

Robert Vannoy, Exodus to Exile, Lecture 9A

Judges

Review

IV. D. The Structure and Content of Judges

2. The Theological Basis for the Proper Understanding for the Book of Judges

Judges 2:6-3:4

Last week we were in the book of Judges, and we were down to Roman numeral IV. D., “The structure and content of Judges.” Right at the end of the session we had talked about IV. D. 2., “The theological basis for the proper understanding for the book of Judges: Judges 2:6-3:4.” You’ll remember I said there were two introductions and two conclusions, if you look at the structure of the book of Judges. As you notice on your outline, the first introduction was the historical background for the period to be described further in the book, Judges 1:1-2:5. We learned there that the tribes went in to settle down in their tribal possessions, as Joshua had outlined. In the end of the book of Joshua, the intent was that the tribes would settle down and complete the conquest of their own territory. Most of them did not do that, and that set the historical basis for what follows in the book of Judges.

But that second introduction gives the theological basis. You read in 2:6 to 3:4 that Israel turned away and began to serve the Baals. Judges 2:10 says, “After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals.” So the Israelites turned away from the Lord and served the Baals. You read in verse 14 that the Lord hands them over to raiders who plundered them, and there is oppression. Then in verse 16, the Lord raised up judges to deliver them. At the end of our last hour I mentioned this cycle of sinning and turning away from the Lord—Baal worship followed by oppression. Sometimes you find a certain repentance element in the cycle. Israel repents or cries out to the Lord, and then you get the deliverance through a judge. I questioned last week whether the third element was really repentance. That’s something that is not all together clear. It’s not specifically

mentioned in this theological introduction.

A. Theology of Judges

1. Israel's Apostasy
2. God's Faithfulness
3. Judges cycles – rebellion, Retribution, Repentance, Rescue

I gave you a handout called “A Theology of Judges.” I want to call your attention to the paragraph there that deals with this particular question, and that’s on page 833, under the heading “God’s Faithfulness.” “God’s Faithfulness,” you notice, is number 2. under “Theological themes.” Number 1. back on page 831 is “Israel’s Apostasy.” So as far as themes of the book, you have Israel’s apostasy, but by way of contrast you get a clear indication of God’s faithfulness. Under that heading on the top of page 833, I’ve said, “Commentators have all suggested that the cycle outlined in part two of the prologue in 2:11-19 and repeated in the stories of the various judges is that of rebellion, retribution, repentance, and rescue.” That’s that four-element cycle—thinking of these as four “R’s” will perhaps help you to remember them: rebellion, retribution, repentance, and rescue. A closer look at 2:11-19, however, will reveal that there is no reference in the prologue to repentance. Retribution for apostasy is described in 14 and 15: “He sold them to their enemies.” But this is immediately followed by, “But then the Lord raised up judges who saved them out of the hands of these raiders,” verse 16. There is no reference to repentance between the description of retribution and rescue.

Repentance Element

When one turns to the stories of the various judges it may seem like the insertion of the repentance element in the cycle is justified by virtue of the recurring statement that the Israelites “cried out”—notice that’s in quotes—“to the Lord in their misery.” See 3:9 at the time of Othniel. In Judges 3:9 you read, “But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer.” So Israel cries out to the Lord and then the Lord raises up a deliverer. The question becomes, what does that cry out to the Lord mean? Does that

involve repentance?

Let's go a little further. 3:9 is the time of Othniel. Judges 3:15 is the time of Ehud. You read there, "Again the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer, Ehud the left-handed man, son of Gera, the Benjaminite." I won't take time to read all these other references, but that's the time of Ehud. Then there's the time of Deborah in 4:3, chapters 6 and 7 at the time of Gideon and 10:10 the time of Jephthah. I do want to read Judges 10:10 because there's another element introduced. In 10:10, the time of Jephthah, you read, "Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord," and notice what follows: "We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals." In Judges 10:10 there's an explicit statement of confession of sin that seems like a statement of repentance. I'll come back to that in a minute. Some commentators have even suggested that this seeming discrepancy between the cycle reported in the prologue and the cycle represented in the stories of the judges is evidence that the prologue and the stories come from different writers. In other words, this is mainstream biblical studies where you find tensions of conflicts between different sources or layers. "This conclusion rests in part on the assumption that 'cry out' necessarily involves repentance. This assumption, however, is far from certain. A study of *za'aq* which is the Hebrew verb 'to cry out' suggests that it is crying for help out of deep distress. In some instances, the cry may be associated with repentance (see 10:10). But in such cases, this is clear only because of some additional statement to that effect." In other words, the idea of repentance is not something inherent in the term *za'aq*, "to cry out."

