



Judges for us is a book of beautiful stories: Deborah, Gideon, Samson and Delilah, Jephthah and his daughter, and towards the end the woman cut into pieces and the priest who sets his own business with the idols of his patron. These narratives that were passed on as popular stories serve as imaged history of an epoch which, although important, is not well known. How were the nomadic Hebrews, who entered Palestine after Moses, able to settle down as simple tillers of the land? And how were they to maintain their identity as a people chosen by God?

The land of Canaan with its fertile plains was most attractive; as was its religion – close to nature where sexual liberty was calmly accepted. Foreign entrants to the country were quickly at home in their new environment. What would become of the intransigent religion of an invisible God? These were dark ages from every point of view, when one might conclude that the fire of Mt. Sinai was truly extinguished.

The Liberators

What was to save the future for the tribes of Israel, was first of all, the aggressiveness of several among them (we have in mind the tribe of Ephraim whose feats are related in the book of Joshua); another factor was their being oftentimes at the mercy of plunderers and other nomads from the desert hoping to take their place. They remained faithful to Yahweh, having experienced on many occasions his saving intervention.

In their difficulties, the Israelites, unorganized and divided into rival camps, were to group themselves around the judges of tribes or around emerging born-leaders of the people, sometimes simple peasants but capable of achieving remarkable victories (see chapters 4 and 5).

These men are known in history as the “Shofetim,” a word that means both “chiefs” and “judges.” We must remember that in Hebrew culture and even in the Gospel, the word “to judge” also means “to govern” (Mt 19:28). For that reason those who may have never been members of a tribunal are called “judges.” Perhaps we should understand the word “judges” in another way: these persons were the instruments of God’s justice. The judges were not saints in the meaning we ordinarily give this word. Nevertheless Israel saw in them the saviors that God in his mercy was sending. To slay an enemy chief or kill the Philistines is no longer a religious act for us. If we keep in mind their time and their milieu, these persons had faith and were courageous amidst much cowardice. In awakening the passivity of their companions, they were preparing for a new phase of their history.

The coals under the ashes

In reading the Book we will not get an exalted idea of the moral and religious level of

1 • ¹ After the death of Joshua, the Israelites consulted Yahweh, “Who among us shall be the first to fight against the Canaanites?” ² Yahweh answered: “The tribe of Judah shall go up first, and I will give the land into their hands.” ³ So the people of Judah said to their brothers from the tribe of Simeon, “Help us conquer the part of the land that is allotted to us, and then we will conquer with you the region that is yours.” So they joined forces for the war.

⁴ When the tribe of Judah attacked the Canaanites and the Perizzites, Yahweh gave them into their hands; in Bezek they defeated ten thousand men.

⁵ In Bezek they encountered the lord of Bezek and fought against him. ⁶ The lord of Bezek fled but they pursued him. They captured him and cut off his thumbs and his big toes. ⁷ The lord of Bezek then said, “Seventy kings whose thumbs and big toes I cut off used to pick scraps under my table, now God has done to me according to what I have done.” They brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.

⁸ The tribe of Judah attacked the city of Jerusalem, and after killing its inhabitants they burned the city. ⁹ Afterwards they went down from Jerusalem to attack the Canaanites who lived in the mountains, in the Negeb and in the plains. ¹⁰ They also attacked the Canaanites who were in Hebron (Hebron was also called Kiriath-arba at that time), and they defeated Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmi. ¹¹ From there they marched against the inhabitants of Debir, a city which was also called Kiriath-sepher. ¹² Then Caleb made this promise, “To the one who takes Kiriath-sepher, I will give my daughter Achsah as wife.” ¹³ It was Othniel who took the city; he was the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, and Caleb gave him Achsah, his daughter, as wife.

¹⁴ When Achsah came to Othniel, she urged him to ask her father for a field. She alighted from her ass, and Caleb asked her, “What do you want?” ¹⁵ She answered, “What a gift this Negeb wilderness is! Give me also springs of water.” And Caleb gave her the Upper Springs and the Lower Springs.

¹⁶ The descendants of the Kenite, Moses’ father-in-law, also went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms to that part of the desert of Judah on the boundary of the Negeb near Arad, and they settled there with them.

¹⁷ Those from Judah and their brothers from the tribe of Simeon attacked the Canaanites who lived in Zephath, and they sacrificed Zephath in honor of Yahweh. For this reason, the city was named “Anathema.”

¹⁸ Judah seized Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron with their respective territories.

¹⁹ Although they conquered the mountainous regions with the help of Yahweh, they could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they fought with iron chariots. ²⁰ Following the orders of Moses, they gave the city of Hebron to Caleb who had cast out the three sons of Anak from there. ²¹ But the tribe of Benjamin did not succeed in expelling the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem; the Jebusites have stayed in Jerusalem until this day.

²² The people of Joseph went up against Bethel with the help of Yahweh. ²³ They sent men out to spy in Bethel, formerly called Luz, ²⁴ and they met a man coming out of the city. They said to him, “Tell us how we can enter the city, and we will not kill you.” ²⁵ He showed them the way. Then they entered and put the city to the sword, but set that man free together with his whole family. ²⁶ The man went to the land of the Hittites where he built a city which he named Luz which is its name to this day.

Ex
2:16
Num
24:21

Num
14:24

Gen
28:19

Jos
6:23

Israel at this time when traditional structures of family and nomadic tribe were rapidly losing value. Yet a deep renewal had begun. Two words enter the religious vocabulary: *heritage* and *sanctuary*.

Heritage: the nomad now has a land. He must see it as a gift from God, cultivate it, pass it on to his children. All religion will be linked to the land that God has given and he will conserve it inasmuch as he remains faithful.

Sanctuary: the Israelites who never had a Temple in the desert discover the places of worship of the Canaanites. They, too, will gradually group themselves for worship where Levites and priests will keep alive the sacred traditions and teaching of Moses. The example of a period when all is to be rediscovered is full of interest for us who now live at a time when all the moral and religious structures lived by our parents are collapsing. It is quite possible that behind the triumphant materialism many things are sprouting, preparing the renaissance of a Christianity more conscious of itself in an urbane, planetary, post-industrial and post-modern society.

²⁷ However, the tribe of Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth-shean and Taanach or the inhabitants of Dor, Ibleam and Megiddo. The Canaanites persisted in dwelling in these cities and in the towns that depended on them, and they kept their lands. ²⁸ But when the Israelites grew stronger, they exacted taxes from the Canaanites who stayed in their place. ²⁹ Neither did the tribe of Ephraim expel the Canaanites who lived in Gezer ³⁰ nor did the tribe of Zebulun drive out the inhabitants of Kitron and Nahalol. These Canaanites lived among them, but had to pay taxes to them.

³¹ Those of Asher did not expel the people of Acco, Sidon, Ahlab, Achzib, Helbah, Aphik or Rehob.

³² The tribe of Asher had to live in the midst of the Canaanites who occupied their territory, for they could not drive them out from that region. ³³ The same happened with the tribe of Naphtali that failed to drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and Beth-anath; they had to dwell in the midst of the Canaanites who lived in that region. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and Beth-anath paid taxes to this tribe.

³⁴ The Amorites did not allow the descendants of Dan to come down to the plain, so the latter had to live in the mountains. ³⁵ The Amorites also remained in Har-heres, Aijalon and Shaalbim, but when the tribe of Joseph grew stronger, they forced the Amorites to pay taxes. ³⁶ The territory of the Amorites extended from the slope of Akrabbim, to Sela and upward.

2 ¹ The Angel of Yahweh went up from Gilgal to Bochim where the Israelites

were gathered, and he said to them, “I made you go up from Egypt and brought you to the land I had promised your ancestors. I said to them, ‘Never will I break my covenant with you,² but you shall not make any covenant with the Canaanites and shall destroy their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my command. Why did you not obey me?³ Now, I will not drive out these nations before you. They shall be your oppressors and their gods shall be a trap for you.”

Ex
23:32
Dt
7:2
Ex
34:12

⁴ After the Angel of Yahweh had spoken, all the Israelites began to weep and cry. ⁵ For this reason, they named that place Bochim, which means “those who weep,” and they offered sacrifices to Yahweh.

⁶ When Joshua dismissed the Israelites, each one of them went to his inheritance to occupy the land. ⁷ The people served Yahweh during the lifetime of Joshua and of the leaders who outlived him, and who had witnessed all the great works of Yahweh for Israel. ⁸ Joshua, son of Nun, the servant of Moses, died at the age of one hundred and ten years. ⁹ They buried him at the boundary of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the mountains of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. ¹⁰ That whole generation died and another one came, but they did not know Yahweh or what he had done for Israel.

Jos
24:31

Summary of the book: unfaithfulness and punishment

• ¹¹ The Israelites treated Yahweh badly for they served the Baals instead. ¹² They abandoned Yahweh, the God of their ancestors who had brought them

• **1.1** The first chapter throws some light on the conquest. It was not as triumphal as it appears in the Book of Joshua, but slow and difficult. The Israelites did not obey the command to wipe out the pagans, though such a massacre would have protected their faith in the only God. In this regard, let us put aside our modern sense of respect for other nations. Israel’s world is one where survival depends on violence and the future of divine revelation in the world is in the hands of primitive nomads continuously threatened with destruction in a pagan environment.

Compare verses 8 and 21: there is no certainty as to this data.

• **2.1** The “Angel of Yahweh” goes up from Gilgal, the first Israelite sanctuary in Palestine beside the Jordan, to Bethel. We know that using the expression *Angel of Yahweh* is a way of naming Yahweh himself, whom the author knows cannot be seen.

The sin consists in not having destroyed the culture and religion of the Canaanites. Let us think of these beginnings: the true faith is given

to a few tribes who have neither chief nor organization, and who are surrounded by a more advanced but pagan culture. The temptation of idolatry was ever present. The Canaanite agriculturists practiced a very attractive religion which celebrated the forces of life and fecundity. They gathered together for rural feasts, assembling in the sacred woods and there had recourse to sacred prostitution to obtain rain and plentiful harvests from their gods, the Baals. It cost the Israelites something unaccustomed to such liberties, to refrain from joining their pagan neighbors in these celebrations.

This explains the affirmations of the author: all this pagan culture should be destroyed; on this point see the commentary of Joshua 6 which shocks us today.

• **11.** Here begins a second introduction to the Book of Judges wherein, after recalling the death of Joshua (see Jos 24:31), the real causes of events that will transpire are given.

The first cause of Israel’s disaster, why they cannot drive out the Canaanites, is their infidelity to Yahweh. All of the Bible will say that for us as

out of Egypt, and served other gods, the gods of the neighboring peoples. They bowed before those gods and offended Yahweh.

¹³When Yahweh saw that they had abandoned him to serve Baal and Ash-taroth, ¹⁴he became angry with his people and gave them into the hands of plunderers who left them in misery. He himself sold them to their enemies who completely surrounded the Israelites, so that these Israelites could no longer withstand them. ¹⁵Whenever they felt strong for an offensive, Yahweh would turn against them and send evil upon them, as he had warned them and sworn to do. And this caused much distress and anguish for the Israelites.

¹⁶Yahweh raised up “judges” (or liberators) who saved the Israelites from their exploiters. ¹⁷But neither did they obey those “judges” for they still prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. They soon left the way of their fathers who obeyed the commandments of Yahweh; they did not follow the way of their fathers.

