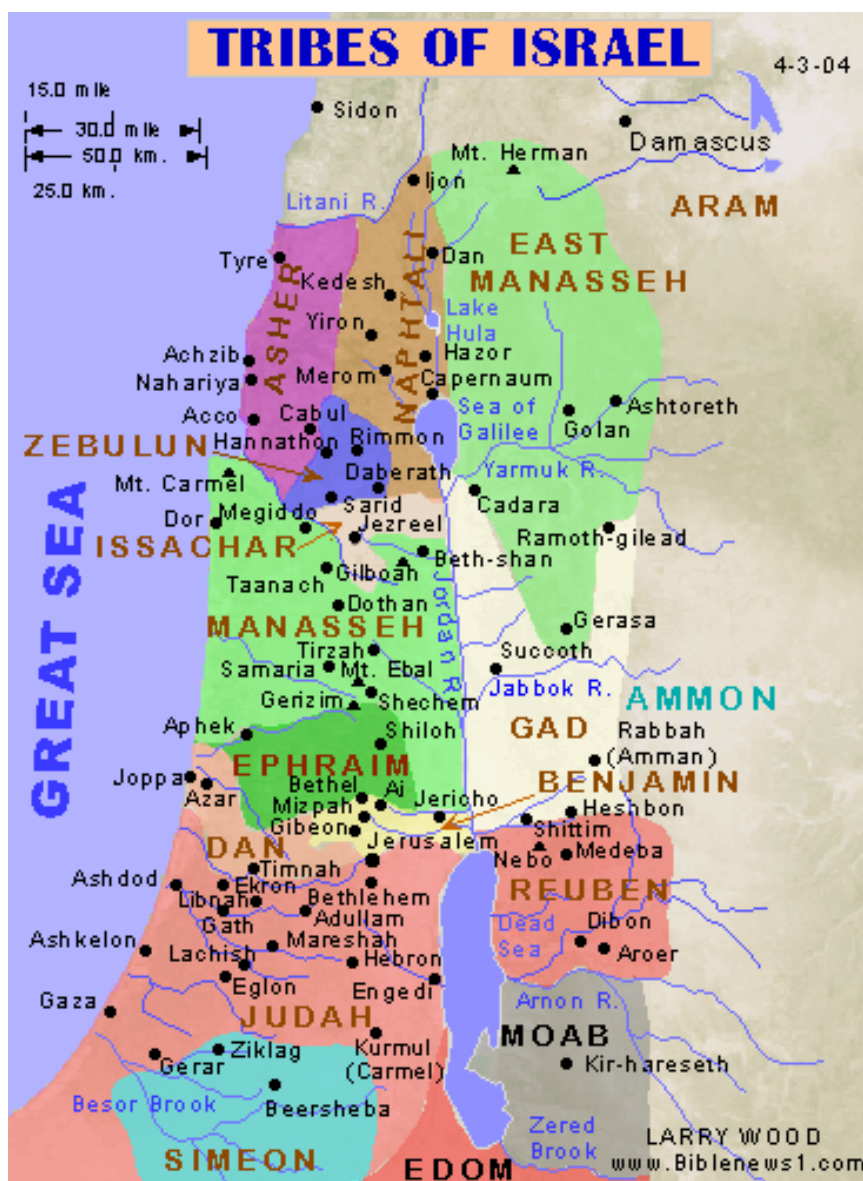


Day 76 Judges 2.7 – 3.31



The Settlement of Israel by the Tribes

The Rise of the *Right-wisars* (1400-1380 BC?)

2.7ff After the death of Joshua, the oversight of Israel passes to ‘the elders’ (Heb. הַזִּקְנִים *Ha-Zeqenim*) who could remember the period in the desert with Moses. But, terribly, the next generation had only experience the land, had not seen the wonders of the desert, and they did not ‘know the Lord’ nor Israel’s story. The impact of a generation not teaching its next generation the story is dire in this case.

2.11ff The Israelites start worshipping the Ba’alim (Heb. בַּעַלִּים) The masters, and the Ashtoroth (Heb. אַשְׁתֹּרֶת) pagan fertility gods whose cult was tied to the progression of the agricultural year and the fertility of the land. It seems incredible that in one generation, such a thing could have occurred, but to see a people whose lives were tied to the land making a religion out of their land-based economy would seemed to

have been more relevant, perhaps, than the stories of a God in the desert who provided manna and water from a rock.

As a result, the people are attacked by raiders; the Ba'alim suddenly prove no match, they are not deliverers from adversity, it seems, while the Lord (YHWH) has promised to defend his people. The people are galvanized into seeking the face of the One who rescued His people from Egypt when they are subjected to attack. However, when things are quiet, they are drawn back to the lascivious good-times creed of the Ba'alim.

2.16ff God, then, raises up these *Shophetim*, who bring *mishpat* (same root in Hebrew, justice-judgment, and set things to rights according to God's order) – hence, in my words, *Right-wisers*.

3.1ff The nation still in the lands are enumerated; they include the fearsome Philistines, Jebusites and Amorites.

Vv5,6 Intermarriage begins to take place.

The First Three Deliverers.

Othniel

3.7,8 The first attack comes from Cushan-Rishathaim, from north-west Mesopotamia, to the north of Israel. Israel falls into tribute to him for eight years.

9-11 Deliverance comes through Caleb's nephew Othniel, the one who captures Debir from the Anakites. He then continues as the leader of Israel for forty years, during which time there is peace.

Ehud

3.12-30 The Moabites attack from the south-east, under their overweight leader, Eglon. God raises up Ehud, a left-handed Benjamite, who kills Eglon in a graphically described assassination in his own audience-chamber, leaving the knife in his flesh. This leads to an uprising against the Moabites, led by Ehud, and eighty years of peace ensues.

Shamgar

3,31. Following Ehud's leadership, the Lord raises up Shamgar, about whom much little is known, except that he saves Israel through killing six hundred Philistines with an ox-prod!

Day 77 Judges 4 to 5

Deborah and Barak

The Israelites have so far been unable to dislodge the peoples of the valley of Jezreel, mainly because of their iron chariots. Jezreel is a wide plain, running west to east from the sea to the Jordan valley, south of the Galilee Hills and north of the Ephraim

hill country. Strategically it is of great importance, and in fact it is here that later prophets predict a tumultuous battle which will draw the nations together against Israel at Har-Megiddo, also known as Armageddon.