God's Faithfulness Not Dependent on Repentance

"This being so, it calls attention to an important theological insight. When Yahweh raised up a deliverer he was not necessarily responding to any repentance on Israel's part. What is seen in Yahweh's rescue of his people is an evidence of his covenant faithfulness." See, that's under this theological theme of God's faithfulness. "Yahweh repeatedly acted in love and mercy for his people in responding to their misery and distress by giving them relief despite their sin." Seems to me that's predominately the

case when you read through these stories. “It is clear from the book of Judges that Yahweh’s deliverances were not merited. In fact, it seems that both the times of oppression and the times of rest were given by Yahweh regardless of repentance. His mercy towards his people was exhibited again and again. He did not drive them from the land, he did not destroy them (which he would have been justified in doing), but in mercy repeatedly called them back to himself.” Let me just read the bottom of page in the paragraph from Nehemiah 9.27-28 where it says, “So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies. But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out [*za’aq*] to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.” So I’m inclined to think that the element of repentance was not always present. The Lord was merciful and delivered them and it was a demonstration of his covenant faithfulness to his people. So that’s all under 2., “Theological basis for proper understanding of the stories of the Judges.”

3. The Stories of the Major and Minor Judges

Number 3. on your outline, is “The stories of the major and minor judges.” 3. a. is the “Major and Minor Judges”, if you look at that slide print-off you’ll see in the dark shade six major Judges: Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Barak, Gideon and Samson. In the light shaded color, you also have six minor judges. So there are six major judges mentioned in the body of the book and there are six minor judges referred to. The distinction between major and minor is based simply on those about whom we have detailed accounts and those about whom we know very little. If you look at the references of the minor judges, Shamgar is 3:31; that’s one verse. If you look at 3:31 it has all we know about Shamgar, which is: “After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. He too saved Israel.” So with Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan,

Elon and Abdon we've got three verses at most about any of them—very little information. With the other judges, Ehud is not terribly long, but you've got two chapters for Deborah and Barak. You get three chapters for Gideon. You've got parts of three chapters for Jephthah and there are four or five chapters for Samson.

Judges or Deliverers

If you read through these narratives you will find that more often than not, the text, calls them deliverers instead of judges. In fact, you might say a better title for the book would be “Deliverers” rather than “Judges.” The only reference to one of these individuals involved in normal judicial activity is Deborah, where you read in 4:4: “Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth”—here in NIV it says “was leading Israel at that time.” “Leading” is a form of the verb *shaphat*, “to judge.” So she was “judging Israel at that time.” But then in verse five it says, “She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.” So she held court and mediated in disputes. That’s normally the kind of activity we associate with a judge.

When you hear the term “judge” you might think that all these people were judicial officers of some kind residing over courts. I think that is misleading. Look at usage of the term *shin pe tet*. The verbal form is *shaphat*, from which the noun form is derived. If you look at the use of the word, it has a wider range of use than the narrow idea of judicial activity of settling disputes or adjudicating in court. If you look up the root in the BDB lexicon, it says “to govern, to administer, to exercise leadership.” So these “judges” were really tribal rulers or tribal leaders. If you look at the way the NIV translates it, you’ll find more often than not that they do not translate it as “judge” but as “to lead.” If you even go into 1 Samuel 8 where Israel wants a king, you get this word. 1 Samuel 8:20 in the NIV says, “The people said, ‘We will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us.’” That’s *shaphat*, “a king to lead us.”

So as I mentioned, these judges are often termed “deliverers.” Let me just give you a few references on that. In Judges 3:9 you read of Othniel, “When they cried out to the

Lord, he raised up for them”—it doesn’t say a judge, it says “a deliverer.” That’s from *yasha*, “to save” or “deliver.” If you look at 3:15 with Ehud, it says, “The Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer.” Look at Judges 6:14-15—that’s with Gideon: “The Lord turned to him and said, ‘Go in the strength you have and deliver Israel out of Midian’s hand’”—save Israel, *yasha*. Same thing in Judges 6:36; 7:2; 10:12-14 and some other places as well. So there are six of these major tribal leaders or judges, and six minor ones.

B. Brief Comments on Four of the Outstanding Judges

B. on your outline is, “Brief comments on four of the outstanding judges.” The four that I’ve listed are Deborah and Barak, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. So first, Deborah and Barak, who are described in Judges 4 and 5. You read in 4:5 that “Deborah, a prophetess was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim.” So she’s from the tribe of Ephraim. Verse 6 says she sent for Barak, who was from the tribe of Naphtali, and asked him to take 10,000 men of Naphtali and Zebulun and go to Mt. Tabor as the LORD had commanded: “I will lure Sisera the commander of Jabin’s army”—Jabin was a Canaanite King who ruled in Hazor, a very important northern city—“and I will lure him with his chariots and troops to the Kishon river and give him into your hands.” She tells Naphtali what the Lord has said, but Barak is reluctant and he says in verse 6, “If you go with me I will go, but if you don’t, I won’t go.” She says, “I will go with you, but because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours; for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman.” I think at that point in the narrative, the expectation is aroused that Deborah is going to go with Barak and she’s going to be the one who leads Israel to victory. She’s the one to whom the Lord will hand Sisera. But as you read further, you find in verse 13, Sisera has 900 chariots, a powerful force. The

Israelites don't have chariots, remember. But Deborah says to Barak in verse 14, "Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?" So Yahweh is the divine warrior, the one who is giving Canaan into Israel's hands. And then you read verse 15, "The LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot."

