

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of JUDGES

"This Book takes its name from a characteristic of the period between the death of Joshua and the accession of Saul, namely the rule of Judges, or saviours, whom God raised up to deliver His oppressed people. Of these there were fifteen, Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah-Barak, Gideon, Abimelech, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, Samson, Eli and Samuel. There were three leading types, the Warrior-Judge, as Gideon and Samson; the Priest-Judge, as Eli; and the Prophet-Judge, as Samuel. The chief of these Judges were Deborah, Gideon, Samson and Samuel....The period of the Judges cannot be determined with any precision.... but we may reckon about 330 years for this period. Nothing is known as to the authorship, though tradition ascribes it to Samuel...."

W. Graham Scroggie.

1) **1:1**

As with any book of Scripture, and perhaps particularly with those of the Old Testament, we need first of all to say something about their place in the ongoing history of divine revelation, and this we now do at the outset of this new study. In Exodus 20 we read of the constitution of Israel as the covenant people of God. In Exo 21-40 we have the record of their wilderness journeyings towards the Promised Land. In the Book of Numbers we have the account of Israel's faithlessness at Kadesh Barnea and their consequent wanderings in the wilderness for forty years. In Joshua, we read of the conquest of the Land by the victorious armies of Israel - a partial conquest, as it turned out, and as we learn from Joshua 13:1, 'There remaineth yet very much land to be possessed'. Then, following the death of Joshua, referred to in Judges 2:8, we have this turbulent period, with its zig-zag pattern of sin / oppression / bondage / crying to the Lord / deliverance through a Judge - a pattern not so much moving backwards and forward as of a downward spiral until, as the final verse of the book shows, a situation of anarchy prevailed, of which it is said that 'every man did that which was right in his own eyes'. The period did not in fact end with the end of Judges, but continued into 1 Samuel 1-12. Samuel was the last of the Judges raised up.

2) **1:1**

It will be useful at this point to look back over the extent of the conquest under Joshua. The southern part of the land with its confederacy of kings was first subdued, as we read in Joshua 10, then the northern group of kings were dealt with in a campaign described in Joshua 11/12 (the Notes on these chapters may be consulted in this series of Bible readings). It is in this context, of a land subdued in principle, but with much nevertheless remaining to be done in terms of consolidation, that we need to understand the opening passage of Judges, and it is against this background that the repeated emphasis in the first chapter on the failure or inability of the tribes to cast out all the inhabitants of the heathen is to be understood.

One further point of introduction that should be made is that we need to think of the over-all purpose of God in the ongoing history of His people, for it is the history of the promised Seed that is in view, and the book of Judges constitutes another step in the unfolding of the Divine plan of redemption, through the preparation of the people of the covenant to bring forth in the fulness of the time that promised Seed, Christ the Redeemer. We need to see this particular section of the history in the context of the whole.

3) **I:I**

The following analysis of the book of Judges, taken from the Tyndale Commentary, by A.E. Cundall, will prove helpful in our ongoing study:-

- I. THE INCOMPLETE CONQUEST OF CANAAN (1:1 - 2:5)
 - a. The conquest of southern Canaan (1:1-21)
 - b. The capture of Bethel (1:22-26).
 - c. A catalogue of unoccupied territory (1:27-36)
 - d. The effect of the broken covenant (2:1-5)
- II. ISRAEL IN THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES (2:6-16:31)
 - a. Introduction to the period (2:6-3:6)
 - b. Othniel and Cushan-rishathaim of Aram (3:7-11)
 - c. Ehud and Eglon of Moab (3:12-30)
 - d. Shamgar and the Philistines (3:31)
 - e. Deborah and Barak against Jabin and Sisera of Canaan (4:1-24)
 - f. The Song of Deborah (5:1-31)
 - g. Gideon and the Midianites (6:1-8:28)
 - h. Gideon's later years (8:29-35)
 - i. The rise and fall of Abimelech (9:1-57)
 - j. Tola (10:1, 2)
 - k. Jair (10:3-5)
 - l. Jephthah and the Ammonites (10:6-11:40)
 - m. Jephthah and the jealous Ephraimites (12:1-7)
 - n. Ibzan (12:8-10)
 - o. Elon (12:11, 12)
 - p. Abdon (12:13-15)
 - q. Samson and the Philistines (13:1-16:31)
- III. APPENDICES (17:1-21:25)
 - a. Micah's household and the Danite migration (17:1-18:31)
 - b. The outrage at Gibeah and the punishment of the Benjamites (19:1-21:25)

4) **1:1-7**

The Tyndale commentary suggests that since the death of Joshua is dealt with in 2:6-9, the most likely explanation of the words in 1, 'after the death of Joshua' is that they form a title and general introduction to the whole book, rather than a reference to what follows in 2ff. In fact, the events recorded in 1:1b-2:5 took place during the lifetime of Joshua. First of all, then, we have Judah's (and Simeon's) campaign against the Canaanites under the rule of Adonibezek. The question of how the children of Israel 'asked' the Lord in 1 about the order of battle may be answered by assuming that the Lord had made known His will in the accepted way of that time, by use of Urim and Thummim (Exo 28:30, Numb 27:21), or by lot (cf Josh 7:16 ff), or by the ephod (cf 1 Sam 23:9). By whatever method, however, the reference is clearly to supernatural guidance and direction. Why Judah (2)? Delitzsch says, because Judah was appointed by the blessing of Jacob (Gen 49:8) to be the champion of his brethren. Judah and Simeon were children of the same mother, Leah (Gen 29:33-35), and generally acted in close relationship with one another. But Simeon's inheritance was within the territory of Judah (cf Josh 19:1-9), and was eventually absorbed in the more powerful tribe. It is not certain where Bezek was located, some think in the vicinity of Gezer, north west of Jerusalem, other that it was between Gibeah of Saul and Jabesh in Gilead. The capture of the king was the most important part of this or any other campaign: 'go for the leader' was always the aim, for with him captured, resistance would inevitably crumble. The grimness and gruesomeness of the retribution in 6, 7 was, as Tyndale points out, only infrequently employed by Israel, but mentioned thus early in the book, it may be some hint that even by this time, Israel were tending to go beyond the bounds in their conduct of 'the holy war', and that the downward movement into spiritual declension was already taking place.

5) **1:8-21**

Jerusalem (8) was the city of the Jebusites, and was built on the Ophel hill, south of the present temple area. This was almost certainly the Salem mentioned in Gen 14:18, over which Melchizedek ruled as priest/king. The statement about its capture and its being set on fire seems to represent something less than complete destruction, since in 21 we are told that the tribe of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites, and that the latter dwelt with the children of Benjamin 'unto this day', i.e. the time this record was written. It may be that the city was not occupied in any realistic way, and was taken later by the Jebusites, and not recaptured again until the time of David (2 Sam 5:6 ff). In 9ff the campaign against the south and west of Jerusalem is recorded, with the capture of Hebron (formerly Kirjath-Arba (and Debir) formerly Kirjath-sepher. The incident recorded in 12-15 is taken from Joshua 15:16-19. It is one of the brighter gems recorded in this generally sombre book. Caleb's remarkable pronouncement, promising his daughter to the warrior who captured Debir, seems to have been something in the nature of a test for Othniel, his nephew, since he was already in probability under consideration as a possible husband for Achsah, as if to say, "How will you react to this challenge, Othniel?" We shall look at this incident once again in the next note, with particular reference to the comments made in the appropriate reading in Joshua.

6) **1:8-21**

Caleb was concerned to see what stuff his future son-in-law was made of; he must have been highly satisfied with the result. Othniel became the first of the Judges of Israel, and the first national leader after the death of Joshua, and we see therefore how God's providences were at work even at this point in His preparation for the future. It was Joshua's reaction to the challenge of God in his earliest days that proved decisive for all his future, and it was much the same with Caleb. And now, in this domestic idyll of love and romance the same is happening once again. Othniel proved himself worthy in battle, and this stood him in good stead when God's spirit came upon him and chose him to be one of the judges of His people.

What follows in 15.18,19 teaches another eloquent lesson. Clearly Achsah's dowry had included a parcel of land in the south. That whole area was in the patrimony of Caleb, given him by God, and a careful study of the map will show that Hebron (called Kirjath-arba) was in the hill country, that central, hilly portion of Palestine about 20 miles south west of Jerusalem, but that Debir was much more on the lowlands. This was where Achsah had been given the parcel of land, and it was apparently fairly parched and not well served with water. Hence her request in 15.19. The significant thing here is that she is following in her father's footsteps: Caleb had asked "Give me this mountain", and it had been given him. And Achsah did likewise, following the inspiration of her father's faith. There is something very lovely and wonderful about this. What a great thing it is when the daughter of a man proves to be of the same spiritual calibre as her father: "give me also springs of water", and Caleb gave her more than she asked, the upper springs and the nether springs. This is often how God deals with His children: when they ask, He gives them far, far more than they could bear to hope. He gives with such abundance, for He is indeed a bountiful God. The spiritual lessons here are very beautiful and very telling.

7) **1:8-21**

What was said in the previous note prompts the reflection - and this is surely the central lesson of these verses -that this is how Israel as a whole should have lived and conducted their campaign, daringly, positively, and in faith. If all the tribes had had this spirit, they would have fared far better, and got much further than they did. Was it a matter of low-spiritedness? A lack of will and determination? A low threshold of endurance? Were they too easily discouraged? At all events, whatever the reason, they betrayed a lack of single-minded dedication, much more reminiscent of the earlier generation's murmuring and faithlessness during the wilderness wanderings than of the spirited forward movement under the leadership of Joshua. One thinks, by way of example and illustration of what is said in Numb 32:1 ff about Reuben and Gad, and Moses' angry reaction against their desire to settle in Gilead rather than cross the Jordan with the other tribes. Did Moses see even then the beginnings of a spirit of compromise and half-heartedness, for which they would pay dearly in later years? For repeatedly that was the portion of Israel that bore the first brunt of enemy attack, because they were so vulnerable, and because they did not have the protection of the river they refused to cross (cf Judges 10:8,17,18; 1 Kings 22:3; 2 Kings 10:32,33; 2 Kings 15:29; 1 Chron 5:26). Moses' eventual access on to their request can only be regarded as permissive of what was certainly a compromise, as if to say, "If you are determined on this course, then follow it and take the consequences", in terms of Psalm 106:15, "He gave them their request; but sent leanness to their soul" (Judges 5:15-17 needs to be read alongside this).

8) **1:22-26**

The capture of Bethel (22ff) is worthy of note, inasmuch as different constructions have been placed upon it. On the one hand, the description of the city's capture seems reminiscent of the earlier capture of Jericho under Joshua (Josh 2), and it may be thought that the men of Joseph were simply following an earlier, successful precedent in what they did, showing mercy to the Bethelite just as Joshua's spies had shown mercy to the house of Rahab in Jericho. Others, however, think of the incident very differently. R.A. Watson, in his Expositor's Bible commentary says: "We are inclined to regard the traitor as deserving of death, and Ephraim appears to us disgraced, not honoured, by its exploit. There is a fair, straightforward way of fighting; but this tribe, one of the strongest, chooses a mean and treacherous method of gaining its end. Are we mistaken in thinking that the care with which the founding of the new city is described shows the writer's sympathy with the Luzzites? At any rate, he does not by one word justify Ephraim; and we do not feel called on to restrain our indignation."

This is a possible interpretation; but we think it may be called in question by the simple statement in 22 that 'the Lord was with them'. If the Lord was in this - as He undoubtedly was in the earlier case in Joshua 2 - is it likely that such a construction as Watson's could legitimately be placed on the incident?

9) 1:27-36

These verses are noteworthy for the monotonously repeated 'Neither' in verse after verse, as the sacred writer chronicles the sad story of failure on the part of the various tribes to subdue the Canaanite tribes. The point he is making is surely clear - and it is made very clear indeed in the chapters which follow - namely, that their failure to do all that God had expected of them led to untold trouble in their subsequent history and experience. Viewed in this light, the Lord's earlier words to Joshua (Josh 13:1) 'There remaineth yet very much land to be possessed', which are generally viewed, and rightly so, as a robust challenge to Israel to be up and doing, must also be seen as containing a grim warning fraught with foreboding for the future. It is impressive to realise that many of the wars in which Israel was engaged in Samuel's and David's time, were against these very tribes, and that, if only the dedication of the earlier days under Joshua had been maintained, the later history of the people of God would have read very differently. And how true to spiritual life this all is! Battles that are funkled or fudged, or avoided when they ought to be fought, become far more serious issues in later life. How often can we look back over our lives and say of them, 'If only I had dealt with that at the time, how much trouble I would have saved myself, and how many tears, in my life today!'

10) 2:1-5

What has been said in the last two Notes is now amply confirmed in these verses, in which we are told that an angel of the Lord confronted the people with their failure. Again, there is a similarity with the book of Joshua, as the record of the latter's encounter with the captain of the Lord's host prior to the fall of Jericho indicates (Josh 5:13 ff). There, however, the encounter, though awesome and dread-full, was full of grace and promise for Joshua's future campaigns, whereas here it must have been the occasion of another kind of dread, as the solemn question 'Why have ye done this?' challenged the people. The emphasis is on the broken covenant, and this was the fateful content of the Divine message. In a brief summary of their history, the angel reminded them of God's faithfulness to His promise to their fathers, and of their own subsequent deliverance from Egypt and entrance into the Promised Land in fulfilment of it. He also reminded them of the response of loyalty and faithfulness to the covenant that was expected and required of them, and particularly the uncompromising attitude towards Canaanite religion and practices enjoined upon them. Their failure in this is described in simple, unadorned terms as disobedience (2). The 'wherefore' in 3 is equally simple and categorical: the enemies whom they had neglected to deal with would be as thorns in their sides and their gods would be a snare to them. This is the tragic story which is unfolded in the chapters which follow.

ii) 2:1-5

The Tyndale Commentary reflection on these verses is very helpful here: "The Canaanites were eventually to disappear as a people. They became assimilated into the nation of Israel which thereby showed its superior virility, but the leaven of Canaan eventually permeated the whole nation. Nowhere else in the sacred record, perhaps, are the disastrous effects of compromise seen so clearly as in this chapter of Israel's history. Absolute loyalty and obedience and the rejection of the claims of expediency and selfishness are required of those who would follow the Lord. But the graciousness of God became the more apparent through this sad chapter of events. He did not cast off the nation irrevocably because it had broken the covenant. Rather He raised up judges and, later on, prophets, to woo and to win the nation back from its infidelity. And even when His final judgment fell upon the nation in the catastrophes of 721 and 587 BC He did not abandon His redemptive purposes, but, working through a purified remnant, prepared the way for the New Covenant, sealed by Christ's death, with a new and inward dynamic making for that filial obedience so sadly lacking in Israel's chequered history. Truly it can be said of our God', I will never break my covenant with you (1).

"Confronted with their sin the children of Israel wept, but in the light of their subsequent history it may not be unjust to regard their tears as superficial. Certainly there was no evidence of a true and abiding repentance. The Lord is not deceived by the external expression of repentance; He looks for the rent heart, not the rent garments (Joel 2:12-14; cf. Ps 51:17)."

12) **2:6-10**

These verses parallel those in Josh 24:28-31, which conclude the record of the conquest of Canaan under Moses' successor, and this forms in effect the introduction to this period of the Judges. This, as Tyndale points out, strengthens the view that 1:1-2:5 have been included by the sacred historian to provide the background for the main part of his book. Here is the comment we made in the reading of Joshua (see note on Josh 24:29-33): "It would seem, and did seem, that the consecration that Israel made was true and real enough, and that it continued during the lifetime of the elders who outlived Joshua - a matter of years it may be. And it might be said, 'They did well, after all, then'. But it was not so very long afterwards that they began to decline, as Judges 2:11 ff makes plain. This is surely a confirmation that they did not rise radically enough to Joshua's challenge. By and by, the evil thing that they had allowed unchecked, took over in their lives and drew them away from the Lord. It is a very frightening thought, is it not?"

The phrase in 10, 'another generation....that knew not the Lord' is an important and significant one, and it serves to underline the root-cause of the declension which followed Joshua's death. It is evident that the spiritual momentum given to the ongoing campaign by Joshua's dedication and loyalty to the things of God continued for a considerable time in the generation that outlived him; but only constant vigilance can maintain the 'succession' of godliness in doctrine and life - whether in a people, a family, or a church. The old hymn says: 'We forget so soon', and there is ever a need to remember and to rehearse the things that God has done (10b). Otherwise the danger of 'second-best' religion (cf 1 Sam 3) with no living experience of God becomes very real. This is the beginning of the 'rot' in Israel. We shall continue thinking of this in the next note.

