

In this article, we will look at the story of Abimelech and Samson and the epilogue of the book which describes Israel's slip into almost total moral decay.

CHAPTER 9: Abimelech

"Who is Abimelech? And why should we of Shechem serve him? (v. 25)

Although it is in the middle of the story of the judges, the story of Abimelech is an oddity in that he is not a judge. He does not set Israel free from any oppression but, instead, only causes trouble.

Abimelech is one of the seventy sons of Gideon, the child of his concubine. He persuades the people of Shechem (his mother's people) that he should be their king. To solidify his one-man rule, Abimelech kills all of his brothers except Jotham.

Verses 7-21—Jotham's Fable. In a rebuke to Abimelech's power grab, Jotham tells a fable to the leadership of Shechem. The fable revolves around the quest for a king to rule over the trees. The olive, the fig and the vine, all decline because they are engaged in productive activity that brings them honor. Only the buckthorn or bramble is willing to be king. The point of the fable is that only the worst and the least qualified want to be king.

God punishes Abimelech for his evil ways by *"putting bad feelings between him and the people of Shechem, who rebel against him"* (v.22). This leads to a civil war in which Abimelech is killed by a woman, considered a disgrace in those times. Abimelech's story ends with these words: *"Thus did God requite the evil Abimelech had done to his father in killing his seventy brothers. God also brought all their wickedness home to the Shechemites, for the curse of Jotham, son of Jerubaal, overtook them"* (vv 56-57).

CHAPTERS 10-12: Jephthah

"If you bring me back to fight against the Ammonites and the Lord delivers them up to me, I shall be your leader" (v.9).

Chapter 10 opens with a brief mention of two minor judges, Tola and Jair.

Verses 6-18 relate Israel's infidelity to the Lord as the people carry on with their worship of foreign gods. Yet God's heart seems to be conflicted. On the one hand, he tells them: *"I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen; let them save you from your distress"* (vv 13-14). On the other hand, when the people repent, and especially when they cast the foreign gods from their midst, God is grieved over the misery of Israel.

Chapter 11 introduces us to the next judge Jephthah. In his book, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, John Collins writes: *"The story of Jephthah is as gripping as any story in the Hebrew Bible. Jephthah operates in Gilead in Transjordan, and the adversaries are Ammonites. Like Abimelech, he is of dishonorable birth, and is expelled by the legitimate children. He rises to prominence as an outlaw, however, and is recalled by the elders because of his prowess as a fighter. He agrees on condition that he will become ruler if he succeeds"* (p.209).

Verses 12-28. Jephthah seeks to resolve Israel's conflict with the Ammonites in a peaceful way. Given the impression that Joshua and Judges are books of unmitigated violence, it is important to note that Jephthah begins by attempting to establish peaceful relations with the Ammonites. He only goes to war when the Ammonite king rebuffs his peace initiatives.

Verses 29-40. *"If you deliver the Ammonites into my power, ... whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites shall belong to the Lord. I shall offer him up as a holocaust"* (v.31). Having received the spirit of the Lord to help him defeat the Ammonites, Jephthah makes a vow to the Lord.

What are we to make of this promise? Jephthah's background may have led him to believe that the promise of a human sacrifice was the noble thing to do. It was his way of making sure he had God's help. While it would seem that Jephthah's vow was a bit rash and foolhardy, he was most likely raised to believe that he must fulfill his word (though he did

not need to keep it). One would look at Jephthah's rash vow with little sympathy considering that his victory had already been assured by the spirit of the Lord. What more did he need?

Other's view Jephthah's action as an attempt to bribe God. The deuteronomist writer does not condemn Jephthah for making the vow or for fulfilling it. Jephthah is even mentioned in the New Testament as one of Israel's heroes (Heb 11:32). In it, he is praised *not* for offering a human sacrifice but for defeating Israel's enemies. Also, if Jephthah was versed in the Torah (which he probably was not, given his background), he should have known that the God of Israel was totally opposed to the practice of human sacrifice. Most likely, Jephthah had an adulterated faith for he worshipped both the God of Israel and the gods of the Canaanites.

Samson, "the Great Colossus with feet of clay" (Chapters 13-16)

Samson is one of the Bible's most colorful characters. His story has inspired artistic renderings, poetry, movies and operas. The *Collegeville Commentary* states: "*Though there is no reason to deny its historicity, it is clear that the cycle of traditions that make up the Samson story have been deeply colored by legendary, cultic and folklore elements*" (p.259). Like previous judges, Samson does not command an army. Samson's story can be subdivided into four parts: his birth (ch.13), marriage (ch.14), victory over the Philistines (ch.15); and capture and death (ch.16).

CHAPTER 13: Birth of Samson

The angel said to Manoah: "*Though you are barren and have had no children, yet you will conceive and bear a son*" (v.3).

Samson is marked out as special from the beginning due to his birth to a barren woman, announced by an angel. Her son was to be dedicated to the Lord in a Nazarite vow (see Num 6) that imposed three conditions: no alcohol, no haircuts, and no contact with deceased bodies to ensure ritual cleanliness.