So he is trying to escape and he finds a tent. You read in verse 17, "He fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin the king of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite." She goes out and acts very hospitably to him, he said he's thirsty. Verse 19, he says, "Give me some water," and she gives him some milk. He goes into the tent and tells her, verse 20, if someone comes by asking if anyone is here, say "No." And then you find out into whose hands the Lord delivers Sisera: it's Jael. You read in verse 21, it's not Deborah, "But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died." So you read that in verse 23, "On that day God [it doesn't say Jael subdued Jabin but God] subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites." So that's the story of Deborah and Barak whom the Lord used to deliver Israel from Canaanite oppression.

That's chapter 4. Chapter 5 is a poetic description of this same occurrence. We're not going to take the time to go through chapter 5, but it is a beautiful piece of literature where Deborah and Barak sing a song of victory. I do want to read verse 24 and following just to give you something of the flavor of chapter 5. You read in 5:24, "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of tent-dwelling women. He asked for water, and she gave him milk; in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk. Her hand reached for the tent peg, her right hand for the workman's hammer. She struck Sisera, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple."

You get this poetic parallelism that makes it even a more forceful piece. “At her feet he sank, he fell, there he lay. At her feet he sank, he fell, where he sank, there he fell, dead.”

The scene changes in 5:28, and it goes back to the home of Sisera’s mother. “Through the window peered Sisera's mother; behind the lattice she cried out, ‘Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?’ [She’s concerned.] The wisest of her ladies answer her; indeed, she keeps saying to herself, ‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoils?—a girl or two for each man, colorful garments as plunder for Sisera, colorful garments embroidered, highly embroidered garments for my neck—all this as plunder?’” Of course, the irony is, he’s not coming back and that is not what is going on. So the last verse says, “So may all your enemies perish, O LORD! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength. And the land had peace forty years.” So there’s the first story of Canaanite oppression and deliverance in which the Lord uses Deborah and Barak to deliver Israel.

2. Gideon

The second story is in Judges 6-8, and that’s Gideon. The oppressors this time are the Midianites who were nomads from the desert. They probably came from the south and the east from across the Jordan and plundered the towns of Israel. Gideon came from a place called Ophrah. You’ll notice in verse 11, “The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite where his son Gideon was pressing wheat in a wine press to keep it from the Midianites.” The location of Ophrah is disputed and not clearly determinable. But most place it near the boundary of Manasseh and Ephraim, again a northern tribal area. The Lord says to Gideon in 6:12, “When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, ‘The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.’” Gideon is skeptical in this interchange with the angel of the Lord, so he says, “‘But sir, if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’” But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian.’ And the Lord turned to him and said, ‘Go in the strength you have and deliver [or save]

Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" So there's the commission. Gideon protests. In verse 15, Gideon says, "How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family.' The Lord says, 'I will be with you and you will strike down all the Midianites together.'"

But that's still not enough for Gideon. Notice in 6:17, Gideon replies, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign." In other words, I want some demonstration that what you are saying is really going to happen. So the Lord gives him a sign. Gideon prepares a sacrifice on an altar and you read in verse 21 that "the angel of the Lord touched the meat and the unleavened bread, and fire glared from the rock consuming the meat and the bread." Verse 22 says, "When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, 'Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!'" Now the angel tells him to tear down his father's altar to Baal. His father had a Baal altar, that's in verse 25; he cut down the Asherah pole. Gideon does that at night, you read in verse 27. And in the aftermath of that, go down to verse 36. "Gideon said to God, 'If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised'"—God's word still was not adequate. He continues, "Look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." Then he wants another sign. "And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water. Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time, make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew.' That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew."

Again, Dan Bloch—I mentioned in his book on Judges last week in the New American Commentary series—he has some interesting comments on that fleece passage on page 272. He says of verse 36 and following, "These verses catch the reader totally by surprise. Even though Gideon has been empowered by Yahweh and he's surrounded by a vast army of troops, he hesitates. He continues to test

God with demands of signs—this time specifically for assurance that God will indeed use his troops to provide deliverance for the nation as he has promised: ‘...if you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised.’ The later expression which occurs twice in verses 36-37 is the key to this text.” And then he makes this comment—I think this is appropriate. He says, “Contrary to popular interpretation, this text has nothing to do with discovering or determining the will of God.” How often have you heard people say, “I’m going to put out a Gideon’s fleece—I’m going to see if the Lord will do this, then I can see his will to do that.” What Bloch is saying is, “This has nothing to do with discovering or determining the will of God. The divine will is perfectly clear in his mind.” He knows what God’s will is. “Gideon’s problem is that with his limited experience with God, he cannot believe that God always fulfills his word.” God had promised, but he was not ready to believe. “The request for signs is not a sign of faith but of unbelief. Despite being clear about the will of God, being empowered by the spirit of God, being confirmed as the divinely chosen leader by the overwhelming response of his countrymen, to his own response to battle, he uses every means available to try and get out of the mission to which he has been called. That seems to be what is going on with this fleece. But it doesn’t work because the Lord is so longsuffering in his dealings with Gideon.” God submits to Gideon’s request and does this. But Gideon is an extremely reluctant warrior in this case.

