

Judges 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Judges chapter 1. After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the Lord, Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them? The Lord said, Judah shall go up. Behold, I have given the land into his hand. And Judah said to Simeon his brother, Come up with me into the territory allotted to me, that we may fight against the Canaanites, and I likewise will go with you into the territory allotted to you. So Simeon went with him. Then Judah went up, and the Lord gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand, and they defeated ten thousand of them at Bezek. They found Adonai Bezek at Bezek, and fought against him, and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. Adonai Bezek fled, but they pursued him, and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and his big toes. And Adonai Bezek said, Seventy kings, with their thumbs and their big toes cut off, used to pick up scraps under my table. As I have done, so God has repaid me. And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there. And the men of Judah fought against Jerusalem, and captured it, and struck it with the edge of the sword, and set the city on fire. And afterward the men of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who lived in the hill country, in the Negev, and in the lowland.

And Judah went against the Canaanites who lived in Hebron. Now the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath Arba, and they defeated Shishai, and Haman, and Talmi. From there they went against the inhabitants of Deba. The name of Deba was formerly Kiriath-sefer. And Caleb said, He who attacks Kiriath-sefer and captures it, I will give him Aksa, my daughter, for a wife.

And Othniel, the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it, and he gave him Aksa, his daughter, for a wife. When she came to him, she urged him to ask her father for a field. And she dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, What do you want? She said to him, Give me a blessing. Since you have set me in the land of the Negev, give me also springs of water.

And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs. And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Israel, from the city of Palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negev near Arad. And they went and settled with the people. And Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath, and devoted it to destruction. So the name of the city was called Horma. Judah also captured Gaza with its territory, and Ashkelon with its territory, and Ekron with its territory. And the Lord was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country. But he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain, because they had chariots of iron. And Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said. And he drove out from it the three sons of Anak. But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem. So the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day.

The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel, and the Lord was with them. And the house of Joseph scouted out Bethel. Now the name of the city was formerly Luz. And the spies saw a man coming out of the city. And they said to him, Please show us the way into the city, and we will deal kindly with you. And he showed them the way into the city, and they struck the city with the edge of the sword.

[3 : 14] But they let the man and all his family go. And the man went to the land of the Hittites, and built a city, and called its name Luz. That is its name to this day. Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth Shean and its villages, or Teanach and its villages, or the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Iblum and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages. For the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land.

When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labour, but did not drive them out completely. And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Giza, so the Canaanites lived in Giza among them. Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Neolol, so the Canaanites lived among them, but became subject to forced labour. Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acho, or the inhabitants of Sidon, or of Alab, or of Axib, or of Helba, or of Aphek, or of Rehob. So the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not drive them out. Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh, or the inhabitants of Beth Anath, so they lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land.

Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh and of Beth Anath became subject to forced labour for them. The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain. The Amorites persisted in dwelling in Mount Heraz, in Aijalon, and in Shealbm, but the hand of the house of Joseph rested heavily on them, and they became subject to forced labour.

And the border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akribim, from Selah and upward. The Book of Judges begins after the death of Joshua. Before his death, Moses passed on the reins to Joshua, who was appointed as the new leader. Joshua was a rather different leader from Moses, whereas Moses represented the Lord more powerfully over against Israel. Joshua represented and related to the people much more directly. However, Joshua didn't appoint a successor in the way that Moses did.

John Barrett compares the death of Joshua to the ascension of Jesus in this respect. Jesus doesn't appoint a new Jesus-like figure to take his place. Rather, leadership is taken up by the apostles and the elders. The Book of Judges begins with the Israelites inquiring of the Lord more directly themselves, rather than Moses or Joshua doing it for them. The beginning of Judges is similar to the beginning of the Book of Joshua.

[5 : 41] After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua, the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, Moses, my servant, is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. However, the similarities also serve to highlight the differences. At the beginning of Judges, the people are taking much more agency themselves. The Lord doesn't directly instruct a leader over them, rather they must inquire of the Lord themselves. The first chapter of Judges sets the tone for much of what follows. It's a chapter of occasional and partial victories and of various failures. Whereas the Book of Joshua generally struck a more positive note regarding the success of the conquest, in Judges we see just how much remains to be done. There is a difference between taking territory and possessing it. Israel has gone throughout the land, defeating cities as they went. However, when they moved on, Canaanites would regroup, rebuild and reoccupy territory that had been taken earlier. At the end of Joshua, we discover that there were still many Canaanites in the land, and in the beginning of Judges we see just how many.

The rest of the Book of Judges will be about securing and consolidating the gains of the conquest. If the Book of Joshua is like Abraham, moving throughout the land and building altars and digging wells, the Book of Judges is like Isaac, who has to consolidate the work of his father, re-digging or re-establishing wells of his father that had been lost or taken.

The Lord had previously said that they would not take the land in one fell swoop. In Exodus chapter 23 verses 29 to 31, I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possessed the land. And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates. For I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. But Israel was also given a warning in Numbers chapter 33 verses 55 to 56, But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them. In Judges chapter 1, we see both the gradual character of the conquest, but also the failure of Israel to drive out the Canaanites and possess the land, and the ongoing problems that produced. Many of the details described recall or repeat earlier accounts from the book of Joshua. Working out the chronological order of events in

Joshua and Judges relative to the fixed points of the entry into the land and the death of Joshua is not straightforward. In Joshua, some events seem to occur prior to the death of Joshua that here seem to occur afterward. The material in both Joshua and Judges is ordered less with a concern for chronological clarity than with a concern for the meaning of the events being recounted. Although Judges chapter 1 begins with the death of Joshua, chapter 2 recounts the death of Joshua again. My suspicion is that much of the material from verse 3 to the end of the chapter might have occurred in the 40 years or so that probably intervened between the entry into the promised land and the death of Joshua, rather than subsequently. The ordering of the material is less chronological than geographical and according to the order of the tribes. The death of Joshua was probably over 40 years after the first entry into the land and they are still fighting to occupy some of their territory. This gives some sense of how long the process of the conquest and the consolidation of the possession of the land was.