CHAPTER 14: Marriage of Samson

Samson's parents said to him: "*Can you find no wife among your kinsfolk or among all our people. . .*" (v. 3).

Samson lived life with gusto and with a larger-than-life enthusiasm, as shown in the following occasions:

- He chances on a beautiful woman whom he must have, regardless of her Canaanite origin and his parents' objection. Verse 4 suggests that God may have his reasons for allowing the marriage. Commenting on verse 4, Clinton McCann writes: "*14:4 is an affirmation that God works incarnation-ally, he works with the human resources at his disposal, flawed as they may be in Samson's case, and indeed, and in our cases as well*" (ibid, p.102).

- When a young lion roars at Samson, he grabs it and "tears it to pieces as one might a kid." Of course, he is able to accomplish this powerful act because the spirit of the Lord is upon him. He eats honey from the lion's carcass notwithstanding his Nazarite vow which forbids contact with a ritually unclean corpse.

- When Samson makes a wager with new companions, it is for high stakes (vv 12-13). He challenges them to solve riddles, which is in a way an act of aggression since no one is in a position to answer them except himself. Unable to solve a riddle, the Philistines make a threat on Samson's wife. "*Coax your husband to answer the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your family*" (v.16). When Samson realizes that the Philistines got the answer from his wife (called a heifer in verse 18), he takes revenge by killing thirty Philistines. In the meantime, Samson's wife is given to his best man. Thus far, Samson is using his God-given power to settle a personal issue and not to lead any army against the Philistines.

Pause: What picture of Samson have you formed from Chapters 14 and 15? What can help us best to deal with the desire for revenge?

CHAPTER 15: Samson's defeat of the Philistines

"With the jawbone of an ass I have piled them in a heap; with the jawbone of an ass, I have slain a thousand men" (v. 16).

Samson comes to his father's house with a gift for his wife, only to discover that his father has given his wife to the best man, thinking Samson would not want her after she told the Philistines the answer to the riddle.

Then the tribe of Judah becomes involved. They fear the Philistines will attack them if they shelter Samson. So they tie him up and hand him over to the Philistines. Once again, the spirit of the Lord comes upon Samson, enabling him to break his bonds and kill a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Verse 20 ends the Samson story. It seems Chapter 16 is a later edition to the book.

CHAPTER 16: Samson and Delilah; capture and death of Samson

Delilah said to Samson, *“Tell me the secret of your strength and how you may be bound so as to keep you helpless”* (v. 6).

“Samson cried out to the Lord and said, “O God, remember me! Strengthen me, O God, this last time that for my two eyes I may avenge myself once and for all on the Philistines” (v. 28).

This chapter has three episodes: Samson and the harlot (vv 1-3), Samson and Delilah (vv 4-22), and the death of Samson (vv 23-31).

In the episode involving the harlot at Gaza, Samson outwits his opponents by leaving the house earlier than they expected.

Verses 4-22 Samson & Delilah. Even though the text does not explicitly state that Delilah was a Philistine, scholars generally assume she was. If so, she was the third Philistine woman that Samson became involved with. We notice that the Philistines always used women to try and trap Samson. They fail the first and second time, but succeed the third time. In his relationship with Delilah, Samson shows himself to be pretty stupid. The story could be titled “Sleeping with the Enemy” or “Fatal Attraction.” Despite ample warning that she is a woman with “honey on her lips and poison in her heart,” Samson finally reveals the true secret of his strength. In this final breaking of his Nazarite vow, the Lord leaves him (v.20). But according to verse 22, Samson’s hair begins to grow back in prison and with it, his physical strength.

Verses 23-31—Samson’s death. The Philistines assemble in the temple to worship their god, Dagon, who they believe saved them from Samson and delivered him into their hands. In the height of their celebration, they bring out Samson from his prison cell to let him act the buffoon for them. Samson turns to the Lord and pleads with him to strengthen him

this one last time (v.28). God hears his prayer. There, in the house of a god where the deity should have the greatest power, Samson destroys the pagan temple. Scores of Philistines lose their lives.

If we want to be charitable to Samson, we might say that he sacrificed his own life to defeat one of Israel’s greatest enemies. This final scene may have been added to show that even though Samson had squandered away his strength out of his own self-interest, in the end he turned to the Lord and died honorably by bringing about God’s justice on Israel’s enemies. Chapter 16 ends by reiterating that Samson judged Israel for twenty years. But there is no mention of peace and rest in the land, something that is noted in the account of previous judges.

What are we to say of Samson? John Collins writes: *“His story is preserved in the Bible as part of the lore of Israel, and it is a gripping and entertaining story. The deuteronomist writer gives it only a light sprinkling of piety, and never suggests that Samson is a moral exemplar. Rather, he is a tragic hero; a person of extraordinary (if brutish) talent who has a fatal weakness in his attraction to Philistine women”* (ibid, p.212).