¹⁸When Yahweh made a judge appear among his people, Yahweh was with him and saved them from their enemies. That lasted as long as the judge lived, for Yahweh was moved to pity by the lament of his people who were oppressed and persecuted. ¹⁹But

well the main cause of the misfortunes in our society is our unfaithfulness to God, even if it cannot be said without causing laughter even among believers.

The writer who later combined all these stories in a single book found a unifying thread which shed light on delays in the conquest and on the stages of liberation. He noted this sequence of events:

- the Israelites abandon Yahweh and fall into idolatry;
- because of this, Yahweh delivers them into the hands of their enemies;
- the Israelites acknowledge their errors and call on Yahweh;
- Yahweh then raises up a savior.

But once victory has been won, after a short period of peace the people forsake their mission once again. In this present world, there is no definitive liberation.

when the judge died, they again became worse than their ancestors – worshipping and serving other gods. They would not renounce their pagan practices and stubborn ways.

²⁰Yahweh was angry and he said, “These people broke the Covenant I made with their ancestors and they refuse to obey me. ²¹Well now, neither shall I drive out before them any of the nations left when Joshua died. ²²And I shall test the Israelites through those nations; then I shall know if they will finally follow my ways as their ancestors did.”

²³So Yahweh left those nations in their place and did not take the land immediately from them. This was also why he did not give them into the hands of Joshua.

3 ¹These are the nations that Yahweh let live in order to test the Israelites through them, that is to say, all the Israelites who had not known any of the wars in Canaan. ²He let these people live so that the generation of the children of Israel who had not known war before might learn how to fight. ³These people were the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites, the Sidonians and the Hivites of Mount Lebanon, from the mountain of Baal-hermon to as far as the entrance of Hamath.

⁴They remained to test Israel to see if they would observe the commandments that Yahweh had prescribed to their fathers through Moses. ⁵So the Israelites lived in the midst of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites,

This text summarizes the lesson found throughout the entire book and which we already read in Deuteronomy 4:1-31.

God always acts as an educator. Since Israel was still a very primitive people and could understand only what was seen and felt, God dealt with them through material rewards and punishment.

They had abandoned Yahweh to serve Baal. (this means: Lord) referred to any Canaanite god, especially to him who let the rain fall. The Asheroths were goddesses, particularly of the soil and of fertility.

So Yahweh raised up liberators. The chiefs or leaders who exercised authority for a time were called “judges” because, at that time, *to judge* a people and *to govern* meant one and the same thing (see Introduction).

Chapter 3 presents three of these *Judges*.

Hivites and Jebusites. ⁶The Israelites married the daughters of these people, gave their own daughters in marriage to the sons of these people and served their gods.

Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar

• ⁷The Israelites treated Yahweh badly; they forgot Yahweh, their God, and served the Baals and the Asheroths. ⁸Because of this, the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel and he left them in the hands of Cushanrishathaim, king of Aram, to whom they were subject for eight years.

^{1:3}
^{Jos}
^{15:17}
^{6:34}
^{11:29}
^{1S}
^{10:6}
^{5:31}
^{8:28}
⁹Then the Israelites cried to Yahweh, and he raised up from among them a liberator who saved them – Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother. ¹⁰The spirit of Yahweh was upon him and he led Israel. When Othniel went to war, Yahweh gave Cushanrishathaim, king of Aram, into Othniel’s hands. ¹¹Othniel won over the king and the land had peace for forty years. Then Othniel, son of Kenaz, died.

¹²The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, so he strengthened Eglon, king of Moab, so he could attack them; that was because they had treated Yahweh badly.

¹³Eglon joined the Ammonites and the Amalekites; they set out and marched together defeating Israel and taking the City of Palms. ¹⁴The Israelites became subject to Eglon, king of Moab, for eighteen years. ¹⁵But as they cried to Yahweh, he gave them a liberator – Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera, from the tribe of Benjamin.

The Israelites entrusted a gift to him to bring to Eglon, king of Moab. ¹⁶So, Ehud made for himself a two-edged dagger, one cubit long, and strapped it on his right thigh under his clothes. ¹⁷He then went to present the gift to Eglon, king of Moab. Eglon was a very fat man.

¹⁸When Ehud finished offering the present, he dismissed the men who had brought all the things. ¹⁹But when he arrived at the place of the Idols, near Gilgal, he went back to the king, and said to Eglon, “I have a secret message for you, O king.” Eglon, king of Moab, then declared, “Leave me alone!” And so everyone who was present left the room.

²⁰Then Ehud approached him, while the king was seated alone on his private roof chamber where it was cool. Ehud said to him, “Lord, I have a warning from God for you.” The king rose from his seat. ²¹Then Ehud, with his left hand, took the dagger from his right thigh and thrust it into the king’s belly. ²²The handle even went in with the blade and the fat closed over the blade, for Ehud did not draw the dagger out of his belly; and the dirt came out. ²³Ehud jumped out through the window after having locked the doors of the roof behind him.

²⁴When he had gone, the servants came and saw that the doors of the upper room were locked. They thought, “He must be relieving himself in the cool room.” ²⁵They waited for some time, but the doors of the roof

• **3.7** *They forgot Yahweh, their God, and served the Baals... and Yahweh left them in the hands of the king of Aram.* The biblical text often plays with these words: he who serves a false god by his own will will be a slave against his own will. Compare with 1 Samuel 7:3.

The spirit of Yahweh was on Othniel. See commentary on 11:1.

Whereas Othniel and Ehud fought against the Edomites, the Moabites and Ammonites, raiders from the other side of the Jordan, Shamgar encountered the Philistines. The latter had arrived by sea on the Palestinian coast at the same

time that the Israelites arrived from the desert. A people of superior civilization, who were well-armed and organized, the Philistines occupied the “Five Departments” i.e., the five cities of Gath, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron and Gaza, with the surrounding territories.

They dominated the rich plain that bordered the Mediterranean Sea, and their troops, time and again, harassed the Israelites who settled in the hills. Only King David would finally conquer them but their name would survive: *Palestine*, name of the land of Israel, comes from “Philistines.”

room remained closed. Finally, they took the keys and opened the doors: their lord lay on the floor dead.

²⁶Ehud had escaped while the servants waited for their king; he had passed through the place of the Idols and reached a safe place in Seirah. ²⁷When he arrived he had the trumpets sounded in the mountains of Ephraim and the Israelites went down from the mountains. ²⁸He stood before all of them and said, "Follow me, for Yahweh has given the people of Moab, our enemies, into our hands." They went down with him, barred the passages of the Jordan towards Moab and they let nobody pass.

²⁹They defeated Moab on that occasion, killing some ten thousand, all strong and brave men. Nobody was spared. ³⁰So on that day, Moab became subject to Israel, and the land remained peaceful for eighty years.

³¹Then Shamgar, the son of Anath, came; he killed six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. He, too, saved Israel.

Deborah and Barak

4 • ¹After Ehud died, the Israelites again treated Yahweh badly, ²so he left them in the power of Yabin, king of Canaan. Yabin reigned in Hazor, and the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoiim.

³Then the Israelites cried to Yahweh, for Yabin had nine hundred chariots of war, and had kept the Israelites oppressed for twenty years.

⁴At that time, Deborah, a prophetess and wife of Lappidoth, became judge.

⁵She used to sit under what was called the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah

and Bethel, in the land of Ephraim. There she resolved the complaints that the Israelites presented to her. ⁶And she sent and called for Barak, the son of Abinoam, who was from the town of Kedesh of Naphtali. She said to him, "This is the order of Yahweh: Go, gather the people on Mount Tabor and take with you ten thousand men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, ⁷for I am going to bring Sisera to you at the river Kishon with his chariots and men, and I will give him into your hands."

⁸Barak answered her, "If you will go, then I shall go, too; but if you do not go, I shall not go." ⁹Deborah answered, "I will go with you, but if you do it that way the honor of the victory will not be yours, for Sisera will be killed by a woman."

In this way Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰Barak summoned men from Zebulun and Naphtali and ten thousand followed him. Deborah also went up with him. ¹²When Sisera came to know that Barak had climbed Mount Tabor, ¹³he gathered all his chariots – nine hundred chariots of war in all – and all his men, and they set out from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the river Kishon.

¹⁴Then Deborah said to Barak, "Rise, for this is the day in which Yahweh shall give Sisera into your hands. Today, Yahweh goes before you."

So, Barak went down from Mount Tabor with his ten thousand men. ¹⁵Yahweh made him win over Sisera and his chariots and all his army. Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled, ¹⁶while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All of

• **4.1** *Yabin, king of Canaan*, was, in reality, king of the plain of Northern Canaan, called Jezrael. It was here that a great victory was won at the time of the Judges.

A woman, Deborah, is judge of Israel, i.e., she administers justice in the name of Yahweh. This is an exceptional case among a people where men hold all the positions of social and religious responsibility. She sends for Barak from the

north. He refuses to go alone, and seeks the cooperation of the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin among whom Deborah is installed.

Barak will be the "technician" of victory, and nothing more, since the word of God was not enough for him to commit himself totally. The Bible held Deborah in higher regard who inspired the uprising.

Sisera's army perished. Nobody was spared.

¹¹ At that moment, Heber the Kenite was encamped by the oak of Zaanannim, near Kedesh, after separating from the other Kenite descendants of Hobab, Moses' father-in-law. ¹⁷ There Sisera took refuge, and came running to the tent of Yael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Peace reigned between the Kenite tribe and the Canaanites of Yabin, king of Hazor.

¹⁸ Yael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come this way, my lord, have no fear." Sisera entered and Yael hid him under a blanket. ¹⁹ He asked her for a little water to quench his thirst. The woman opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him again with the blanket. ²⁰ And he said to her, "Stand at the entrance; and if anyone comes and asks you, tell him there is no one with you." ²¹ Sisera was very tired, so he slept. Then the woman took a hammer and a tent peg, went quietly to him and drove the peg into his temple till it was fixed into the ground. ²² When Barak arrived, Yael came out to meet him and said, "Come in, and I will show you the man you are looking for." He entered and saw Sisera dead with a tent peg through his temple.

²³ On that day Yahweh humbled Yabin before the Israelites. ²⁴ The Israelites did not rest until they destroyed all the Canaanites.

Song of Deborah

5 • ¹ On that day, Deborah and Barak, the son of Abinoam, sang this song:

² In Israel the warriors let their hair loose, in Israel they presented voluntary offerings for the war. Blessed be Yahweh!

³ Listen, O kings; pay attention, O princes. To Yahweh will I sing. To Yahweh, the God of Israel, will I offer praise.

⁴ When you went forth from Seir, O Yahweh, when you came from the camp of

Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens reeled and the clouds poured down rain. ⁵ The mountains rocked before Yahweh, before Yahweh – the God of Israel.

Is
68:7-
8
Ps
68:8

⁶ In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Yael, caravans ceased and travelers wandered through the byways. ⁷ There were no leaders in Israel until I, Deborah, awoke and arose as a mother of Israel.

⁸ They went after new gods, and war was upon them. There was hardly a shield or a spear for forty thousand men in Israel!

⁹ My heart is with the leaders of Israel, among the people who came willingly. Blessed be Yahweh!

¹⁰ Those who go riding on white asses, those who walk by the way, meditate! ¹¹ Hear the voice of those who divide the plunder near the watering place: they sing the favors God has done to Israel when the people of Yahweh march down to the gates.

¹² Wake up, Deborah, wake up! Wake up, wake up and begin to sing. Arise, Barak! And bring your songs, son of Abinoam.

¹³ Let the survivors of the people rule over their oppressors! May Yahweh be with me, stronger than the valiant! ¹⁴ Your roots, O Ephraim, are in Amalek; your brother Benjamin is behind you among your army. From Machir the commanders marched down; from Zebulun the leaders bearing the brass staff.

