

JUDGES – saviours of the nation

The book of Judges begins with the situation that followed the death of Joshua. His departure had severed the last link between the Israelites and the slavery of Egypt. A new generation arose. These people knew nothing of the hardships suffered by their fathers, and ease and prosperity turned their hearts away from God. There were still pockets of Canaanites left unsubdued, and the temptation to slide into the easy-going, pleasure-seeking fertility religions of their neighbours proved too great.

The great Moses had warned the Israelites this would happen, and also of the consequences. God responded by putting painful pressure on His erring people to bring them to their senses

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“... all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that He had done for Israel ... They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and He gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And He sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.” Judges 2:10, 14, 15

When, however, the people repented and recognized their folly, the Lord was quick to forgive, and sent heroes, called **Judges** in the Scripture record, to deliver them from their oppressors. The book of Judges gives fascinating pocket biographies of these courageous men (and in one case a woman), who were called to risk their lives to save the nation. To understand the true greatness of these leaders you need to use some imagination, putting yourself in their shoes as you read, and feeling the pressures facing them. Every word counts. Let's look at one or two examples.

Deborah, in the fourth chapter of Judges, was literally a judge, that is she held courts of

justice where the people came to have their cases heard – the Levites were no longer performing this duty, now people had turned away from God. She was also a prophetess, inspired from time to time by the Spirit of the Lord. Hazor, destroyed by Joshua over a century before, had been rebuilt. Its new ruler had access to the latest advances in metal technology, and assembled an army accompanied by chariots with iron fittings that enabled them to run faster. Jabin used his military strength to dominate Israel and put them under tribute, and they groaned under the heavy burden.

Deborah called on **Barak**, whose Hebrew name means Lightning, to raise an Israelite army and attack Jabin, promising him God would give him victory. Barak had cold feet, and insisted he would only go if she came along too. With some difficulty he persuaded volunteers from the northern tribes to join his troops, and his poorly armed forces assembled as instructed on the **Hill of Tabor**, which still projects today out of the Valley of Jezreel. He had 10,000 men, but the enemy force ranged against him included 900 chariots under the command of Jabin's general **Sisera**. They waited for him on the broad, flat plain – ideal for chariot manoeuvres.

Surprisingly, Barak thrashed Sisera. His soldiers chased the fleeing enemy to the far end of the Valley of Jezreel. How did he achieve this amazing victory? Here we have to read the narrative carefully. We notice first that Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled away on foot. Then in chapter five we have a celebratory battle ode composed to thank God for the victory (there are several of these in the Old Testament) in which it speaks of heavy rain, and the brook Kishon sweeping the enemy away. Putting these hints together we can visualise a sudden heavy rainstorm, swelling the river and turning the clay soil of the valley to mud. The chariot wheels stick fast, and the enemy loses all his advantage. It was typical of the way God's timely use of natural forces can change the balance of power in minutes. But we are left deeply impressed by a man who, faced with tremendous odds, was prepared to go into battle believing that God would not let him down. That quality the Bible calls faith. It

is essential we also have it, if we are to please God.

Gideon, another character listed alongside Barak in Hebrews chapter eleven, the New Testament chapter of heroes, is also said to have been “*made strong out of weakness*”. In his time the people of God had turned to the worship of **Baal**, the fertility god of the Canaanites, and **Ashtoreth**, his lascivious consort. Even Gideon’s father, headman of the village, had decided to go along with the trend, building an altar to Baal. God, ever patient, waited for His people to repent. To jog their consciences He allowed the **Midianites**, descendants of Lot, to raid their farms and steal their produce. Their lives became a misery.

Gideon was busy threshing his wheat, not on the village threshing floor where the give-away cloud of chaff would be visible from a distance, but uncomfortably in a below-ground winepress. Here an angel of the Lord visited him. The stranger looking down at him heard his complaint that God seemed to have abandoned His people, and challenged him to go himself and deliver Israel. His first assignment was to destroy his father’s altar and build a new one to the God of Israel. He did this by night to avoid publicity. He was then instructed to gather the tribes together for a confrontation with the Midianites. Untrained in battle, he did that, but began to have doubts as to his ability. He asked for a sign, and God gave it to him. He asked for another one, and God gave him that too. Then, to his dismay, the angelic commander suggested he should reduce his forces down to a mere 300. God was going to show His people that it is not human strength that brings victory, but faith in Him. On the battle night Gideon was instructed to set his men in three groups of 100 around the camp of the Midianites. They were to lift up blazing torches, blow trumpets and cry ‘*the sword of the Lord and of Gideon*’. The effect was dramatic. The enemy soldiers attacked each other in the darkness, and then in dire panic fled downhill and across the Jordan. Gideon, the timid hero, became the judge of Israel, and the land had rest for forty years. Again, it is easy to read these thrilling stories, but we need to think through the courage it takes to abandon yourself into the hands of the unseen God, believing He will not let you down.

The book of Judges covers a period of 500 years, and can be characterised by this phrase

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“... Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Judges 17:6

It was time for a reform, and God would bring this about through a new form of leader – a king.

It is difficult to step into the shoes of a great man. Joshua, desperately lonely as he took charge of the nation, was encouraged, first by God Himself, and then by the people, to be strong and press on. His first task was to cross the River Jordan and advance into the heartland of the Canaanites. The ancient city of Jericho barred the way. Sensibly, he sent two spies to reconnoitre, and they reported the morale of the inhabitants was at rock bottom.