4.1- 3 Because of their continuing rebellion, the people of Israel come under the overlordship of a Canaanite king, Jabin, whose seat of government is in Hazor, in the north of Israel, to the north of the sea of Galilee in the Naphtali hills. However, the commander of his armies, Sisera lived at Harosheth Hagoyim (meaning ‘workman of the nations’.) This settlement near the Kishon River was in the Jezreel Valley itself, and presumably Sisera was based here to have a commanding hold on the plain.

Sisera’s nine hundred chariots must have been a terrible war machine, and kept the Israelites in subjection for twenty years in that region. This leads to their crying to the Lord, who is the one who has promised to deliver them when they call.

4.4-10. We learn that a woman, Deborah, is now *Right-wiser* of Israel. There is no explanation or comment on this, she just is the one to whom the people of Israel are coming to have their disputes settled.

She is described as a prophetess (Heb נְבִיאָה *Nevi’ah*) and she is married. She had her seat of judgment under a palm tree named Deborah’s Palm near Bethel in Ephraim.

She has a word from the Lord for Barak son of Abinoam (Heb בָּרַק בֶּן־אַבְיָנָם *Baraq ben-Avino’am*) from the northern land of Israel, at Kedesh, near Lake Huleh, to go and take on Sisera at Mount Tabor, on the northern side of the Jezreel plain, with an army of ten thousand troops made up of men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. The Lord is then going to bring Sisera’s army into the middle of the plain, where the Kishon river runs, and there the Israelites will be victorious over him.

Barak now goes quite wimpish, and says he will only go if Deborah comes with him. Presumably he wants her there as a talisman, a guarantee of God’s favour. Because of this, she says that God will give the glory in the battle to a woman, and not to Barak. But she does accompany the army to Tabor.

4.11 – 16 Just at this point, mention is made of Heber the Kenite. The Kenites were the tribe descended from Moses’ wife’s family, and his father-in-law Jethro. Hobab, mentioned here in verse 11, was actually Moses’ brother-in-law (see Num. 10.29). We saw that the Kenites moved in alongside the Israelites after the conquest of the land (see Judges 1.16) but Heber has separated from the main body of his tribe to settle at Zaananim, which could be in the north of the country, or, more likely, somewhere on the plain. The Kenites are in good relations with Jabin and Sisera, and they seem to point the way to Tabor, where the Israelites are gathering.

Sisera gathers his chariots, and the Israelites, urged on by Deborah, come down the mountain to join battle. Notice, it is not the Israelites, but the Lord who routs the Canaanites. Sisera abandons his chariot and flees.

4.17-24. Sisera seeks friendly shelter, and comes to the tent of Heber the Kenite, where his wife Jael invites him in. He asks for water, she brings him milk, and makes him comfortable. Exhausted, he falls asleep.

Jael now does something quite heinous for a mid-eastern hostess; she takes a tent-peg and a hammer and drives it through the head of the sleeping captain, pinning him to the ground. This is surprising because she is betraying her duty as a host to protect her guest. But she wins the day, and Israel celebrates her for her cunning and strength.

When Barak comes seeking Sisera, Jael takes him to show him the grisly end of her guest. This is the beginning of the end for Jabin's domination of Israel.

5. 1- 31

This chapter is a hymn to the Lord for His defeat of Jabin and Sisera at the hands of Barak and Jael.

5.6ff The song recalls how in the days of the previous judge, Shamgar, the roads were not safe to travel, so they were empty, and people took byways out of fear. But Deborah arises, called a mother in Israel (Heb *שָׂמַרְתִּי אִם בְּיַשָּׁרְאֵל* *shaqamti em be'Yisra'el*)

5.10,11 Now the roads are safe to travel in comfort, and there is no threat of snipers on the way.

5.13ff There is crowing at this point over the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, who were in the battle. Where were the other tribes, asks the song? Gilead, Dan and Asher stayed away, though Issachar and Reuben joined in, as well as some from Ephraim.

5.24 There is blessing for Jael, called most blessed of women, recalling her exploit.

5.28ff Here is a touch of pathos at the end of the song, Sisera's mother and her ladies waiting for her son to return, while he and his armies are being plundered, perhaps of the garments the women sewed for them.

5.31 The song ends with a paean of praise to God, and we are told that peace now comes to Israel for forty years.

Day 78 Judges 6 and 7

Gideon the *Ba'al-Breaker* c.1184-1177BC

Forty years have passed since the victory of Deborah and Barak, and the Israelites have reverted to worshipping the Ba'alim and the Ashtorot. It seems that when times are going well for Israel, she betrays her Saviour-Lord, and falls into the religion of the land, the 'good-time idols' who are reputed to ensure the harvest and whose lewdness bespeaks a lax lifestyle of loose and wayward morals, particularly the worship of the genital sexual elements of fertility.

Jdg. 6.1ff God now allows Israel to be afflicted by a new sting in the tail. The Midianites were a marauding people coming from the far south-east of the desert, from alongside the Red Sea. They were descendants of Abraham, by his later wife Keturah, but considered by the Jews as Ishmaelites. (See Jdg.8.24) They had a new weapon, the camel, and used it to terrifying effect. So fearsome were they that Israel abandoned her lands and took refuge in the hills and mountain caves (v.2).

Worthy of note is that the Midianites destroy the crops, which Ba'al and Asherah are supposed to be guaranteeing. This makes a mockery of the fertility gods' credentials, and causes Israel to cry out to a God who can save them, unlike the dumb idols of the Canaanites.

6.7-10 First, God sends an unnamed prophet to denounce the Israelites' treachery; the God they have refused is the God who saved them from the hand of Egypt and sustained them forty years in the desert. They have not listened to Him.

6.11ff. The angel of the Lord comes, very physically, and sits down under an oak in the Ophrah, in the north-west of the Jezreel valley, in the lands belonging to Manasseh.

Here, he confronts Gideon (Heb. גִּדְעוֹן *Gid'on* from a root גָּדַד *gada* meaning to fell a tree, or to cut down – a kind of lumberjack, hence by extrapolation, a warrior, a hewer.) Gideon is threshing grain, separating seed from stalks, in a winepress, probably an underground chamber, for fear of Midianite attack. The angel tells him to save Israel, which Gideon laughs out of court – he is the least likely, in view of his status.