¹⁵ The leaders of Issachar are with Deborah, Issachar is with Barak; the people rushed forth following their footsteps into the plain.

There were long talks among the clans of Reuben. ¹⁶ Why did you choose to remain in your folds listening to the flute among the flock? The clans of Reuben could not decide.

¹⁷ Galaad remained on the other side of the Jordan, and Dan, why did you remain in your ships? Asher has remained on the seacoasts; he is quiet in his ports.

¹⁸ Zebulun, in turn, has scorned death; Naphtali went up to the battlefield, too. ¹⁹ The kings came to fight; the kings of Canaan fought at Taanach, near the waters of Megiddo, but they got no silver.

²⁰ From the heavens the stars fought, from their orbits they fought against Sisera. ²¹ The torrent Kishon dragged them away, the cold torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on without fear, my soul!

²² Hoofs of horses shake the ground: the galloping, galloping of his horses. ²³ Cursed be Meroz, said the angel of Yahweh, cursed

• **5.1** The "Song of Deborah" is one of the more ancient pieces of Hebrew literature. Composed a little after the events, it is a hymn to Yahweh the conqueror. This poem takes note of

the individualism of the tribes with only three of them joining together to confront the Canaanites.

Ex
19:16
Dt
33:2

be it, cursed be its inhabitants, for it came not to the aid of Yahweh, not like the heroes.

^{Jdt 13:18} ^{Lk 1:42} ²⁴ Blessed among women be Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite, among the women who dwell in tents, blessed may you be! ²⁵ He asked for water, she gave him milk; in the cup of honor she served him cream.

²⁶ She put her hand to the peg and with her right hand took the hammer of a workman. She struck Sisera, crushed his head, pierced and shattered his temple. ²⁷ He collapsed at her feet, and there he fell, and lay still.

²⁸ Sisera's mother looks out of the window, and she cries out behind the lattice: Why is his chariot late in coming? Why is his chariot delayed? ²⁹ The wisest of her women answers and says: ³⁰ Surely they are dividing the plunder – one captive, two captives for each warrior; colored cloths for Sisera as booty, colored cloths twice adorned with raised embroidery for a scarf.

^{Dn 12:3} ^{Mt 13:43} ³¹ So may all your enemies perish, O Yahweh, but may your friends be like the brilliant sun!

And there was peace in the land for forty years.

6 • ¹ The Israelites treated Yahweh badly, and Yahweh gave them into the hands of the Midianites for seven years, ² and the hand of the Midianites lay heavily on them.

Because of Midian, the Israelites made for themselves passages in the mountains, caves and shelters. ³ When the Israelites had sown, Midian would come with Amalek and with the people of the East. They would come up against the Israelites, ⁴ encamp in the lands of the Israelites and destroy all the fields as far as the entrance to Gaza. They would leave no provisions or sheep or ox or ass, ⁵ for they would come up like locusts in number, bringing with them their livestock and their tents. They and their camels were many and they invaded and plundered the land. ⁶ In this way, Midian subdued Israel and brought upon

it so great a misery that the Israelites cried to Yahweh.

⁷ When the Israelites cried to Yahweh because of Midian, ⁸ Yahweh sent them a prophet who said to them, "This is the word of Yahweh, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery. ⁹ I freed you from the hands of the Egyptians and from all your oppressors. I drove out before you the inhabitants of these lands, and gave their lands to you, ¹⁰ and I said to you, 'I am Yahweh, your God. Disregard the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell.' But you did not listen to me."

Call of Gideon

¹¹ The Angel of Yahweh came and sat under the sacred tree at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash, of the family of Abiezer. Gideon, the son of Joash, was threshing the wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. Ex 3

¹² The Angel of Yahweh said to him, "Yahweh be with you, valiant warrior." Jer 1:8

¹³ Gideon answered, "Please, my lord, if Yahweh is with us, why is all this happening to us? Where are the wonders which our fathers recounted to us? Did they not say that Yahweh led them up from Egypt? Why has he abandoned us now and given us into the hands of the Midianites?"

¹⁴ Yahweh then turned to him and said, "Go, and with your courage, save Israel from the Midianites. It is I who send you." ¹⁵ Gideon answered: "Pardon me, Lord, but how can I save Israel? My family is the lowliest in my Ex 3:11
1S 9:21

• **6.1** Chapters 6–9 relate the story of Gideon and his son, Abimelech. The former is called by Yahweh and acts as "Judge."

In two successful campaigns he ensures the freedom of his people. After Gideon, Abimelech rides on his father's fame in a bid to become king.

The Angel of Yahweh shows himself to Gideon in human form. Luke's Gospel will remind us of this paragraph: Luke 1:26-38.

Yahweh raises up a savior even where there is no hope. Gideon believes in Yahweh but lacks confidence: God may have done everything in the past, but Gideon does not see him acting in the present.

6:15. We find this attitude of Gideon in other texts of the Bible. The mission which God entrusts to us always goes beyond our human strength (Ex 3:11; Jer 1:6).

God gives hope when he gives a task to be done; he does not promise to do things for us but he invites us to take action: *by your valor, you will save Israel from the Midianites*. Thus Yahweh looks to the man he chooses. Then the young farmer Gideon discovers himself in this call and already knows that he will carry it through.

Verses 25-31 closely tie up the liberating mission entrusted to Gideon with the public confession of his faith in Yahweh, thereby making him worthy of God's commitment to him.

Gideon agrees to commit himself but wants to have the assurance that it is indeed Yahweh who speaks. He, therefore, asks for a sign which Yahweh grants him. Gideon is not like others who ask for signs in order to gain time because they doubt or do not want to be convinced (see Mk 8:11 and Lk 1:18).

Jer 1:6 tribe and I am the least in the family of my father.”

Jos 1:9 16 Yahweh said to him, “I will be with you and you shall defeat the people of Midian with one single stroke.” 17 Gideon said to him, “Please give me a sign that it is indeed you who speak. 18 Do not leave until I return with an offering and present it to you.” Yahweh responded, “I am going to wait for you here.”

19 Gideon went and prepared a young goat, took a measure of flour and baked unleavened bread. He put the broth in a pot and the meat in a basket, and went to present them to the Angel under the tree. 20 Then the Angel of God said to him, “Take the meat and the bread; put them on this rock, and pour the broth over them.” Gideon did so. 21 At that moment, the Angel of Yahweh extended the staff he was holding and touched the meat and the bread. Suddenly, fire blazed from the rock. The fire consumed the meat and the bread, and the Angel of Yahweh disappeared.

Gen 32:30 22 Gideon realized that he was the Angel of Yahweh and said, “Alas, O Lord Yahweh! I have seen the Angel of Yahweh face to face.” 23 But Yahweh said to him, “Peace be with you. Do not fear for you shall not die.” 24 Gideon built an altar to Yahweh in that place and called it Yahweh-Peace. To this day, it is still in Ophrah of Abiezer.

25 That same night Yahweh said to Gideon, “Take with you ten of your father’s servants and a seven-year-old bull. Destroy your father’s altar to Baal and cut the sacred pillar beside it. 26 Then build an altar to Yahweh on this knoll and sacrifice the bull to me, burning it with the wood from the sacred pillar.”

27 So, Gideon, with the help of his ten servants, did what Yahweh had commanded. But because he feared his family and the people of the town, he did it by night.

28 On the following day, the townspeople saw the altar of Baal broken into pieces and the sacred pillar cut down. They also saw that a bull had been sacrificed on the new altar. 29 So they asked one another and, as they investigated, found out that it was Gideon who had done it, 30 and they went to Joash and said, “Hand your son over to us for he must die; he destroyed the altar of Baal and cut down the sacred pillar.” 31 But Joash said to the angry crowd, “Are you going to defend Baal and save him? If he is god, let him defend himself when someone destroys his altar.”

32 On that day they gave Gideon the name Jerubaal which means: “Let *Baal defend* himself against Gideon, for Gideon destroyed his altar.”

33 All Midian, Amalek and the people of the East joined forces, crossed the Jordan and invaded the plains of Jezreel. 34 Then the spirit of Yahweh clothed Gideon with strength; he blew the trumpet and summoned the men of Abiezer. 35 He sent messengers throughout the whole territory of Manasseh and they joined him. The people of Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali also went out to meet them.

36 Gideon said to God, “If indeed you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, grant me this favor. 37 I am going to spread this woolen fleece on the threshing ground. If the dew falls only on the fleece while all the ground remains dry, then I shall know that you are to save Israel by my hand, as you have promised.”

38 So it was: Gideon rose at daybreak, squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew, filling a cup with water. 39 Gideon again spoke to God and said to him, “Don’t be angry with me if I dare to speak to you again. Allow me to make another test with the fleece: let it be dry only on the fleece and let dew come on all the ground.” 40 That night, Yahweh did so. The fleece remained dry and dew covered all the ground.

1K
18:27

3:10
11:29
13:25

Gen
18:30

7¹ Jerubaal, that is Gideon, rose early with all the people who were with him and they encamped beside the spring of Harod. The Midianite camp was farther north and extended from the hill of Moreb to the plains.

² Then Yahweh said to Gideon, “There are too many people with you. If I give the Midianites into their hands, the Israelites might think that they won over the Midianites by their own strength. ³ So summon your men and say to them that whoever is afraid may go home.” So twenty-two thousand men returned and only ten thousand remained.

Dt
20:8
1Mac
3:56

⁴ Yahweh said to Gideon, “There are still too many people. Take them down to the water and I myself will test them for you. If I say: This one shall go with you, he will go. And if I say: Not this one, he shall not go.” ⁵ So Gideon brought them down to the water and Yahweh told him, “Those who lap the water like a dog, you shall place on one side. And those who kneel down to drink, you shall place on the other side.”

⁶ Three hundred men lapped the water, and the rest knelt down to drink. ⁷ Then Yahweh said to Gideon, “I will help these three hundred men who lapped the water and give the Midianites into your hands. Let the rest return to their homes.” ⁸ The three hundred men took the pitchers and the horns of whom Gideon dismissed. Finally, Gideon and his three hundred men faced the Midianites who were encamped below the valley.

⁹ That night Yahweh said to him, “Rise and go down to the camp, because I have given it into your hands. ¹⁰ But if you are afraid to go down alone, set out for the camp with your servant Purah, ¹¹ and listen to what they say there. You shall be strengthened by it and then you shall attack the camp.” He then

went down with his servant Purah to the outposts of the guards of the camp.

¹² Midian, Amalek, and all the people of the East were in the valley, thick as locusts, and their camels were as countless as the sand on the seashore. ¹³ Gideon approached just as a man was recounting his dream to his comrade. Gideon heard him say, “I had a dream: a big loaf of barley bread rolled down into the camp of Midian, until it came to a tent, bumped against it and overturned the tent.” ¹⁴ His comrade answered him, “This cannot mean anything other than the sword of Gideon, son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given Midian and the whole camp into his hands.” ¹⁵ When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed, returned to the camp of Israel and said, “Arise, for Yahweh has given the camp of Midian into your hands.”

¹⁶ Gideon divided the three hundred men into three groups. Then he handed the trumpets to all and the empty pitchers with lighted torches inside. ¹⁷ He said to them, “Look at me, and do what I do. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. ¹⁸ When I and those who are with me blow the trumpets then blow yours all around the camp and shout, ‘For Yahweh and for Gideon!’”