I won’t go further with the whole rest of the story, but you remember how Gideon had enormous response of people willing to go, and then the Lord says, “You have too many, you’ve got to cut those numbers down.” When you get into chapter 7, the Lord says in verse 2, “You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands.” Now why does the Lord say that? Some people use this text as showing there is some kind of virtue of being small; you want to weed out everybody and somehow being smaller is better. That’s not the point here. The point here is what the Lord says in verse

2: “In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her.” It’s not the mighty army that’s going to give Gideon and Israel the victory. It is the Lord who is going to give them the victory, and the Lord doesn’t want any confusion about that.

“In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’” That’s an interesting proposal to put to men who are about to go into battle. “If you have any fear, you can be exempted, you can go home.” There are very few people I can imagine going into warfare who do not have fear. But here anyone who trembles with fear can turn back. So 22,000 men left, while 10,000 remained. “But the LORD said to Gideon, ‘There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, “This one shall go with you,” he shall go; but if I say, “This one shall not go with you,” he shall not go.’ So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, ‘Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink.’ Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.” Verse 7, “The LORD said to Gideon, ‘With the three hundred men that lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands.’”

So the purpose of all this is to demonstrate that when victory does come, it is the Lord that has given the victory. Then they go into the Midianite camp at night. You read in verse 16, “Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside. ‘Watch me,’ he told them. ‘Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do. When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, “For the LORD and for Gideon.””” And you read in Judges 7:19, “They blew the trumpets, and broke the jars that were in their hands.” The results were that the Midianites were confused and began to fight each other, resulting in Israel’s victory.

The leaders of the Midianites in chapter 8 who were named Zebah and Zalmunna fled. Gideon and his army chased them, and you read in verse 12 of chapter 8 that they captured them. Along the path, they went to a place called Succoth. It’s interesting that in

verse 5 Gideon said to the men of Succoth, “Give my troops some bread; they are worn out. I am still pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna the kings of Midian.” The people of Succoth did not know what the outcome of this was going to be. They weren’t about to align themselves with Gideon. So you read in verse 6, “But the officials of Succoth said, ‘Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your troops?’” They were afraid that Zebah and Zalmunna would escape and come back, and if they found that the people of Succoth had helped Gideon and his people, Zeba and Zalmunna would take revenge on them. So they didn’t help. But Gideon and his men pursued them and captured them. Then you notice in verse 13 that when they returned, Gideon caught a young man of Succoth and questioned him. The young man wrote down for him the names of 77 officials of Succoth, the elders of the town. Now, two things about that. He’s not going to let the people of Succoth off. Gideon goes back and calls to account their not having helped him along the way. But the interesting kind of sideline here is that he gets just a random individual who can write down the names—these were literate people! It seems like writing was something that was quite common in that time.

You read in verse 16, “He took the elders of the town and taught the men of Succoth a lesson by punishing them with desert thorns and briars.” So it seems like he beat them with whips and thorns and briars. “...He also pulled down the tower of Peniel and killed the men of the town.” There you wonder if that wasn’t excessive. Now, these are not Canaanites; these were Israelites. It seems like maybe he went too far there.

But in 21b you read that Gideon also killed Zeba and Zalmunna and took their ornaments off of their camels’ necks. So that’s the victory the Lord gave Israel with a small number of troops under the leadership of Gideon.

In the aftermath of that victory, notice what happens in verses 22 and 23, because I think those two verses are significant. I’m going to come back to them later. You read there, “The Israelites said to Gideon, ‘Rule over us—you, your son and your grandson...’” In other words, establish a dynasty. Why? “...Because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian.” Gideon’s response was an entirely appropriate response. In

verse 23, “Gideon told them, ‘I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you.’” I think Gideon understands what is going on there. The people are attributing the victory to him. He is very aware that he was not the one who brought the victory. It was the Lord who had won the victory, and therefore he was not going to rule over them. The Lord would rule over them. If you go back to Judges 7:2, you read there, right at the beginning of this, that the Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men in your hand. In order that Israel will not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, cut down these numbers of soldiers that you have.”

Now there is one further epilogue to this story of Gideon. Even though Gideon was the one who provided the leadership that gave this victory, Gideon, later in his life, led Israel into some form of idolatry. He was a flawed leader. You read in verse 24 that Gideon said, “I do have one request, that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder.” They were happy to do that. So you read in verse 26 that he collected 1,700 shekels of gold. And then you read in verse 27, “Gideon made the gold into an ephod which he placed in Ophrah his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping this. And it became a snare to Gideon and his family.”