19ff The angel proceeds to give Gideon a sign by consuming his offering with fire, and Gideon is terrified that he has seen God face to face, which seems to entail death. But the angel assures him he is not going to die.

As a response, Gideon builds an altar, and names it *Adonai(YHWH) Shalom* (Heb. אֲדֹנָי הַשָּׁלוֹם) the Lord is wholeness/peace.

Jdg.6.25ff The angel now instructs Gideon to tear down Ba'al's altar, built by his father, Joash, and the phallic pole erected to Asherah, and build an altar to the Lord, sacrificing a bull burned on the wood of the idol shrine. Gideon does this in secret at night, so as not to incur opposition.

6.28ff Next day, the men of the town are ready to lynch him, but Gideon's father speaks up for his son, saying that if Ba'al is such a powerful god, he can judge Gideon himself. As a result, Gideon obtains a new nickname, Jeruba'al (Heb. יְרֻבָּעַל) contended by Ba'al.

6.33ff A joint army of the Midianites, Amalekites and others from beyond the Jordan have invaded and are camped in the Valley of Jezreel, scene of Barak and Deborah's triumph.

The Spirit of the Lord comes upon Gideon. This expression is unique here in Hebrew, for it means, *The Spirit of the Lord put on Gideon (like a garment.)*

(Heb אָת־גִּדְעוֹן רוּחַ יְהוָה לָבַשׁ ve-ruach Adonai(YHWH) labh-shah et-Gid'on) It is a powerful picture of God's empowering a human by becoming incarnate in him.

Gideon, indwelt by the Spirit, blows a trumpet to summon his clan, the Abiezrites, and also summons the Manassites, and Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, their northern neighbours, who respond to the call.

Jdg 6.36 Although God is empowering Gideon, it does not prevent him from needing extra proof, and this comes in the miracle of the fleece, laid out on two occasions, once to be soaked in the middle of dry ground, then left dry in the middle of soaking ground. God graciously grants his testing prayer.

7.1ff On the day of battle, Gideon is told by God that he has too many men. It seems he has gathered some thirty-two thousand men together, a considerable army. But God's logic is very different. So that Israel cannot boast that it was the strength of arms that saved her, God first gets Gideon to dismiss all who don't really want to fight, (twenty-two thousand leave!) and then, God tries them with a test to see who sticks their faces in the water to drink, and who cups water up to his face. Perhaps the sign is that those who cup the water to their lips are more vigilant, while the faces-in-stream brigade are less aware of what is coming behind them!

7.4ff As a result, just three hundred out of the original army are left. But Gideon makes no murmur.

7.9ff The Lord reveals through a dream overheard in the Midianite camp how terrified the Midianites are of Gideon - perhaps they have heard that Gideon has thousands at his disposal – how wrong they now are!

Gideon arranges his band into three groups, with jars and lamps, and in the middle of the night, just as a new guard has come on, they smash the jars and let the lights shine, shouting at the tops of their voices. The Midianites, totally unprepared for a night attack, flee in disarray.

7.23ff Now, Gideon recalls the dismissed thousands, from Manasseh, Asher and Naphtali, and they rout the fleeing armies, Gideon also calling the men of Ephraim to come down from their hill country to head the Midianites off as they try and get back across the Jordan. The two chieftains, Oreb and Zeeb are captured, and beheaded, and their heads are delivered to Gideon who has come down to the Jordan to see the end-game through.

Day 79 Judges 8 and 9

Gideon and Abimelech

The slow decline into disorder of the amphictynony (the tribal federation) of Israel is becoming more apparent. This section begins with animosity between Israelite tribes, and ends with the death of a power-seeking pseudo-king, all pointing the way to more trouble ahead as Israel fails to live in accordance with the guidance of her Saving God.

Jdg 8.1ff The pride of the Ephraimites whom Gideon called down to the Jordan valley to head off the Midianites is offended that Gideon has not called on them when he first went out to fight Midian. This human tendency to jealousy is debilitating in relationships, reading into actions an intentional exclusion which, in Gideon's case, was not present. It introduces a competitiveness among the brother tribes which is unhelpful.

But Gideon handles the situation very diplomatically, helping the Ephraimites to see that their action in killing the kings of Midian was perhaps the most significant of the campaign, as they have taken the prize of the enemy heads. This pacifies the jealous men.

Jdg 8.4ff As Gideon with his three hundred come across the Jordan, they are in need of provisions. They ask at the east bank towns of Succoth and Peniel, both on the Jabbok River, in the territory of Gad, but both the towns refuse them, presumably out of fear of reprisals from the Midianites, should they return. Gideon promises vengeance for their betrayal of fellow-Israelites.

Jdg.8.10ff Two other Midianites chieftains, Zebah and Zalmunnah are on the run, with fifteen thousand men. Gideon overtakes them and routs them, capturing the leaders in the process

Jdg.8.13ff As he promised, Gideon returns and wreaks his vengeance on the towns of Succoth and Peniel, killing the elders and pulling down the defences of Peniel.

Jdg.8.18ff Gideon orders the execution of Zebah and Zalmunnah, for their killing his own brothers. Because his son, Jether, won't do it, Gideon himself takes a sword and kills the two Midianites.

An Attempt to Make Gideon Ruler

8.22ff. The Israelites now want to make Gideon their ruler, but he refuses, saying that neither he nor his son will rule over them, for the Lord is their Ruler.

(Heb. **יְהוָה יִמְשֹׁל בְּכֶם** *Adonai (YHWH) yimshol bakhem* – the word **יִמְשֹׁל** *yimshol* comes from the root word **מָשַׁל** *mashal*, meaning to rule. However, it is not the word 'reign as king', which is **מָלַךְ** *malakh*), so the invitation is not quite to be king.

However, Gideon does take an honorarium in the form of a gold ear-ring taken from the Midianites from each of his soldiers. This comes to around 20 kilos of gold, which

Gideon now chooses to have made into an *ephod* (Heb אֶפֹד) a type of breastplate. We have come across the ephod of the High Priest of Israel before, in Ex.39.2, which is connected with the discernment of the will of the Lord. Whatever its shape or purpose, the ephod becomes a snare to Gideon, because Israel turns it into a relic and worships it. Such is the danger of celebrity.