13) 2:6-10

The striking thing about these verses is the manner in which they speak of a generation "which knew not the Lord" within the covenant people - a phenomenon which we might tend to think was a contradiction in terms, if we did not know that it is one which has occurred again and again in the history of the Church and the people of God. Two quotations come to mind which serve to underline this, and the hazard it represents. The first is from P.T. Forsyth's book, "The Church and the Sacraments":- "The once-born are the chief spiritual peril in the Church, the religious-minded without the religious experience, with a taste for religion but no taste of it, who treat Christianity as an interpretation of life rather than a recasting of the soul, and view the Church as the company of the idealists rather than the habitation of the Spirit".

This is a very challenging word, but we can hardly doubt its validity, nor should we fail to realise that our Lord Himself confronted with such a situation in His day, as we may gather from His encounter with Nicodemus who, though a ruler of the Jews, was one of the 'once-born', and needed a rebirth to enable him to enter into the kingdom of God. Who would venture to say that Pharisaism did not constitute a peril to the Church of our Lord's day?

14) **2:6-10**

The second quotation is from Sir Frederick Catherwood, from a talk he gave some years ago to a gathering of students- "The upsurge of Christian belief seems, since the Reformation to have gone in cycles of a hundred years, each cycle being stronger than the one before. The down-slope of the last cycle seems to have gone through four generations. The first were true Christians, they went to Church because they wanted to go. They believed with all their hearts and they acted out their Christian belief in their secular activities. This was the generation of Gladstone and Shaftesbury. They were followed by their sons who had not the root of the matter in them but who were heavily influenced by their fathers, maintained a formal belief in Christianity, went to Church and kept up the outward appearance but were entirely lacking in the spirit of Christianity. This is the generation of Soames Forsyte. They were the Victorian hypocrites against whom there was a violent and prolonged reaction.

"The next generation was agnostic. They were neither heathen nor Christian. This is the generation in the ascendancy today. So far as they have a philosophy, it is humanist. They don't believe in absolutes, standards etc. All of life is relative. But they have assumed that the value system in society is stable and progressive; they do not realise that their agnosticism may make it disappear altogether. Yet that is precisely what is beginning to happen. They are now faced by a rising generation a large part of which is taking them at their word, which is taking their disbelief in absolute values to its logical conclusion. The resulting confrontation in university after university (excluding perhaps the oldest and sanest) would be very funny if it were not so deadly serious."

15) 2:11-23

These verses, including also 3:1-6, form an introduction to the main section dealing with the various judges of Israel (3:7 - 16:31). They sum up the entire period which lasted some 200 years, up to the time of Samuel and Saul. This is therefore an important section, in that it gives us a 'bird's-eye view' of an era comparable to the age from, say, the beginning of the French Revolution (1789) to the present day. This is to see the period in perspective, something we sorely need to do in our own situation today. We are so bogged down with 'colour' politics - red or blue, with all shades in between - that we are not able to see trends (whichever party may be in power!) and to realise that it is not ultimately economics, but morals that lie at the root of national misfortune and calamity. What is in view here are the principles of Divine dealings with nations, and what we are given is "an interpretation and judgment of the history of the whole period, which is represented as 'an almost rhythmical alternation of idolatry and subjugation, return to Yahweh and liberation'" (Moore, ICC). Moore goes on to say, "It is clear....that the author's aim was moral and religious rather than purely historical; the lesson of the history is for him the chief thing in the history".

16) 2:11-23

The 'gods of the people' around Israel (12,13) were principally Baal and Ashtaroth. Baal was the Canaanite god, given different names in different districts (e.g. Baal-peor in Num 25:3, Baal-gad in Josh 11:17, Baal-berith in Judg. 9:4) hence the plural 'Baalim' so often used in the Old Testament. Ashtaroth is the plural form of 'Astarte' ('Ishtar' in Babylonia), Baal's consort. They were fertility gods, whose worship was accompanied by lascivious practices. The immoralities associated with heathen religions was proverbial, and this serves to explain the prophetic charge of adultery brought against God's people when they turned to idolatry - it was literal as well as spiritual. In 15, the historian gives a commentary on the situation of declension: the 'hand of the Lord was against them'. But this does not necessarily mean that they were conscious of this. All they were probably conscious of was that things were going wrong for them - perhaps it did not occur to them to ask why, or what was happening - and that they were experiencing distress because of this. We repeat that this was an interpretative comment by the historian on the situation, and the fact of the Lord's displeasure is not something that could be proved either militarily or economically, any more than the prophetic statements today about the cause of our decline and misfortune can be proved. The 'nevertheless' in 16 bears testimony to the patient grace of God. 'Raised' has the force of 'repeatedly raised', and refers to the whole period. This was ever the Divine answer to their distress. God's unaccountable longsuffering and mercy towards His sinning people is something which gleams with light and beauty in the pages of the Old Testament.

17) 2:11-23

'And yet'.... (17) they forgot so soon! Their repentance, again and again, was short-lived, and when the immediate crisis was over, they forgot both their earlier misery and the more sober frame of mind that had been induced in them. The mistake they made was to fail to realise that gratitude for deliverance ought to be expressed in life-long dedication (cf Hosea 6). Even in the days when a particular judge had been raised up as their deliverer, and in the midst of the deliverance, they would prove fickle and unfaithful, going a-whoring after false gods. The phrase in 17 'out of the ways of their fathers' is a sad and moving commentary, in its implications. One recalls Jeremiah's words about 'the old paths', in which men find rest for their souls (Jer 6:16). There is also something even more sinister in 19 ff, for these verses seem to indicate a progressive deterioration, with each successive cycle being characterised by a greater descent into apostasy and corruption, and by a more superficial repentance, than the one preceding it. The Tyndale commentary adds: "The voice of conscience can become dulled by successive acts of sin, and repentance can become more and more superficial until, ensnared in the character formed by a multitude of thoughts and actions, a miracle is needed to produce a genuine repentance and a seeking of the Lord with the whole heart." In 21 the significance of God's refusal to drive out the Canaanites is that because of their sin, God's people were forced to live with the consequences of it. This is a constant principle in God's dealings with men: Abraham, we may remember, was obliged to live with the consequences of his sin with Hagar, when he wanted to push her away; and there is the institution of the 'kings' in Israel's history - God blessed them within the limits they themselves placed upon their relationship with Him, but oh, the trouble the kings brought upon them!

18) 2:11-23

As a kind of postscript to our study thus far the following is an interesting note from the Tyndale commentary about Israel's failure to possess the land fully: "No fewer than five reasons are advanced in the book of Judges for the failure of the Israelites to occupy the land of Canaan. It was because of the superior arms and fortifications of the Canaanites (1:19); because of Israel's disposition to make alliances with the inhabitants of the land (2:1-5); because Israel had sinned and must be punished (2:20,21); because God was proving Israel's faithfulness (2:22,23; 3:4); and finally, it was so that Israel might be instructed in the arts of war (3:1-3). To suggest that there is inconsistency here would do despite to the basic Hebrew approach to life, with its highly developed conception of the sovereignty of God. Israel had failed to occupy the land for very good reasons and so the former inhabitants remained in the land, but God overruled even this for His people's good. There is no need to allege two or more traditions; all five reasons could have suggested themselves to the same Hebrew mind at various times and in differing contexts. Or again, we could cavil at the way in which Israel is said to have been given into the hand of a certain oppressor and subsequently delivered and governed by a particular judge, whilst the context makes it clear that only a minority of the tribes and a relatively small area of the land were affected. An explanation of this may lie in the Hebrew conception of racial solidarity."

19) **3:1-6**

These verses describe the nations and peoples by whom Israel were surrounded in their settlement in the Promised Land. The five lords of the Philistines (3) represent the five-city state of Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath. The Canaanites usually mean all the original inhabitants of the land, but here the reference may be to those who dwelt in the valleys and coastal areas. The Sidonians were located around the port of Sidon, and known later as the Phoenicians. The Hivites in the north in the area of Hermon and Lebanon are often identified with the Horites (cf Gen 36:2, 20, 29). The Hittites (5), a great nation covered the whole region of Syria (cf Josh 1:4). The Ammorites dwelt in the hill country on either side of the Jordan, the Perizzites were also hill dwellers. The Jebusites dwelt in the hills round about Jerusalem. Surrounded on all sides as they were by heathen influences, it is understandable that Israel should have been under pressure to conform to their corrupt practices. It is significant, however, to see the sacred historian's comments in 2 and 4: on the one hand, Israel were to learn the arts of war since, as Tyndale observes, "military prowess was a necessary accomplishment, humanly speaking, if she was to survive". This does not necessarily mean an abdication of trust in the Lord for protection and victory: for the Lord uses the ordinary means of military skills for the fulfilment of His purposes. On the other hand, these pressures were used as a 'trial of faith', and a test of obedience (4), and it was always on the cards that Israel could have risen triumphantly to the challenge, as in the days of Joshua. But alas, it is very different now in this generation that 'knew not the Lord'.

20) 3:7-11

We come in these verses to the central theme of the book and to the beginning of the record of the individual judges. The statement in 7 stands in parallel to 5 and 6, and crystallises the declension process. Also, it is a potted version of the principle unfolded already in 2:18, 19, and which is seen at work throughout all the rest of this main section of the book. 'Mesopotamia' in 8 is the land of Aram, the area to which Abraham came from Ur of the Chaldees (Gen 11:31), on his way to Canaan (Haran is the city, Padan-aram is the area). It lies in the Euphrates 'curve', north-east of Canaan, in present day Syria, east of Carchemish, in the former Hittite empire. It was into the hands of the king of Aram that the Lord delivered His people because of their sin, and it was in relation to this bondage that Othniel was raised up as Israel's deliverer. The account of Othniel's judgeship is brief and summary, being no more than a statement that the spirit of the Lord came upon him to be his enabling in the setting free of the people. A question does arise here, however. It is not easy to see why, if the attack came from the north-east, Othniel who belonged to the tribe of Judah in the far south should have been chosen as deliverer. But the simple answer may be that Othniel was well known in the land as a whole (cf 1:12f, the story of his exploit at Kirjath-sepher). He was a man with a proven record of valour: what could be more natural, then, than that the nation should instinctively turn to him - and indeed that the Lord should lay His hand upon him, in time of need.

21) 3:7-11

In 10 we need to understand that the spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel, and Divine grace was bestowed on him, not only - and not indeed in the first instance - to effect deliverance, but also to judge Israel, i.e., to guide them and lead them towards a state of preparedness in which deliverance could become a possibility. This is an important consideration, and undoubtedly that state of preparedness would include, and have as its primary concern to bring about spiritual renewal. Military success would not in itself answer any problems. It was a programme of recovery in the deepest sense (for a useful and more explicit parallel to this compare the early years of Samuel's judge-ship, and his leading the people to consecration at Mizpeh 1 Sam 7). No doubt Othniel accomplished deeds surpassing the courage and strength of the natural man through his Divine anointing, but it is his judging of Israel that is the important element. It is interesting to see the time-scale involved in these verses. Israel were under subjugation to Aram for 8 years, but after the deliverance effected by Othniel, the land had rest for forty years. If we compare this, by way of illustration with the six years of the Second World War, which was followed by forty years of peace, we may gain some idea not only of the privations and the suffering that Israel's subjugation involved, but also the jubilation and rejoicing that must have followed Othniel's victory. The illustration is a valid and illuminating one, for it demonstrates the hazards involved in 'winning the peace'. Israel clearly failed to do so, as we see from the ominous words which follow in 12, and this should serve to make us in our day reflect on our parlous situation in Britain today.

22) 3:12-30

This is a long passage, which cannot well be dealt with in one Note, but it is better to read the whole account through as one piece to get the flavour of it, then look in detail at its particular issues. Here, then, is the next instalment of Israel's declension, after the forty years of peace that resulted from Othniel's judgeship and deliverance. The same monotonous refrain rings out once more in 12, the sins of Israel, and the hand of the Lord against them through their enemies because of their sins. Moab was situated in the area south east of the Dead Sea, Ammon to the north of them, and the Amalekites in the southern part of the land, in what is now called the Negev. The attack upon Israel was therefore from the southeast, with the enemy crossing Jordan at much the same place as Israel had crossed sixty years earlier under Joshua, when he captured Jericho, the city of Palm trees. On this occasion the servitude of Israel lasted, not eight years, but eighteen - a measure of the deeper declension into which they had sunk. We may well think of the dilapidation, the shabbiness, the reduction that eighteen years of occupation must have brought to Israel, and the dispiritedness that must have devastated them during these years! Such was the setting in which the new deliverance was to take place. We should note particularly the different direction of the assault. Is it not significant that the Promised Land was so surrounded by strong and powerful enemies on all sides? Israel was always under threat, always vulnerable, and for this reason, surely, that God always intended her to trust and rest in Him alone, not in herself, for her safety. "My safety cometh from the Lord".

23) **3:12-30**

Ehud, son (or descendent) of Gera, was a Benjamite (cf Gen 46:21). The territory of Benjamin was directly under threat by Eglon (Gilgal and Jericho, the city of palm trees were within it), so it is understandable that the Lord should raise up a deliverer from that tribe. Particular reference is made to the fact that Ehud was 'a man left-handed' (15), a fact that is of significance in relation to what happened in his encounter with Eglon, as we shall see (the name 'Benjamin' has the meaning of 'son of the right hand', and it may be that this is one reason for Ehud's left-handedness being remarked upon). There is a curious reference in Judges 20:16 to the presence of 700 chosen left-handed men in the tribe of Benjamin, who obviously fulfilled a very useful function in the army. Doubtless their presence in such numbers would afford modern medical science an interesting study! In ancient times left-handedness was regarded as a defect. The Latin word for 'left hand' is 'sinister' - this derived from the practice of augury, for omens seen on the left were considered unfavourable. The idea, of course, is an erroneous one: being left-handed or right-handed is morally neutral, although the idea still persists in common usage, as, for example, in the phrase 'a left-handed compliment'. Matthew Henry's comment is interesting: "Either through disease or disuse, he made little or no use of his left hand". If the Israelites regarded this as a defect, then what is being suggested here is that God chooses the weak things of the world to confound the mighty, and that He chose this left-handed man to be the man of His right hand (cf Ps 80:17), whom He would make strong for Himself.

24) **3:12-30**

The chief significance, however, of the left-handedness lies in the stratagem that Ehud played on Eglon (16,21), for he had his dagger by his right side, so that he would appear unarmed to his enemy, who therefore would not be suspicious of any ill intent. The word 'present' in 17 is a euphemism for 'tribute', and represents the harsh exactment made upon a conquered people. The 'quarries' in 19 is rendered 'sculptured stones' in RSV. They appear to have been a prominent landmark, and may even have been the actual stones set up by Joshua to commemorate the miraculous crossing of Jordan (Josh 4:20 ff). The account of the assassination of Eglon is gruesome and horrible, and naturally it raises grave moral issues. It is true that it is a reflection of the barbarism of the times, true also that this was the turning point of Israel's long captivity, but we are not called upon of necessity to approve of it. What we must beware of however is of falling into the simplistic expedient of branding it as 'sub-Christian', as if it belonged to an era when 'they did not know any better'. One has only to think of some of the desperate exploits of the Second World War, and the many cruelties and atrocities on both sides that took place, and which raise many moral problems for the Christian today. Even to mention this is to indicate that we are touching on vast and complex moral questions involving the whole question of whether war, with its attendant evils is ever justified. Is assassinating a heathen monarch in such a brutal way worse, or better, or different from using napalm or bombing civilian targets? These are very real questions, and we must not yield to the temptation of giving merely 'emotional reaction' answers to them. Primitive, Old Testament 'barbarities' are mere 'dilettantism' by comparison with the horrors of 20th century 'inhumanity to man'.

