacle is located (in Shiloh).

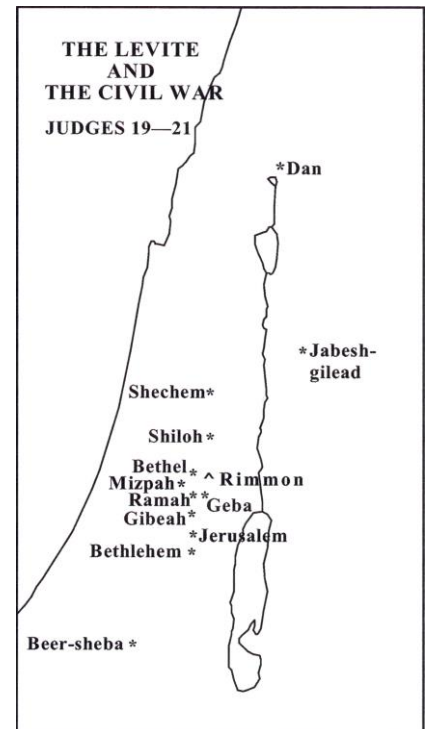
Verses 7 – 10. The 5 warriors travel all the way north to the town of Laish where they find an unsuspecting people living on prosperous land and without any attachment or protection from any other people. Then they return to their brothers and encourage them to go up and take the land for themselves.

Verses 11 – 26. Six hundred armed men set out. With the 5 warriors leading them, they travel to Micah's house so they can take the carved image, cast idol, household gods, and ephod for their own. When the Levite asks them what they are doing, they entice him to come and be the priest for an entire tribe rather than just one family. The Levite likes the idea so he helps them take everything and continue on their journey. Micah discovers what they have done and calls his neighbor to go with him and overtake the Danites. He confronts them about what they have taken from him and asks "why." They reply that he shouldn't argue with them or some of the men will attack and kill them. Since the Danites are too strong for him, Micah returns home. Again we see that the people are doing whatever they want without any thought about what God has commanded them to do.

Verses 27 – 31. The Danites proceed to Laish (also called Leshem in Josh 19:47). They attack and burn the town to take possession of it (probably killing all of the residents). Then they rebuild the town and rename it Dan after their ancestor. This now becomes the northernmost settlement of the Israelites (the southernmost was Beersheba). Here we are told that the priest's name was Jonathan, that he was the son / descendant of Gershom and thus the son / descendant of Moses, and that the house of God (Tabernacle) is in Shiloh. Gershom was born before Moses returned to Egypt to lead the people out, so by the end of the Exodus he would have been over 40 and at least some of his children would have been born during the Exodus. The time of Joshua leading the people was about 25 years, so unless Jonathan was born to Gershom at the end of the Exodus or soon after the entry into the Promised Land, he would not have been a young man as indicated in 17:7.

Chapter 19

Verses 1 – 15. A Levite living in the remote country of Ephraim takes a concubine from Bethlehem. This is another example of everyone doing as they saw fit (Jud 17:6). This may be the same Levite the story is told about in chapters 17 and 18 since he is living in the remote area of Ephraim and was familiar with Bethlehem so he probably had lived there. Taking a concubine (a live-in wife but not actually married) shows that he isn't following God's will. The concubine is unfaithful to him and then returns to her father's home in Bethlehem. It is four months before the Levite goes to persuade her to return with him. Her father gladly welcomes the Levite and prevails upon him to stay for a while. After three days, the Levite gets up early, prepared to leave, but the girl's father prevails upon him to stay for something to eat and then convinces him to stay another night. The next day he again prepares to leave and the father tries to convince him to stay another night but he refuses. So the Levite, his servant, and the girl start for his home, but it is not so early so that by the time they are approaching Jebus (later called Jerusalem after David captured the city.) the day is almost gone. The servant wants to stay the night in Jebus, but the Levite doesn't want to because it is not an Israelite city yet so they are strangers to the inhabitants. He wants to go on to Gibeah, an Israelite city in the area of tribe of Benjamin. They arrive just after the sun set and stop in the town square expecting someone to invite them to stay the night with them. That was the custom since there were no "official" inns. But no one invites them to stay the night.



Verses 16 – 30. Finally an old man comes in from working in his fields. When he learns they are traveling from Bethlehem to the house of the Lord (Shiloh), he invites them to stay the night with him and, even though they have food for their donkeys, he does not let them feed the donkeys their own food, but supplies it for them. While they are eating and enjoying themselves, some evil men of the city pound on the old man's door, demanding that he send the traveler out so they can have sex with him (sodomy). This sounds like what happened to Lot and the angels in Sodom.

The old farmer asks them not to do such a disgraceful thing since the man is his guest. So he offers his own virgin daughter and the man's concubine instead of the man, but the evil men would not listen. So the Levite sent his concubine out and the evil men rape and abuse her through the night until the break of dawn. This shows how women were treated more like possessions to be used rather than someone to be loved and protected.

When the evil men are finally finished abusing her, the concubine crawls back to the door of the old farmer's house and apparently dies. When the Levite arrived home, he cut up the woman into twelve pieces and sent a piece to each of the tribes. This was his way of announcing to the entire nation what these men of Gibeah had done. And all the people that saw, exclaimed that such a thing has not been done since the day the Israelites had departed Egypt. And they asked what should be done about it.

Chapter 20

Verses 1 – 11. Members of all the tribes except Benjamin (400,000 armed men from Dan to Beersheba) gathered at Mizpah to hear about the atrocity they had seen (a woman cut to pieces). They ask the Levite how this awful thing happened and he recounts the events for them. Then he asks them for their verdict and they reply that none of them will go home until they go against Gibeah. So they take a tenth of the men, representative from every tribe, to get provisions for the army of 400,000. Then the army was to go up against the city of Gibeah and give them what they deserved (death) for their vile actions.

Verses 12 – 17. The tribes sent men throughout the tribe of Benjamin asking that the wicked men of Gibeah be surrendered to them for the evil they had committed. But the Benjamites refused. They gathered 26,000 from all their towns and 700 from Gibeah and came together at Gibeah to fight the Israelite army which numbered 400,000.

Verses 18 – 48. The Israelites inquire of God, “Who shall fight the Benjamites first.” And God replies, the tribe of Judah. So the army sets up camp near Gibeah and the next day go to battle. The Benjamites come out of Gibeah and kill 22,000 that day. The Israelites weep before the Lord until evening and ask if they should go to battle again against their Benjamite brothers. The Lord replies to go. So they go to battle the second day, and the Benjamites kill 18,000. Then the Israelites go to Bethel (where the ark of the covenant is located with Phinehas and Eleazar, Aaron’s sons, ministering before it) and ask whether they should go to battle again against their Benjamite brothers. Again the Lord says to go, but adds that he will give them into their hands. So the Israelites again set up battle lines, but this time they also set up an ambush. When the Benjamites come out to battle and start to inflict casualties, the army starts to withdraw and lures the Benjamites farther away from Gibeah. When they are lured far enough away, 10,000 men attack the city and set fire in it. When the Benjamites see the smoke, they realize the disaster that has come upon them and they flee toward the rock of Rimmon. That day 25,000 Benjamites are killed, but 600 escape into the desert and stay at the rock of Rimmon for four months. The Israelite army go throughout the territory of Benjamin, putting all the towns to the sword, killing the animals and everything else they found and set the towns on fire.

Chapter 21

Verses 1 – 9. We learn first that when the Israelites gathered at Mizpah they had made a vow that none of them would give their daughter in marriage to a Benjamite because of what had happened at Gibeah. The Israelites go to Bethel (where the ark of the covenant is located) and weep bitterly before God because of what has happened. And they build an altar and present burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to God. They have to build an altar because the Tabernacle is located in Shiloh so that is where the altar for burnt offerings is located. Again this shows that they have not really been following God’s will because the ark of the covenant was supposed to be kept in the holy of holies in the Tabernacle. By the time of Samuel (1171 BC) the ark is again at Shiloh.

The assembled Israelites were grieved because they had almost wiped out one of the twelve tribes of Israel. They wondered how they would provide wives for the 600 Benjamites who were left since they had vowed not to give any of their daughters to be a Benjamite’s wife. They also wanted to know if anyone from all the tribes has failed to come to the assembly because when they were assembled at Mizpah they had made a solemn oath that anyone who failed to assemble should be put to death. They discovered that the town of Jabesh Gilead had not sent anyone to the assembly.

Verses 10 – 25. So the assembly send 12,000 fighting men to Jabesh Gilead and kill all the men, married women, and children there. And they take the 400 virgins they find and return to Shiloh. Then they send an offer of peace to the 600 Benjamite men at the rock of Rimmon. The men return and the women are given to them to be their wives. But there are not enough women, so the assembly decides on a plan to get wives for them. There is an annual festival of the Lord that is happening in Shiloh (probably the Passover) and the men are told to hide in the vineyards and wait for the virgin girls to come out dancing. Then the men are to rush out, grab one of the girls for their wife, and return to the territory of Benjamin. When the fathers or brothers of those girls complain, they would be told, “Do us a kindness by helping them, because we did not get wives for them during the war, and you are innocent, since you did not give your daughters to them.”

So the men of Benjamin (600) return with wives and rebuild the towns of their inheritance. Then all the assembled Israelites return to their homes. And the book ends with the observation that, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.”