The word used here of what Israel did in worshipping Gideon's ephod is *prostituted themselves* (Heb קָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל נִיזְנוּ *va-yiznu khol-Yisrael*, = and they prostituted themselves, all of Israel, from the root word זָנָה *zanah*, fornicate, consort with prostitutes, commit adultery.) Here then is how God sees the pursuit of idols, it is a breaking of the marriage vows with God which Israel have made.

Jdg 8.28ff After a further four decades of peace, and the fathering of seventy sons by many wives, and in particular, by one mistress in Shechem, of a son named Abimelech (Heb אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ *Avi-melekh* meaning, my father is king) Gideon, Jerubaal, dies and is buried in Ophrah in the Jezreel Valley.

Jdg. 8.33ff The Hebrew here indicates the speed with which Israel could turn to idols. The original has נִיְהִי כַאֲשֶׁר מַח גִּדְעוֹן נִיְשׁוּבוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִיזְנוּ אַחֲרַי הַבְּעָלִים *Va-yehi ka'asher met Gid'on va-yashuvu benei Yisrael va-yiznu acharei ha-Ba'alim* And it was just as died Gideon & turned sons of Israel & whored after the Ba'als

They actually invent their own version of Ba'al, the Ba'al-Berit (Heb בְּעַל בְּרִית) The Ba'al, or Master of the Covenant, as kind of syncretistic mish-mash of the Lord who has made covenant with them, and the fertility idol of the Canaanite pantheon. They forget again the Rescuer, and they dishonour Jerubaal-Gideon's name, (no surprise, seeing they have reinstated Ba'al.)

How fickle are the hearts of men and women....

9.1ff Abimelech, the son of Gideon by his concubine, now goes to Shechem, on the borders of Manasseh, the town between the hills of Ebal and Gerizim, and presents himself as a rival to the legitimate sons of Gideon at Ophrah in Jezreel, who carry the mantle of Gideon. Here is a further example of populist democracy in Scripture taking completely the wrong turn and leading to great darkness.

The Shechemites, seeing Abimelech as one of them, coming from the town, support Abimelech against the sons of Gideon. They fund Abimelech with offerings from the idol-shrine of Ba'al Berit, with which Abimelech hires mercenaries as his private army. This ruthless band he leads up to Ophrah, where he slaughters his rivals, the seventy sons of Gideon, except the youngest, Jotham, who manages to get away and hide. Now, the people of Shechem and Beth Millo, a fortification nearby, gather and 'cause Abimelech to be king.' The word used here in Hebrew, unlike the word 'to rule' used by Gideon in 8.22 is King (Heb נִימְלִיכוּ *va-yamlikhu* from the root word מָלַךְ *malakh*, to be king.)

Jdg.9.7ff Now, Jotham, the survivor, goes to the symbolic summit of Mt Gerizim, and speaks a parable denouncing the crowning of a king, and of Abimelech in particular. The essence of the parable is that gifted people are too busy getting on with life to want to lord it over others, and the one who is chosen, the thornbush, is useless other than for firewood, which will end up burning the good trees.

Jdg.9.20 He then finishes with a curse on Shechem and Beth Millo for their faithlessness to his father's memory. After this, he flees south into the desert, to Be'er (Sheva) to live.

Jdg.9.22ff After three years of Abimelech's pseudo-kingship, God pours poison into the relationship between him and the people of Shechem. It is shocking to us to see that God sends an evil spirit (Heb. רַעַר רָחַרְחַר *ruach ra'ah*) which we also find in the later situations of Saul, but we must acknowledge that God has command even of His enemies, and can direct evil to His ends. Note, however, that this is in situations where *evil has already taken over* – God is not employing evil to frustrate the faithful or upright, but rather intensifying the evil spirit already at work in a situation of rebellion. (As later, with Saul, who is already in the grip of the enemy.)

The citizens of Shechem set up bands of highwayman to attack those going through the pass between the two peaks, contravening Abimelech's rule. An incomer named Ga'al comes and spearheads a rebellion against the false King, who, after all, is a son of that hated figure, Jeruba'al-Gideon!

Jdg.9.30ff The city governor calls on Abimelech to quell this rebellion, and Abimelech manages to attack and overcome the men of Ga'al. In an act of vengeance, Abimelech now turns on the city of Shechem, killing its inhabitants and destroying its property.

Jdg 9.46ff The people of Shechem take shelter in a defence tower, where the temple of Ba'al Berit is. (note, here called *El-Berit* Heb. אֱלֹהֵי בְרִית *the god of Covenant*, highlighting even more the mixture in their practice) Abimelech and his men burn the place with all the people inside, killing a thousand people.

Jdg. 9.50ff Abimelech moves on to the settlement of Thebez, about 11 miles north-west of Shechem, (modern Tabas) and presumably in league with the Shechemites. Here a similar pattern emerges, with the people taking refuge in a tower. This time, as Abimelech approaches to set fire to the tower as he had done in Shechem, a quick-witted woman heaves a millstone over the parapet, and brains Abimelech with it.

So as not to suffer the shame of being killed by a woman (perhaps remembering the end of Sisera at the hands of Jael) Abimelech orders his servant to kill him, which he obligingly does.

Jdg. 9.55-57. God has not allowed Abimelech to triumph, and in accordance with Jotham's parable, the people of Shechem have been devoured by the fire of the thornbush.

Day 80 Judges 10.1 – 12.15

Tolah, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon. C.1134-1111 BC

Jdg.10.1-5 A number of lesser *Right-wisers* are noted at this point, for the sake of the record. They do not *rule* or *reign*, but *right-wise*, i.e. lead or judge. (Heb שֹׁפֵט *shaphat*).

10.6ff Israel is continuing in her rebellion, going after the Ba'als and Ashtoreths, as well as other gods of the peoples around. Now begins eighteen years oppression by the Amorites in the eastern territories, and Philistines from the west coast.

10.10ff Israel once again calls upon her Rescuer-Lord, and repents. Israel seeks a new hero-deliverer.

11.1ff **Jephthah** is a maverick; he is of the sub-clan of Gilead, a branch of the east-of-Jordan section of the tribe of Manasseh. His name means 'He will open up' (Heb יִפְתָּח *Yiphtach*) He is illegitimate, and for that reason has been expelled by his legitimate brothers from his family inheritance. He ends up in a 'good land' called Tobh (Heb. טוֹב *tov*, meaning simply 'good' in Hebrew.) where he gathers a band of 'ne'er-do-wells' and nobodies (Heb אֲנָשִׁים רְקִים *anashim reqim*, literally, 'empty men'.) Perhaps this could also mean men of no inheritance, like himself, outcasts and rejects.