How was Joshua to get the whole nation across the Jordan, which at this time of year was in full flood? The instructions came from his angelic Advisor. After three days, the priests were to lead the way, carrying the Ark into the centre of the river. Miraculously, as their feet came to the bank of the Jordan, the water dried up, and it became possible to cross dry-foot. Hours later, with everyone safe on the western side, the floodwaters resumed their course. There was a rich symbolism in this incident. The water, says the record, was cut off (perhaps by a landslide) further north at a place called Adam. As the ark, a potent symbol of Jesus, held back the flood that would have swept Adam’s descendants down to the Dead Sea, so salty that nothing can live, the people crossed over into the Promised Land. In the allegory, they had entered the Kingdom of God.

Jericho was the first Canaanite city to be conquered by Joshua. Once again, the angel, “captain of the Lord’s host” as he is styled, issued his commands. God was going to drive home an important lesson for the Israelites and their enemies alike – the victory would not be by man’s military genius, but by the power of Israel’s God. For six days running the army tramped in silence round the walled city, to the amusement of the inhabitants. On the seventh day they completed seven circuits. On the very last circuit the walls of Jericho fell outwards (probably by an earthquake), so that the city lay wide open to the sword and fire. It was a great victory.

Joshua chose to advance up into the central mountain range to capture the south of the country. He was aided by the decision of the Canaanite kings or chieftains to band together and attack Gibeon. This important city had tricked Joshua early in his campaign into signing a treaty of peace. He now felt obliged to honour his pact with them. Actually, a battle in the open field was just what he needed – attacking walled cities one by one would have taken months, even years. Ascending from the main camp at Gilgal near Jericho by night, a climb of 3000 feet (900 m), he took the enemy by surprise in the morning light, and defeated them roundly. It was a long day, in which God sent a devastating hailstorm that mowed down the fleeing troops, and gave Joshua extended daylight to complete the rout.

The second phase was in the north of the land, where again the chieftains decided to join forces to combat the Israelite threat. This battle took place by a small lake north of the Sea of Galilee. Joshua's victory was followed by the systematic destruction of the capital city of Hazor. Excavations by the Israeli Yigael Yadin in the 1970's found traces of the fire with which Joshua burned Hazor, and stone idols beheaded by his soldiers as they threw down the pagan shrines. This confirmed the statement that

“... Joshua turned back at that time and captured Hazor and struck its king with the sword, for Hazor formerly was the head of all those kingdoms.

And they struck with the sword all who were in it, devoting them to destruction; there was none left that breathed. And he burned Hazor with fire. Joshua 11:10, 1.1

“So Joshua took the whole land,” continues the record, “according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses. And Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war”. v23

This initial breaking of the military power of the Canaanites was essential. With the armed forces subdued, the Israelites could begin the takeover of the land that God had promised them. This was effected by drawing up detailed maps. Mountains, the River Jordan and the seas were used to define boundaries, and then the countryside was divided into family-sized

inheritances. These were then apportioned to the people on the fairest possible basis by drawing lots. This exercise is described in Joshua 14:2 through to chapter 19.

Critics of the Bible often question the morality of the Israelites killing the Canaanites and taking over their lands. In today's culture, it would be counted as 'genocide'. However the Bible makes it plain that God is the ultimate owner of all lands. He decides who will live in a country and for how long. The prophet Amos has a revealing statement –

“Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,” declares the LORD.” Amos 9:8

God's eyes had been upon the Canaanites for centuries. He had told Abraham that his descendants –

“...shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” Genesis 15:16

“The Amorites” is a general term for the peoples inhabiting the land of Canaan (Israel). God waited patiently. He permitted four more generations of Amorites to consider the evils their fathers had committed, and repent, but to no effect. Now the time had come for them to be replaced by the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham. This matches what Moses had told his people -

“Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that He may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” Deuteronomy 9:5

The corollary of this is that when civilizations such as ours reach the same depths of depravity as that of the Canaanites, where violence, homosexuality and oppression abounded, a day of judgment will inevitably fall. That is an essential part of the Christian gospel. We are responsible to God the Creator, and He is going to send His son Jesus to judge the world in righteousness (see Acts 17:31).

The last task of Joshua, described in chapters 20 to 21, was to provide accommodation for the tribe of Levi, who were to be full-time priests, teaching and administering the law. To ensure justice was readily available to the population, they were apportioned 48 towns, scattered evenly through the twelve tribes. Of these, six were set aside as special 'cities of refuge'. If you accidentally slew someone, for example when the head flew off your axe, the kinsmen of the dead man might assume you had murdered him. This could easily lead to a hasty revenge killing, and even start a blood feud between families. By running to the nearest city of refuge, you could take sanctuary until your case could be heard in a court of law, and the facts examined in a proper trial. If you were found not guilty of murder, but guilty of manslaughter, you were required to remain in the city of refuge until the death of the High Priest. After that you could go free. This ruling emphasized that even an accidental killing was still the taking of a precious life, which belonged by rights to God.

Now the work of subduing the Canaanites was complete, the soldiers from the two and a half tribes who had chosen to have their inheritance on the east of the river Jordan were allowed to return to their families. The book of Joshua concludes with a description of a great national assembly called by their aged leader, in which he warned them to hold fast to their promise to serve the Lord their God, erecting a stone monument to remind them of their solemn covenant. He died at the great age of 110 years, and was mourned by all the people.

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