¹⁹ With the hundred men with him, Gideon came to the Midianite camp just as the guards were changing shift at the beginning of the midnight watch. ²⁰ Then the Israelites smashed the jars, took the torches in one hand, and blew the trumpets they were holding in the other hand. After blowing the trumpets, the three groups shouted, “For Yahweh and for Gideon!” ²¹ Everyone stood in his place around the camp while the Midianites ran, shouting as they fled. ²² As the three hundred Israelites went on blowing the trumpets, Yahweh made the Midianites in the camp kill one another. Those who managed to escape went as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, and as far as the border of Abel-meholah opposite Tabbath.

• **7.4** *There are too many people with you.* These words of Yahweh help us believe that a small minority of militant people can bring about revolutionary change.

²³Then the Israelites from the tribe of Naphtali, Asher and the whole of Manasseh came to help Gideon, and they pursued Midian. ²⁴Gideon also sent messengers throughout all the mountains of Ephraim to say, "Come down to fight against Midian and block the passages as far as Beth-barah and along the Jordan." So, all the men of Ephraim came out and occupied the shallow waters as far as Beth-barah and along the Jordan. ²⁵They took the two leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb as prisoners. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon at the other side of the Jordan.

Gideon's second campaign

8 ¹The people of Ephraim said to Gideon, "Why didn't you call us when you went to fight against Midian?" They argued with him violently. ²He said to them, "What have I done in comparison with what you have done? Are not the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? ³Yahweh has given the leaders of Midian – Oreb and Zeeb – into your hands. What have I been able to do in comparison with what you have done?" After hearing this, their anger lessened.

⁴Gideon and his three hundred men came to the Jordan and crossed it. They were exhausted and hungry. ⁵So he said to the people of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the army that follows me, for they are exhausted and hungry, and I am still pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian."

⁶But the elders of Succoth answered, "Have you by chance already restrained the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna? Why should we give bread to your army?" ⁷Gideon answered them, "Well, when Yahweh has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hands, I will skin your flesh with the thorns and thistles of the desert."

⁸From there he went up to Penuel and made the same request. But they answered him as those of Succoth had. ⁹So Gideon said, "When I return victorious, I will tear down this tower."

¹⁰Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army of about fifteen thousand men, all that were left of the people of the East; a hundred and twenty thousand warriors had died! ¹¹Gideon went up by the road of the nomads, east of Nobah and Yogbehah, and fell upon Zebah and Zalmunna and their army. ¹²Zebah and Zalmunna fled. He pursued them, took the two as prisoners and scattered all their army.

¹³After the battle, Gideon, the son of Joash, returned through the slope of Heres. ¹⁴He caught a young man of the people of Succoth and questioned him. The young man wrote down for him the names of the seventy-seven leaders and elders of Succoth. ¹⁵Gideon went to the people of Succoth and said to them, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna about whom you mocked me by saying: Have you by chance already restrained the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna for us to give bread to your hungry troops?"

¹⁶So he took the elders of the town and punished the people of Succoth with thorns and thistles of the desert.

¹⁷He tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the inhabitants of the town. ¹⁸Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "What did the men whom you killed at Tabor look like?" They answered, "They looked like you, they looked like sons of kings." ¹⁹Gideon answered, "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As Yahweh lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you."

²⁰He said to Yether, his eldest son, "Courage, kill them!" But the youth did not draw his sword; he did not dare do it for he was still very young. ²¹So Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Rise and kill us yourself, for as the man is, so is his courage." Gideon arose and killed them, and took the ornaments off their camels' necks.

Gideon's error

²²The Israelites said to Gideon, "Since you have saved us from the Midianites, you shall be our king, and after you, your son and the descendants of your son."

²³But Gideon answered, "I will not rule over Israel, nor my son, for Yahweh is our king!" ²⁴Gideon added, "I will ask something from you. Let each of you give me an earring from your booty." Gideon said this for these Midianites wore gold earrings like all the Ishmaelites.

²⁵They answered him, "That we will gladly

• **8.22** The Israelites had to form a nation, and this stage would bring great progress after the anarchy created by disunited and disorganized tribes. For the first time in the Bible, the desire to have a king is hinted at in 8:22-31.

Perhaps those who edited the present book in

the last century of the kingdom of Jerusalem had been so mistreated by their rulers that they dreamt of a time in the past when there had been neither kings nor administrators. They thought that Israel, being the people of God, had no need of permanent chiefs like the rest of the nations,

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Ex
32:2

do.” Then Gideon spread out his cloak and every Israelite threw in an earring from his booty.²⁶ The gold earrings reached one thousand seven hundred pieces of gold; not counting the brooches, the rings, the expensive garments used by the kings of Midian, and the collars of the camels.²⁷ With this money, Gideon made an idol and put it in his city of Ophrah. People from all Israel began to go to that place, turning away from Yahweh. That was the trap into which Gideon and his family fell.

²⁸In spite of this, the Midianites were humbled in such a way that peace reigned in Israel for forty years during Gideon’s lifetime.²⁹ Gideon returned to Ophrah and remained in his house.³⁰ He had seventy sons of his blood, for he had many wives.³¹ A woman from the city of Shechem also bore him a son whom he named Abimelech.

³²Gideon the son of Joash died at a happy old age, and he was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, in Ophrah of Abiezer.

³³After the death of Gideon, the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals and took Baal-Berith as god.³⁴ The Israelites no longer remembered Yahweh, their God, who had freed them from the hands of all the enemies who surrounded them.³⁵ Neither were they grateful to the family of Jerubaa-Gideon for all the good things he had done to Israel.

Abimelech

9¹Abimelech, the son of Jerubaa, marched to Shechem where the brothers of his mother were, and he said to them and to the whole paternal family of his mother,² “Please ask this of all the lords of Shechem: Which is better for you, that you be governed by all the seventy sons of Jerubaa, or by only one man? Remember that I am of the same blood as you are.”

³The brothers of his mother sent this message to all the lords of Shechem. The lords of

Shechem took sides with Abimelech, saying, “He is our brother.”⁴ So they gave him seventy pieces of silver from the temple of Baal-berith which Abimelech used to hire wicked mercenaries to set out with him.⁵ Abimelech went with them to the house of his father in Ophrah, and on one stone killed all his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerubaa. Only Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubaa, was able to escape by hiding himself.⁶ Then all the lords of Shechem and the whole council assembled together by the oak at the pillar in Shechem, and proclaimed Abimelech king.

⁷When Jotham was told about this, he went to the top of Mount Gerizim. There he cried out to them, “Listen to me, lords of Shechem, that God may listen to you!

•⁸The trees once set out to find and anoint a king. They said to the olive tree, ‘Be our king.’⁹ The olive tree answered, ‘Am I going to renounce the oil by which – thanks to me – gods and people are honored, to hold sway over the trees?’

¹⁰The trees said to the fig tree: ‘Come and reign over us.’¹¹ The fig tree answered them, ‘Am I going to renounce my sweetness and my delicious fruit, to hold sway over the trees?’

¹²The trees said to the vine: ‘Come and reign over us.’¹³ The vine answered, ‘Am I going to renounce my juice which cheers gods and people to hold sway over the trees?’

¹⁴Then the trees said to the bramble bush: ‘Come, reign over us.’¹⁵ The bramble bush answered the trees, ‘If you come in sincerity to anoint me as your king, then come near and take shelter in my shade; but if not, let fire break out of the bramble bush to devour even the cedars of Lebanon.’

¹⁶And now, tell me, have you acted rightly and truthfully in choosing Abimelech king? Have you treated Jerubaa and his family well and given him what he deserves according to his merits?

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10:1
11:1

that perhaps it would have been better had they lived day by day, trusting in Yahweh who would raise up a liberator whenever necessary.

That is why the Book of Judges remarks on Gideon’s refusal to be their king: *Yahweh has to be your king*. Unfortunately, Gideon asked for gold instead of authority, and, by this, the hero destroyed everything he had done for his people.

All these saviors: Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, and Samson are very disappointing – like many of those who now speak of liberating oppressed people. What lesson shall we draw from these bitter experiences which Scripture recalls? That political action is useless and that we should instead focus our efforts on prayer and catechetical work? Shall we leave to others the struggle for justice? Justice is inscribed on every page of the Bible.

Actually, to speak of politics is to speak of power, and power corrupts those who do not have a well formed conscience. Little can be expected of politics where a conscience has not been formed early in a healthy family where a child discovers love and fidelity in his parents (two qualities that are never separated in the Bible), and has not been formed by parents ready to use their authority to control whims.

Later, a time will come when God will give priority to personal formation in the family for believers: the time of the Wisdom books and the observance of the Law.

• **9.8** In 9:8-15, an ancient fable was inserted and placed in the mouth of Jotham whereby the authority of the kings was vehemently criticized: the most useless persons, it claims, are those who are willing to reign.

¹⁷For my father fought for you, risking his life to free you from the hands of Midian. ¹⁸But now, you have risen against the family of my father. You have killed all his seventy sons with one stone, and have declared Abimelech, the son of his slave, as king over the lords of Shechem because he is your brother. ¹⁹If you have acted rightly and truthfully toward Jerubaal and his family today, then may Abimelech rejoice in you and you in him. ²⁰But if not, let fire break forth from Abimelech to devour the lords of Shechem and their council; and let fire break forth from their council to devour Abimelech.”

²¹Jotham fled to the safety of Beer, where he lived far from his brother Abimelech.

²²Abimelech ruled over Israel for three years. ²³But Yahweh sent a spirit of discord between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem; and the lords of Shechem betrayed Abimelech. ²⁴Yahweh did this so that the seventy sons of Jerubaal might be avenged. Their blood had to fall back upon their brother Abimelech who murdered them, and the lords of Shechem who helped him murder his brothers.

²⁵To do him harm, the lords of Shechem prepared ambushes against Abimelech on the mountaintops, and intimidated everyone who passed by the way. Abimelech was informed of this.

²⁶Then Gaal, the son of Ebed, came with his brothers, and he won the confidence of the lords of Shechem. ²⁷One day they went to the vineyards and gathered grapes and trod on them. Then they feasted in the temple of their god. While eating and drinking, they cursed Abimelech. ²⁸Then Gaal, the son of Ebed, exclaimed, “Who is Abimelech for the Shechemites that we should serve him? He is only the son of Jerubaal, and Zebul is but his town captain. Let us serve the people of Hamor, the father of Shechem. Why should we serve Abimelech?”

²⁹If only this people were in my hands, then I would remove Abimelech and say to him: Reinforce your army, come out and fight!”

³⁰When Zebul, the city governor, was informed of the plan of Gaal, the son of Ebed, he was very angry. ³¹He sent messengers to Abimelech in secret to say to him, “See, Gaal, the son of Ebed, has come with his brothers to Shechem and he is stirring up the city against you. ³²Therefore, arise, you and the men you have with you, and lay an ambush in the field. ³³By early morning at sunrise, go and rush upon the city. When Gaal comes out against you with his men, you may do to him whatever you wish.”

³⁴Abimelech and all his troops rose by night, and they laid an ambush against Shechem in four groups. ³⁵When Gaal, the

son of Ebed, went out and stood at the entrance of the city, Abimelech and his troops rose from their hiding place.

³⁶Gaal saw the troops and said to Zebul, “Look, people are coming down from the mountain tops.” But Zebul answered him, “It is the shadow of the mountain that you see. You mistake it for men.” ³⁷Gaal said again, “Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and another group is coming from the Diviners’ Oak.” ³⁸Zebul then said, “Did you not say: Who is Abimelech that we should serve him? Are not these men those whom you despised? Go now and fight them.”