11.4ff When the leaders of Gilead come to ask Jephthah to lead them, he remonstrates with them – haven't they allowed him to be disinherited, and driven out? But they promise that if Jephthah overcomes the Ammonites, he will be their leader. (Is there in Jephthah something looking for power, something wanting revenge?)

However, it is clear that Jephthah is confessing the Lord (YHWH) as His inspirer and God, from his language.

11.12 ff Jephthah sends envoys to the Ammonite king to find out what he wants. He wants the restitution of the lands he claims Israel took east of the Jordan at the time of their passing through to Canaan. Jephthah responds with an account of the injustice done to the Israelites by the rulers of that time, and says that God has given them the land they now have.

If their god, Chemosh, has only given them a wee patch of land, while the Lord has given them their land, that is not Israel's concern.

11.28 He ends with a call upon 'The Lord (YHWH) the Right-wiser, the Judge' (Heb אֲדֹנָי הַשֹּׁפֵט *Adonai Ha-Shophet*) to decide between them.

11.29ff Now the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Jephthah – here Hebrew has simply 'The Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah' (Heb וַתְּהִי אֵלַיִם יִפְתָּח רִיחַ אֲדֹנָי הַשֹּׁפֵט *va-tehi al-Yiphtach ruach Adonai (YHWH)*.) He crosses the territory, to meet the Ammonites.

It is here that he makes his infamous vow (Heb נָדַדְתִּי *neder*) to the Lord, to sacrifice as a burnt offering to the Lord whatever comes out to meet him, should he return home victorious.

11.32ff Ammon is defeated before Jephthah, and Israel is free of them.

11.34ff When Jephthah arrives home, to his horror his young daughter, his only child, comes dancing out to greet him. He is distraught, because he has made what he sees as an unbreakable vow to the Lord; she must die. She responds by submitting to this outcome for the sake of Israel, but asks for two months to be with her friends. Her father then kills her and burns her as he has promised.

This is a shocking and horrible story for us; one thing we must notice here, is that there is an obvious silence in terms of the Lord's speaking on this. With Abraham's son, Isaac, the Lord rejected the killing of the boy. We cannot look at this story and assume that the Lord sanctions the killing of this young virgin; it is all Jephthah's doing, and his understanding of what God wants.

It does, though, accentuate the seriousness with which people hold vows in the Bible. Better not to take a vow, Ecclesiastes .5.5 says, than to take it and break it. Jesus Himself teaches us that we should not make vows, but just state our case and affirm the truth. (Matt. 5.37)

It highlights the terrible situation of Israel in the period of the Judges. One of the themes which will soon appear as a refrain in the rest of the book is 'There was no ruler in those days, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' (eg Jdg.17.6) There seems to be no word from a priest or prophet, just Jephthah's own action.

In commemoration of this terrible action, each year the Israeli girls left their homes to wander, remembering Jephthah's daughter.

12.1-3 In a recurrence of the jealousy of the tribe of Ephraim shown toward Gideon in Jdg.8.1ff, the Ephraimites now cross over the Jordan and threaten Jephthah with force of arms for his failure to call on them to assist in the battle against the Ammonites. They are intent on violence against the Gileadites. Jephthah protests that he did call them, but they didn't come.

12.4ff In a terrible inter-tribal battle, Jephthah now attacks the Ephraimites, because of their insults against his sub-tribe, accusing the Gileadites of being *renegades* or *fugitives* (Heb פִּלְטִים *pelitim* from root word meaning to escape to safety, to give the slip to) of Manasseh and Ephraim, ie they are cowards and runaways.

The Gileadites from the east head off the fleeing Ephraimites as they try and get back to their western hill lands; they block the fords of the Jordan, and use a tribal difference of accent to catch out the Ephraimites. Simply put, Ephraimite Hebrew had developed a characteristic of not pronouncing the letter שׁ *Shin*, making the sound 'sh'. Thus, if you gave an Ephraimite a word with the letter 'shin' in it, they would turn it into a שׁ *Sin*.

The Gileadites test those coming over the fords by getting them to say *Shibboleth* (Heb שִׁבּוֹלֶת) meaning *ear of corn* or *channel of water*. If the man arrested says *Sibboleth*, unable to say the ‘sh’, he is slain as an Ephraimite. In this way, the Gileadites capture and kill forty-two thousands of their fellow-Israelites.

From this story comes the modern term ‘shibboleth’, meaning a test or a trial to prove whether someone is compatible or not with the tester’s views or beliefs. For example, the acceptance of homosexual ‘marriage’ in the UK is becoming a *shibboleth* of the humanist liberal ruling ideology, a test of heresy against modern secularism.

Jdg.12.7ff **c.1083 BC** Jephthah dies, after being *Right-wiser* for six years. He is followed by Ibzan of Bethlehem, Elon from Zebulun and Abdon an Ephraimite.

The overarching feeling coming out of these stories is one of slow descent into chaos and disorder, along with syncretism and idolatry. Unfortunately, it does not get better soon.

Day 81 The Book of Ruth

We break into the account of the Judges of Israel to encounter this book set in the same period. This is one of the most engaging, personal narratives of the whole of Scripture. Unusually it focuses on women and their experience in a male-dominated story. The theme of the book is loss and redemption, and it is a gem of hope, with many echoes of the great salvation story of God and His people. It also brings us again the hope that God is not interested just in Israel, but also in the nations of the world, as Ruth the foreigner is enfolded into the people of God, an ancestress of the great King David himself.

Ruth is the first book we encounter in this journey which is found in the third division of the Hebrew Scriptures. The first five books are known as **Torah** (Heb תּוֹרָה) or the Law, then come the books of the **Nevi'im** (Heb נְבִיאִים) meaning the Prophets (including the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, but not Chronicles, as well as those we would recognise as prophets.) Ruth is in the large section called **Ketuvim** (Heb כְּתוּבִים) meaning the Scriptures or Writings, and contains the rest of the books of our Old Testament, including Psalms, Proverbs, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. The Hebrew Old Testament is known by Jews, therefore, by the mnemonic of the three initial letters of the sections, **TaNakh** (Heb תּוֹרָה נְבִיאִים כְּתוּבִים).