As at the beginning of the initial conquest in Joshua, they start in Jericho, as we see in verse 16. Jericho is the city of palms and they're taking over the land. The Lord declares that the Judahites should go up first. We should probably hear something more in the statement the land has been given into Judah's hand. Judah will lead the tribes into battle and the tribe of Judah will also come to lead the nation. The preeminence of Judah among the tribes was already seen in Genesis chapter 49 verses 8 to 10. Judah your brother shall praise you, your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies, your father's son shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's cub, from the prey my son you have gone up. He stooped down, he crouched as a lion, and as a lioness who dares rouse him. The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler starve from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. In Numbers chapter 2, the tribe of Judah was also the tribe that led Israel on its marches. There is an implicit answer not just to the question of who will lead Israel in the fight against the Canaanites, but also to the question of what sort of rule would emerge after the deaths of

[10:42] Moses and Joshua in time. We should also notice here that the people are dividing more into their tribal groups, without a single human leader over the whole nation or a gathered assembly of the whole nation at this time. The order of Judges 1 is carefully stylized. It can be divided into two halves, the first half from verses 3 to 21, and the second from 22 to 36. The first concerns the southern tribes, Judah, Simeon and Benjamin. It's led by Judah, and the second concerns the northern six and a half tribes, although no mention is made of Issachar at this point, and they're led by the house of Joseph. Judah and Simeon form an alliance and begin with a great victory over Adonai Bezak, where they defeat over 10,000 of his men, a round number that clearly seems numerically significant for its suggestion of completeness. It's a resounding victory. Simeon's territory as a tribe lies within the borders of Judah, and the pact between the two leads to the absorption of the former into the latter in time.

They cut off the thumbs and the big toes of Adonai Bezak. This is an act of justice. It's testified to by Adonai Bezak himself, as he had done the same thing to 70 rulers. Adonai Bezak is, beyond being an important defeated enemy, something of a representation of the brutality of the Canaanites, and the reason why the Lord sent Israel to destroy them. Adonai Bezak rules over 70 rulers, perhaps reminding the reader of the 70 nations of the world, mentioned in chapter 10 of Genesis.

The Judahites capture the city of Jerusalem and set it on fire. The mention of Jerusalem at this point is important. It will later be the royal city, where the kings of Judah will reign. Both in the opening reference to the preeminence of Judah and the presence of Jerusalem in the narrative, some royal themes are starting to emerge in a book that will be about a period in which there was no king in Israel. It will not be until 2 Samuel chapter 5 that Jerusalem is finally properly taken by David.

Caleb was a leader of the Judahites, and in Joshua chapter 14 verses 6 to 15, he was granted the territory of Hebron by Joshua. In Joshua chapter 15 verses 13 to 19, we have the same story of Aksa, Caleb's daughter, that we have here. Othniel captured Kiriath-sepher for Caleb and won Aksa's hand.

Aksa's request to Caleb is one of the great land-grant narratives in the book of Joshua. She requests springs of water, and perhaps this should remind us of the connections between women and water sources in Genesis and elsewhere. We also discover at this point that some of the descendants of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, were among them at this time. Later, the wife of one of these Kenites, Jael, will play an important part in the story. The story of Judah's possession of the land is generally positive, but they failed to take the lowland, as the inhabitants of the plain had iron chariots. Also, while the Judahites captured Jerusalem and put it to the sword, the Benjaminites, in whose territory it lay, couldn't drive out the Jebusites who lived there.

[13 : 54] After the southern struggle for possession led by Judah, we have the northern struggle for possession led by the house of Joseph. Judah goes up first in the first attack upon the south, and then in verse 22, the house of Joseph then goes up. Judah and Joseph were the leading tribes, as we see in the preeminence of Judah and Joseph in the blessings of Genesis chapter 49. Judah and Joseph were also formally represented by Caleb and Joshua respectively. As in the case of the conquest of Judah, this story begins with an important city. In the former account it was Jerusalem, and this time it's Bethel, or Luz.

Bethel was a prominent city in the stories of Abraham, and particularly of Jacob. Jacob had the vision of the ladder there, and had called it Bethel at that time. The house of Joseph spy out the city, much as the spies spied out Jericho at the beginning of the book of Joshua. They are helped by a man, whom they spare, much as the Israelites spared Rahab in Joshua. However, the stories diverge at this point.

The story of the defeat of Jericho ends with a curse upon the person who tries to rebuild the city, and with Rahab living among the Israelites. However, this story ends with the man moving to the land of the Hittites, and building a city named after the original Canaanite name of the city of Bethel.

This is not a promising sign. The northern tribes are a great deal less successful in their attempts to occupy their land. While they generally dominated the Canaanites dwelling in their territories, and sometimes reduced them to forced labour, they could not expel or assimilate them. In some cases, we are told that the Canaanites lived among them. In others, that they lived among the Canaanites.

In verse 33, for instance, the Canaanites are referred to as the inhabitants of the land. Dan has particular difficulties overcoming the Amorites, and were repelled in their attempts to capture the lowland, being driven back to the hill country. The northern tribes can achieve little more than a fragile hegemony. By the end of the chapter, the confidence with which it began has sunk, and the situation of Israel looks rather bleak. Israel has failed to live up to the promise of the conquest. A question to consider. Taking stock of the situations that the various tribes find themselves in at this point, what might have been the greatest challenges and temptations that they would have felt?