Now it says that he made an ephod out of this gold. It is not altogether clear exactly what this was. The biblical usage of the term “ephod” is connected with a garment worn by the high priest that was very costly to make. The instructions for making an ephod are in Exodus 28:6-12. Was this ephod something similar to that garment worn by the high priest? It was in connection with the ephod in its pockets that the Urim and Thummim were held by the high priest. The Urim and Thummim were a means of receiving divine oracles. Did Gideon want some alternative, illegitimate means of receiving the divine oracles? Some think that’s what it was, and others think that the ephod here is reference to an image of some sort. Dan Bloch in his commentary suggests that it’s a figure of speech called a

synecdoche in which the part stands for the whole. In this interpretation the ephod represents not just a garment, but the clothing of some kind of image. It stands for the image as well, over which the garment was draped. Therefore the image became an idol and an object of worship for Israel. So it is obscure; we are not exactly sure what Gideon did here, and what the purpose of it was. But the result is quite clear. You read in verse 27b, “All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping this ephod.” So Gideon led Israel astray.

Abimelech and Kingship

At the end of the chapter 8, verses 30-31, there is a reference to his son Abimelech who becomes the primary figure in the following chapter. You read in verse 31 that Gideon’s concubine who lived in Shechem bore him a son whom he named Abimelech. Gideon died at a good old age, and was buried on the tomb of his father Joash in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. As soon as Gideon died, the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals.

So, Abimelech the son of Gideon is the subject of chapter 9. I’m not going to take time to go through the whole chapter. Abimelech becomes king of Shechem, and the result of that was the eventual destruction of Shechem and the death of Abimelech. So the outcome of Gideon’s story is very mixed. They were delivered from the Midianites, and Gideon says, “I’m not going to rule over you, the Lord is going to rule over you.” That’s good. But the result was some form of idolatry. And then Gideon’s son becomes a “king” more in the image of the Canaanite city-state kings of the land of Canaan, and that led to disaster as well.

3. Jephthah and His Vow

The third judge I want to draw your attention to is Jephthah in Judges 10:6-12:7. In this case, Israel is oppressed by the Ammonites. You read in 10:6, “Again the Israelites

did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him, he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites.” So you are in the north and the east in the land, with the primary problem being in Gilead, east of the Jordan River.

In that time, the elders of Israel send to a place named Tob for an exile from Israel by the name of Jephthah. He was living in Tob, a city east northeast of Ramoth Gilead up in that same general area. You read in 11:1, “He was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead, his mother a prostitute, and he became an outcast.” So you read in verse 3 that he fled and settled in the land of Tob. Then, in verse 5, the elders of Gilead send to him and ask him to become the commander of their forces so they can fight the Ammonites. Jephthah wants to bargain with them. In verse 9 Jephthah says, “‘Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me—will I really be your head?’ The elders of Gilead replied, ‘The LORD is our witness; we will certainly do as you say.’ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them.” And so he takes on this task of fighting the Ammonites. At first he sends some negotiators who talk with them, really arguing that the Ammonites have no historical claims to the land they were occupying. The next section of chapter 11 down to verse 27, you read that the king of Ammon paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him. So Jephthah decides to gather Israelite forces to fight them, but before doing so he makes a vow. This is the thing that’s probably most well-known about Jephthah. You read in 11:30, “And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: ‘If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.’” Well, he goes out to fight, and he is victorious over the Ammonites. You read in verse 34, “When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to

meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, ‘Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break.’ She says, ‘you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. But grant me this one request,’ she said. ‘Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry.’ ‘You may go,’ he said. And he let her go for two months. After the two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed.”

So I think the fairest way to read this is that Jephthah made that vow and kept it; he sacrificed his daughter to fulfill the vow. That understanding is disputed by some, but I think that is the most likely reading of the text. Look at your citations on page 55 at bottom of the page. This is from the commentary on Judges and Ruth by Cundall and Morris in the Tyndale Old Testament series. They comment, “Attempts have been made to show that Jephthah had an animal sacrifice in mind and that he was taken by surprise when his daughter came to greet him, but these cannot be substantiated since the designation ‘whoever comes forth from the doors of my house’ must refer to intended human sacrifice. It is certain that this was intended as an act of devotion on Jephthah’s part, a recompense for God’s actions through him. But had he been better versed in the traditions of Moses, he would have known that God did not desire to be honored in this way. The lives of others are sacred, not to be terminated for private ends, no matter how laudable that end may appear. As Bishop Hall observed, ‘It was his zeal to vow and his sin to vow rashly.’”

However, look at the second paragraph on page 56: “All the earlier commentators and historians accepted that Jephthah actually offered up his daughter as a burnt offering. It was not until the Middle Ages that well-meaning but misguided attempts were made to soften down the plain meaning of the text. The susceptibilities of enlightened minds may well be shocked at such actions, particularly by one of Israel’s judges. But the attempt to commute the sentence of death to one of perpetual virginity cannot be sustained.” That’s

what some have argued—that perpetual virginity was the penalty, not her life. “The final reference to the virginity of Jephthah’s daughter is added to point the tragedy of the affair, and the perfect tense is best taken as a pluperfect, a use which often is in the Hebrew, ‘she had no.’ The plain statement ‘He did with her according to his vow which he had vowed,’ must be allowed to stand.” Martin Luther said, “One would like have it said that he did not offer his daughter, but the text clearly says that he did.” It seems to me that that is the most apparent way to read this. Some who argue that he didn’t offer her up read verse 31 which says, “whatever comes out the doors of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s,” and then you get a *waw*, which the NIV translates “*and* I will sacrifice them as a burnt offering.” Some try to translate that *waw* as an “or”: “Whatever comes out of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s”—in other words, “If there’s a human being, they will be dedicated to the Lord, or if it’s an animal—sheep, goat, chicken, or whatever—I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.” But that doesn’t fit well with the rest of the context, and it’s kind of a strained way to read the original.