1.1ff. The time period for this account is given as the time of the Shoph'tim, the *Right-wisiers* of Israel, known to us as the Judges. A famine has occurred, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, an Ephrathite (Ephrath, meaning fruitfulness, was an ancient name for Bethelhem, perhaps denoting the locality in which it was located) leaves the promised land and heads for the south-east, beyond the borders of Israel.

Ironically, he is leaving the *House of Bread*, Bethlehem (Heb. בֵּית לֶחֶם *Beit Lechem*) and *fruitfulness* (Heb. אֶפְרַת *Ephrat*) to go to Moab, one of the peoples descended from the incestuous relationship of Abraham's nephew Lot with his daughters (Gen.19.31) The name of the man is Elimelech (Heb. אֱלִימֶלֶךְ meaning my God is King) and his wife is Naomi (Heb. נָעֻמִי *No'omi* meaning sweetness.) They have two sons, Mahlon (Heb. מַחֲלֹן *Machlon*, meaning sickly) and Chilion (Heb. כִּלְיוֹן *Kilyon* meaning failing or consumptive), perhaps so named because of their state at birth, as testimony to God's goodness in bringing them through a dangerous beginning.

In Moab, Elimelech dies. The two sons find Moabite wives. This intermarriage was specifically forbidden to the Jews, but they are now living in times of such compromise, that the Law seems to hold little weight, particularly for exiles in need of a spouse. Chilion marries Orpah (Heb. עֲרַפָּה meaning *A Mane*) and Ruth (Heb רוּת *Root* meaning *Friend*) marries Mahlon. (cf Ruth 4.10)

Ten years later, still in Moab , tragically, the two sons die, leaving three destitute widows.

1.6ff Naomi has news that there is at last a good harvest in Bethlehem, and so she decides to set off for home. She releases the two young women to return to their parents, but, while Orpah reluctantly goes away, Ruth refuses to leave her mother-in-law. Naomi remonstrates with her; she cannot bear sons for Ruth to be given one in Levirate marriage, and does not want to implicate them in what she sees as the heavy hand of the Lord against her.

1.15ff In one of the most powerful passages in Scripture, Ruth covenants her allegiance to Naomi, and swears she will not go back to her family. In v.17, Ruth uses a powerful oath formula connected with the covenant sacrifice, calling God to cleave her in two if she does not keep her word to Naomi; she says
 כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לִי וְכֹה יוֹסִיף *Ko ya'aseh Adonai(YHWH) li ve'kho yosif*, - Thus may do the Lord to me and thus increase it...

In other words, Ruth is determined to stay, and Naomi yields to her.

1.19ff They return to Bethlehem, and everyone is shocked to see Naomi in such a reduced state. In her desperate state, Naomi asks them to change her name to Mara (Heb מָרָא *Mara'* meaning bitterness.) as she has suffered so much, which she attributes to God's action against her.

2.1ff The wonderful story telling at first hides from us the inside knowledge that Naomi has a male relative on her husband's side. At first, Boaz is introduced to us as just a 'good friend' of Naomi's (Heb מוֹדֵעַ *mod'a* from root *yad'a* to know.) Ruth goes out to glean, that is, to pick up the leftovers of the harvest as provided for the poor in the Law of Moses (see Lev.19.9-10), and she *just happens* to find herself in Boaz's field.

When Boaz arrives to see how the work is going, his eyes light on the young woman, and he is taken with her. We should not impute lustful motives to Boaz, for his conduct seems entirely honourable. After all, he realises the reality that in fact Naomi is a relative of his, and in taking care of Ruth, he is taking care of his widowed cousin.

2.8ff Boaz asks Ruth to stay in his fields, where he will provide for her. Ruth is overwhelmed at this, and bows before Boaz asking why she has received such favour in his eyes, especially as she is a foreign woman? He has heard of her kindness to Naomi, and calls down a blessing on her from the God of Israel ‘under whose wings you have sheltered.’

Boaz invites her to eat with them at mealtime, and then arranges for extra gleanings to be left in front of her, so that she goes home with bulging bags. When Naomi sees them, she is amazed, and then overjoyed to find that it is Boaz that has provided such generous amounts.

2.20 Naomi blesses Boaz and the Lord, that He has not stopped showing *Chesed* (Heb טוֹב) His self-obligating love out of covenant to his people. Naomi recognises Boaz’s good heart , and suggests Ruth stays with him. She also reveals in the Hebrew at this point that he is more than just a friend, he is a *go’el*, a possible kinsman-redeemer.(see below at 3.10 on this.)

3.1ff In the next scene of the story, Naomi takes up the role of matchmaker. She actually is putting Ruth into danger, in some ways, and it might be seen that this is rather an unscrupulous action which could have brought shame on Boaz, and backfired on them all.

She advises Ruth to go to the threshing floor, where grain and waste are separated, and when the men lie down to sleep, she should go in secret and ‘make herself available’ to Boaz. The words *uncover his feet* in the Hebrew are something of a euphemism, since the word *margelah* (Heb מְרַגְלָה) could be a polite term for the genitals.

3.8ff No wonder then, that when Boaz, merry with the previous night’s harvest supper, is startled when he stirs in the night, and finds himself uncovered and vulnerable, and a young woman lying beside him!

3.10ff What happens next is full of delightful goodness. Boaz, instead of taking advantage of this young, available woman, praises her for her *chesed* (Heb טוֹב) shown to Naomi, her self-effacing commitment coming from her devotion to her mother-in-law.

Boaz is determined to act honourably, even though temptation is lying at his naked side. He acknowledges her virtue, and her self-respect, and therefore, he says that he will do things right by her, and preserve her honour, and go through the correct channels to become her *Kinsman-Redeemer* (Heb גֹּאֵל *Go’el*) However, there is a closer claimant to the title, and he must be consulted first.

The concept of the *Go’el* is linked to the provision of the Law, where a childless widow’s brother-in-law should take up the responsibility of having children by her for the redemption of the line of his brother. (Deut.25.5ff) If the brother-in-law refuses, he may be replaced by the next nearest, who is the *Go’el*, the one who rescues the line.

3.14ff. Boaz sends Ruth back, unmolested, to her mother-in-law, unbeknown to anyone that a woman has been at the threshing-floor among sleeping men. Scheming old Naomi is satisfied that Boaz will do his duty by her.

4.1ff In the last scene of this wonderful drama, Boaz meets the nearer Go'el and informs him first of his entitlement to first refusal on the purchase of the late Elimelech's lands, being sold by his widow Naomi. The go'el is willing to buy, but when Boaz explains that the purchase will entail also a Levirate marriage to Ruth, the man backs off, worried that this responsibility will compromise his own estate. He then hands the responsibility over to Boaz, signified by the removal of the first go'el's sandal (he then becomes known as 'the family of the unsandalled') which is gifted to Bo'az as a seal of the transaction.

Boaz now legally announces his acquisition of the estate of Elimelech and his sons, and of Mahlon's Moabite widow, Ruth as his new wife. The elders at the gate of the town speak a beautiful blessing over his new wife,

יִתֵּן יְהוָה אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה הַבָּאָה אֶל־בֵּיתְךָ כְּרַחֵל וְכִלְאָה אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ שְׁתֵּיהֶם אֶת־בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל
(Above is read right to left)

Yiten Adonai (YHWH) et-ha-Ishah ha-ba'ah el-beitekha ke-Rachel u-khe-Le'ah asher

Let give the Lord the woman coming to your house as Rachel and as Leah which

banu sh'teyhem et-Beit Yisrael

built both of them the House of Israel.

4.12 They also invoke a rather strange memory in blessing as well – wishing the offspring of Boaz and Ruth to be like Perez, who was actually born out of the congress of Judah and Tamar, father-in-law and daughter-in-law; perhaps this is because Boaz is old enough to be her father-in-law, and they are reminding them of this venerable precedent in Israel's story!

Boaz and Ruth have a son, Obed (Heb עֹבֵד *Obhed* meaning One who serves.) In a closing tableau of joy, Naomi is again called *sweetness* and finds redemption through her faithful daughter-in-law Ruth.

4.18 The closing verses place Boaz and Ruth, and their new son in the context of the line of descent from Judah, father of Perez, down to their illustrious descendant, King David of Israel.

There are obvious pointers for us in this story to the coming of the great Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, who takes us from our destitution and sin, and brings us into His family through covenant, and becomes for us the ultimate Rescuer and bringer of Hope. For He is our Boaz (Heb. בְּעֹז) meaning, 'In Him is strength.'

Day 82 Judges 13 to 16

Samson (c1090 – 1050 BC?)

Returning to the story of the *Right-wisdom* of Israel, the next character is a very turbid one, and not the obvious example of a godly man leading a holy nation. There are many facets to Samson which are driven by his lusts and base desires, but God chooses to use him, to deliver Israel. In the end, however, his passions lead to his downfall. Perhaps Samson is an allegory of the whole pattern of the people of Israel at this juncture.

Jdg.13.1 The oppression of Israel at this time comes from the south-west, from the coastlands, where the Philistines are still holding out against Israel. It's interesting to note that the Hebrew word Philistine (Heb. פְּלִשְׁתִּים *Pelishtim*, inhabitants of *Peleshet*, meaning 'rolling' or 'migratory' land) is the same word from which was derived the later province of Palestine – they are related terms, and still in use today as a description of the people and land.

13.2ff The barren wife of a member of the tribe of Dan whose name is Manoah (Heb. מָנוּחַ *Manoach*, meaning 'rest') is visited by the angel/messenger of the Lord (Heb. מַלְאָךְ-יְהוָה *mal'akh-Adonai (YHWH)*), who tells her that she will have a son, who will be raised and live in accordance with the Nazirite vow (see Numbers 6.1-21), and will be the one to deliver Israel from the Philistine oppression. In addition, she herself is to take on the restrictions of the Nazirite regarding alcohol during her pregnancy.

13.6ff Manoah's wife, like Gideon in Jdg. 6.11ff, does not realise the import of what she has just witnessed. She thinks a man of God (Heb. אִישׁ-הָאֱלֹהִים *Ish-ha-Elohim*), a prophet has been by and given her a word of prophecy. It is interesting that when the angel of the Lord appears, he does not have wings or halo, but appears as a man. It is this fact which leads many scholars to see these occurrences as theophanies, (God-appearances) and incarnations of Christ ahead of His Bethlehem nativity.

13.8ff Manoah prays to the Lord for further direction from the 'man of God', who returns and speaks to the woman, who brings her husband; the angel repeats that his wife must do what is commanded her. (Note the angel comes to the woman first in this story.)

13.15ff The angel refuses to accept their hospitality, but invites them to sacrifice the goat they are offering to the Lord as a burnt offering. They ask His name, and He asks them why they want to know. He tells them it is *Peli* (Heb. פֶּלִיאַי from the root meaning to separate, be distinctive.), which means 'wonderful' or 'supernatural'. A related word is used of the coming Messiah in Isa.9.6, which must recall this occasion. It is possible, however, that the angel is not revealing His name to them, since it is beyond their understanding. (as in NIV – KJV has 'it is secret'.)

13.19 Manoah then makes the offering, and the Lord does something *wonderful*, in keeping with the word He has just used of Himself, which is a related term in the

Hebrew. (Heb. מַפְלִי *maphli* – causing something to be distinctive, wonderful) The angel ascends in the flame, and disappears from view.

Manoah and his wife are terrified, as was Gideon. They prostrate themselves on the ground, and Manoah thinks they are about to die as they have looked on God. This is an interesting theological assumption that he is making. He believes that in seeing the messenger of God, they have seen God Himself, not just a servant of the Lord. This is one reason for saying that this is a pre-Jesus incarnation of the Son of God.

His wise wife comes up with a fairly safe rebuttal to his fears – ‘If God was going to kill us, why would He have just told us all this, and received our offering?’ .QED.

13.24. The child is born, a son, whom they name Samson (Heb. שִׁמְשׁוֹן *Shimshon* , meaning ‘Sunshine’ from *shemesh*, meaning ‘sun.’) He grows blessed of God, and begins to be moved by the Holy Spirit. The term used here is quite unusual. It says in the original Hebrew וְתָחַל רִיחַ יְהוָה לְפָעֻמוֹ *ve-tachel ruach Adonai(YHWH) le-pha’amo*. The last word comes from a root פָּעַם *pa’am* meaning to tap or strike, as on a drum or a bell. It’s used in other places (for instance of both Pharaoh in Genesis and of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel to refer to the agitation caused by their respective dreams.)