³⁹Gaal went out and led the people of Shechem in fighting Abimelech. ⁴⁰Abimelech pursued Gaal who fled and many fell dead before reaching the gates. ⁴¹Abimelech returned to Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his brothers, and did not let them live in Shechem.

Shechem destroyed

⁴²The following day, the people went out into the fields. Abimelech was informed about this, ⁴³so he called his troops, divided them into three groups and laid an ambush in the fields. When he saw the people coming out of the city, he rose against them and killed them. ⁴⁴Abimelech and the group with him attacked and took possession of the entrance to the city gates; other groups rushed upon those who were in the fields. ⁴⁵Throughout that day, Abimelech attacked the city. He took it and killed all its inhabitants. Then he destroyed the city and sprinkled salt over it.

⁴⁶When the inhabitants of the Tower of Shechem heard this, they went to the underground room of the temple of El-Berith. ⁴⁷Abimelech was told that all the inhabitants of the Tower of Shechem were together, ⁴⁸so he went up to Mount Zalmon with all his troops. Taking an ax, he cut down a branch of a tree, lifted it up and bore it on his shoulders. He then said to the troops with him, “You have seen what I have done, so do the same.” ⁴⁹So all his men cut the branches, then followed Abimelech. They piled the branches on top of the underground room and set them on fire over the people inside. So all the inhabitants of the Tower of Shechem – about a thousand men and women – died.

Death of Abimelech

⁵⁰Abimelech went against Thebez, besieged it and took it. ⁵¹But inside the city was a strong tower in which all the men and women, all the inhabitants of the city sought refuge. They locked it from within and went up to the roof of the tower. ⁵²Abimelech came to the tower to attack them; he approached the door, intending to set it on fire. ⁵³But a

woman threw a millstone upon his head and shattered his skull. ⁵⁴He immediately called out to his young armor-bearer and said to him, “Draw your sword and kill me, lest they say of me: ‘A woman killed him.’” So his armor-bearer thrust him through, and he died. ⁵⁵When the people of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone returned to his home.

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^{31:4}
²⁵
^{11:21}

⁵⁶In this way God repaid Abimelech for the evil he had done to his father when he murdered his seventy brothers. ⁵⁷He also made the people of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. So the curse of Jotham, son of Jerubaal, was fulfilled.

Tola, Jair and Jephthah

10 • ¹After Abimelech, Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, appeared to save Israel. He was from the tribe of Issachar and lived at Shamir, in the mountains of Ephraim. ²He was judge of Israel for twenty-three years and when he died, he was buried in Shamir.

³After him rose Jair of Gilead who was judge of Israel for twenty-two years. ⁴He had thirty sons who rode on thirty asses, and had thirty cities which are still called the villages of Jair to this day, in the land of Gilead. ⁵When Jair died, he was buried in Kamon.

⁶The Israelites again treated Yahweh badly; they served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Aram and Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. They abandoned Yahweh and no longer served him. ⁷The anger of Yahweh burned against Israel, so he gave them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites.

⁸For eighteen years, all the Israelites living on the other side of the Jordan in the Amorite land of Gilead

were disturbed and oppressed. ⁹The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to attack Judah, Benjamin and the people of Ephraim. Israel was in great distress.

¹⁰In those years the Israelites called out to Yahweh saying, “We have sinned against you, for we have abandoned Yahweh, our God, to serve the Baals.” ¹¹Yahweh said to the Israelites, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, ¹²the Sidonians, Amalek and Midian oppressed you, and you cried out to me, did I not save you from their hands? ¹³But in spite of this, you have abandoned me and served other gods. So I will not save you again. ¹⁴Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen: see if they will save you in the time of your distress.”

¹⁵The Israelites answered Yahweh, “We have sinned. Do to us whatever you wish, but save us today.” ¹⁶Then they put away the strange gods and served Yahweh. And he could no longer endure the suffering of Israel.

¹⁷The Ammonites assembled and went to encamp in Gilead. The Israelites also assembled and they encamped at Mizpah. ¹⁸There the people and the leaders of Gilead asked one another, “Who will lead us all to fight against the Ammonites? Whoever he is, we shall make him head of all the inhabitants of Gilead.”

11 • ¹Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior. His mother was a prostitute, and his father was Gilead. ²But Gilead’s wife also bore him sons, and when they grew up, they drove Jephthah out saying, “You shall not

¹⁵
^{15:17}

Heb
^{11:32}

• **10.1** Each tribe had its own problems. There rose up saviors in various places who, after a victory, were honored as “Judges” for the rest of their lives: Gideon from Manasseh; Tola from Issachar; Jair from the country of Gilead.

One notices Yahweh’s tireless and ever-forgiving love. As sins increase Yahweh says “*I will not save you again*”; and again *God could no longer bear the sufferings of Israel*. If we

complain about God’s inaction with regard to oppression and social injustice, it is because we cannot see that the oppressed, as well as the oppressors, share the responsibility and sin.

• **11.1** Jephthah is one of the more controversial saviors found in the Bible. He is filled with rancor against his brothers who despise him. His war against the tribe of Ephraim does not bring glory to the people of Israel. Finally, his vow to

share or inherit anything in the household of our father, for you are the son of another woman.”³ Jephthah fled from his brothers and went to the region of Tob. There he joined a band of mercenaries who made their raids with him.⁴ The time came when the Ammonites declared war on Israel.⁵ So the elders of Gilead went to Jephthah in the land of Tob⁶ and said to him, “Come and lead our men in fighting the Ammonites.”

⁷ Jephthah answered the elders of Gilead, “Didn’t you drive me out of my father’s house because you hated me? Why do you come to me now in your distress?”⁸ The elders answered him, “We come asking you to join us in fighting the Ammonites; we want you to be head of the whole of Gilead.”⁹ Jephthah answered them, “If you ask me to return to fight the Ammonites and Yahweh grants me victory, I will be your head.”¹⁰ And they said to him, “May Yahweh listen to us! Woe to us if we do not carry out what we have just said!”

¹¹ So Jephthah returned with the elders of Gilead and the people made him their head and general, and Jephthah repeated all his conditions before Yahweh in Mizpah.

¹² Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites to say to him, “What happened between us that you come and attack me in my own country?”¹³ The king answered the messengers, “When Israel went up out of Egypt, they seized my country from the Arnon to the Yabbok and to the Jordan. So give it back willingly.”

¹⁴ Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites,¹⁵ saying “This is what Jephthah says: Israel has not seized the land of the Ammonites.¹⁶ When they came up from

Egypt, Israel went through the desert to the Sea of Reeds and came to Kadesh.¹⁷ Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom and said to him, ‘Let us pass through your country.’ But the king of Edom did not listen. They also sent to the king of Moab, and he, too, refused. So Israel remained at Kadesh.¹⁸ Then journeying through the desert, they went around the country of Edom and Moab, and came to the east of the land of Moab. They encamped on the other side of the Arnon, for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab.¹⁹ Israel then sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon, and said to him, ‘Let us pass through your country and go to our place.’²⁰ But Sihon did not trust Israel enough to let them pass through; he gathered all his men and encamped at Jahaz and attacked Israel.²¹ Yahweh the God of Israel gave Sihon and all his people into the hands of Israel. Israel defeated them and conquered all the land of the Amorites who lived there.²² So they conquered the whole territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Yabbok, and from the desert to the Jordan.

²³ Since Yahweh the God of Israel has taken this land from the Amorites for his people Israel, can you now take it away from us?²⁴ Do you not hold all that your god Chemosh has given you? In the same way, we hold all that Yahweh, our God, has given us.²⁵ Will you do better than Balak, son of Zippor, the king of Moab? Was he able to attack Israel?²⁶ For three hundred years, Israel has lived in Heshbon and the cities that depend on it. They have also lived in Aroer and in its villages and in all the cities on both sides of the Jordan. Why didn’t you recover these within that time?²⁷ I have not offended you, but you are treating me badly by attacking me. Let Yahweh, the Judge, decide today between the children of Israel and the children of Ammon.”

²⁸ But the king of the Ammonites did not pay attention to Jephthah’s message.

Jephthah’s daughter

•²⁹ The Spirit of Yahweh came upon Jephthah. He went through Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of

sacrifice a member of his family is in line with the custom of the Canaanites who easily sacrificed their children. Still, we read: *the Spirit of Yahweh was on Jephthah.*

By *the Spirit* people of those times meant the superhuman strength from Yahweh which drives a person to accomplish extraordinary feats. The Spirit of Yahweh does not act merely in religious ceremonies, or through religious people, prophets or priests. It acts “renewing the face of the earth” (Ps 104) through people gifted with strength and authority for historic tasks that

advance the kingdom of God. Sometimes, the liberators of modern times are undeservedly looked upon as saints in spite of the fact that they do not always live by faith, or recognize Christ. It would be more accurate to compare them with the “judges” who, in spite of their limitations, served God’s plans “moved by the Spirit of Yahweh.”

• 29. The Bible relates Jephthah’s vow without commentary. It is considered as the lamentable error of a hero.

Dt
2:19

3:10
6:34
1S
10:6

Gilead, and then entered the territory of the Ammonites.

³⁰ Jephthah made a vow to Yahweh: ³¹“If you make me victorious, I shall sacrifice to you whoever first comes out of my house to meet me when I return from battle. He shall be for Yahweh and I shall offer him up through the fire.”

Gen
22:1-
19
2K
3:27
Mic
6:7

³² Jephthah crossed the territory of the Ammonites to fight against them, and Yahweh gave him victory. ³³ He pursued them from the city of Aroer to the entrance of Minnith and Abel Keramim, seizing twenty towns. So he defeated the Ammonites.

³⁴ When Jephthah returned home to Mizpah, his daughter came out to meet him. She was so happy to see her father that she danced to the sound of her tambourine. She was an only child; besides her he had no other daughter or son.

³⁵ When Jephthah saw her, he tore his clothes and cried out, “My daughter, you have shattered me; you have brought me misfortune. For I have made a foolish vow to Yahweh, and now I cannot take it back.” ³⁶ She answered him, “Father, even if you have made such a foolish vow, you have to do to me just as you promised, for Yahweh has avenged you and crushed your enemies. ³⁷ I only beg of you to give me two months to live with my companions in the mountains. There I shall lament because I will never marry.” ³⁸ Jephthah said to her, “Go then.” And he sent her away for two months. She and her companions went to the mountains and wept because she would never marry.

Num
30:3
Ecl
5:3

³⁹ At the end of two months, she returned to her father and he fulfilled the vow he had made. The young girl had never known a man. From this comes the Israelite custom ⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel go out for four days annu-

ally to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

12 ¹ The men of Ephraim gathered, crossed the Jordan northward and said to Jephthah, “Why did you go and attack the Ammonites without asking us to march with you? For this we shall burn you inside your house.” ² Jephthah answered them, “My people and I had a great struggle with the Ammonites. I asked help from you but you did not save me from their hands. ³ When I saw that no one had come to help me, I risked my own life and marched against the Ammonites, and Yahweh gave them into my hands. Why, then, have you come up today to fight me?”

⁴ Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and attacked Ephraim. The Gileadites defeated the Ephraimites who told them, “You, Gileadites, are fugitives who crossed from Ephraim and Manasseh.” ⁵ Gilead seized the shallow waters of the Jordan and blocked the way. Whenever a fugitive from Ephraim said, “Let me pass,” the men of Gilead would ask him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he responded, “No,” ⁶ they would add, “Then say Shibboleth.”