4. Samson – Webb’s RTR Article

The next judge I want to discuss is Samson. That’s Judges 13:1-16:31, so chapters 13-16. I thought that for Samson I would give you this handout rather than working through the text. This is a sort of brief resume of an article that I think is quite good, written by Barry Webb in the *Reformed Theological Review*, called “A Serious Reading of the Samson Story.” I’ll just try to give a kind of synopsis of the article. Webb says, “The Samson story is an embarrassment for many evangelicals. They want to treat him as the word of God but don’t know how to do it. The Samson story doesn’t lend itself easily to the kind of moralizing that is quite common in evangelical pulpits and Sunday School lessons. Now if you’re going to get examples for living from Bible characters you’re probably not going to go to Samson to find them, or at least not for very many points, but maybe a few. The alternatives are to trivialize it and view Samson as a biblical superman, or to ignore it. The last alternative is probably the most common.”

Webb calls for a serious reading that recognizes the essentially theological character of the story of Samson, and that understands how it functions in its canonical context. He notes that the story occupies a strategic position in the book of Judges, at the end of the main central section of the six major judges. It is given a lot attention—there are four chapters. Because of the positioning of this narrative and the amount of space given to Samson, Webb argues, “If we miss a point of this episode, we may miss the point of the entire book of Judges.”

a. First Movement

As far as structure for the narrative, Webb argues it unfolds in three movements. First, an angel makes a prediction: a barren women will bear a son. That’s in Judges 13:2 where you read, “A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was sterile and remained childless. The angel of the LORD appeared to her [the wife of Manoah] and said, ‘You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son.’” So a barren woman will bear a son. And the second prediction: the son will begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines. You read that in verse 12. Last phrase, “He will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines.”

The first prediction is fulfilled in 13:1-4, where you read, “The woman gave birth to a boy and called him Samson.” The second prediction, “He will begin the deliverance from the Philistines,” is seen progressively in two major narrative movements spanning chapters 14 through 16.

The first of those two movements is number two of the three movements of the narrative. Samson goes to Timnah where he falls in love with a Philistine girl—you read that in 14:1. Samson goes down to Timnah, he sees there a young Philistine woman, and he goes back to his father and mother and says, “Get her for me as my wife.” That movement climaxes in the slaughter of the Philistines of Ramoth Lehi in 15:14-20. In Judges 15:14-20 you read that the spirit of the Lord comes on Samson. He breaks those bands by which he was bound and gets the jawbone of a donkey and strikes down a

thousand men. Speaking to the Lord, he says, “With a donkey’s jawbone, I’ve made donkeys of the Philistines; you have given your servant this victory.” So that first movement climaxes in the slaughter at Ramoth Lehi.

b. Second Movement

The second movement begins with Samson going to Gaza in Judges 16:1 where he visits a harlot. That movement climaxes with the slaughter of Philistines at the temple of Dagon, where he breaks the pillars and kills more in his death than he did in his life in Judges 16:30. It says, “Samson said, ‘Let me die with the Philistines.’” Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.

The references to Zorah and Eshtaol in Judges 13:25 and 16:31 bracket these two movements. Now that’s just a literary feature which you might say is part of the structure of the narrative. You see in 13:25, “And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him while he was in Mahaneh Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.” Keep that reference between Zorah and Eshtaol. In 16:31 at the end, “They brought him back and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol.” So you see Zorah and Eshtaol bracket the passage from chapter 14 through the end of chapter 16. So they bracket those two movements in the Samson narrative. The references to Manoah, Samson’s father, also frame the entire narrative. If you go back to the very beginning of the narrative in Judges 13:2, it says, “A certain man of Zorah named Manoah.” Then go to 16:31 at the end of the entire narrative: “He was buried in the tomb of Manoah, his father.” These are inner structure elements in the narrative. So I think he makes a good case for three movements in the narrative.

c. Samson and the Nazirite Vow

Then these further comments: “Samson the Nazirite.” Nazirite defines what Samson was by divine determination. Go back to chapter 13 where the announcement of his birth was made. You read in verse 5 that the angel of the Lord says, “No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he

will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines.” So he was to be a Nazirite his entire life—from birth onward. Now, some comments on that. He’s not a voluntary Nazirite. We’ve looked at the role of the Nazirite, which was a voluntary vow for a temporary period of time. Samson’s situation differs from that, in that it is not voluntary or temporary; he’s not a Nazirite by voluntary vow but by divine decision. The period of consecration is not temporary, but for his whole life. When he is released it’s not just his hair that’s sacrificed, which is the way in which Nazirite vow was terminated, but Samson himself, his whole person, is offered up. As the story unfolds, Samson does everything a Nazirite should not do: he touches dead bodies, drinks wine, and lets his hair be clipped. He goes against all the provisions of a Nazirite. In Judges 16:17 he says, “...because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man.” One calls attention to that last phrase, “be like any other man.” This suggests that Samson may have wanted to be like any other man, but God would not let him be so. Yahweh withdrew from him only long enough to have him transferred to the place where he at last was to fulfill his calling. He was captured, blinded and taken to the Philistine temple.

d. Samson’s Story as a Recapitulation of Israel’s Story

John Milton in “Samson Agonistes” speaks of Samson this way: “Oh mirror of our estate.” And Barry Webb says Milton is right in terms of the whole way the Samson story functions in the book of Judges. The story of Samson is the story of Israel recapitulated and focused for us in the life of a single man. That’s really Webb’s thesis: the story of Samson is the story of Israel. As Samson was a holy man, Israel was a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). As Samson desired to be like other men, Israel desired to be like other nations. As Samson went after foreign women, Israel went after foreign gods. As Samson cried to God in his extremity and was answered, so did Israel. Finally—and this goes beyond the scope of Judges—as Samson had to be blinded and given over to the bitter pain of Gaza before he came to terms with his destiny, so Israel would have to go through the bitter suffering of exile in Babylon. So you see what Webb is suggesting is that the

Samson story mirrors the story of Israel.

e. Epilogue – Double Conclusion linked to Samson Story

In the epilogue, there's a double conclusion to the book of Judges, just like there is a double introduction. In Judges 17:6 and 21:25 you read, "Every man did what was good in his own eyes." What Webb argues is that Samson is every man. In the structure of the book, the Samson story leads into the epilogue. It comes right before the epilogue; it's the last of the stories of the major judges in the book. In Judges 14:3 when Samson wants his parents to get him this Philistine woman, "His father and mother replied, 'Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?' But Samson said to his father, 'Get her for me.'" Then the next phrase: the NIV says, "She's the right one for me." You know what that is in Hebrew? This is "She is good in my eyes"—it's the same phrase as "Everyone did what was good or right in his own eyes." So in the structure of the book, the Samson story leads into that epilogue where everyone is doing what is right in his own eyes; that's exactly what Samson was doing.

Samson, the deliverer and savior. The Philistines had captured him and were praising Dagon in Judges 16:23-24: "Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, 'Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands.' When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, 'Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain.'" So the Philistines attribute the capture of Samson to Dagon, their deity; but as Webb points out, here's the dramatic irony of the story. It's not their god who had given Samson into their hands, but it is Israel's God, Yahweh, and he had done so for the purpose of destroying them. So it's not going to turn out to be to their advantage in the end that Samson had come into their hands.

6 Main Issues:

1. Contest of Yahweh and the gods; Yahweh's Sovereignty and Freedom

There are two issues central to the book. One is the contest between Yahweh and the other gods for the loyalty of Israel. With Samson, the victory goes decisively to Yahweh. Samson's death proves that the other gods are no gods at all, and that Yahweh alone is worthy of Israel's devotion. Second, the story highlights Yahweh's sovereignty and freedom. All the savior judges with the exception of Othniel are what Webb terms "unlikely heroes" in one way or another. These are not the kind of people that you would normally think God would use to deliver his people. The God revealed in the book of Judges as the true God acts in ways that confound human wisdom, and the story of Samson is the author's supreme testimony to that fact.

2. Concluding Reflections – Kingdom of Priests

Concluding reflections: I think there are three points here. First of all, Israel's calling as a holy nation in Exodus 19:5-6: "You shall be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a peculiar possession among the peoples, the Lord's treasured possession." It is applied to Christians as the new covenant people of God in 1 Peter 2:9. Peter all but quotes Exodus 19:5-6 and applies it to the people of the new covenant. They go on continuities between people found in the Old Testament and people found in the New Testament. What Webb says here is: "What we are corporately we are also individually. We're called to be saints; that is, we're called to be whole, we are to be a holy nation, we are to be a holy people. We're to be holy individually as well. Because of this continuity between the fundamental calling of the Old Testament and the New Testament people of God, it's entirely appropriate that we see in Samson not just Israel's story but our own." In other words, if the Samson story is a reflection of the story of Israel, it is also a reflection of our own story. "The challenge here is whether or not we will gladly embrace our call if we are saints by calling. We are to be a holy people by calling. We cannot be as other men and should not want to be."

3. Nature of Faith

Secondly, Samson's name appears in Hebrews 11:32. "He is one of the heroes of

faith in that chapter. He has something to teach us about the nature of faith. In spite of his failure there are moments where Samson shows awareness that the great reality that stands behind the world and his own existence is God, whose servant he is.” That comes out explicitly in Judges 15:18 which I already read. He says there, “You have given your servant this great victory.” Here he attributes the great victory to the Lord. “He casts himself utterly on God, and this time we find him faithful. Samson’s finest moments are moments of faith from which we can still learn much in spite of many failures; and other times he’s not a good example but a bad one.”