So the language here is saying that the Holy Spirit was agitating or beating on Samson like a drum or bell as he grew.

14.1ff The action moves to Samson in his youth, and we immediately encounter him as impetuous and demanding, wanting a Philistine girl as his wife. His mother and father would rather he married in Israel, but Samson insists.

There is a comment here that God was working through Samson’s impetuosity, to achieve His purpose. It reminds of Psalm 76.10, ‘even the anger of man will be turned for Your glory.’

14.5ff On his way to Timnah to meet the girl, Samson, by the power of the Holy Spirit kills a young lion. Perhaps this is a training exercise for Samson. He leaves the carcass at the roadside. Next time he comes by, on his way to collect his bride, he sees that bees have made their nest in the rotting flesh of the lion, and he helps himself to the honey, and shares it with his parents, but keeps quiet about where it came from.

14.10ff At the wedding feast, commencing with a kind of stag night with thirty men provided for him for the purpose, Samson makes a wager; there are not many bets in the Bible, but this is one of them. Samson will set a riddle, and if his groomsmen answer it, they will get a shirt and suit each. If they can’t, they will give him a shirt and suit each. Typical male competitiveness.

14.14 The riddle is, in the original Hebrew,

מִהָאֶכֶל יָצָא מְאֹכֵל וּמֵעוֹ יָצָא מְחֹק

(Above is read right to left)

Mey-ha-okhel yatsah ma'akhal u-me'az yatsah machoq
From the eater came out food and from strength came out sweetness

We might render the sense of the riddle as

Out of the eater came something to eat; out of the strong came something sweet.

The Philistine men spend three days of the wedding feast trying to get the answer. They get more and more frustrated, until they turn to threats of violence against Samson's new bride. (Some manuscripts say that they threaten her on the fourth day, some on the seventh. It would seem illogical that she would cry all week, if the threat was only made on the seventh day.)

The outcome is that Samson, in a moment of weakness, worn down by his importunate wife, tells her the answer, which she relays to the groomsmen.

14.18 They come back with the answer;

מִה־מְחֹק מְדַבֵּשׁ וּמִה עוֹ מְאָרִי

(Above is read right to left)

Mah-machok mi-devash u-meh az mey-ari
What sweet(er) than honey and what strong(er) than a lion?

Samson, angered, responds with another poetic phrase;

לֹאִי חֲרַשְׁתֶּם בְּעֵגְלָתִי לֹא מְצַאתֶם חֵידָתִי

(Above is read right to left)

Luley charashtem be-eglati, lo metsa'tem chidati
Had not you ploughed with my heifer not you got out my puzzle

14.19 Samson, raging but empowered by God's Spirit, goes to nearby Ashkelon and kills and plunders the clothes from thirty Philistines, and gives them to the men, then leaves the feast! As a result, his father Manoah gives his wife to one of the groomsmen !

Jdg.15.1ff One of Samson's most debilitating character flaws is his weak-will when it comes to women. At harvest time, remorseful at what he did, he wants to go back and see his wife. But Manoah now reveals that she has been given to another. He suggests Samson take her younger sister to wife.

Samson, in his anger, now takes a hundred and fifty pairs of foxes, sets their tails alight and sends them to devastate the Philistine corn harvest.

15.6 In a terrible retaliation, the Philistines burn his wife and her father, causing Samson to come down and kill many more of the Philistines, after hiding out in cave.

Jdg.15.9ff The Philistines now attack the lands of the tribe of Judah, their neighbours, wanting the surrender of Samson to them. Three thousand men of Judah track Samson down to his cave, and accuse him of bringing down the Philistines on them, at a time when the Philistines are already oppressing them and ruling them. The men of Judah intend to hand Samson over.

Samson makes them promise they won't kill him themselves, and allows himself to be bound, with new ropes.

15.14. As the Philistines come for him, the power of the Lord moves upon Him, and Samson breaks the ropes easily off himself. He picks up a donkey's jawbone lying nearby, and kills a thousand Philistines. He then finishes off with one of his poems, which is more a crowing over his victory;

בְּלָחֵי הַחֲמֹר חֲמֹר חֲמֹרָתַיִם בְּלָחֵי הַחֲמֹר הַכִּיְתִי אֶלֶף אִישׁ

(Above is read right to left)

Bil'chi ha-chamor chamor chamoratayim Bil'chi ha-chamor hikketi elef ish

With jaw of the ass heaps of heaps With jaw of the ass I slew 1,000 men

The place is ever after known as *Ramat L'chi* (Heb רַמַת לָחֵי), Hill of the Jawbone.

15.18 Dehydrated and weak, Samson calls on God for water, which He gives him from a rock, afterwards calls En Hakkore, Spring of the Calling. He goes on to be Israel's new *Right-wiser* for the next twenty years.

Jdg.16.1ff In spite of his powerful ministry to Israel, Samson still is a womanizer, and still goes to the Philistine women, in particular. When the Philistines try to capture him during his night of bought sex with a Gaza prostitute, he just takes the city gates off their hinges and walks to Hebron with them!

16.4ff Samson falls for a Philistine woman named Delilah, who is subverted by her countrymen into getting out of Samson the secret of his strength. But Samson has been here before, with his wife from Timnah, and he gives her several false leads, involving seven bowstrings, new ropes and his hair woven on a loom. However, she gets it out of him by her wiles in the end, and he tells her of his vow to God which must not be broken.

Samson's hair, knotted into seven tails, is now shaved off while he is asleep, and he is captured as he tries to fight off the Philistines, not knowing that he is undone by his lover. He is set to work at the millwheel in the prison in Gaza, his eyes gouged out as punishment.

Samson's hair, however, begins to grow back.

16.23ff The Philistines bring out their captive to mock and to praise their fish-god, Dagon for his capture. Having his hands put on the pillars of their temple, the Spirit of the Lord comes on Samson once more, and the whole thing collapses in a last suicide mission, and Samson kills more in his death than in his life. He is then buried back in the territory of Dan, in his father's tomb.

Samson's story is such a paradox; a man, supernaturally called and anointed, yet so fickle in his flesh. He is a warning sign to all who minister, but also an encouragement that God would use a weak man to be his vehicle. In one sense, of course, in the time of the Judges, there was no other kind.