But then he would say, “Sibboleth” for an Ephraimite could not pronounce it correctly. So they would seize him and cut his throat by the shallow waters of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand men from Ephraim perished at that time.

⁷ Jephthah was judge in Israel for six years. Then he died and was buried in his city, Mizpah of Gilead. ⁸ After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem was judge in Israel. ⁹ He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. His thirty daughters were given in marriage outside his clan, but for his sons, he brought in thirty women. He was judge in Israel for seven years. ¹⁰ When Ibzan died, he was buried in Bethlehem.

¹¹ After him, Elon the Zebulunite became judge in Israel. He governed Israel for ten years. ¹² Then he died and was buried in Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.

¹³ After him, Abdon, the son of Hillel of Pirathon, was judge in Israel. ¹⁴ He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy asses. He was judge in Israel for eight years. ¹⁵ Then he died and was buried at Pirathon, in the mountains of Ephraim, in the mountain of the Amorites.

Samson's birth foretold

13 ¹ The Israelites again treated Yahweh badly so he gave them

• **13.1** Here follow four episodes from the “stories” of Samson. Samson seems to have been a man from the countryside who had

extraordinary strength and fought on his own account against the Philistines. Legend attributes to him numerous feats.

into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.

²There was a man of Zorah of the tribe of Dan, called Manoah. His wife could not bear children. ³The Angel of Yahweh appeared to this woman and said to her, "You have not borne children and have not given birth, but see, you are to conceive and give birth to a son. ⁴Because of this, take care not to take wine or any alcoholic drink, nor to eat unclean foods from now on, ⁵for you shall bear a son who shall be a Nazirite of Yahweh from the womb of his mother. Never shall his hair be cut for he is consecrated to Yahweh. He shall begin the liberation of the Israelites from the Philistine oppression."

⁶The woman went to her husband and told him, "A messenger of God who bore the majesty of an angel spoke to me. I did not ask him where he came from nor did he tell me his name.

⁷But he said to me: 'You are to conceive and give birth to a son. Henceforth, you shall not drink wine or fermented drinks, nor eat anything unclean, for your son shall be a Nazirite of God from the womb of his mother until the day of his death'."

⁸Manoah called upon Yahweh and said, "I pray you, Lord, that the man of God whom you have sent may come again to us and teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born." ⁹Yahweh listened to Manoah and the Angel of Yahweh came to the woman as she was seated in the fields. Again Manoah, her husband, was not with her when the Angel came.

¹⁰The woman immediately ran to inform her husband and told him, "Look, the man who came to me the other day is here again."

¹¹Manoah rose and followed his wife. He came to the man and said to him, "Are you the man who has spoken to this woman?"

He answered, "I am." ¹²Manoah said to him, "When your word is fulfilled, what rule and direction shall the boy follow?"

¹³The Angel of Yahweh answered Manoah, "She must abstain from all I have

indicated to this woman. ¹⁴She shall not taste anything that comes from the grape, nor drink wine or fermented drinks, nor eat anything unclean, and she shall observe everything I have commanded her."

¹⁵Manoah then said to the Angel of Yahweh, "Permit us to detain you and prepare a young goat for you." (Manoah did not know that the man was the Angel of Yahweh) ¹⁶But he said to Manoah, "Even if I did stay, I would not taste your food. But if you want to offer a burnt offering, offer it to Yahweh." ¹⁷So Manoah said to the Angel of Yahweh, "What is your name, that we may honor you when your word comes true." ¹⁸The Angel of Yahweh answered him, "Why do you ask my name? It is *Wonderful...*" ¹⁹Manoah then took the young goat and the cereal offering, and offered it upon the rock as a holocaust to Yahweh who does wonderful things.

²⁰And something happened as Manoah and his wife looked on. A fire broke forth from the altar rising toward heaven, and the Angel of Yahweh ascended in the flame.

When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell face downwards on the ground. ²¹When the Angel of Yahweh vanished from the sight of Manoah and his wife, Manoah knew then that he was the Angel of Yahweh. ²²And he said to his wife, "We shall surely die for we have seen God." ²³She answered him, "If Yahweh had wanted to kill us, he would not have accepted the holocaust or the offering from our hand; he would not have made all these things happen or said what we have just heard."

²⁴The woman gave birth to a son and named him Samson. The boy grew and Yahweh blessed him. ²⁵Then the Spirit of Yahweh began to move him when he was in Mahane Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol.

Stories of Samson

14 ¹Samson went down to Timnah and saw a Philistine woman. ²He came up and said to his father and mother, "I have seen a Philistine woman at Timnah; get her for me that she may be my wife." ³His father and mother said to him, "Is there no one among the daughters of your brothers and among all your people that you should go and take a wife from among those uncircumcised Philistines?"

Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for I like her." ⁴His father and mother did not know that this came from Yahweh who was seeking a quarrel with the Philistines; for at

Samson is said to have been miraculously born of a barren couple. This was in accordance with God's ways, as seen in the case of Abraham's son (Gen 18), and in the case of Samuel (1 S 1), and still later John the Baptist (Lk 1:5).

The child must be a *Nazirite*, i.e., consecrated to God, according to a very ancient rite in the Bible (Num 6:1). This consecration to God is the source of his strength.

Gen 18:11
1 S 1:11
Lk 1:7
Lk 1:13
Num 6:4
Lk 1:15
Mt 1:21

Is 9:5
6:21
Gen 32:31
Dt 5:24

that time, the Philistines had dominion over Israel.

⁵Samson then went down to Timnah, and when he reached the vineyards at Timnah, a young lion came up roaring toward him. ⁶The Spirit of Yahweh then seized Samson. With bare hands he tore the lion to pieces as he would have done with a young goat. ⁷But he told neither his father or mother what he had done. ⁸Then he went down and talked to the woman who pleased him.

After some time, he returned to take her. He went out of his way to look at the carcass of the lion. He found a swarm of bees and honey in the lion's carcass. ⁹Samson scraped the honey into his hands and ate it as he walked.

When he reached his parents, he gave them honey and they ate it, too. But he did not tell them he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass. ¹⁰Then, Samson's father went down to the woman and Samson offered a banquet as was the custom among the young. ¹¹When he appeared, the Philistines assigned thirty men to go with him as his wedding companions.

¹²Samson said to them, "I am going to give you a riddle. If you can give me the right solution within seven days of the feast, I shall give you thirty tunics and thirty linen garments. ¹³But if you can't tell me the solution, you will give me thirty tunics and thirty linen garments." They answered, "Tell your riddle; we are listening."

¹⁴He said to them, "From him who eats came what is eaten, and from the strong, sweetness came." ¹⁵After three days, they had not guessed the riddle. So on the fourth day, they said to Samson's wife, "Convince your husband to explain the riddle to us, or we will burn you and your father's family. Did you invite us to rob us?"

¹⁶Samson's wife began to weep and she threw herself upon her husband saying, "You do not like me or love me anymore. You have given a riddle to the young men of my people, but you have not explained it to me." He said to her, "I have not explained it even to my parents, why should I explain it to you?" ¹⁷She cried before him for seven days while the feast lasted. On the seventh day, he explained it to her for he was bored with her crying. She then related it to her countrymen.

¹⁸On the seventh day, before the married couple were to enter the wedding chamber, the people of the city said to Samson, "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" He said to them, "If you had not plowed with my young cow, you would not have guessed my riddle."

¹⁹Then the Spirit of Yahweh seized him. He went down to Ashkelon, killed thirty men, took their plunder and gave the linen gar-

ments to those who had guessed the riddle. Then, in great anger, he came up to his father's house. ²⁰So Samson's wife was given to one of his wedding companions.

15 ¹After some time, during wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife, bringing a young goat with him, and he said, "I want to be with my wife in our room." But her father would not let him in, ²saying, "I thought that you did not like her anymore, so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister still better? Why don't you take her instead?" ³Samson replied, "This time I owe nothing to the Philistines even if I do them harm."

⁴Samson went out and caught three hundred foxes, took some torches and tied the animals tail to tail. He then placed a torch between every two tails, ⁵set fire to the torches and turned the foxes loose in the grain fields of the Philistines. In this way, he burned the sheaves and the standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves.

⁶The Philistines asked, "Who did this?" And they answered, "Samson, the son-in-law of the man from Timnah, because this man took his wife and gave her to his companion." So they went up and burned her and her family. ⁷Samson said to them, "Since you did this, I will not rest until I have had my revenge on you." ⁸So he caused a great havoc upon them. Then he went down to live in a cave in the rock of Etam.

⁹The Philistines went up to the mountains of Judah and raided Lehi. ¹⁰The men of Judah asked them, "Why have you come to attack us?" They answered, "We have come to capture Samson, and do to him what he did to us."

¹¹Three thousand men of Judah went down to the cave at the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines lord it over us? Now what have you done to us?" He answered, "What they did to me, I have done to them." ¹²They said to him, "We have come down to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines." Samson said to them, "Swear to me that you will not kill me." ¹³They answered, "No, we only want to tie you up and hand you over to them, but we will not kill you." They bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rocks. ¹⁴When they arrived in Lehi, the Philistines ran to him with shouts of victory. But the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Samson. The ropes that bound him became like linen flax burned in the fire and the knots were loosened from his arms. ¹⁵He found a fresh jawbone of an ass, grabbed it and with it killed a thousand men. ¹⁶Samson then said, "With the jawbone of an ass, I dealt them a mighty blow; with the jawbone of an ass, I beat a thousand men."

¹⁷When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone and that is why the place was called Ramath-lehi. ¹⁸Then he became terribly thirsty and called out to Yahweh saying, "You have given your servant this great victory. Now am I to die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?"

¹⁹So Yahweh opened a hollow in the ground at Lehi and water gushed forth from it. Samson drank; his strength returned and he revived. For this, the name En-hakkore was given to the fountain which is still in Lehi to this day.

²⁰Samson became judge of Israel for twenty years during the time of the Philistines.

16 ¹When Samson went to Gaza, he saw a prostitute there and entered the place where she lived. ²When the men of Gaza were notified that Samson had come, they made the rounds and lay in wait for him at the city gates. They kept quiet all night, thinking, "We will wait for him until dawn and then we will kill him." ³But Samson slept until midnight. At midnight, he arose and took hold of the door panels of the city gates together with the doorcase, and pulled them up with the bar. He put them upon his shoulders and carried them to the hilltop opposite Hebron.

Samson and Delilah

• ⁴After this, Samson fell in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek; she was called Delilah. ⁵The Philistine chiefs said to this woman, "Charm him and find out where he gets such strength and how we can defeat and tie him up. Each of us shall give you eleven hundred pieces of silver."

⁶So Delilah asked Samson, "Tell me, please, where do you get such strength and how can others tie you up to subdue you?" ⁷Samson answered her, "If they bind me with seven new and moist bowstrings, then I shall lose my strength and be as any other man."

⁸The Philistine chiefs sent seven new bowstrings that had not been dried to Delilah, and she tied Samson with

them. ⁹With men hidden in her dwelling, she shouted, "Samson, here come the Philistines!" Samson broke the bowstrings as if they were burned flax. So they did not find out where his great strength came from.

¹⁰Then Delilah said to Samson, "You made a fool of me, and you lied to me. Tell me, how can they subdue you?"