25) **3:31**

The judgeship of Shamgar, if it can be so called, occupies one solitary verse. But there is a reference to him in 5:6-8, from which we may gather something about the conditions of his time - highways unoccupied, because of infestation by the enemy Philistines, villages evacuated, with the people deprived of any weaponry with which to defend themselves. It was obviously a period of great turbulence and dislocation of normal life, and it is in this context that we have to understand Shamgar's solitary exploit, mentioned in this verse. The ox goad which he used to slay the Philistines may indicate that he was a farmer - as someone has put it, God uses ploughmen in His service - although the significance of the reference may lie in the fact that there were no weapons of war available (one recalls how the Home Guard during the Second World War undertook the defence of the realm with similar implements, simply because rifles were not available.) The fact that nothing is said of Israel doing evil in the sight of the Lord and that there is no reference to the Philistines oppressing Israel at the time, lends force to the conjecture that Shamgar's exploit took place during the judgeship of Ehud, and that he may not have been a judge after the usual pattern, but simply a daring patriot who waxed mighty against the enemy on one particular occasion. At all events, his valour is enshrined in sacred rite for all posterity to see, and it may be that no one would have been more surprised by this than Shamgar himself.

26) **4:1-7**

We are told in 3:30 that after Ehud's deliverance of Israel from the oppression of Moab the land had rest for eighty years. This is a long time, almost equivalent to a 'golden age' (cf the Victorian era and the 'prosperity and settled life' of the sixty years of Victoria's reign in the 19th century), and it is clear that prosperity led Israel once again into careless and unhallowed living. The next twenty years - observe once more the increase in the period of oppression - saw Israel become a beleaguered and sorely tried people. This time the oppressor was Jabin, king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The geographical notes in these verses are full of interest. Hazor is in the far north of Canaan ten miles or so north of the Sea of Galilee; Harosheth of the Gentiles, the home of Sisera the captain of Jabin's host lay at the foot of the Carmel mountain range, near the river Kishon. Barak was from Kedesh, in the land of Naphtali which lay north of Hazor, right in the heart of Jabin's domain. Deborah was from the south, in the land of Ephraim, between Ramar and Bethel some twenty miles from Jerusalem. The river Kishon (with its tributaries, and called, in 5:19, 'the waters of Megiddo') flowed north westwards through Jezreel and Eshdraelon to the sea north of Carmel, at Acre. It was a seasonal river, little more than a stream in the dry season, but a raging torrent flooding the plains in the time of the rains, with the low-lying areas surrounding the river being completely swamped and waterlogged. Mt. Tabor towered some 1800 feet above the north-eastern side of the plain of Jezreel (sometimes called Esdraelon, which is the Greek form of the name Jezreel, but in fact distinct from it) which slopes down to Bethshean overlooking the Jordan valley with Galilee to the north and Mt. Gilboa to the south.

27) **4:8-17**

A careful examination of a map of Canaan in the time of the Judges will show the strategic importance of this whole area as a battleground, and indeed the serious and critical nature of Jabin's and Sisera's threat to Israel. For not only were the entrances to the hill-country of Israel in the hands of the Canaanites, but also the northern tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali, were wholly cut off from those in the south. Also, with the Canaanite camp at Harosheteh, the home base of Sisera, the coastal tribes of Asher and Dan in the north were effectively isolated. The threat on this occasion was therefore far greater than the earlier besetments, for the national existence of Israel itself was in jeopardy. It was into this critical situation that Barak was thrust by the determination of Deborah.

The record of the battle with Sisera and of his ignominious death, which occupies the rest of the chapter, is given significant comment and interpretation in the next, in the song of Deborah and Barak, and we shall wait till we come to that chapter before making fuller comment. In the meantime, we note in the verses before us the hesitation shown by Barak in face of the challenge thrust upon him by Deborah who, one might almost say, was the Golda Meir of the 12th century B.C. ('the female of the species is more deadly than the male'). Delitzsch discounts, as the reason for this hesitation, the suggestion that Barak distrusted the Divine promise given to him by Deborah, and maintains rather that "his mistrust of his own strength was such that he felt too weak to carry out the command of God. He wanted divine enthusiasm for the conflict, and this the presence of the prophetess was to infuse into both Barak and the army that was to be gathered round him." (This thought will be continued in the next note.

28) **4:11-17**

Deborah's promise to go with Barak was accompanied by the announcement that, as the punishment for this want of confidence in the success of his undertaking, the prize of victory - namely the destruction of the enemy general - would be taken out of his hands and given to a woman. Barak's hesitation is, of course, paralleled elsewhere in Scripture: one thinks of Jeremiah's cry, "Ah Lord God, behold I cannot speak; for I am a child" (Jer 1:6), and Moses' similar plea in Exo 4:10 ff, "Oh Lord, I am not eloquent...." In an old book, entitled 'Men who prayed', we have come across the following comment which surely has application to Barak also: "The worshipper at the burning bush lost a blessing that day. He refused to count upon God's power; and the result was that the Lord's anger was kindled against him. So Jehovah gave to Aaron the ministry which he purposed to give to Moses.

It is a serious thing to trifle with God's grace and power. To do so is to run the risk of losing something which one may ultimately greatly covet."

(The introduction of the reference to Heber in 11 is important in relation to the final doom that befell Sisera at the hands of Jael, Heber's wife, in 17 ff, to which we shall come in the next note.)

As has already been said, the details of the great victory are given in the next chapter; but even here, in 15, in the use of the word 'discomfited', there is an indication of the miraculous intervention of God on His people's behalf - it is the word used in Exo 14:24 and Josh 10:10 to denote the confounding and destruction of Pharaoh's army, and of the Canaanites at Gibeon respectively. The rout was total and devastating for Israel's enemies, and Sisera fled the field shattered and exhausted and found refuge in the tent of Jael, Heber's wife, a vain refuge, as we see in the passage which follows.

29) 4:18-24

The account of the slaying of Sisera by Jael given in these verses, and the circumstances of treachery and betrayal in which it took place makes grim reading indeed, and it raises once again the questions that were discussed in the Note on Ehud's ugly exploit in 3:16 ff. We are not obliged to justify the means used on either occasion to accomplish the ends in view, namely the breaking of the tyrant's power and the bringing of deliverance to Israel. And here, as there, we need to think both of the long years of oppression which Israel had suffered, and of the often desperate and brutal and merciless expedients resorted to in commando-type operations in modern warfare to give us some kind of perspective in which to view this ugly story. It is, however, a solemn thought that even in the context of what we sometimes call 'the just war' it is hardly possible for victories to be gained without becoming implicated in further acts of evil. This is part and parcel of the tragedy of mankind in its fallen state.

At all events, as the Tyndale commentary points out "Israel's persecutor met a treacherous but swift death at the hands of a woman, itself a disgrace in the view of that age (cf 9:54)when Barak did arrive it was to find that the prophecy of Deborah had been fulfilled (cf 9) and that the principal honour, of slaying Sisera, was not to be his".

30) 5:1-5

The song of Deborah is a magnificent utterance on any estimate, bearing worthy comparison with the song of Moses in Exo 15, and that of Hannah in 1 Sam 2. It is generally agreed by the scholars that it is of ancient date, and belongs to the time and the events which it describes. As the Tyndale commentary says, "It is beyond question one of the oldest elements in our present book of Judges and is therefore of great importance in its witness to the economic, social, political and religious conditions of the period". The song begins first of all, in 1, 2 with a summons to praise the Lord. The AV states simply that the praise is due 'for the avenging of Israel' but most modern translations render it differently, and the RSV is probably right in its translation that 'the leaders took the lead in Israel' (Delitzsch has 'the strong in Israel showed themselves strong'). This is an important and significant consideration: that the strong should show themselves strong means that they 'came into their own', and that they were what they ought to be. They rose to the occasion. Leaders ought to lead, and these did! The Hebrew word for 'strong' means 'to let loose from something', and these leaders were liberated from all that might have bound them and were brought into a true freedom. Sometimes this is what hinders people in the service of God - they need to be set free in a great liberation in order to serve worthily. Delitzsch comments: "This introduction transports us in the most striking manner into the time of the judges, when Israel had no king who could summon the nation to war, but everything depended upon the voluntary rising of the strong and the will of the nation at large. The manifestation of this strength and willingness Deborah praises as a gracious gift of the Lord".

31) 5:1-5

We might well entitle this part of Deborah's song as 'the right hand of the most High'. In 3-5 she looks back to the vitality of former days. The 'kings and princes' whom she addresses in 3 are not those of Israel (they had none at that time), but those of the heathen. The reference to olden times has this significance: Deborah is acknowledging and indicating that this splendid victory over Sisera is just like those of old, and stands in the same succession and tradition, that is, her song is giving the glory to God for His intervention. Delitzsch says: "Just as Moses in his blessing (Deut 33:2) referred the tribes of Israel to this mighty act (i.e. that referred to in 4, the Divine intervention in delivering Israel from Egypt and constituting them as the people of God) as the source of all salvation and blessing for them, so the prophetess Deborah makes the praise of this glorious manifestation of God the starting-point of her praise for the great grace, which Jehovah as the faithful covenant God had displayed to His people in her own days". The help which Israel had just experienced was a renewal of the coming of the Lord to His people. Deborah 'sees it all again', reliving the wonderful events of Sinai in her own experience of victory against Sisera. We too can surely look back on our history to days of the right hand of the most High, if not in our own immediate experience, at least in longing for such manifestations of Divine power today (as the Psalmist did in his time, Ps. 77:10), to find inspiration and indeed hope for days to come. For is not the Lord the same yesterday, today and forever?

32) **5:6-11**

In 6-8 Deborah describes the predicament and need before she was raised up by God for the deliverance of the people. This provides a striking contrast to the former days of which she has just made mention. The land was under enemy occupation. The plight of occupied France under the heel of the jackboot during the Second World War readily comes to mind - highways deserted, travellers using the by-ways, for very fear, and, with the oppression, the lack of men to lead or fight. It was in such straits that God moved His chosen ones to cry to Him in prayer for deliverance. And much need there was for such cries and such deliverance, when the glory of the Lord had so departed from Israel. In a far different sense today, our highways are unoccupied, and in place of former days, when the people were glad when it was said to them, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord', we have the highways leading to God's house deserted by all but the few - and almost no men! What need for a nation-wide awakening and revival!

But God stirred His folk to lay hold on Him. Deborah and Barak were those who had vision to see the need, and called the nation to arms. And the Lord crowned their willingness with victory (9). All classes are called upon, and have reason to join in the praise, high and low alike - rulers, those on white asses, the well-to-do, those who sit on rich carpets (so RSV), and ordinary folk, those that walk by the way - for all alike enjoy the fruits of victory. The picture of well-being in 11 is a very lovely and moving one, but the AV rendering 'archers' has been changed to 'singers' (NIV) and 'musicians' (RSV), and we will look at this in the next note.

33) 5:6-11

The Tyndale commentary points out that the word in the Hebrew translated 'archers' is uncertain as to its meaning, and maintains that it most probably has to do with some kind of musicians (so RSV and NIV), most likely that class of wandering musicians who played the lyre. Delitzsch maintains, however, that 'archers' is right, and that the reference may be to the Benjamites, who were archers (Deborah was of the tribe of Benjamin), and it was probably natural for Deborah to mention the archers as representatives of warriors generally. He says, "The tarrying of the warriors among the drawers of water, where the flocks and herds were being watered, points to the time of peace, when the warriors were again occupied with their civil and domestic affairs. Delitzsch continues, with reference to the 'villages in Israel', now delivered from the oppressors, "After that victory the people of the Lord went down again to their gates, from the mountains and hiding-places in which they had taken refuge from their foes (6, 7), returning again to the plains of the land, and the towns that were now delivered from the foe". This makes very good sense, in terms of the country's return to some semblance of normal living after the crisis of war, and we may readily think of the general demobilisation of service men at the end of the Second World War, returning to 'civvy street' and to the occupations they left when called up to serve in H.M. Forces. The picture here is vivid, and immensely realistic.

34) **5:12-18**

Deborah now comes to a description of the conflict with Sisera and the glorious victory won over him. The address to Deborah and Barak in 12 seems to imply that they first of all were stirred to action by the Spirit of God, they in turn succeeded in stirring and mobilising the tribes for battle. The AV rendering in 13 is difficult to follow, and the RSV is clearer: "Then down marched the remnant of the noble; the people of the Lord marched down for him against the mighty". The reference is to the general response of the people to the summons, and the response of the particular tribes is given in the verses that follow (14 ff). What Deborah is celebrating is the streaming down of the ten thousand men from Mount Tabor mentioned in 4:14 (which see) to fight with the enemy. The whole nation did not fight (as will be seen in 15b-18), only a remnant, a fraction of the manpower available - perhaps a reflection of the low-spiritedness of the people after their long years of oppression. In practical terms - and especially in spiritual work - it is generally by a remnant that victories are accomplished. We do not have to wait till the whole Church is of the same mind before the battle can be won! The picture, then, is of the army of Israel streaming down the mountain to engage the enemy. In 14 the RSV deletes the word 'Amalek' and emends it to 'From Ephraim they set out thither into the valley'. This certainly makes more sense than the obscure reference to Amalek - but it does raise a real problem: Is it really an improvement to make sense of an obscure verse if you have to emend the original Hebrew in order to do so? We prefer Delitzsch's interpretation, which makes the verse mean that the warriors that came from Ephraim were those who had settled in territory which had formerly been inhabited by Amalakites. The AV is true to the original here.

35) **5:12-18**

Deborah combines praise for the tribes of Israel which participated in the battle with rebuke for those who did not, whether for reasons of cowardice, self-preservation or other dubious motives. With them, her appeal for assistance fell on deaf ears. Four tribes come in for particular mention, Reuben, Gilead, Dan and Asher. Of these, Reuben figures most prominently (15b, 16). The 'divisions' of Reuben are taken by RSV to mean the 'clans' of Reuben, but Delitzsch points out that the Hebrew word means 'brooks', a rendering of the word established by Job 20:17, remarking that "the territory of Reuben, which was celebrated for its splendid pastures, must have abounded in brooks". The important point is, however, that Reuben debated the issue, held meetings and passed resolutions amid searchings of heart, but in the end decided to remain quietly at home in their own pastoral life. Moses, it will be remembered, had good cause to be suspicious of this tribe's attitude (Numb 32: 1 ff) - they sailed too near the wind for comfort; and now, in a time of crisis, they failed to rise to the challenge of their destiny. Gideon, Dan and Asher alike were found wanting, lying low at a distance, unwilling to let the national movement disturb their normal way of life. With Zebulun and Naphtali it was so different: they loved not their lives even unto death, sacrificing themselves willingly for the sake of their fatherland. But how solemn for names to be recorded in Holy Writ as having failed in the day of opportunity! Well might Mordecai have said to Esther (Esth 4:14): "If thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time....and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

36) 5:19-23

The enemy kings went into battle in the hope and expectation of destroying Israel and capturing rich booty, but these hopes were quickly doomed to disappointment, for they were met not only by a resolute Israel, but - more importantly - by the overwhelming power of the living God, Who brought a violent storm upon the battleground, swelling the river Kishon until it flooded the plains of Megiddo, trapping the proud chariots of Sisera in a morass of mud and debris until they were helpless. The reference in 20 to the stars in their courses fighting against Sisera is a poetic description of the supernatural intervention, the terrible storm, the thunder and lightning. It was indeed a theophany, of which there are numerous examples, as in Psalm 18:7 ff. It is Scripture's glad testimony that the living God will move heaven and earth to help His covenant people in their time of need. The dramatic intensity of the situation is well conveyed in 22, and one can almost hear in the poetic language the thundering of the horses' hooves, and those that could fled the field in total disarray. The reference in 23 to Meroz means, according to Delitzsch, that "the enemy, or at all events Sisera, might have been destroyed in his flight by the inhabitants of Meroz: but they did not come to the help of the Israelites, and brought down the curse of God upon themselves in consequence...the curse being described as a word or command of the angel of the Lord, inasmuch as it was the angel of the Lord that fought for Israel at Megiddo, as the revealer of the invisible God, and smote the Canaanites".

The Tyndale commentary helpfully renders the exclamation in 21, 'O my soul, thou hast trodden down strength' as 'March on, my soul, in strength', a rendering followed in substance by both the RSV and the NIV (which see).