4. Figure of Individual Who Raised Up by Yahweh to Save His People

Thirdly, here is a figure or individual who was raised up by Yahweh to save his people. And then notice the parallels here with something we find later in the Scripture. His birth is announced by an angel, his conception is miraculous—born to a barren woman. He is rejected by his own people—that’s when the Hebrews turned him over to the Philistines in Judges 15:12: “We have come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines.” So he was rejected by his own people. His saving work is consummated in his death, a death in which he brings down Dagon and lays the foundation for deliverance for God’s people in the future. In other words, in this most unlikely figure we see possibly more clearly than anywhere else in the Old Testament the shape of things to come. “We must not reduce Samson to a mere warning against willfulness that was an example of faith. He is much more. He is a forerunner of the greatest savior of all, and in certain respects his life points forwards to the life of Christ and typifies that event.” So I think Webb has done us a good service here in pointing out ways in which we can find significance and meaning for today from even some of these difficult narratives associated with Samson.

h. 4 Judges Listed in Hebrews 11:32

Now, I’ll conclude this in just a minute. I’ve spoken of four of the six major judges. Those four were listed in Hebrews 11:32. You read there: “And what more shall I

say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets.” But you see the four judges mentioned there—Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah. They are in that chapter of the heroes of faith. I think what we can take from them is that in spite of serious failures these four individuals are people whom the Lord used to deliver Israel from their oppressors. The Lord used them in spite of personal failures as they stepped out in faith to challenge those who were oppressing God’s people. Webb says back on page one, “We need to recognize the theological character of this book and understand how it functions in its canonical context, and it is in that way that we will find meaning for today.”

4. A Spiritual and Moral Deterioration in the Time of the Judges Illustrated

Let me try to wrap up Judges. Let’s go on to 4. in your outline. 4. is “A spiritual and moral deterioration in the time of the judges illustrated.” That’s chapters 17-21. This is the double conclusion that mirrors the double introduction. We find two stories appended to the end of the book and they are 4a. and 4b. 4a is: “Micah’s private sanctuary is robbed of its idols and priests, Judges 17-18.” Then 4b is: “The story of civil war against Benjamin that was occasioned by the sexual abuse and murder of the Levite’s concubine.” That’s in Judges 19-21.

These two stories found at the end of the book do not mention the name of any judge. I think the purpose of these stories is to demonstrate how quickly religious deterioration settled in and the people turned away from the covenant after the death of Joshua and the generation of the conquest. It’s in this section where you get that statement four times, “There was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” This was a time in which there was no central civil authority, and when that was the case, the people turned away from the covenant. The result was anarchy. That anarchy is illustrated in these two stories. One story illustrates religious apostasy and the other story illustrates moral deterioration.

a. The Focus on Religious Apostasy

So the first story is “The focus on religious apostasy”; that is Micah’s private sanctuary, idols, and priest. It’s associated with the migration of the Danites from the fragile possession given under Joshua. They weren’t satisfied with that. They wanted to find a new place and sent some people to investigate where they might move to. They go to the extreme north—look at Judges 18:7: “So the five men left and came to Laish, where they saw that the people were living in safety, like the Sidonians, unsuspecting and secure.” They think this would be a good place for the Danites to move. In that process of moving to the north, you read in verse 14 of chapter 18, “Then the five men who had spied out the land of Laish said to their brothers, ‘Do you know that one of these houses has an ephod, other household gods, a carved image, and a cast idol?’” So they go there to the house of the young Levite at Micah’s place. They greet him and they go in to this house, verse 18, and take the ephod and the image and the other household gods. They ask the priest there to come with them.

Go down to verse 23. They take these idols from Micah from this private sanctuary and as they’re leaving, “As they shouted after them, the Danites turned and said to Micah, ‘What’s the matter with you, that you called out your men to fight?’ He replied, ‘You took the gods I made, and my priest, and went away. What else do I have? How can you ask, “What’s the matter with you?”’” So here’s the man who has an illegitimate private sanctuary, and these Danites take these idols. He’s very upset and so asks “What else do I have? How can you ask what’s the matter with me?” But you read in verse 27: “Then they took what Micah had made, and his priest, and went on to Laish, against a peaceful and unsuspecting people. They attacked them with the sword and burned down their city.” Remember these were all Israelites. Then verse 28, “They rebuilt the city, settled there, and called it Dan.” So here is religious apostasy in this private sanctuary that was robbed of its items.

b. The Other Story Ended in Civil War

The other story ended in civil war that was sparked by the sexual abuse and

murder of a concubine of a Levite from Bethlehem. I won't go through that narrative. It's a brutal story of the abuse of this woman, and then the almost extermination of the tribe of Benjamin, as it was nearly wiped out by the rest of the tribes of Israel because of the way in which they treated this concubine.

So these two stories show something of the chaos that resulted in Israel when they turned away from the covenant during this dark period of time.

Transcribed by Andrea Mastrangelo and Dominique Gobeil
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Final edit by Elizabeth Fisher
Re-narrated by Ted Hildebrandt