¹¹Samson answered her, "If they bind me this time with seven newly-braided ropes which have never been used, then I shall lose my strength and be like any other man." ¹²So Delilah bound him with seven newly-braided ropes. But when she shouted, "Here come the Philistines!" he again snapped the ropes round his arms like thread. ¹³So Delilah said to him, "How long will you deceive me and lie to me? Tell me how they can subdue you." He answered her, "If you braid the seven locks of my hair in the warp of the loom and tighten it with a pin, then I shall lose my strength." ¹⁴She lulled him to sleep, and then braided the seven locks of his hair in the warp of the loom and tightened it with a pin. Then she cried, "Here come the Philistines!" Samson woke up and pulled the warp with the locks of his hair. And so, Delilah did not find out where his great strength came from.

¹⁵Then Delilah said to him, "You say that you love me, but your heart is not with me. Three times, you have deceived me and have not told me from whence your great strength comes."

¹⁶And as Delilah insisted and bothered him day after day with her questions, the time came when Samson felt he would die in disgust. ¹⁷So he told her the truth: "Never has my hair been cut for I am a Nazirite, consecrated to God

• **16.4** After presenting Samson as a "superman" continually winning over the Philistines, the story shows him conquered by a woman.

Samson reveals to Delilah his consecration to God, as a Nazirite. There is in him a part reserved for Yahweh which is the source of his supernatural strength.

Weakness of heroes. Samson entrusts himself, body and soul, to a woman who does not love him.

Elsewhere in the Bible we read: "It is good to keep to oneself the king's secret," and "Do not throw your pearls before swine lest they trample on them and stretch themselves over you."

from the womb of my mother. If my hair is cut, then I shall lose my strength and be like any other man.”

¹⁸Delilah understood that he had told her the truth this time, so she called the Philistine chiefs and said, “Come, because Samson has revealed his secret to me.” They took the money and came to her. ¹⁹Delilah lulled Samson to sleep upon her knees and called a man to cut the seven locks of his hair. And she could immediately subdue him for his strength had left him.

²⁰When Delilah shouted “Samson, the Philistines!” he awoke and thought that he could still save himself as on other occasions. But he did not know that Yahweh was no longer with him. ²¹So the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes, and brought him to Gaza. There they bound him with two bronze chains and made him turn the mill in the prison. ²²The hair on Samson’s head, however, began to grow as soon as it was cut.

Death of Samson

²³The Philistine chiefs assembled to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon and had a great feast, saying, “Our god has given Samson, our enemy, into our hands!”

²⁵As they were very happy, they said, “Bring out Samson that he may amuse us.” They brought him out of prison and he amused them. Then they had him placed between the columns ²⁴and on seeing him the people praised their god saying, “Our god has put our enemy into our hands, Samson who has destroyed our country and killed our men.”

²⁶Samson then said to the boy who held him by the hand, “Lead me where I can touch the pillars on which this house rests, so that I may lean on them.” ²⁷The house was full of men and women, all the Philistine chiefs were also there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson for amusement.

²⁸Samson called on Yahweh and exclaimed, “Lord, Yahweh, please remember me and restore my strength only this once, so that I may avenge myself against the Philistines for my eyes.”

²⁹Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, leaned on them with his right arm on one pillar and his left on the other, ³⁰and cried out, “Let me die with the Philistines!” He pushed with all his strength and the house fell upon the chiefs and the people gathered there. Those who joined him in his own death were more than those he had killed during his lifetime.

³¹His brothers and the whole family of his father went down to get him. They buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol, in the tomb of his father Manoah. He had judged Israel for twenty years.

Story of Micah

17 ¹A man named Micah lived in the mountains of Ephraim. One day ²he said to his mother, “The eleven hundred pieces of silver taken from you and about which you uttered a curse, well, it was I who took that silver. And now, I return it to you.” ³His mother answered, “May Yahweh bless my son!” So he returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother.

But his mother said to him, “I had conse-

Lev
5:1

• **17.1** The Book of Judges concludes with two typical stories about the life of Israel at that time. After having extolled that epoch during which there was no need for kings (see 8:22), the author recognizes the evils that anarchy produced.

In Chapters 17–18, the absence of religious authority results in a situation where priests do as they please. Let us bear in mind that, at that time,

men of the tribe of Levi were dedicated to Yahweh’s service (see Num 3).

In 18:27 we have one of those passages in the Bible where great indifference is shown regarding a savage massacre. The Israelites at that time did not know how to value human life, either that of an enemy or their own. Individuals did not count but only the people collectively. To them it was not more serious to wipe out a foreign people than to destroy a forest.

crated this money to Yahweh with my own hand, so that with this money, my son could make a statue cast in metal. So I am giving this silver back to you.”

⁴He, however, returned the silver to his mother who set aside two hundred pieces for the silversmith, who made a statue cast in metal. ⁵This was placed in the house of Micah, so that Micah had a house of God. He also made an ephod to consult Yahweh as they cast lots, and some small idols, and consecrated also one of his sons as his priest.

^{18:1}
^{19:1}
^{18:30} ⁶At that time, there was no king in Israel and each one did what seemed right to him.

⁷A young Levite of Bethlehem in Judah, a descendant of Moses who lived there as a foreigner, ⁸left Bethlehem one day and set out to see where he could live as a guest. He came to the house of Micah in the mountains of Ephraim, ⁹and Micah asked him, “Where do you come from?” He answered, “I am a Levite and I have come walking from Bethlehem; I am in search of a place where I can stay as a guest.” ¹⁰Micah said to him, “Stay in my house and be a father and priest to me; I shall give you ten pieces of silver a year, clothing and food.” So the Levite went in to his house.

¹¹The Levite agreed to stay in Micah’s house and became like one of his sons. ¹²Micah consecrated the Levite, and this young man became his priest and remained in the house of Micah. ¹³And Micah said, “Now I know that Yahweh will bestow favors on me for this Levite has become my priest.”

18 ¹At that time there was no king in Israel. The tribe of Dan was looking for a territory to dwell in, because until that day they had not received a share in the inheritance of the tribes of Israel. ²So the Danites sent five valiant men from Zorah and Eshtaol – all from the Danite tribe – to go around the land and explore it. They said to them, “Go and explore the country.” These men came to the mountains of Ephraim near the house of Micah and spent the night there.

³When they were near the house, they recognized the voice of the young Levite, so they went in. They asked him, “Who has brought you here? What are you doing in this place? Why are you here?” ⁴He answered, “Such and such a thing Micah has done for me. He has hired me to become his priest.” ⁵They said to him, “Ask God so we may know whether the journey we are making shall be successful or not.” ⁶The priest answered them, “Go in peace, the journey you make is under the eye of Yahweh.”

⁷The five men left and came to Laish. They saw that the inhabitants of that place were living in security according to the customs of the Sidonians – quiet and trusting people – with no one creating trouble. They

lived far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with anyone else.

⁸Upon their return to their brothers in Zorah and Eshtaol, ⁹they were asked, “What news do you bring?” They answered, “Come on, let us go and attack them for the country we have seen is an excellent place. But why are you silent? Do not delay in setting out to conquer the land. ¹⁰When you go, you shall meet a quiet people; the land is vast and God has given it into our hands, a place which does not lack anything.”

¹¹So six hundred armed men of the tribe of Dan set out from Zorah and Eshtaol; ¹²they went up and encamped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. ¹³From there they passed through the mountains of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah.

¹⁴Then the five men who had gone to explore the land addressed their brothers and said, “Do you not know that in one of these houses, there is an ephod used to consult Yahweh, some small idols and a statue cast in metal? Now decide what you have to do.”

¹⁵The troops made a detour and entered the house of the young Levite, the house of Micah. They greeted him ¹⁶while the six hundred armed Danites stood at the threshold of the gate. ¹⁷Then the five men who had earlier gone up to explore the land went up again, entered Micah’s house ¹⁸and took the statue, the ephod that is used to consult Yahweh and the small idols, while the priest stood at the gate with the six hundred armed men. The priest said to them, “What are you doing?” ¹⁹They said to him, “Be quiet!” Put your hand on your mouth and come with us. You shall be a father and priest to us. Do you prefer to be a priest in the house of one individual or to be a priest for a tribe of Israel?”

²⁰This made the priest happy, so he took the ephod, the small idols and the statue, and went with the troops.

²¹The Danites went on their way, putting the women, children, livestock and precious objects in front of them. ²²They were already far from the house of Micah when the people of the neighboring houses started shouting and set out to pursue them. ²³But the Danites turned around and said to Micah, “Why are you shouting?” ²⁴He answered, “You have taken the gods which I made, and my priest is going away with you. What else is left to me? And yet you still ask me: ‘What is the matter with you?’” ²⁵The Danites answered him, “Be quiet now lest some ill-tempered men fall upon you, and kill you and your household.” ²⁶So the Danites went their way, and Micah, seeing that they were stronger, returned home.

²⁷As for them, they now had the gods which Micah had fashioned and the priest he had in his service, and they marched on

against Laish, a quiet and trusting people. They put the inhabitants to the sword and burned the city. ²⁸No one came to help them for they lived far from Sidon, and had no relationship with anyone else. This city was in the valley which extended to Beth-rehob.

²⁹The Danites rebuilt the city and lived there, and they gave it the name Dan in memory of their ancestor Dan, son of Israel, though the city was formerly called Laish.

^{Ex 2:22} ³⁰They set aside a place for the statue, and Jonathan – a descendant of Gershom, son of Moses – and his sons after him, became priests of the tribe of Dan until the people were driven out of the land. ³¹They set up the image Micah had made, and there it remained as long as the house of God was in Shiloh.

The crime at Gibeah

19 ¹At that time there was still no king in Israel. A Levite who lived deep in the mountains of Ephraim took a woman from Bethlehem in Judah as concubine. ²This woman left him and returned to her father's house in Bethlehem of Judah. She remained there for about four months. ³Her husband set out to visit her and speak to her heart to make her return to his home. He brought with him a servant and two asses.

She welcomed him in the house of her father who was glad to see him. ⁴His father-in-law, the father of the girl, made him stay so he remained with him for three days. They ate, drank and spent the night there. ⁵On the fourth day, they rose early in the morning and the Levite prepared to leave. But the father of the young maiden said to his son-in-law, "Eat some bread first so you can regain your strength, then you can go."

⁶The two sat and began to eat and drink together. Then the father-in-law said, "Please spend the night here and have a good time." ⁷When the Levite got up to leave, his father-in-law insisted, so he stayed that night.

⁸On the fifth day, he again rose early in the morning to go, but the father of the young maiden said to him, "Have more patience and stay until evening." So they ate together. ⁹But when the husband, his concubine and his servant stood up to leave, the father-in-

law said to his son-in-law, "Look, it's already getting dark. Spend the night here and enjoy yourself. You can leave early tomorrow morning and be on your way home." ¹⁰But the Levite refused to spend the night there, so he got up, left and arrived opposite Jebush, or Jerusalem. He brought with him the two saddled asses, his concubine and his servant.

¹¹It was very late when they came near Jebush. So the servant said to his master, "Let us not go any farther but go into the city of the Jebusites and spend the night there."

¹²His master answered him, "Let us not go to a foreign city where there are no Israelites; we will go to Gibeah." And he added to his servant, ¹³"Come and let us go near one of those towns. We will spend the night in Gibeah or in Ramah." ¹⁴So they went their way, and at sunset they arrived opposite Gibeah of Benjamin. ¹⁵They turned aside and went there to spend the night. ¹⁶Then, an old man came in from his work in the fields. He was a man from the mountains of Ephraim and lived as a visitor in Gibeah, for the people of that place were of the tribe of Benjamin.