37) 5:24-31

The treachery of Meroz (23) is set in contrast with the very different attitude of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, upon whom Deborah calls down a blessing for her daring exploit in slaying Sisera, the enemy general. As was pointed out in the Note on 4:18-24, the same problems arise here as with the earlier story of Ehud and the assassination of Eglon of Moab, and the same comments that were made in that Note apply here. One has to bear in mind the exigencies of the time, and the long years of oppression that were being overcome. In the last verses of the chapter we are given a very graphic description of Sisera's mother's growing anxiety and foreboding as she awaited the return of her distinguished son from the battle. Her words "Why is his chariot so long in coming?" (28) say it all, a sentiment redolent of the agonising experience of so many homes and families during the Second World War, as they waited in vain for reassurance about loved ones who never came back. The characterisation is so realistic - even the sense she had of the emptiness of her ladies' confident pronouncements, saying to herself in her heart (29b), 'I knew better than they that something has happened to him'. As to the concluding word in 31, the Tyndale commentary says, "The writer is concerned to stress the Lord's intervention on their behalf and the inevitable corollary of this is that those who oppose Him must perish, but those who love Him and cooperate with Him will prosper".

38) 6:1-6

Forty years after the defeat of Jabin and Sisera (about the period from the end of the Second World War to the present time), another period of declension came upon Israel. One readily recalls the words of the old gospel hymn, "Tell me the story often, For I forget so soon" - how sadly true this was for Israel - and with the consequent and inevitable lapse into oppression. God saw to that, for His world is built on moral values, and He is not mocked - whatsoever men sow, that shall they also reap, and this is as true for a covenant people as for the heathen (cf 2:3). The misery and distress that these latest enemies of the people of God, the Midianites, brought upon Israel seems to have surpassed their earlier misfortunes, if what is said in 2 ff is any criterion, for Israel was obliged to take refuge in the dens and caves of the earth (cf Heb 11:38) and suffered the spoiling of all their crops until there was food for neither man nor beast (4).

The Midianites were desert dwellers, from south of Edom, near the Gulf of Aqaba, and were descended from Abraham and Keturah. The Amalekites occupied the area to the south of Judah, in the Negev; the children of the east (3) were a nomadic group from the Syrian desert (cf Numb 23:7). The incursions of the Midianites were clearly considerable, probably annually - they were a speedy, long-range fighting force, with camels. It is clear also that several of the tribes of Israel were at the receiving end of their raids, and the mention of Gaza shows the extent of these marauding incursions, as they lived off the land with their cattle and their tents (5), impoverishing the land and the people. It was a deeply distressing time, causing Israel to cry again to the Lord for deliverance.

39) **6:7-10**

In their distress at this latest experience of oppression, Israel once again cried to the Lord. On this occasion the Lord sent an un-named prophet to them, to administer a forthright and stinging rebuke to them for their sins, speaking in terms very similar to those used by the angel of the Lord at Bochim in 2:1-3. The remedy against the Midianite invaders had been in their own hands, said the prophet, but they had not heeded it, or availed themselves of it (10). They had failed in the obedience to the Lord that would certainly have been the means of their preservation. It may be wondered what is the force and point of these verses, with the rebuke they contained, which preceded the account of the deliverance that was to follow, through the raising up of Gideon. Perhaps the simplest explanation lies in the fact that it is a typical 'Fatherly' attitude, scolding and rebuking them, and not prepared to let them think that because He was about to act on their behalf He did not regard their sin too seriously. This is an important consideration, and it would do a great deal to dispel false notions of the Divine Fatherhood if we understood it fully. The truth is men so often think of God not as a father at all but as "a grandfather in heaven - a senile benevolence who, as they say, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves...'" (C.S. Lewis). The real God, however, is different. He loves, with a love that is inexorable and utterly uncompromising. This is the love that is shown here. The love that will not let us go will not let us off either - not with anything! This is why it is to be feared and utterly trusted.

40) 6:11-24

These verses record for us the call of Gideon. It is an account full of interest and incident. The picture given in 11 of conditions obtaining during the oppression is graphic - the winepress was hardly an ideal place to be threshing wheat, and it could not have been a very ample harvest if it could be threshed in such a confined space. The need for secrecy is also a telling comment on the hazardous conditions that beset the Israelites at that time. The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon in human form, and it would seem that at first Gideon did not recognise that this was a Divine visitation, as may be seen from a comparison of 'my lord' in 13, which RSV translates as 'sir' with 'my lord' in 15, which RSV renders 'Lord'. Also, we could hardly imagine that Gideon would have replied as he did in 13 if he had known that it was the angel of the Lord who spoke to him. It is as if he had said "The Lord with me? It does not look very like it, from all I see around me". But when the realisation dawned on him that the Lord was indeed speaking to him, his attitude became very different. The evidences, of course, were all such as Gideon described in 13 - the activity of God was all in the past, and he was as a stranger in the land. What Gideon said was all true; but the Lord had now come to change all that - as 14 makes clear. We must therefore understand the angel's words in 12 as a proclamation of the Divine purpose, to make Gideon a mighty man of valour, and it is this that finally dawned on Gideon in 14, with what sense of awe we may well imagine as he heard the Lord's words 'Go in this thy might' - that is 'the might you now have since I have spoken and commanded you', the might by which God would again do miracles and wonders among His people. We shall continue our consideration of the call of Gideon in the next note.

41) **6:11-24**

The Lord's words to Gideon, 'Have not I sent thee?' (14) - i.e. 'Do you not realise that this interview is a commissioning, and that you are to go in My Name?' - are surely a fitting message for the first day of 1986. Please God we shall all of us recognise the prophetic note in it, and take it as a guideline for days to come. Gideon's reaction to this commissioning is to utter a disclaimer about his suitability and resources for such a task. In this Gideon is in good company: one readily recalls similar attitudes expressed by Moses (Exod 4:1ff) and Jeremiah (Jer 1:6ff). The Lord's rejoinder to Gideon in 16, 'Surely I will be with thee' echoes a similar word spoken to Moses in Exod 3:12, and it may be that the association of ideas was deliberate on the angel's part, to direct Gideon's mind to the earlier deliverance wrought by the Lord for His people. In 17 we see Gideon coming to a full recognition that this is no ordinary visitation, but he nevertheless asked for a sign, to confirm its Divine nature, and prepared to make an offering to this mysterious being who had thus appeared to him. The offering was duly prepared (19) and presented to the angel of God, who instructed Gideon to place it on an improvised altar. It was when the offering was consumed by fire at the touch of the angel's rod and the angel himself disappeared that any doubts Gideon may have had about what was happening disappeared and the awesome conviction dawned that he had seen an angel of the Lord face to face. Seeing God face to face was always assumed by the Israelite to mean death (cf Judges 13:22, but God stilled the terror of his heart (23), and assured him that he would not die. It is this incident that has given rise to the beautiful thought expressed in the words 'Jehovah-shalom', which means 'the Lord send peace'.

42) 6:25-32

Gideon's first assignment was the purifying of his father's house from idolatry and the sanctifying of his own life and labour unto God by the offering of a burnt sacrifice. The altar of Baal had to be broken down and destroyed before the altar of God could be rebuilt. The reference to the seven-year bullock in 25 is said by some to be an allusion to the seven-year oppression by Midian, and one is not disposed to cavil at such a suggestion, bearing in mind the oft-repeated symbolism of the Old Testament. This assignment Gideon fulfilled by night, as we read in 27, because he feared his father's household - an evidence of his own timid spirit, to which he had already referred in 15. Nevertheless, he did it, fearful though he was! That is the important point. The expected reaction took place, as was inevitable, and Gideon was in jeopardy of his life (28-30). It is well for us to pause at this point to think of what this represented: a family, a tribe of Israel, thirled to Baal-worship and reacting so violently to the coming of the true altar of God into their midst - it was surely a sadly eloquent indication of the depth of the spiritual declension that had taken place in Israel in these days! The intervention of Joash, Gideon's father, on his son's behalf (31) was very timely, and saved the day. It was also a very significant intervention, and we shall look at it in more detail in the next note.

43) **6:25-32**

Joash's challenge to those who were intent on putting Gideon to death was very forthright. The general meaning of his words is surely clear, although the phrase in the AV 'whilst it is yet morning' is somewhat uncertain. Delitzsch gives the following rendering: "Whoever shall fight for Baal, and seek to avenge the destruction of his altar by putting the author of it to death, shall be put to death himself; let us wait till to-morrow, and give Baal time to avenge the insult which he has received. 'If he be God, let him fight for himself; for they have destroyed his altar', and have thereby challenged his revenge. Gideon's daring act of faith had inspired his father Joash with believing courage, so that he took the part of his son, and left the whole matter to the deity to decide. If Baal were really God, he might be expected to avenge the crime that had been committed against this altar." It is significant to see the beginnings of true spiritual life in Joash. As the Tyndale commentary puts it, "Joash's defence of his son was possibly the first step in his own spiritual rehabilitation". Some step indeed, for the fearless words with which he addressed the men of the city more than a little remind us of the resounding challenge which the prophet Elijah was to throw down, centuries later, to the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel: the withering scorn and contempt with which he dismissed the false god shows him to be in harmony and at one with the great prophetic witness that was yet to come in Israel; and one can almost see the look of incredulous joy dawning on the face of Gideon, as he witnessed his father's magnificent stand for truth and for God.

44) **6:33-35**

Reference was made in an earlier Note to the fact that the Midianites appear to have made an annual incursion into Israel's territory, during this time of oppression. Here, in 33, they did so again for the eighth year in succession, encamping in the valley of Jezreel, a place fraught with significance in time past as one in which the hand of the Lord had wrought mightily on behalf of His people (4:13; 5:19, 21). In 34, the all-important statement is made: 'the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon', thus sealing and confirming his calling as the Lord's appointed deliverer. According to the RV margin, this could well be translated "the Spirit of the Lord clothed Himself with Gideon". It is a graphic, dramatic rendering, almost as if the Spirit of God 'put him on' as men put on a cloak. It is a word that denotes full and complete possession by the Spirit, and it is this that explains all that took place in the record that follows. Gideon's courageous act against the altar of Baal (27) certainly paid dividends so far as his own clan was concerned, for Abi-ezer rose as one man to support him (34). It is clear that on reflection their anger at his action (30) had subsided and that second thoughts had shown them that the Lord's hand was upon him. Manasseh, his own tribe, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali all rallied in his support. There is no mention, however, of Ephraim. The Tyndale commentary observes: "The omission of Ephraim, the most powerful of the tribes, may reveal the timidity of Gideon even at this stage. Perhaps he feared the reaction of the Ephraimite rulers if he, a member of a less-powerful tribe, should be presumptuous enough to set himself up as a leader. In view of the sequel (7: 24; cf. 8:1 ff) the failure to summon the Ephraimites was significant."

45) **6:36-40**

The reference to Gideon's timidity at the end of the previous note is further borne out in these verses, in the well-known incident of putting out the fleece. As to the significance of his action, Delitzsch gives a helpful comment: "Dew in the Scriptures is a symbol of the beneficent power of God, which quickens, revives, and invigorates the objects of nature, when they have been parched by the burning heat of the sun's rays. The first sign was to be a pledge to him of the visible and tangible blessing of the Lord upon His people, the proof that He would grant them power over their mighty foes by whom Israel was then oppressed. The woollen fleece represented the nation of Israel in its condition at that time, when God had given power to the foe that was devastating its land, and had withdrawn His blessing from Israel. The moistening of the fleece with the dew of heaven whilst the land all round continued dry, was a sign that the Lord God would once more give strength to His people from on high, and withdraw it from the nations of the earth. Hence the second sign acquires the more general signification, 'that the Lord manifested himself even in the weakness and forsaken condition of His people, while the nations were flourishing all around'; and when so explained, it served to confirm and strengthen the first, inasmuch as it contained the comforting assurance for all times, that the Lord has not forsaken His church, even when it cannot discern and trace His beneficent influence, but rules over it and over the nations with His almighty power." A double confirmation, then, for weak faith - but this is not something to use lightly and superficially, and certainly not a substitute for the exercise of calm and certain faith in the word of a gracious God. Weak faith is still weak faith, even if God is compassionate and pitiful towards it, and it should not be magnified as something that it is not. 'Putting out a fleece' had better be a very sparing and occasional exercise for us!

46) **7:1-8**

We come now in these verses to what the Tyndale commentary calls 'strange generalship'. And strange, indeed, it is, for Gideon is now commanded to reduce the size of his army very drastically, first from 32,000 to 10,000, and then from 10,000 to 300. The point in this is surely to indicate that the deliverance was to be the Lord's, and not men. And, the more one thinks of this, the more one realises that this was no ordinary warfare. How could any military undertaking succeed in these terms? This does much to show that what was going on was a Divine enterprise, not a human warfare at all. It was something God was doing. Israel, then, was to have no opportunity, even in its crisis hour, to 'vaunt itself' against God saying, 'Mine own hand hath saved me'.

We wonder, however, whether there is any connection between the 'fleece' incident at the end of the previous chapter and this reduction of the army. On any estimate, Gideon's faith was showing marks of weakness, and it may well be that God was intent upon putting it further to the test in this way before finally giving him the victory. C.S. Lewis has something very pertinent to say about 'the trial of our faith':

"God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn't. In this trial He makes me occupy the dock, the witness-box and the bench all at once. He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down."

47) **7:1-8**

The first reduction of the army, from 32,000 to 10,000, was in fact in accordance with the Mosaic instructions in Deut 20:1-8. The earlier verses of that passage are expressive of compassion and understanding, but 20:8 has to do with the removal of the cowardly and the despondent, those with no real heart for the battle. Fear and cowardice are contagious, and could well demoralise an army, especially when faced with a foe 'like grasshoppers for multitude' (12). What are we to say, then, about so many - 22,000 - turning back and going home? Surely they were a dispirited people, lacking the will to fight - and this may well have been the effect of captivity and oppression upon them. And what must the remainder of the army have thought and felt? The question of divided loyalties arises here. As the Apostle James says, 'a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways' (James 1:8).

But even the 10,000 were too many for the Lord (4), and a second test was applied. The first one had to do with the morale of the army, but now it was something different: they were to be purified ('try') further by the Lord. The separating factor was as follows: those drinking water from their hands, while still standing up were separated from those who lay down to drink. The idea is that the former (the 300) were alert to any possible danger, while the latter showed themselves lacking in a true awareness that they might be thus surprised and found at a disadvantage, throwing caution to the winds. This prompts the question 'How do we drink at the streams of life?' The command in 7 to let all the others go was a further test of faith for Gideon. It was to be no 'technical' or 'theoretical' separation; the victory was to be really through the 300.

48) **7:9-15**

Next there follows a remarkable passage in which God gives to Gideon the assurance of victory. Once again the human fears and timidity of Gideon are taken into consideration. God was apparently prepared to go to all lengths to impart strength and courage to him for the battle. How many qualms he seems to have had! This is so true to human experience, and what an encouragement this is to us! Men are, so often, used of God, not because they are strong but because they are weak, and in their weakness rest upon, indeed cast themselves, helpless and forlorn, upon God. This is one of the meanings of the apostle Paul's words in 2 Cor 4: 10, 'Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus'. Just as He was crucified in weakness and raised in power, so also our weakness is likewise transfigured into power, by Divine grace. The foray into the enemy lines described in these verses is highly exciting, and the sense of drama is immense, as Gideon and Phurah, hidden, overheard the conversation among the soldiers. The dream about the 'loaf of barley bread' (NIV) is significant: Delitzsch says that it was the food of the poorer classes, and was to be regarded, in the dream, as the symbol of Israel, who were so despised among the nations. The news of the God of Israel, however, had got round to the Midianites, and fear had already got into them. This is the probable explanation of the dream: 'psychological pressure' was beginning to tell on them, and the way in which the soldiers 'put two and two together' (14) seems to have represented the 'cracking point' for them. The message that Gideon took from this (15) was a confirmation of the Lord's word to him in 9, 10, and all the assurance that he and his men now needed, as we shall see in the verses which follow.

49) 7:16-25

We come now to the battle itself. Gideon divided his 300 men into three companies, an expedient adopted on other occasions in Israel's history (cf 1 Sam 11:11; 2 Sam 18:2), and it clearly represents the Divine strategy on this occasion. It is not clear whether we are meant to assume that the Lord gave Gideon precise and specific instructions as to what to do, or whether it was a strategy Gideon himself planned under the inspiration of the Spirit.

Whether the one or the other, however, it proved immensely and devastatingly effective. The instructions given to the three groups of 100 men were as follows: each man was to take an empty pitcher with a lamp inside it in one hand, and a trumpet in the other. At an arranged signal, they were all to blow the trumpets and shatter the pitchers, and let the light stream out. This was done at the beginning of the middle watch (i.e. after 10 p.m.), when a considerable part of the enemy army would be asleep. It does not require much imagination to realise the confusion and disorder that must have resulted, not to mention the stampede of the camels (12). It is little wonder that they turned on one another in sheer panic (22). They were completely routed, and fled in disarray, with the Israelites in full pursuit calling upon Ephraim to safeguard the fords across Jordan and head off the Midianites. The whole episode affords a striking illustration of spiritual warfare, and we shall do well to pause in our ongoing exposition to consider this, in the next note.

50) **7:16-25**

Matthew Henry, the Puritan commentator, in his exposition of Paul's description of the ministry committed to him, in 2 Cor 4 maintains that the apostle is making reference to this incident when he speaks of having 'this treasure in earthen vessels'. The 'treasure' is the light of the gospel, 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' which God hath shone into our hearts. The 'earthen vessels', the pitchers bearing that light, are the lives of the servants of God. And what Paul goes on to describe in the verses that follow - about being troubled on every side, perplexed, persecuted, cast down, always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus - represents the shattering of the earthen vessel that lets the light of the gospel shine forth to men. Whether or not the Apostle in fact had this story in mind when he wrote these words in 2 Cor 4, it certainly provides a most fruitful illustration of what he is saying. For just as it was the breaking of the pitchers that enabled the light to shine forth leading to the rout of the enemy, so also it is the shattering of the earthen vessels of the Apostles' lives, in costly sharing of Christ's sufferings, that let the light of the gospel shine out to a lost world. No life has ever told for God that has not at least in some measure borne in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus in this way. To put it another way, and in pursuance of the illustration, the 'blast' on the trumpet - representing the proclamation of the gospel - has to be accompanied by something else - this shattering of the earthen vessel - before the word can be with power. What a word for preachers is this!

51) **8:1-3**

The story of Gideon continues in this chapter. Its opening verses follow on from 7:24,25, where we saw Ephraim responding to Gideon's urgent request to them to hold the fords of Jordan to prevent the Midianites from escaping. Here, Ephraim's resentment at not being allowed to participate in the main battle at Jezreel flares up against Gideon. We may perhaps wonder whether Ephraim would have responded to Gideon even if they had been asked for their help in the first instance; but now, when victory was evident, a mixture of injured pride and the prospect of being left out of any share of the spoils of war. At all events, Gideon felt the sharp edge of their tongue, and it took considerable diplomacy on his part to avoid what might have become a dangerous situation. It is some evidence of the prestige in which Ephraim was obviously held that Gideon should have taken such pains to mollify them. The fact that he gave such a 'soft answer' to turn away their wrath (Prov 15:1) not only shows that injured pride and ambition were involved, but also that Gideon had some skill and wisdom in managing people. He was not only a warrior, but a judge. It is not a meagre endowment that God gives when His Spirit lays hold upon a man! Nor need we suppose that Gideon was simply employing the doubtful expedient of insincere flattery, for if we are to believe a much later statement, in Isa 10:26, Ephraim's contribution at Oreb must have been considerable. He did not falsely flatter the Ephraimites, but gave praise where praise was due -even if it meant playing down his own distinguished generalship. We could all learn a good deal from Gideon's wisdom here.

52) **8:4-9**

The account of the pursuit of the Midianites by Gideon's men is now resumed. A new situation now arose. Gideon's army of 300 men were hardly equipped for a lengthy pursuit of a fleeing enemy, and it is clear that they were soon in some considerable straits, lacking food and sustenance, which doubtless Gideon had expected to be supplied by the tribes who had allied themselves with him, especially those on the east side of Jordan. But first the men of Succoth (6), then those of Penuel (8) refused to help them, faint as they were through pursuing (4). This unpatriotic attitude on their part not only shows a lack of unity, or indeed a break-up of unity, in Israel (this, surely, an evidence of the disintegrating power of continued sin in the national life), but also was an expression of contempt on their part of the smallness of Gideon's force, unable apparently to discern the hand of God at work in his daring enterprise, and assuming that the victory that had been won was altogether too precarious and uncertain for them to commit themselves to help him - just in case! If so, then there was also fear and cowardice involved, lest Midian should 'live to fight another day'. What does this say, then, about the tragic lack of faith and trust in God that still prevailed in Israel, and the inability to see His hand at work even when His enemies were being put to flight? Gideon's reaction on this occasion was very different from that in 1-3, and his strong words in 7, 9 are some measure of the serious light in which he held this hindrance to the Lord's purposes at this time.

53) **8:10-21**

Nor did Gideon's strength confine itself to words, it expressed itself also in action, as 13ff will show. Before he dealt with the men of Succoth and Penuel, however, he dealt with the remnants of the Midianite army (11) who mistakenly assumed that at such a distance from the scene of their rout in Jezreel, felt themselves secure. The sudden and unexpected appearance of Gideon and his men among them must have totally demoralised them. The rout was complete. And now it was the turn of the men of Gideon and Penuel (13ff). It was a day of reckoning indeed! And we may say exact reckoning, as 14 indicates. The word 'described' in the AV would be better rendered 'transcribed', for what is indicated is that the names of the princes of Succoth were written down by the youth for Gideon's guidance. The nature of the punishment meted out to them (16) is not clear, but it was clearly exemplary and rigorous and, if the treatment meted out to the men of Penuel is any guide, it ended in death. The seriousness of the situation derived from the seriousness of the treachery they showed towards an army that God had laid His hand upon and vindicated, and therefore they had affronted His name and honour. God is not mocked: whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. The account of the execution of the two Midianite kings seems to suggest that they had been taken in battle, and killed later in captivity. Gideon's question to them and their answer to it seems to suggest that they recalled the incident in question sufficiently to describe it, and commentators think this may well indicate that their deaths had been particularly gruesome and cruel. At all events Gideon realised that it was his own brothers that had been slain, and he had no alternative but to avenge them. It says something about his humanity that he would have been prepared to spare the kings' lives if only they had spared his brethren's – an unusually clement attitude for that age. The kings' courage in 21 is also noteworthy: they did not count it a disgrace to be slain by so noble a warrior as Gideon.

54) **8:22-28**

With a campaign against Midian brought to a successful conclusion, Gideon is now given an invitation to kingship, an invitation which he immediately and instinctively refuses. This instant refusal is important, and the reason given for is still more so: 'The Lord shall rule over you' (23). It is evident that what he refused was not merely the desire to make him a king, but also to establish a dynasty - 'and thy son, and thy son's son also' - and this was something which he could not countenance. His clear testimony to the idea of theocracy rather than monarchy is given prominence here, and this is the more striking in the light of what was to happen later, in Samuel's time, when Israel determined to have a king, and insisted upon it in face of Samuel's solemn warnings against it. We wonder whether this earlier account was known to Israel in Samuel's time? It certainly was a testimony against them. The temptation to kingship, then, was resisted; but another temptation was yielded to (24 f) with fateful consequences. As one reads these later verses, the thought inevitably comes: 'If only he had stopped there!' The sequel to the kingship incident is certainly an inglorious one, and one that has important lessons to teach us, which we shall come to presently. But first of all, we must ask. What was the nature of his sin? Some think that in asking for the gold and making an ephod, Gideon was assuming kingship in all but name (we think this is an unlikely interpretation), but it certainly seems that the ephod - whatever it signified - became the occasion of idolatry. Delitzsch suggests that the making of the golden ephod was an invasion of the prerogative of the Aaronic priesthood, thus drawing away the people from the one legitimate sanctuary. Whatever it signified, however, it is surely clear that he would have been far better to have retired quietly into obscurity, crowned with honour for his courageous leadership against the Midianites.

55) **8:22-28**

The whole sad incident gives us a graphic illustration of the Apostle Paul's important lesson unfolded in Eph 6:10 ff, in the words '...and having done all, to stand'. So often, it is not during the battle, but after it is over, that the evil one gets us with his final fling, when our guard is down. The Tyndale commentary wisely comments: 'It is easier to honour God in some courageous action in the limelight of a time of national emergency than it is to honour Him consistently in the ordinary, everyday life, which requires a different kind of courage. Gideon, who came through the test of adversity with flying colours, was not the first nor the last to be less successful in the test of prosperity'. The summary statement in 28 indicates that the land had rest and peace for forty years after the defeat of Midian, and it was clearly during this period that the snare of the devil operated in Gideon's life. From which we may gather that easy times - with 'the lines falling to us in pleasant places', as the Psalmist puts it (Ps 16:6) - are not always or necessarily the best times for God's people. The words of one of our hymns express this very well:

When the world around is smiling,
In the time of wealth and ease,
Earthly joys our hearts beguiling,
In the days of health and peace,
By Thy mercy,
O deliver us, good Lord.

It would be instructive to look at some important parts of Scripture in this light, to see the potential for enemy counter-attack after crisis times that have ended in victory - Noah's experience after the Flood, David's after the subduing of his enemies, Uzziah's after his long and honorable restoration of his kingdom (2 Chron 26:15,16). O how solemnly watchful we should be, that having done all, we might continue to stand!

56) **8:29-35**

The story of Gideon's later years makes rather mixed reading. On the one hand, the latter prosperity of Gideon, deriving in all probability from the proceeds of the booty mentioned in 26, tells a very different story from his earlier days, when he described his humble origin as being 'poor in Manasseh', and 'least in his father's house' (6:15). Also, the mention of his many wives in 30 is an indication of his affluence, for as the Tyndale commentary says, "a large harem was the usual appendage of the monarchy in the Fertile Crescent". This prompts the reflection that perhaps the idea of kingship appealed to Gideon more than he realised, even though he had so robustly refused it, when approached by the men of Israel (23). On the other hand, however - and this does need to be said - Gideon's influence even in retirement seems to have acted as a restraint upon Israel, for as soon as he was dead, the people reverted to idolatrous ways. It is some considerable evidence of the power of the Divine anointing upon a man that it should exercise such a restraining influence, simply by being there.

The distinction made between Gideon's seventy sons (30) and the son borne to him by his concubine form an introduction to the events described in the next chapter. Abimelech was brought up in Shechem, within his mother's family, not with the other sons of Gideon, and it is this 'alienation' which lies at the heart of the jealous hatred of his 'brethren', who doubtless despised him and regarded him as inferior. With such a rankling within him, Abimelech's subsequent actions were predictable.

57) **9:1-6**

Shechem (the modern Nablus) is situated between Ebal and Gerizim. It was hallowed in Israelite tradition as the place where God first revealed Himself to Abraham after his arrival in the land (Gen 12:6, 7), and this association with the past is referred to in the phrase 'by the plain of the pillar that was in Shechem' - which the margin of the AV (along with RSV) renders 'by the oak of the pillar' (see Joshua 24:26, also Gen 35:4). The Shechemites were 'the sons of Hamor' (28), who was a Hivite (Gen 34:2), and this seems to indicate that the people of Shechem were Canaanites, or predominantly of Canaanite stock, and that there was therefore a good deal of association and mixing with the heathen nations at this time. And here is a lesson at the outset: all the trouble and conflict recorded in this chapter came from the fact that Gideon transgressed the law of God by taking a concubine from the people of Shechem (of course, even given the custom of the times, it was wrong for him to have taken a concubine from anywhere, and the polygamy of his household must have been an offence to God). The Scriptures do not hesitate to expose the sins of the saints, or show the consequences - often long-term - of sin in personal and national life.

In 2, the raising of the question of kingship probably confirms that it was a Canaanite, rather than an Israelite, idea to have a king at all. And the fact that Gideon's sons seem to have had in mind some idea of rule may be evidence that they saw in their father's life-style a contradiction of his refusal of kingship in 8:23, and drew their own conclusions. One's words do not always give one's real thoughts and intents, and it may be that Gideon's life spoke louder to his sons, and influenced their subsequent actions and attitudes, than what he said. Solemn thought, indeed!

58) **9:1-6**

It might well be asked, concerning Abimelech, 'What chance had he, with such a background and upbringing?' Surely he was more sinned against than sinning?' Ah, yes, the background was bad, and Gideon did more than he realised when he took the concubine. It is ever so. All the same, this cannot be used as an excuse for Abimelech. For it stands forever recorded in Scripture that, with a similar background and similar circumstances, another man reacted very differently. Boaz was the son of a harlot, Rahab. Yet look at him! No trace of bitterness and resentment at his background, no hang-ups, no chip on his shoulder, but instead, a generous, gracious spirit, full of gentleness and indeed gentlemanliness. Such was the triumph of grace in his soul, and such it might also have been for Abimelech. The low cunning represented by his words in 2 serves to make the contrast with what he might have been all the more striking, as he deliberately dissociates himself from the household of Israel, in claiming kinship with the Shechemites. This, as we see in 3, is what won their allegiance to him. The seventy pieces of silver (4) used for the hire of assassins came from the heathen temple of Baal-berith. The 'vain and light persons' would be better rendered 'worthless and reckless fellows' (one is reminded of 'certain lewd fellows of the baser sort' in Acts 17:5). These were the men who at Abimelech's instigation committed foul and terrible assassination at his own father's house at Ophrah, when all but one of his brethren were put to the sword. Abimelech was made king by the Shechemites (6), - sadly and sacrilegiously, in the place so hallowed by ancient tradition. It would almost seem as if Abimelech, intoxicated by his success, was intent on deliberately flouting all that was dear to Israel and his father's house, thus blasphemously assuming kingship in a place that was sacred to the memory of the patriarchs. Well, no man can do this with impunity, and Abimelech's reign - three years on - was destined to come to a violent and dishonourable end, as we shall see in the remainder of his story, in the chapter which follows this one.

59) **9:7-21**

Jotham, the youngest son of Gideon, was the only one of the family to escape the assassins, and his obvious intention was to flee as far as possible from the murderous Abimelech (21). Before he did so, however, he went up Mt. Gerizim and uttered a famous parable to the men of Shechem, which as the Tyndale commentary says, was "both a protest against the shameful treatment meted out to the house of Gideon, and a prophecy of the effect of Abimelech's rule". On any estimate the parable is a notable and striking utterance. In it, the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine, refuse in turn to assume kingship, all alike recognizing that to do so would be for them to forsake their own proper calling and sphere of usefulness, that for which they were made. Finally the bramble was offered the role of king, and self-importantly invited the others to shelter under its shadow - a manifestly absurd proposal, since it was worthless as timber, and proved a menace to the farmer with its continual encroachments on his land. What shadow could it hope to provide, for anyone or anything? The point being made was obvious: the men of Shechem had chosen a worthless king, who could neither provide security for them nor preserve them against their enemies. Time, Jotham meant, would reveal the wisdom or folly of their action: if they had done right, all would be well with them (16, 19), but if not, they would with Abimelech be destroyed (20), just as bramble creepers, catching alight, could ruin farmland in a destructive conflagration. It was a grimly prophetic utterance, as we see from what follows: having sown the wind, Abimelech proceeded to reap the whirlwind. It is ever so: God is not mocked!

60) 9:22-25

Nemesis had been invited, and nemesis came; and in three short years Abimelech learned to his cost that whatsoever a man sows, that he also reaps. God saw to that, as we see in 23, where it is specifically said that it was He Who sent an evil spirit to queer relations between him and the men of Shechem. The nature of their treachery is not immediately clear in the AV rendering of 25, and the RSV rendering is better - "(they) put men in ambush against him", that is, 'in opposition against him'. What apparently happened was that they ambushed the caravans on the trade-routes passing Shechem, thus depriving Abimelech of the dues he would normally exact from travellers passing through his territory. And this was but the beginning of the alienation that developed between him and the Shechemites, as subsequent verses will show. This, we are told in 24, happened as a divine retribution upon the cruel and barbarous fate they between them had inflicted upon the family of Gideon: assassins and instigator alike were thus brought to judgment. All this teaches a very important lesson, and it is this: evil, of whatever form, has the seeds of its own destruction within itself, and that self-destructive principle is inevitably at work wherever evil holds sway. As the saying has it, "the mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small". This is a principle, which the book of Revelation demonstrates and expounds, as in Rev 17:15-18, where we see the various powers of evil at each other's throats, involved in an angst of mutual self-destruction. It is not without significance that the book of Revelation unfolds this as a source of comfort and encouragement to hard-pressed saints, and this is certainly one lesson we may gather from the story of Abimelech. Evil never pays, however scatheless it may seem to be, for long enough, in the heart-sore experience of those who have to suffer it. God is on the throne, and He will see to it that it is brought to judgment (see Ps 37:10-22).

61) 9:26-41

The process of disintegration is outlined very graphically in the events which are recorded in this passage. In the absence of Abimelech, one Gaal, son of Ebed, about whom nothing else is known apart from what is recorded here, made a direct challenge to Abimelech's authority, in an attempted coup reminiscent of many which have taken place today in unstable third world countries, when leaders have been absent at various conferences and consultations. It is some evidence of just how unstable Abimelech's rule was that the men of Shechem should have been so easily swayed by Gaal's guile. They were men of straw, it seems clear, but then, had they not been made that by the evil to which they had committed themselves? Of what use could they be to anyone, when they could swing to Gaal's allegiance as easily as they had earlier to Abimelech's? Gaal set himself up as the upholder of the old ways and traditions - this is surely the force of the reference to Hamor (28) - a convenient and likely tactic with men who may have already begun to be tired of Abimelech. His words in 29 'Would to God....' are reminiscent of Absalom's speech at the time of the revolt against his father David in 2 Sam 15:1-6, and prompts the reflection that evil follows a sorry, unoriginal pattern - as the wise man says, "There is nothing new under the sun". Zebul, the ruler of the city, seems to have been with Gaal's army for otherwise how could he have spoken as he did with him 36, 37? Delitzsch thinks that he was the town officer or prefect, and that he heard of Gaal's contemptuous words and sent word to Abimelech from within the city - i.e. he was a kind of fifth-column inside, reporting out to Abimelech. Ah, when evil has its head, what lengths of intrigue and scheming can go on among men?

62) **9:42-57**

After Gaal's defeat – in which Abimelech showed all the astuteness of his father Gideon's military skill, with, alas, none of his father's values - this apostate leader took summary vengeance upon the Shechemites, showing no mercy to the inhabitants of the city that had played him false, and condemning it to perpetual desolation (this is the meaning of the symbolism of 'sowing it with salt', cf Deut 29:23, Jer 17:6). But this act of revenge was counter-productive, in that it destroyed his own capital, and the only effective basis of his power. Once more we see in this the seeds of self-destruction at work in evil. One thinks readily of the words in Hosea 13:9: "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself", for this could certainly be applied to Abimelech, in the insensate fury with which he dealt with Shechem. That fury knew no bounds, as we see in 46 ff, in the attack on the tower of Shechem. He should have let well alone, for it was this that led ultimately to his death. The tower was destroyed, but his hatred was insatiable, and Thebez was next. And this time it was too much, He was ignominiously destroyed, by the action of a woman casting a piece of milestone down from the parapet upon his head, breaking his skull. It was grim justice indeed, to deal with a grim and terrible situation, and to set at nought the wild cruelty of a man who went beyond all bounds in his inhumanity and viciousness. He could only have come to a violent end. The 'thus' in 56 introduces an editorial comment from the writer with the observation that this ugly conclusion to the story fulfilled the curse pronounced by Jotham in 20, upon both Abimelech and the men of Shechem.

63) 10:1-5

After the sad and grim episode of Abimelech, there is brief mention of two more judges, Tola, of the tribe of Issachar, who judged Israel for 23 years (1,2), and Jair, of Gilead, who judged Israel for 22 years (3-5). They are given only the briefest mention, but we should not underestimate their importance, for between them they clearly dominated the life of Israel for 45 years - which is a long time, on any estimate. It should be noted that nothing is said of any particular enemies of Israel in these verses. This may not mean that there were not any; but it may be an indication that in their judging and defending of Israel (1) they kept the people from idolatry, and within the ways of God, during that time. And is not that a great accomplishment? It is surely better not to have needed a great and spectacular deliverance, having fallen into idolatry and sin, than to magnify God's mercy in deliverances like those accomplished by Gideon, Barak and Deborah.

It will be helpful to notice the disposition of the various enemies that we have seen thus far in the book of Judges who devastated Israel. In the time of Othniel of Judah (3:8ff), the enemy was Aram; in Ehud of Benjamin's time (3:15) it was Moab; in Deborah of Ephraim's time (4:1 ff) it was Jabin of Hazor; in Gideon's (who was of Manasseh 6:1 ff) it was Midian and Amalek. The next judge is Jephthah, the Gileadite of Manasseh, in Transjordan (Gideon was of Manasseh on the West side of Jordan where the other half tribe dwelt). And the next enemy is Ammon. It is useful to consult a map, to see the geographical position of these tribes and their enemies, to see how substantial the threats to Israel's security were. It is almost as if the writer were emphasising that good behaviour on Israel's part was the only effective safeguard against the encroachments of their enemies. They were indeed being 'shut up unto faith'.

64) **10:6-18**

Before, however, we come to the story of Jephthah, there is a long introduction, which must first of all occupy our attention. The pattern of declension unfolded in these verses has become a familiar one, as we may see in 6, where a sevenfold idolatry is described. The result of this was a twofold oppression, by the Philistines and the Ammonites (7). The deliverance from Ammon was wrought by Jephthah in the chapters which follow, and that from the Philistines first of all, and only partially, by Samson in 13:1 ff, and fully and finally by Samuel. The oppression in 8 refers to Ammon, the land between the Jabbok in the north and the Arnon in the south (half way down the Dead Sea). It only took a year for Ammon to subdue Israel (i.e. Gilead), but for the next 18 years they were under subjection. Incursions were also made into the west bank, to harass Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim. In 10 we have the familiar cries for help under pressure: 'We have sinned....', but this was simply a question of words, words, words! The Lord's response was a reminder of the deliverances He had wrought for them in the past (11, 12) - the sevenfold deliverance mentioned in these verses corresponds significantly with the sevenfold oppression in 7, and what is being indicated, according to Delitzsch is that "Israel had balanced the number of their deliverances by a similar number of idols which it served, so that the measure of the nation's iniquity was filled up in the same proportion as the measure of the delivering grace of God." This comment serves to underline the 'Yet' in 13: in spite of all God's patient grace, this is what they did, and it serves to explain the 'wherefore' in 13b. God says: 'Enough' and 14 follows through the statement that the 'wherefore' introduces. More of this in the next note.

65) 10:6-18

What we have in 14 is an example of the Psalmist's words in Ps 18:26b: "With the froward thou wilt shew thyself froward". This severe Divine dealing clearly had its salutary effect, and the confession made in 15 is different from that in 10, as 16, its consequence, makes clear. The words "Do....whatsoever seemeth good unto thee" indicate an acceptance of the consequences of their sins, and a handing of themselves into God's keeping. One is reminded of the theologian P.T. Forsyth's famous words about the holy God Who is 'strong enough to resist pity until grief has done its gracious work even in His Son'. The words in 16, 'they put away the strange gods' is the real test. This was done, not with a view to gaining the Divine intervention, but done anyway, because they now hated their sin. And it was this disinterested turning from sin, without ulterior motive, when the love of sinning was driven out of them that changed the Divine treatment of them. God's love for them, His attitude to them, did not change; His treatment of them did, and had to. Hence 16b: 'God's heart grieved for the misery of His people'.

All this, then, in preparation for, and introduction to, the story of Jephthah. In 17, 18, the scene is set: Gilead and Mizpeh in Gad held the respective armies (Mizpeh is S.E. of Succoth and Penuel, south of Jabbok river). The Gileadites are represented as gathered together with a new spirit and a new morale, but lacking a leader. But 'a new spirit' and 'a new morale' are what makes the raising up of a leader of stature possible among the people of God. We should take note of this in our own national situation today. It is lack of this spirit that has robbed Britain of leadership. Ability to shout loudly and stridently should not be mistaken for leadership!

66) **11:1-3**

There is a certain contrast presented, and surely intended by the writer, between Jephthah, the next character in the story, and Abimelech, whose grim record has occupied us in the past few readings. For, of course, the backgrounds of the two men are very similar. Both were sons of harlots; both had a hard time, and a difficult family situation - a deprived life. Indeed, the nature of the contrast seems to be to underline that it was even worse for Jephthah than for Abimelech. There is no record in chapter 9 that Abimelech's brethren (the sons of Gideon) did any despite to him. The resentment was all on Abimelech's side, and he imagined their contempt of him. But with Jephthah it was the other way round: his brethren did really despise him, and discriminate against him (2), and drove him out, heartlessly, from home and inheritance. Abimelech at least had the support and help of his mother's people at Shechem; Jephthah had none of this. He was really 'on his own'. The fact that Jephthah fled, as we are told in 3 seems to suggest that his brethren had threatened his life. In the land of Tob, to which he fled, he became a brigand-chief over a group of outcasts and misfits - and, it would seem, did with them what David later did with his men at Adullam, licked them into shape, into a body of fighting men. We shall have more to say about this in the next note. But in the meantime, we should realise something of the desolation and loneliness of Jephthah's lot, and it is against this background that his evident character and stature is seen to be all the more impressive.

67) **11:1-3**

What was said at the end of the previous note is emphasised and confirmed by the apostle's statement in Heb 11:32, with its underlining of the faith of Jephthah. And it certainly was a faith that worked a transformation in his life, for he comes over in the story as a grave, balanced, good and honourable man, able and well-equipped and endowed. The truth of the matter is that in the fastnesses of Tob he met with God, and found in Him One whose love made him of inestimable value in His sight, and made him what he became. One thinks of the great words in the song of Hannah, in 1 Sam 2:8: "He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes". This is how it was with Jephthah: when the Lord lifts up, He does it in style! This is the real message of Jephthah's story, as Heb 11 insists: it is the power of Divine grace to overcome the tremendous liabilities of any man's background. This surely adds a new dimension to our understanding of Isaiah's words (42:3), "A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench". Jephthah accepted his situation, and this is the biggest lesson a man can ever learn, as well as being the only realistic way forward. Amy Carmichael's words are so true:

He said, "I will accept the breaking sorrow
Which God tomorrow
Will to His Son explain."
Then did the turmoil deep within him cease.
Not vain the word, not vain;
For in acceptance lieth peace.

68) **11:4-11**

The inevitable crisis brought about by Israel's declension came, in the form of invasion by Ammon and the response of the elders of the people was to call upon Jephthah in the land of Tob. Their invitation indicated a recognition of his fighting qualities, and his ability with the 'vain men' (3), licking them into a well-trained band, had obviously 'made the news', and they saw he was the man for the hour (one is reminded of Sir Winston Churchill's wilderness days before 1939). Their approach brought stinging words from Jephthah (7). Why come now, in your distress? Taunts, indeed! But it is significant that Jephthah did not say 'I will not come'. There was no 'getting his own back' here. One sees something of the size of the man, and the measure of his deliverance from bitterness and 'hang-ups'. What is said in represents the turning of the tables for Jephthah. God vindicates him, and they, the elders of the people, do all the offering of exalting him (cf 1 Sam 2:8; Ps 113:7, 8). God sets things to rights, indeed! What encouragement to have such a God. Jephthah seeks confirmation of their seriousness in 9, and they swear by oath (10) that it shall be so. What took place at Mizpeh (11) was almost a 'coronation' ceremony, with all the ceremonial, and the Lord's Name involved. It was a solemn commitment on either side, and it set the scene for the confrontation with Ammon which followed.

69) 11:12-28

Jephthah's charge against Ammon was that they had violated Israel's territory by invading Gilead. The argument in these verses is so like the present day argument about the Holy Land and who has the right to stay in it, and furthermore the complexity of the argument is matched by the complexity of the present day situation. Jephthah rehearses the historical facts of Israel's earlier experience on their journey towards the promised land, referring to the episodes with Edom and Moab, and Sihon, king of the Amorites (cf Numb 21:21 ff; Deut 2:5, 9, 19). The point of this historical resume was not only to show that there had been no violation of the land of the Moabites or of the Ammonites, and that since Moab had a better claim to the disputed area than the Ammonites had yet had remained silent and unprotesting when they had greater justification for intervening than Ammon had, the latter were without justification for their intervention at this point. It was Jephthah's conviction that the land was Israel's by Divine right that made him so confident to commit the whole issue to 'the Lord the Judge'. This was doubtless an appeal to Ammon to recognize the validity of Jephthah's reasoning, but failing that a challenge to put their own position to the test in battle. The king of Ammon, not unnaturally refused to accept or acquiesce in this reasoning, and so confrontation became inevitable. It is of course significant that the next verse (29) tells of the Spirit of the Lord coming upon Jephthah, and this in itself is the seal that God's man needed as he prepared for the battle. With such a seal the issue could hardly have been in doubt, as 32 makes clear.

70) 11:29-40

These verses deal with one of the most controversial aspects of the story of Jephthah, although arguably not the most important, and it will be necessary to say a good deal about it. There are two main lines of interpretation of Jephthah's vow (30, '31): one is that a literal blood sacrifice was made of his daughter, the other that he simply confined his daughter to a perpetual virginity.

The first of these views was held by the early fathers, but the second was developed only in the Middle Ages. One is impressed with the fact that so substantial a commentator as Delitzsch finds insuperable difficulties in the way of the literal interpretation. It is clear, he says, that Jephthah contemplated a human sacrifice, not an animal one. Yet human sacrifices were prohibited in the law, under pain of death (Lev 18:21, 20:2-5; Deut 12:31, 18:10). Is it conceivable that he could have even contemplated such an unspeakable violation of the law, being a God-fearing man? Could he have been ignorant of the law? To do this would have made him a worshipper of Molech, not of Jehovah. And is it conceivable that God should have chosen a worshipper of Molech to carry out His work, or a man who was capable of vowing and offering a human sacrifice? Also, the intreaty of his daughter to be allowed to spend two months bewailing her virginity would surely be out of keeping with the fact that she was to be put to death. Would she be likely to spend the last two weeks of her life away from the father she loved? Would Jephthah have been likely to allow this? The writer of Judges records the fulfilment of the vow as something laudable: could he have done this, it was against the law?

Such are Delitzsch's arguments against the idea of a literal interpretation. They are weighty, but hardly conclusive, particularly when we bear in mind that human sacrifice was a common-place at the time, and Jephthah probably expected a slave to come out to meet him. We continue on this theme in the next note.

71) 11:29-40

If the literal interpretation of Jephthah's vow is the correct one, the question that arises is, Could it possibly have been right for him to have kept it? The only answer to this is that, in spite of the fact that Scripture so solemnly emphasises the importance of keeping vows, he should have broken the vow. It is never right to do wrong, and it is never safe to suppose that God is guiding us in any action that is contrary to His holy law. And if Jephthah did what was wrong, what he did was precisely not an illustration of faith, but the lack of it, and therefore the reference in Heb 11 can hardly be said to apply to his vow, but to other aspects of his career. Wrong vows, then, should be abjured and ignored.

The whole question of making vows as such arises in relation to the Christian life. Is there any place for vows in the Christian life? Well, the fact is, Christians do make vows, of a variety of kinds, and in a variety of contexts, and it is as well that we should look into the whole matter from the Christian perspective. It is a striking and impressive fact that when we look up the word 'vow' in a concordance, we find that while it is found almost everywhere in the Old Testament, it is scarcely ever used in the New (Acts 18:18, and 21:23). It may not be possible to draw firm conclusions from this, but it might in fact be prima facie evidence that what was needed in the Old Testament economy (because of the limitations of the old covenant, which could make nothing perfect) was not in the same way needed in the new, which is the era of the Spirit. In this respect, it compares with the phenomenon of 'lots', which were extremely common in the Old Testament, as a means of discerning the Lord's will, but virtually unknown in the New, when the leading of the indwelling Spirit superseded them. This is a consideration to which due weight' should be given in our thinking about either lots or vows.

72) **11:29-40**

Calvin has a longish section his 'Institutes' Book IV. 13 on the subject of oaths and vows, and his words are worth noting: "As timid and inexperienced consciences, even after they are dissatisfied with a vow, and convinced of its impropriety, nevertheless feel doubts respecting the obligation, and are grievously distressed, on the one hand, from a dread of violating their promise to God, and on the other, from a fear of incurring greater guilt by observing it, it is necessary here to offer them some assistance to enable them to extricate themselves from this difficulty. Now, to remove every scruple at once, I remark, that all vows, not legitimate or rightly made, as they are of no value with God, so they ought to have no force with us. For if in human contracts no promises are obligatory upon us, but those to which the party with whom we contract wishes to bind us; it is absurd to consider ourselves constrained to the performance of those things which God never requires of us: especially as our works cannot be good unless they please God, and are accompanied with the testimony of our conscience that He accepts them....Therefore, if it be not lawful for a Christian man to attempt anything without this assurance, and if any one through ignorance has made a rash vow, and afterwards discovered his error, why should he not desist from the performance of it? Since vows inconsiderately made, not only are not binding, but ought of necessity to be cancelled....Hence we may conclude, that vows which have originated in error and superstition, are of no value with God, and ought to be relinquished by us".

73) **12:1-7**

We leave the matter of Jephthah's vow, and say no more about it as we go on, except this: it is some measure of the size and stature of the man that even such a disaster as the vow (if it was literally fulfilled), and the tragedy it entailed, did not destroy or unmake him, or render him a broken man. He continued in public life, as a judge, as these verses show. There is something very impressive about this, and it prompts the reflection that it is what we do with our tragedies, and how we breast the storms that come that marks us as men and women that cope with life. The late Lord Reith's biography records that he suffered for most of his adult life from a distressing depressive spiritual malady in which he laboured under a dark conviction that he was spiritually reprobate and unable to find peace. Yet how much he accomplished in face of this dark and terrible affliction, and in spite of it. What a challenge this is not to lie down or give up when assailed and devastated by tragedy, grief or affliction.

These verses describe another episode involving the tribe of Ephraim. One has only to read it to see a certain similarity with an earlier one in 8:1 ff, in their reaction, in rather analogous circumstances, to Gideon. There are lessons for us to learn (see 3:1 ff and the note). Clearly, Ephraim (descended from Joseph's second son, and inheritor of Jacob's blessing before Manasseh) had from the beginning a position of prestige and significance. It distinguished itself, tribe-wise, by a number of outstanding leaders, particularly Joshua, son of Nun, (Num 13:8). In the Note on 8:1 ff we suggested there was something of injured pride and ambition involved in the 'spikiness' of Ephraim, and that they had to be smoothed down by Gideon, who gave them 'the soft answer that turns away wrath'. The problem and difficulty, however, with touchy people is that they 'keep at it', exercising a kind of blackmail on others, until life becomes almost insufferable - or, until they meet with someone who calls their bluff and will stand no more nonsense from them. This becomes the 'crunch point' for them, as we shall see in the next note.

74) **12:1-7**

The trouble with such people is that they get to thinking that 'the world owes them a living', and expect kid-glove treatment all along the line. Thus, they come in for a rude shock in the end, for sooner or later, the Gideon's of this world, who handle them softly, are replaced by a Jephthah, who is a different kettle of fish, for he was not a man to suffer fools gladly, or to submit to 'blackmail'.

We see in these verses that Ephraim's attitude is worse than it was in relation to Gideon. They had been made worse by the soft treatment; and now they were very threatening (1b). But Jephthah was not impressed. He challenged the Ephraimites roundly, pointed out to them the Lord's vindication of him in his victory over Ammon, and showed the incongruity of their attitude, in view of the Divine seal on the campaign. This should have made Ephraim pause to think, but no; men in their state of mind do not think as they should. In their fury they accused and taunted Jephthah and the men of Gilead with being renegade Ephraimites (4). Battle was joined between them, and Ephraim was ignominiously defeated. And, whereas in the earlier battle with Midian (7:24 ff) it was they who guarded the fords of Jordan to trap the invaders, on this occasion they themselves were trapped by the same fords by the Gileadites. The test that the men of Gilead made as a means of identifying the Ephraimites was a simple one: it was to get them to pronounce the word 'Shibboleth' (any word beginning with 'sh' would have done). The Ephraimites, apparently, were known as being unable to pronounce 'sh' properly (in much the same way as English people, apparently, cannot seem to pronounce 'loch' properly, but say 'lock' instead!). The Ephraimites were betrayed by their speech, saying 'Sibboleth' when given the fateful word-test, in much the same way as the apostle Peter was at the time of our Lord's trial. (Matt 26:73 - 'thy speech betrayeth thee'). Thus the Ephraimites fell in a great and grievous slaughter (6).

75) 12:8-15

These brief verses record the judgeships of three other leaders of the people, Ibzan, who judged Israel for seven years (8-10), Elon for ten years (11, 12) and Abdon for eight years (13-15). Nothing else is known or recorded about these judges, and the record is necessarily brief. It will be useful, however, to add a further comment on the chapter as a whole, with particular reference to the Ephraimites in 1-7. For what was said about them in the last two Notes indicates that there does seem to have been something almost fateful about what is said concerning Ephraim. One thinks of the solemn verdict pronounced upon them in Ps 78:9 in this connection. Ephraim had a history, and it went on and on until they were confirmed in a wrong and faithless attitude. And the crunch came when Ephraim was 'displaced' in the Divine purposes (Ps 78:67 ff): Shiloh, in Ephraim, was disqualified as the place of God's dwelling, in favour of Jerusalem (Ps 78:60,67ff).

Sow a thought, reap an act;
Sow an act, reap a habit;
Sow a habit, reap a character;
Sow a character, reap a destiny.

76) 13:1-14

We come in this chapter to the story of the last judge, Samson. It extends to the end of chapter 16, and is the longest and fullest of all the stories of the judges. As to its context, we may recall that mention was made in 10:7 of the twin threat of Ammonites and Philistines against Israel. The Ammonite danger is compassed by the story of Jephthah. Now the (greater) threat of the Philistines is dealt with in this story of Samson, The Philistine oppression was a major and serious one, lasting forty years (13:1), and carrying on into the time of Samuel and the opening years of David's reign.

One wonders if it is possible to see a progression in the seriousness of the crises and oppressions that came on the people of God - in the sense that, since there were repeated declensions and failures, and therefore needed lessons not really properly learned, God laid His hand of judgment even more heavily upon them, and more seriously and for longer time. At all events, this was a very serious oppression, perhaps the most serious of them all that came upon Israel. The Tyndale commentary contains a useful comment on the history of the Philistines:

"The Philistines had settled in large numbers on the coastal plain about a generation after the Israelites had entered the land (c.1200 BC), although the possibility of earlier, smaller settlements of ethnically related groups is not excluded (Gn 21:32,34; 26:1ff). When they had established themselves in their pentapolis (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath) they began to penetrate the hinterland. At some point they were momentarily repulsed by Shamgar, thus affording temporary respite to the Israelites (3:31). The Philistine pressure on the Amorites led to a corresponding pressure on the Israelites (1:34-36) and this led in turn to the migration of a portion of the Danites to the extreme north of the land (18:1ff). It is likely that that took place before the time of Samson, who would then be one of the remnant of the Danites in what remained their original tribal portion."

77) 13:1-14

Another introductory lesson that may be underlined at this point is that, in the over-all story of Samson, we have a tale of 'what might have been'. As Tyndale says, "It is a sad tale of a lack of discipline and true dedication, and the reader is left wondering what Samson might have achieved had his enormous potential been matched and tempered by these mental and spiritual qualities (of his Nazirite vow)".

Another particular characteristic of the Samson narrative is that Samson appears as a lone champion: nowhere is he associated with others, not a band of companions, let alone an army. He was of the tribe of Dan, but the Danites do not appear to have been involved in his escapades. Some of these escapades, it must be conceded, involving prodigious feats of strength, were questionable from a moral point of view, and prompt the question as to what was the association of Samson's anointing with morality of life. There is no doubt that in New Testament terms possession by the Spirit of God is associated with uprightness of character. Samson, however, was a man of his age, and that age was one of declension and apostacy, and Judges bears faithful witness, as Tyndale points out, to this sombre but significant fact.

78) **13:1-14**

The first thing to note in this record of angelic visitation is its similarity to other stories in the Scriptures - that of Sarah (Gen 18) Hannah (1 Sam 1) and Elisabeth (Luke 1) and, indeed, to some extent, the call of Gideon. It is interesting, in passing, to note that while Sarah laughed in unbelief (Gen 18:12), and Elisabeth's husband Zecharias was stricken dumb (Luke 1:20), Manoah and his wife were utterly believing (cf 8, 'teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born'. What we should note is that these are all, in some small measure shadows and illustrations of the coming of a Greater Judge and Saviour of men, the promised Christ. Indeed, they are all adumbrations of that greater Coming. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that there should be some similarity in this story. Also - and this is common to the others - we should observe how this visitation, this provision of a deliverer for the people, came to - and from - a humble, ordinary family. Manoah's wife was barren - what a burden of prayer this must have been for her (cf also Hannah) - and it was out of the agony of that humble woman's prayers that the deliverer came. One thinks readily of the birth of Moses, that came in answer to the cries of the Israelites in bondage - for so long nothing seemed to happen, yet all the time God had been at work in the baby that was born. One thinks also of today's situation, remembering the prayers for revival at the end of the Second World War in 1946. We thought that the prayers had gone unanswered, but we have only to look at children born in those, and succeeding, years, who are peopling the pulpits of the land today and proclaiming the Word of the gospel. God is faithful!

79) 13:1-14

The preparation for the deliverer is described in 4. Do not these words anticipate so much of very modern medicine - only now is ante-natal care extending to things like alcohol and smoking as being detrimental to an unborn child's health! The conditions of the Nazirite vow were to apply to Samson's mother also - an indirect testimony to the truth that we can hardly expect our children to be what we ourselves fail to be, or are not prepared to be. This will bear a good deal of thought! It is not a matter of their 'doing' differently from us, but rather a matter of their doing, in their situation, correspondingly to what we do in ours - i.e. self indulgence in us may take a different form in them, but it is still self indulgence. For the details of the Nazirite vow see Num 6:1-21. The phrase in 5, 'he shall begin to deliver' is not a reference to the partial nature of Samson's work because of his unfaithfulness, but rather the fact that he was the beginning of a movement against the Philistines which was continued by Samuel, Saul, Jonathan and David. From what is said in 6 ff it seems that Manoah's wife had no awareness that it was an angel that had spoken to her, nor did she seem to grasp the significance of the reference to the Philistines. This was only natural: her interest would surely be in the promise of a son, hence her limited reaction. Her husband's, however, was different as we shall see in the next note.

80) 13:1-14

Manoah's perception of what had happened is clear, and his consciousness that God was in all this is evident from his prayer in 8, and his attitude at the second appearance of the angel. (11ff). He was a devout spirit, in the midst of all the declension of that Godless time, and this reminds us that in any age God has His faithful ones who have not bowed the knee to Baal. We should note that he showed a simple acceptance of the angelic announcement. He did not question, he simply wanted to be guided as to how best to deal with the child that was to be born. This is surely an attitude that all prospective parents would do well to emulate - not merely 'doing their best' for their children, but doing God's best, and God's will, for them. It is this prayerful attitude on Manoah's part that led to the coming of the angel the second time to his wife. On this occasion she summoned Manoah, with better presence of mind. Manoah's question in 12 may be rendered "What shall be the boy's mode of life, and his vocation?" The angels response to this question was to repeat his original statement in 4, 5. God's communication of Himself to these humble Israelites had no problems: they understood very well what He was saying to them! When hearts are responsive to the Divine will and purpose, it is not difficult to know what God wants us to do.

81) 13:15-25

The remainder of the chapter tells of their subsequent experience with the angel of the Lord, and their final realisation that it was an angel that had met with them. The traditional offer of hospitality (15) serves to highlight the reality of the angelic visitation, as does Manoah's asking 'What is thy name?', reminiscent of Jacob's experience in Gen 32:29. Here, the angel's reply is impressive (18) - 'secret' is rendered 'wonderful.' in the AV margin, and immediately reminds us of Isa 9:6 (which see). The phrase in 19 'the angel did wonderfully' is explained and defined in 20 in his 'going up' in the flame of the fire. It was this that brought the realisation of the supernatural nature of the visitation right home to Manoah's heart, filling him with misgiving and terror (22), since it was widely believed in Israel that no man could see God face to face and live. His wife's rational and common sense attitude came to his rescue, in her conviction that the Divine revelation must be greater than tradition (23). God would surely not have gone to all this trouble with them if they were simply to be killed for seeing Him! Indeed so!

82) 14:1-7

The last two verses of the previous chapter give a descriptive summary of Samson's career as a judge. In 13:5 we read 'he shall begin to deliver Israel' and in 13: 25 we read that 'the Spirit of the Lord began to move him'; and what follows fills in this summary, in a number of detailed incidents. It will be helpful to read through 14:1 - 15:8 at one reading, to get the flavour of the exploits. We should note first of all the emphasis on Samson's emotional entanglements - first the woman of Timnath (14:1ff), then the harlot in Gaza (16:1ff), then Delilah (16:4ff). The significance of these episodes may be gathered when we recall the purpose of his birth and his destiny, to be God's deliverer. For this his Nazirite vow was made. But alas, his Nazirite vow was a very partial and fragmentary thing, and glaring weaknesses were soon seen in his character, which force on us the truth of the Pauline observation that 'he that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things'. For what is the use of a boast about the total abstinence from strong drink if you are not abstinent but secretly indulgent - even openly indulgent - in other directions. This great, towering giant of a man, this turbulent, tempestuous, fiery spirit had gigantic weaknesses, which he indulged instead of crucifying - with the inevitable and predictable results, as we shall see in the Notes which follow.

83) **14:8-20**

The ongoing story of Samson from this point through to chapter 16 makes deeply interesting and disturbing reading. Two things stand out: one is the stature of the man, his qualities and capabilities - he was big in more than physical stature; the other is the tempestuous dance that his unbridled instincts led him throughout the twenty years of his career. The element of risk in his escapades was very considerable. There is no doubt that there was both thrill and excitement in the way he lived, not to say a certain attractiveness that would undoubtedly make a popular hero of him. To many he would have been simply 'fabulous', especially to a younger generation of Israelites. And no doubt he seemed to bear a charmed life, escaping from difficult and seemingly impossible situations again and again against the odds. But you can live only so long in this kind of way before life catches up with you, and life certainly caught up with Samson, as we shall presently see.

What strikes one particularly in these verses is the tortuous complicated unfolding of the story, and this is surely an indication that all was not well in his life, and that there was something far wrong and unhallowed about it from the outset. The reference to Samson's father in 10 is somewhat enigmatic, and left without explanation. Had he gone down to Timnath to try to prevent a marriage that to him was clearly in variance with Samson's calling as a Nazarite. It seems to confirm the impression that something was far wrong that the atmosphere at the feast should suddenly have changed to something very ugly and threatening. The potential for violence and disorder became very real - in much the same way as situations tend to explode in our own time, and with the same kind of sordid consequences, as we shall see in the next note.

84) 14:8-20

The threat to Samson's bride was obviously a real one, and under duress she pressurized him to reveal the secret of his riddle. His anger was obviously kindled not only against her but the Philistines also, as is clear from 18b, and he took a characteristic revenge against them (19). The writer of Judges is, of course, primarily concerned with the fact that the Spirit of the Lord was his enabling for the slaughter which followed, and we must give due weight to this aspect of the story, and recognise that even in the context of Samson's very dubious lifestyle God's hand was upon him. All the same, we cannot but be struck with the sorry and even sordid outcome of the whole matter, with his bride being handed over by her father to his best man. One is too aware of the almost incredible complications and snarls that sometimes take place in human relationships today to question this particular one in the story of Samson. Ancient or modern they are a sorry and tragic evidence of the disintegration of human life. We are not told what Samson's father's reaction was to all this, but we may well believe his heart to have been full of misgiving and distress as he witnessed the predictable mess his son was making of his life. Truly, "the way of the transgressor is hard" (Prov 13:15), and as we shall see it was to become harder still for Samson.

85) **15:1-8**

The sorry tale continues in these verses, which record Samson's revenge against the Philistines who had thus humiliated him. The Tyndale Commentary suggests that the gift of a kid to his wife was "more than a device to remove her resentment; it was probably the prescribed offering for a husband visiting his wife in this kind of marriage, where the bride remained with her parents." The same commentary goes on to suggest that their offer of the bride's younger sister may be explained either in terms of their consciousness that they had acted hastily and improperly or in terms of an acute personal fear of Samson and a desire to placate his revengeful spirit. And vengeful spirit there certainly was, for Samson devastated the Philistines' harvests (4, 5). There could hardly have been a more serious disaster, so far as the Philistines, in their dependence on an agricultural economy, were concerned. They, in turn, reacted brutally and mercilessly, burning the woman and her father to death. This in turn led to a further attack on the Philistines by Samson. Clearly, a chain reaction of events took place, which was really outwith Samson's power to control or limit.

Samson thus brought tragedy upon a family with whom he had sought to enter an alliance through marriage. There were so many wrong things the whole episode, and this prompts us to ask: "Could this have been God's way of doing things? May there not have been another, and better, way if only Samson had kept his consecration?" True God's hand was certainly on the man; but how much more might have been accomplished if Samson had not put limitations upon Him by his wilfulness and undisciplined, reckless passions?

86) 15:9-20

Reading between the lines in these verses is an instructive exercise. They record a further confrontation between Samson and the Philistines, but it is the reaction of the men of Judah to Samson that is interesting. Judah had clearly acquiesced in the Philistines' domination and occupation of their territory. This reminds us of Vichy France's attitude to the Nazis in the 1940's and the considerable co-operation which they gave to the German high command. It was hardly surprising that the collaborators viewed the prospect of an allied invasion and liberation with considerable misgiving. And so it was here, with the men of Judah: Samson's proposed 'liberation' (11) was an embarrassment to them. What is said in 12 makes very sad reading. That they should prefer occupation to freedom, simply because of the cost of identifying themselves with Samson, God's appointed judge and deliverer, is astonishing but understandable, and is a reflection of the depths to which they had fallen at this time.

Once again, Samson's guile and skill come into evidence in 12b, 13, as he concealed the source of his supernatural strength both from the enemy and from their collaborators in Judah. Again the anointing of the Spirit came upon him, in what was clearly a supernatural manifestation of power, and the Philistines were again routed (15). In 18-20 we have a remarkable indication of God's care for His overwrought servant. The story reminds us of Elijah and his single-handed victory over the prophets of Baal, followed by his depression and despair under the juniper tree. Samson's reaction was a very human one, and the record is so true to human psychology, with emotional feelings overruling rational judgment as the prospect of death through thirst terrified him much more than an army of Philistines could have done. But then, Samson was never characterised by rational considerations taking precedence over undisciplined emotions!

87) **16:1-14**

The unhallowed saga of Samson's love affairs continues in these verses, until finally nemesis is reached, and the Lord's anointed is brought into captivity. As the Tyndale commentary points out, "The reputation of Samson had now extended far beyond the immediate vicinity of his exploits and his appearance in Gaza led to an attempt to apprehend him". At first, his easy ascendancy over the Philistines is maintained (1-3), but finally his involvement with Delilah set in train a series of events which finally led to his downfall. There is a threefold 'lead-up' to his captivity: first of all (7 ff) there is the episode of the green 'withs' or 'bow strings' (RSV); then, in 11, 12, that of the new ropes; and thirdly, in 13, 14, the process of weaving his hair. As the Tyndale commentary points out, this third attempt to trap Samson was perilously near the truth, for it concerned Samson's hair, wherein lay the real secret of his strength. This may in fact represent a significant stage in the wearing down process which ultimately led to the breaking down of his will. Some might think that this is an artificial story, but in fact it is very true to human psychology, and it very graphically illustrates the kind of pressure that can be brought to bear within the context of an emotional entanglement of the intensity that this one of Samson's clearly was. He was undoubtedly so blinded by his passion for Delilah that caution was thrown to the winds and he could hardly have realised how dangerous was the ground he was now treading. To have been so blind to the falseness of Delilah's real objective and to her collusion with the Philistines surely argues a hopelessness of infatuation on Samson's part that must inevitably lead to disaster!

88) **16:15-24**

The secret is finally revealed and the source of Samson's strength is disclosed to false and perfidious Delilah. One reads the story with a kind of horror that it should at last have happened. It is very impressive to realise that on every previous occasion in which it did not, but could have, happened, it was through the wiles of a woman! Even when we make every allowance for the moral climate of the age, it seems evident that this final relationship - with Delilah - was simply the crowning act of Samson's folly, the point of no return which, when passed, inevitably led to disaster. And disaster came: the divinely given strength and power left him. There is no sadder verse, or more tragic, in all Scripture, not to say more frightening, than 20b: "He wist not that the Lord was departed from him". Samson came crashing down, in shame and humiliation. Here is the man separated unto God for service as the deliverer of His people from the Philistines, and now he is grinding in the prison house, 'eyeless in Gaza', the object of the contempt and derision of all the enemies of God! Milton's great words in Samson Agonistes say it all:

Nothing of all these evils hath befallen me
But justly; I myself have brought them on;
Sole author I, sole cause. If aught seem vile,
As vile hath been my folly, who have profaned
The mystery of God, given me under pledge
Of vow, and have betrayed it to a woman,
A Canaanite, my faithless enemy.

It was not Delilah; all along he had flirted with forbidden things, setting in train a whole moral chain-reaction making it quite inevitable that he should yield up his secret at the last. The real mistakes were made before ever he met Delilah. There was a fatal weakness that had been neglected right from the start. It was there - in his emotional life - that the seed of this tragedy was sown. If ever a lesson cried out to be learned, it is: "Resist beginnings". For if you do not, you will end up, like Samson, 'grinding in the prison house'. And the church of God is strewn with the wrecks of those who could bear witness to the truth of this solemn statement.

89) 16:25-31

But - thanks be to God - evil does not have the last word in God's world. Samson did grind in the prison house, the Philistines put out his eyes and made sport of him, but in that prison house he had time to think (God gives us time to think and to learn many salutary lessons in the prison house). And as Samson languished in his misery and helplessness, his hair grew again and his strength returned, and this is symbolical of the return of his dedication and consecration. And at last the opportunity returned for him to be what God had all the time meant him to be - the scourge of the Philistines - and in his death he slew more Philistines than in his lifetime. His last exploit proved to be the greatest of them all. There are two ways in which this story can be applied, first to the church, and then to the individual believer. As to the first, the church is God's gift to the world. Jesus said 'Ye are the light of the world, a city set on an hill cannot be hid'; and in these words He set a Nazarite vow upon His people for the world's salvation. But who can deny that the Church of Christ in our time has been beguiled from its calling to be separate unto God, as Samson was? Who can deny that it has become so bogged down with other interests, other attitudes, other activities, that she is no longer any real witness in the world beguiled by flirtations in the ecclesiastical sphere and in the political and social spheres until she has lost her testimony. The salt has lost its savour, and the Philistines make mock of it. One has only to see the way in which the clergy are characterised on T.V. and radio to realise with what amused tolerance and contempt the world holds the Church of God - weak, spineless nonentities instead of the intrepid and fearless prophets of God they are supposed to be. The enemy makes sport of us, and the church is grinding in the prison house instead of going forth terrible as an army with banners. How needful today the call to a new consecration that will sweep away the things that have smothered the church's real witness in the world and all but extinguished her light!

90) 16:25-31

The second application of the Samson story is to the life of the individual believer. It is a simple truth that God has a plan and purpose of grace and blessing for every true believer's life. He is raised up as a light amidst the darkness of the world. 'Ye shall be witnesses unto Me', said Christ. But alas, it is true of so many believers that they are like Samson grinding in the prison house, instead of working triumphantly for Christ and His gospel. And the simple reason is this: they have been beguiled from the simplicity that is in Christ. They have lost their first love: the subtle claims of the world, of forbidden things, of questionable and unhallowed relationships - in personal life, in business life - have robbed their testimony of unction and power. The fine edge of their consecration has worn off, and they have grown cold in the things of God. The problem with Samson lay in an undisciplined emotional life. It was there that he had refused the Lord's dealings with him, there that the Nazarite vow was to have had effect. There was a death that he refused to die - in his emotional life and make-up; it was there that the weakness - and the danger - lay.

One further thought may occupy our attention before we leave the story of Samson: the fact remains, notwithstanding his final triumph in death, that deliverance was not wrought in Israel as it was meant to have been. Which prompts the interesting reflection that if deliverance was meant to have been in our post-war era for the Church of God, then it may be that the reason why it has not taken place is the fact that there are Christian people in our churches today whom God brought into the world and destined for significant service as Nazarites unto God, and they have been flirting for years with forbidden things. So far, they may have escaped disaster, often against all the odds; but grinding in the prison house may be their ultimate fate, if they do not come to themselves. Has God laid His hand on our lives? Is He having His way with us? Or is there a death that we are refusing to die? These are the lessons that the Samson story teaches us.

91) 17:1-6

With the story of Samson we come to the end of the main section of the book of Judges, and what remains is a series of appendices which reflect the conditions of the time. There is a repeated observation that "in those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). As the Tyndale commentary puts it, "We are made vividly aware of the low moral standards, of the debased religious conceptions and of the disordered social structure". Clearly the period under consideration represents one of the lowest points in all Israel's history. Chs 17 and 18 belong together. The latter deals with the events associated with the migration of part of the tribe of Dan, who apparently found the pressure of the Philistines upon them increasingly intolerable, and wanted 'a place of their own' away from such pressure. It is this fact that provides the connection of the two chapters with the previous ones (chs 13-16) which record the oppression of the Philistines in the time of Samson. The earlier chapter 17:1ff introduces the character that comes to grief in ch.18. In many ways these final chapters of the book make very unedifying reading. But then, this is the point of them, which is to show that life in a state of declension and alienation from God is always a mess. As we once put on our notice board, "Without God - hell on earth".

92) **17:1-6**

These verses record the incident of a son who is a thief stealing from his mother, who puts a curse upon the thief; and it also records the making of graven images, something expressly forbidden by the law (cf Ex 20:4,23; Deut 4:16). And significantly, all that is recorded here is attributed to the fact that there was no king in Israel, but everyone did that which was right in his own eyes, without reference to a central, objective, Divine and absolute authority. Three points may be made: first of all the breakdown in family relationships - that a son should steal from his own mother argues a heartlessness and lack of natural affection. Furthermore the unnaturalness of the mother makes sad reading also. She presents more like a witch, putting curses on the thief, than like a mother in Israel. One commentator suggests that the fact that her son mentions that she spoke the curse 'in mine ears' may be an indication that she suspected him of the theft. But what is she about, dabbling in curses? We note also the sad mixture of religion and godlessness. There was, nominally, an adherence to the things of God (2b) but mixed, nevertheless, with crass superstition and idolatry, reminding us of some of the grosser forms of Roman superstition rife in many parts of the world today. Finally, the idolatry - the worship of the true God under forms that were idolatrous, with no consciousness of the blasphemy of it or its incongruity. Indeed, it is the lack of any sense of incongruity that marks the extent of the declension - one can almost hear the puzzled question, "Why, what's wrong with that?" - a question often asked today when dubious methods of fund raising in the Church, such as bingo and tombola are challenged. It is not merely the fact that congregations can descend to such levels but that they do not see it as a descent that marks the real measure of the Church's decline in our day.

93) 17:7-13

The continuing story of Micah underlines the sad declension of the times. They record the institution of a 'priesthood' in his household. It is a commentary on the need of the human heart for God even in the midst of the God-forgetting of the age. In 5 Micah had 'consecrated' one of his sons to be a priest; but here, a Levite becomes his 'household priest', a kind of 'private chaplain' so to speak (perhaps Micah was a fairly well-to-do figure in his community). The setting apart of his own son as priest was a retrograde step, going back to conditions prior to the setting apart of the tribe of Levi to the priestly offices. How different is all this from 2 Chronicles, where the concern is ever to do things 'by the book'. There must, however, have been some feeling of the rightness of this appointment for Micah immediately to replace his son with a regular 'priestly' figure. There is something touchingly sad in 12, 13 in the assurance Micah expresses of the Lord's blessing because of what he had done. The sad thing is the manifest sincerity of his attitude. But sincerity is not enough, when the known and revealed will of God is ignored and set at nought. The setting up of his own private sanctuary is something that would have simply not been tolerated in other times, and it would not be an excuse to plead 'I did not know'. The irony here is that the next chapter shows how very wrong he proved to be, for the Lord did him anything but good (cf 18:24). Another irony, of a different sort, is seen in 10, 11 which bear witness to the strange mixture of good and error in the story, for these verses indicate a true pastoral and caring relationship. How sad that all this should be vitiated by wrong thinking and wrong attitudes. And is not this strange mixture of good and error reflected also in the church today?

94) 18:1-10

We are now introduced to the story of the migration of the tribe of Dan, and Micah's involvement with it. The Danites sent five of their number to spy out the land. The significance of this episode here of the spies meeting the Levite is that later, when the whole contingent moved north they went via Micah's house, with the set purpose of 'stealing' Micah's priest, and taking him with them to act for them. Hence their request for counsel in 5 - they were 'proving' him, putting him to the test as to his genuineness. And his prophecy was authentic - even in such a dubious moral and spiritual situation, this was a genuine prophecy. Here again is the sad mixture of truth and error in the Israel of those days. The report of the spies (7 ff) is reminiscent of the incidents recorded in Numb 13, but very different from the woeful account that Moses' spies brought back to him. We may well think of the Danites exploit here in terms of Judges 1/2 - their subduing the land of Canaan and taking possession of it. That is not the point at which objection can be taken to the Danites behaviour. Rather, it is the heartless and callous treatment of fellow Israelites, in the way they 'disposed' of Micah and his household. That is the measure of the moral and spiritual declension of the time, that such heartless and even ruthless attitudes towards fellow members of the covenant people should be displayed.

95) 18:11-20

In these verses which give an account of the migration of the tribe of Dan to their new territory there is much that is very distasteful. It seems clear from the thinly-veiled suggestion by the spies in 14 that they already had had designs on Micah's religious ordinances, and in the flush of an apparently successful advance decided to plunder Micah's household, purloining his images and idols, while their force of six hundred men stood threateningly nearby to quell any possible resistance. It speaks volumes about the declension of true religion in this tribe of Israel that they should have thought of this as a religious establishment for their people. The level of superstition that it represents is, to say the least, deeply disquieting. Micah's Levite made a feeble protest (18), and it does seem that the young man was beguiled by the prospect of worldly advancement (19) and a 'better living' into a measure of disloyalty to the man who took him in and treated him as one of his own sons (17:11). Did he have no sense of debt towards the man who had befriended him? What a stab in the back this must have been for Micah! The priest's 'gladness of heart' (20) sets him in a very discreditable light indeed. Severe strictures are passed on such attitudes in Scripture, as we may see from Ps 55:12ff. The Lord does not think much of disloyalty, and when it is shown by those for whom much has been done in the advancement and prospering of their circumstances, his heart is both saddened and angered. He will not hold such people guiltless.

96) 18:21-31

These verses record what we might call the 'judgment' on Micah. He is left desolate, stripped of everything he had - his costly investment of family wealth is suddenly brought crashing down. You cannot violate the laws of God with impunity - he had broken the commandments in his desire for security, he had got it all worked out (cf 17:12, 13 - 'the Lord will do me good...'). The Lord does not sanction, and will not own, wrong and unhallowed things. And very often, the nemesis comes without any explanation from God, or comment. Things start to go wrong, and to disintegrate. But what of Dan? Two things may be said: first of all, the words in 30, 'the day of the captivity of the land' refers to the invasion of Israel by Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria in 732 BC. The shrine that was set up at this time was elevated to the status of a national sanctuary by Jeroboam I, son of Nebad (cf 1 Kings 12:29 ff) and this undoubtedly led to the rapid decline of the northern kingdom, from his time onwards, and to its ultimate destruction by the Assyrians. The second thing that can be said is this: the tribe of Dan, significantly, is missing from the lists of tribes mentioned in Rev 7:5-8. This is a solemn thought, and bears out the New Testament assertion that idolators have no part in the kingdom of heaven.

97) 19:1-9

The next three chapters form the second of the two appendices at the end of the book of Judges. They record an ugly story, gruesome and distasteful; and if chs. 17/ 18 underline the tragedy of ungodliness and idolatry, these underline the inevitable outcome of such ungodliness, namely unrighteousness (cf Rom 1:18). The point that is being made is surely clear: this is what happens when there is no central authority holding national life together, and no law and order. There is a sense in which the whole section should be read through at one sitting, or at least the whole of ch.19, in order to see the enormity of what took place. The irony is that this unnatural atrocity was committed, not in the heathen city of Jebus, but in Gibeah, one of the cities of Israel. It was within the chosen people that this awful thing was done. When God's chosen ones go wrong, their wrong is far worse than the wrong of the heathen.

The story begins innocently enough with the account of a reconciliation effected between a certain Levite and his concubine who had been unfaithful to him. The unfolding of that reconciliation in these verses makes interesting reading, and the generous hospitality thrust upon the Levite by his father-in-law reflect the social etiquette of the period. