

Old Testament History, Literature, and Theology

Judges

Author: Dr. Ted Hildebrandt | **Session** 21

Sponsored by Biblealearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Abimelech, Jotham's Fable, Jephthah, Shibboleth, Samson, Delilah, Levites, Gibeah, Ruth, Boaz

Abstract

Lecture 21 examines the dark conclusion of the Book of Judges alongside the redemptive transition found in the Book of Ruth. Dr. Ted Hildebrandt analyzes the moral decline of Israel through Abimelech's tyranny, Jotham's satirical fable, Jephthah's vow, and Samson's tragic strength and flaws. The narrative shifts to extreme social and spiritual anarchy in the tales of two Levites, culminating in the horrific civil war surrounding Gibeah. Finally, the narrative introduces Ruth and Boaz, whose virtuous loyal love (hesed) establishes a genealogical bridge from the period of the judges to King David, setting the historical and theological stage for the Israelite monarchy.

Outline

I. Abimelech and Jotham's Fable (Judges 9)

A. The Self-Proclamation of Abimelech

1. Meaning of Abimelech: 'My father is king' (ironic contrast with Gideon's non-royal status).
2. Brutal execution of his brothers to eliminate rivals for power.
3. Represents the first failed, illegitimate attempt at kingship in Israel during the Judges era.

B. Jotham's Fable of the Trees

1. Jotham (youngest surviving son) delivers a satirical fable from Mount Gerizim.
2. Rejection of kingship by fruitful trees: Olive tree (oil) and Vine (wine).
3. Acceptance of kingship by the thorn bush (bramble): useless, offers non-existent shadow, threatens destruction.
4. Function of the fable: satire on Abimelech's ruthless pursuit of power and political incompetence.

II. Jephthah and the Shibboleth Incident (Judges 10–12)

A. Divine Rejection and Sarcasm

1. God's response to Israel's repeated idolatry: 'Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen.'
2. Function of divine sarcasm as a prophetic rebuke to stir true repentance.

B. Jephthah's Vow and Daughter

1. Rash vow before fighting Ammonites: offering whatever comes out of his house as a burnt offering.
2. Daughter comes out dancing; debate between literal human sacrifice vs. perpetual virginity/dedication to the Lord.
3. Biblical principles on vows (Ecclesiastes 5: guard your steps, let words be few).

C. The Shibboleth Conflict

1. Inter-tribal warfare with Ephraimites at the Jordan River crossings.
2. Linguistic dialect marker: 'Shibboleth' vs. 'Sibboleth'.
3. Identification and execution of Ephraimites based on regional pronunciation.

III. The Samson Narrative (Judges 13–16)

A. Samson's Calling and Background

1. Nazirite from birth; meaning of name Shimshon ('Sunny').
2. Territorial context: Philistine borderlands, Beth Horon, Kiriath Jearim, and Elah Valley access roads.

B. Samson's Relationships and Exploits

1. Wife from Timnah: parents unable to say 'no'; riddle of the lion carcass and honey.
2. Betrayal through tears and Samson's metaphorical insult ('plowed with my heifer').
3. Prostitute at Gaza: demonstration of massive physical strength hauling town gate doors 20 miles uphill to Hebron.
4. Delilah and the Sorek Valley: distinction between Hebrew ahav (love/lust) and Greek agape/eros; Samson betrayed for silver.

C. Samson's Tragic Downfall and Final Vengeance

1. Shaving of hair, loss of divine strength, blinding, imprisonment, and public mockery in Gaza.
2. Final prayer focused on personal vengeance regarding his two eyes.
3. Destruction of the Philistine temple by collapsing two central load-bearing pillars (archaeological verification).
4. Profile of a flawed hero used by God despite severe personal and moral failures.

IV. The Tale of Two Levites (Judges 17–21)

A. The First Levite: Micah and the Danite Migration

1. Micah of Ephraim constructs a household idol and hires a Levite priest.
2. Tribe of Dan migrates north to escape Philistine territorial pressure.
3. Danites steal Micah's idol and Levite priest, establishing northern idolatrous shrine at Dan (foreshadowing Jeroboam's golden calves).

B. The Second Levite: Concubine at Gibeah

1. Levite travels with concubine from Bethlehem; avoids non-Jewish Jebus and stops in Gibeah (Benjamin).

2. Hostility in town square; echoes of Sodom and Gomorrah night attack.
3. Abuse and death of concubine; Levite dismembers her body into 12 pieces sent to all tribes of Israel.

C. Inter-Tribal Civil War and Reconstitution of Benjamin

1. Israelite tribal alliance wages war against Benjamin for protecting Gibeah.
2. Near-extinction of Benjamin (600 surviving men hiding in the wilderness).
3. Securing wives: destruction of Jabesh-Gilead (400 virgins) and abduction of Shiloh dancers (200 women).
4. Narrative function: explaining why Benjamin was the 'least tribe' and setting up the historical background for King Saul.

V. The Book of Ruth: A Story of Hesed and Hope (Ruth 1–4)

A. Tragedy in Moab and Return to Bethlehem

1. Famine drives Elimelech ('My God is king') and Naomi ('Pleasantness') to Moab.
2. Death of Elimelech and sons Mahlon ('Weakly') and Chilion ('Sickly').
3. Naomi renames herself Marah ('Bitterness'); Orpah returns home, but Ruth exhibits unwavering loyalty.

B. Ruth's Loyal Love (Hesed)

1. Ruth's covenant statement: 'Where you go I will go... your God my God.'
2. Definition of hesed: stubborn, loyal, persistent love reflecting God's covenant loyalty.

C. Boaz the Kinsman Redeemer (Go'el)

1. Boaz ('Strength') shows protection to Ruth during gleaning (virtuous woman, Proverbs 31).
2. Threshing floor encounter: Ruth offers herself; Boaz honors her dignity and enforces proper Levirate legal process.
3. Redemption of Naomi's land and marriage to Ruth.

D. Genealogical Bridge to King David

1. Conclusion of Ruth: lineage from Perez through Boaz and Ruth down to Obed, Jesse, and King David.
2. Narrative contrast: while Judges establishes the tragic background for King Saul (via Benjamin), Ruth establishes the righteous lineage for King David.