¹⁷Looking to one side, the old man noticed the visitor in the city square and said to him, "Where do you come from and where are you going?" ¹⁸And he answered, "We are passing through, for we come from Bethlehem of Judah, and we are going up to the borders of the mountains of Ephraim where I come from. I went to Bethlehem of Judah and now I am returning home. But here no one has offered me his house. ¹⁹We have, however, straw and green fodder for our asses, and bread and wine for me, my wife and the young man who accompanies us. We don't lack anything."

²⁰The old man said to him, "Peace be with you. I shall provide you with all that you need. Just don't spend the night in the square."

²¹He brought them to his house and gave fodder to the asses. The travelers washed their feet, then ate and drank.

²²As they were relaxing, the wicked men of the city went round the house, pounded on the door and said to the old man who owned the house, "Bring out the man you have welcomed into your house so we may amuse ourselves with him." ²³The owner of the

Gen
19:1-
11
Hos
9:9
10:9

• **19.1** This misdeed resembles very much what is found in Genesis 19 and what is said there in the footnote, with respect to the answer of the master of the house, is also relevant here. Verses 24-25 and 27-28 are a horrible testimony to what has been for centuries, the attitude of men towards women: total irresponsibility and contempt.

For as long as there was no central authority, or king who would "judge," each family and tribe felt obliged to defend and avenge its own members. There was no other way to protect the

individual among a people who had no authorities. In this situation, a crime could cause war among the tribes, as happened in the example recounted here. The narration gives much emphasis to the war and to the destruction of Benjamin. We do not need to accept the figures as authentic.

A lesson is imparted here: in spite of all the sins and errors of Benjamin, not one of the twelve tribes which are Yahweh's inheritance can disappear. In spite of the trials they bring upon themselves, a remnant will always be saved.

house went out to them and said, “No, my brothers, do not treat him badly. This man has come into my house, so do not do him evil. ²⁴Here is my daughter, a virgin, and my companion’s concubine. I can give her to you if you want. Ravish her and do with her what seems good to you, but not with this man.” ²⁵But those men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and brought her outside. They violated and maltreated her the whole night until morning. At dawn, they left her.

²⁶At early morning, the woman came and fell at the entrance of the man’s house where her husband was. She lay there until it was day. ²⁷When her husband rose up in the morning, opened the door of the house and went out to go on his way, he saw the woman, his concubine, lying at the entrance of the house, her hands on the threshold. ²⁸He said to her, “Get up, and let us go.” But there was no response. So the man put her on his ass and went home.

²⁹When he arrived home, he took a knife and taking hold of his concubine, he divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces and sent them throughout the territory of Israel. ³⁰He gave his messengers, this order: “Say this to the Israelites: Until today, have you seen anything like this since the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt? Think about it. Seek counsel and decide.” Everyone who saw it said: “Until today, never has this happened nor has a thing like this been seen since the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt.”

20 ¹So all the children of Israel, the whole community from Dan to Beer-sheba, gathered as one man, including the land of Gilead, before Yahweh at Mizpah. ²The heads of all the people and of all the tribes of Israel came to the assembly of the people of God: four hundred thousand men on foot, all armed with swords.

³The men of the tribe of Benjamin also knew that the Israelites had gone up to Mizpah.

The Israelites said, “Tell us how this crime happened.” ⁴The Levite, the husband of the murdered woman, addressed them and said, “I arrived at Gibeah in Benjamin with my concubine to spend the night there. ⁵By night, the residents of Gibeah showed up and surrounded the house, intending to harm us. They were determined to kill me, and they abused my concubine in such a way that she died. ⁶I then took her, cut her into pieces, one piece to each territory of Israel, because what they have done is a shame for Israel. ⁷Now that you are here, all Israelites, discuss among yourselves and make a decision now.”

⁸All the people rose as one man and said,

“None of us shall return to his tent nor go to his house. ⁹This is what we will do with the people of Gibeah: we will draw lots ¹⁰and will take from the tribes of Israel ten men for every hundred, a hundred for every thousand, and a thousand for every ten thousand. They shall gather provisions for the troops who will go to punish Gibeah in Benjamin for the crime its inhabitants have committed in Israel.” ¹¹So all the men of Israel united as one man against the city.

¹²The tribes of Israel sent messengers throughout the whole tribe of Benjamin and said to them: “What is this crime that has been committed among you? ¹³Hand over those wicked men of Gibeah to us, that we may kill them and banish the evil from Israel.” But the Benjaminites did not mind their Israelite brothers.

¹⁴Meanwhile, the Benjaminites also left their cities and gathered at Gibeah to face the Israelites. ¹⁵That day the Benjaminites who came from different cities totaled twenty-six thousand men, armed with swords, without counting the inhabitants of Gibeah. ¹⁶Among them were seven hundred valiant men, all left-handed and able to sling a stone at a hair’s breadth without missing.

¹⁷The people of Israel also counted their men. Without counting Benjamin, there were four hundred thousand men, able to draw sword, all men of war. ¹⁸So they set out and went up to Bethel where they asked God: “Who among us shall go up first to fight the sons of Benjamin?” And Yahweh answered, “Judah shall go up first.”

¹⁹The Israelites rose early and encamped opposite Gibeah. ²⁰They went out to fight against Benjamin and drew up the battle line against Gibeah. ²¹But the Benjaminites came out of Gibeah and killed twenty-two thousand Israelites. ²²On the second day, the sons of Israel attacked the Benjaminites.

²³The Israelites then went up to weep before Yahweh until evening, and asked Yahweh, saying, “Shall we fight again with the sons of our brother Benjamin?” Yahweh answered, “Go up against them.”

²⁴So the people, the troops of Israel, regained their courage and returned to their former battle line. ²⁵On that day, too, the Benjaminites went out against them and killed eighteen thousand sword-wielding Israelites.

²⁶Then all the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel. There they sat weeping before Yahweh. They fasted the whole day until evening and presented burnt and peace offerings before Yahweh, ²⁷for the Ark of the Covenant was there, ²⁸with Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, as its minister. They asked: “Shall we come out again and fight the sons of our brother Benjamin, or not?” Yah-

Gen
19:8

1S
11:7

Dt
17:12

weh replied, "Go up tomorrow, and I will give them into your hands."

^{Jos 8} ²⁹ Israel set men in ambush around Gibeah. ³⁰ On the third day, the Israelites marched against Gibeah and positioned themselves in the battle line as on previous times. ³¹ The sons of Benjamin went out against them, but the Israelites cut off the way that led back to the city. The Benjaminites began as before to attack the men of Israel, killing about thirty men on the roads going up to Bethel and to Gibeah. ³² So the Benjaminites thought: "We have defeated them again as before."

But the Israelites said to themselves: "Let us flee to draw them away from the city and cut off the roads." ³³ All the men of Israel moved from their camp and took up position at Baal-Tamar, while those who were in ambush rushed out of their place to the west of Gibeah. ³⁴ So ten thousand chosen men from all Israel came against Gibeah. The battle was fought hard, and the Benjaminites did not notice the calamity which was to come upon them. ³⁵ Yahweh defeated Benjamin before Israel, and on that day the Israelites killed twenty-five thousand Benjaminites, all sword-wielding men.

³⁶ The Benjaminites thought they were victorious, but the men of Israel gave them ground, because they relied on the ambush they had set against Gibeah. ³⁷ The men in ambush rushed out and quickly deployed themselves. They attacked Gibeah and put the whole city to the sword. ³⁸ The men of Israel had planned with those in ambush that smoke would rise from the city as a signal. At this, the Israelites would then return and fight.

³⁹ So the Israelites who pretended to escape returned when the Benjaminites had killed about thirty men and had thought: "Now they are defeated as in the first battle." ⁴⁰ The smoke signal was already rising from the city. When the Benjaminites looked behind, they saw that the whole city was on fire, with flames rising up to heaven. ⁴¹ When the Israelites faced them, the Benjaminites trembled before the calamity which had come upon them. ⁴² They retreated before the men of Israel and fled in the direction leading to the desert. But the Israelites who came out of the city overtook them and destroyed them. ⁴³ They surrounded the men of Benjamin, pursued them without rest and crushed them opposite Gibeah by the east.

⁴⁴ Eighteen thousand Benjaminites fell, all valiant men. ⁴⁵ The survivors retreated and fled towards the desert to the rock of Rimmon. About five thousand men, however, were killed on the way. They also pursued Benjamin as far as Gideon, killing two thousand men.

⁴⁶ On that day, twenty-five thousand

sword-wielding Benjaminites died, all valiant men. Of those who fled to the desert to the rock of Rimmon, ⁴⁷ six hundred were able to escape. They remained there for four months. ⁴⁸ The troops of Israel turned against the towns of Benjamin and put them to the sword, the people as well as the livestock and everything in them. They also burned all the cities they found.

21 ¹ The men of Israel swore at Mizpah: "None of us shall give his daughter in marriage to any Benjaminite."

² The people went to Bethel. There they sat before Yahweh until evening, called on him and wept with great lamentation.

³ They said, "Yahweh, God of Israel, why has this misfortune happened to Israel, that one of its tribes has perished today?" ⁴ On the next day, the people rose early, built an altar there and offered holocausts and peace offerings. ⁵ The Israelites then asked, "Who among all the tribes of Israel did not come to the assembly of Yahweh?" For they had solemnly sworn that whoever would not come up to Mizpah before Yahweh should die.

⁶ The sons of Israel had compassion on their brother Benjamin and they said, "Today a tribe of Israel has been cut off, ⁷ what shall we do to provide wives for those that remain, for we have sworn to Yahweh not to give them our daughters in marriage?"

⁸ Because of this they asked, "Did any tribe of Israel not come up to Mizpah before Yahweh?" And they found out that none from Yabesh of Gilead had come to the camp for the assembly. ⁹ They made the census and saw that there was no one from Yabesh of Gilead.

¹⁰ Then the community sent there twelve thousand of their valiant men with this order: "Go and put to the sword the inhabitants of Yabesh of Gilead, including women and children. ¹¹ This is what you shall do: kill every man and every woman who has had a relation with a man, but let the maidens live." ¹² So they did. They found four hundred young virgins among the inhabitants of Yabesh in Gilead (who had not had any relations with man), and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh in the land of Canaan.

¹³ Then the community sent messengers to the Benjaminites who were at the rock of Rimmon to make peace with them, ¹⁴ and the Benjaminites returned. The Israelites gave them the women of Yabesh of Gilead they had spared, but there were not enough for all.

¹⁵ The people had compassion again on Benjamin for Yahweh had let one of the tribes of Israel perish. ¹⁶ So the community elders said, "What can we do to provide wives for those that are left, for the women of Benjamin were killed?" ¹⁷ and they added, "How can the

survival of Benjamin be assured that a tribe of Israel may not perish? ¹⁸We cannot give them our daughters since we have made this oath: Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin?"

¹⁹But they said, "It is now the feast of Yahweh which is celebrated annually at Shiloh, north of Bethel, east of the road that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah." ²⁰So they advised the Benjaminites: "Go and wait in ambush in the vineyards. ²¹Be ready and when the maidens of Shiloh come dancing in groups, come out of the vineyards and each man seize a wife and go to the land of Benjamin.

²²If their fathers or brothers come to complain against you, we shall tell them: Try to understand them; see, the war left us with no means of giving a wife to each one of them. You are not the ones who gave them your maidens, otherwise you would have broken your vow."

²³So the Benjaminites did and seized the women they needed. Then they went and returned to their inheritance, rebuilt their cities and dwelt in them.

²⁴The Israelites then marched from there to their homes, by tribe and families.

²⁵At that time, there was no king in Israel and everyone did what seemed good to him.