Pause: How can the world, the flesh and the devil seduce us into not developing our God-given potential and preventing us from using our gifts in a way that pleases God?

PART THREE: EPILOGUE

Israel’s descent into moral decay

Scholars regard the last four chapters of Judges as the book’s Appendix or Epilogue. These chapters, which make no mention of judges, were most likely added to the book at a later time. This final part of Judges contains two episodes *“that have been placed here because they deal with the monarchy: the migration of Dan to the north (chs. 17-18), and the civil war against Benjamin (chs. 19-20)”* (Collegeville Commentary, p.262). This final section of Judges shows Israel falling deeper and deeper into idolatry and moral decline.

The purpose of chapters 17 and 18 is not only to report on the history of the tribe of Dan but also to give information about the origins and nature of the sanctuary of Dan.

CHAPTER 17-18: The tribes of Micah and Dan

“Stay with me”, Michah said to him. “Be father and priest to me. . . .” (v. 10).

This verse is intended to show Israel’s state of total disarray prior to the time of the monarchy. Chapter 17 also demonstrates how the tribes (in this case, Micah and Dan) were turning more and more to idolatry.

Israel lacks a central leadership. Even though the tribe Dan has been assigned land to meet their needs (Josh 19:40-48), they did not succeed in taking the land. So the Danites set about in search of new land. In their quest, they cruelly attack the quiet and trusting people of Laish. Such unjustified action by the Danites (v.27) is yet another example of the people turning farther and farther away from God.

CHAPTER 19: The Levite and his concubine

“Bring out your guest that we may abuse him” (v. 22).

A Levite goes down to Bethlehem to bring home his concubine from her father’s home. She had been unfaithful to him or—as another translation puts it—she “played the harlot.” After experiencing days of great hospitality at his father-in-law’s home, the Levite finally heads off for home with his lady. When they arrive at Gibeah, an elderly man offers them bed and breakfast (vv 15-21).

What could have been a nice and peaceful stay with a kind host is suddenly interrupted when some hooligans from the town come knocking at the door. What follows is a horrific scene reminiscent of the occurrence in Lot’s home in Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:4-11). When the hooligans demand that the old man hand over his male guest (v.22), the man refuses. Instead, he offers to give them his maid’s daughter and his guest’s concubine. *“Ravish them, or do whatever you want with them; but against the man you must not commit this wanton crime”* (v.24). Perhaps shocked by the mention of handing over his host’s virgin daughter, the Levite pushes his concubine out the door. The depraved men abuse and rape her all night.

Needless to say, we are horrified by this whole scene, especially at the old man’s coldheartedness in offering his virgin daughter to the local “dogs,” and

at the Levite for doing the same thing. As stated in the commentary on Genesis 19, the hospitality rules in those days would have demanded that a host hand over members of his own household to the mob in order to protect his guest. Obviously, we cannot appreciate that custom. We only see two men acting very selfishly to save their own skin.

Verses 26-30 do nothing to redeem the reputation of the Levite. When he sees his concubine lying half-dead, or maybe dead, at his host’s door, he simply throws her on his donkey and heads off for home.

On reaching home, he dismembers her body in twelve pieces and sends them to the twelve tribes of Israel as a way to rouse their anger and bring them together to avenge the unspeakable crime of the Benjaminite.

Pause: What sort of human behaviors today cause you to be outraged?

CHAPTER 20: The tribes assemble to make war on the Benjaminites

“What is this evil that has occurred among you?” (v. 12).

All the Israelites gather as one man to avenge the terrible crime that took place at Gibeah, located in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. This is a story of Israel’s increasingly deteriorating condition. They are now assembled for a civil war, ready to fight and kill their own people.

When the assembled men ask what was the crime committed in Gibeah (v.3), the Levite conveniently omits the fact that *he* is the one who threw his wife out to the mob. How easy it is for us to give partial facts or to twist the truth to take away our responsibility. What follows is an unnecessary civil war, which could have been averted if the leaders of the Benjaminites were willing to hand over the few men who raped the woman (vv 12-14). The civil war that was triggered by the rape of one woman resulted in the rape of six hundred women by the surviving Danites.

CHAPTER 21: Wives for the Benjaminite men

“In those days there was no king in Israel’ everyone did what he thought best” (v. 25).

Having almost wiped out an entire tribe, the Israelites realize that if the tribe of Benjamin is to survive, they must obtain wives for the six hundred male survivors. Two accounts of how the wives were procured are woven together as a way to explain that each account provides only a partial solution to the problem (v.14). As we read the two accounts, we will quickly see that both solutions were horrible and a final sign of the moral deterioration of Israel at the end of the period of the judges.

The Book of Judges ends with words we have heard several times in this book: “*In those days there was no king in Israel...*”—words that prepare us for the period of the monarchy. But first we will look at the Book of Ruth which belongs to this period in Israel’s history.

Pause: What message do you take with you from the Book of Judges?

RESOURCES

- Collegeville Bible Commentary – Old Testament
- Interpretation Series Commentary on Numbers
- The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition