

Judges 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Judges chapter 2 Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim, and he said, I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers.

I said, I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land. You shall break down their altars. But you have not obeyed my voice.

What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you. As soon as the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept.

And they called the name of that place Bokim, and they sacrificed there to the Lord. When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land.

And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of one hundred and ten years.

[1 : 0 6] And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-Herez, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Geash. And 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. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals.

And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them.

And they provoked the Lord to anger. 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.

[2 : 0 2] And as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress. Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them.

They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord. And they did not do so. Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge.

And he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning, because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them.

They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. And he said, Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers, and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did or not.

So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly. And he did not give them into the hand of Joshua. The beginning of Judges chapter 2 needs to be read as the conclusion to chapter 1.

[3 : 24] Judah and Joseph go up, and then the angel of the Lord goes up in chapter 2 verse 1. The identity of this figure is a matter of some debate. Literally the messenger of the Lord, a case could be made for him being a prophet, an angel, or a theophanic manifestation of God himself.

Back in Exodus chapter 23 verses 20 to 24, the angel of the Lord was introduced. Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way, and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice. Do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies, and an adversary to your adversaries.

When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces.

It seems most likely to me that this is the figure that we encounter in Judges chapter 2. The angel of the Lord goes up from Gilgal to Bochim. Perhaps we are to identify the angel of the Lord here with the same commander of the army of the Lord that Joshua met near Gilgal at the end of Joshua chapter 5.

[4 : 46] The angel casts judgment upon Israel for its failure. He recounts the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and condemns Israel for its failure to destroy the altars of the people of the land, and their breaking of the requirement not to enter into covenant with them.

As a consequence of their unfaithfulness, the Lord will not drive out the Canaanites before them. Rather, the Canaanites will be a continual threat to them in fulfilment of the 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.

However, we should note that in the angel of the Lord's speech, the people are not judged for failing to drive out all of the Canaanites. Rather, it is their failure to tear down the false worship of the Canaanites, and to refrain from entering into covenant with them that they are condemned for.

Israel's response to the angel's indictment suggests some degree of remorse or contrition for what they have done. They even name the place after their weeping. However, as soon becomes apparent, even though they weep and make sacrifices, there is no significant and deep change.

[6 : 04] Bokim was most likely near Bethel, as the two are identified in the Septuagint. The visit of the angel might also recall the judgment upon Adam and Eve in the garden. What is this you have done?

The land now yielding thorns and thistles that will make their labour difficult for them. Verse 6 is a jarring break with the flow of the narrative, presuming that we are reading the preceding verses as having occurred after the death of Joshua.

It seems that after the encounter with the angel at Bokim, Joshua dismisses the people. However, this is likely a flashback. The first chapter had focused upon Israel's military failure.

The second chapter focuses more upon their religious failure and their going after false gods. Joshua dies at the age of 110. It's the same age as Joseph died at.

If Joseph brought Israel out of the land, it was Joshua, a descendant of Joseph, who returned them. Moses lived to be 120, 12 times 10, a number suggesting a full measure of Israel.

[7 : 07] However, 110 is 10 times 11, falling short from 12. There is a sense of incompleteness here. Indeed, as James Jordan and James Bajan have observed, multiples of the number 11 occur at several points in the book of Judges.

And here in Judges, we certainly get a sense of the way in which the work of Joshua was incomplete. And we also see reminders of the original situation of the Exodus, when we are told that Joshua and his generation died out, and a new generation arose who did not know the Lord or what he had done for Israel, especially when we consider the parallels between Joshua and Joseph.

Exodus chapter 1 verses 6 to 8 reads, Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly. They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. It's the same sort of thing that's happening here. The people of this new generation did not know the Lord.

They also have a very different character from the generation that preceded them. They have not experienced his deliverances. Generations that have not had certain formative experiences can easily forget the lessons painfully learned by past generations.

[8 : 27] So much of the Pentateuch was devoted to memorial, to remembrance, and to institutionalization of events, precisely in order to guard against such a scenario, to ensure that Israel never forgot the Lord in such a manner, never forgot the lessons that they had been taught in the time of the Exodus.

The failure of Israel on the military front, their failure to drive out the Canaanites in chapter 1, was bad enough. However, here we see far more serious failures, as Israel goes after the gods of the Canaanites, the Baals, and the Ashtoreth.

These are the gods of the people of the land, the foreign gods that Israel had not known. These are gods that had not delivered them, that they had not experienced in salvation before.

Barry Webb notes the succession of verbs here, that put the gravity of their sin into the sharpest relief. Served, abandoned, went after, prostrated themselves, abandoned and served.

We should consider that they probably served these gods in large measure as a form of treaty-making and assimilation to the ways of the Canaanites, who continued to dwell in their midst. Religious syncretism, alliances, and intermarriage went together, and were the sort of strategies that a people in Israel's precarious position in the land would be extremely tempted to adopt.

The prospect of remaining distinct from the people in whose midst they dwelled, or who dwelt in the midst of them, was one that probably scared many of them. Such people could easily turn against them if the balance of power shifted.

So it seemed to make sense to worship their gods, to enter into treaties with them, to intermarry with them, and in all ways possible, to get on good terms with their neighbours. As a result of their unfaithfulness, the Lord gave them into the hand of plunderers, and acted against them.

The Lord, however, took pity upon his people, even in their unfaithfulness, and raised up judges to deliver them. He heard their groaning, much as he had heard the groaning of the Israelites in Egypt.

The judges were raised up as deliverers for Israel. They also, as implied by verse 17, served to proclaim the truth of the Lord, and to establish some sort of true worship.

However, even if Israel temporarily improved in the days of a judge, they would soon return to their unfaithfulness, becoming even worse than they were before. And as a consequence of their disobedience and unfaithfulness, they would not enter into the full possession of the land.

The Lord had declared by Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 11 verse 24, Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours. Your territory shall be from the wilderness to the Lebanon, and from the river, the river Euphrates, to the western sea.

However, now their territory would not expand beyond the gains made by Joshua. There would be people left in the land, and they would become a snare and thorns in their side.

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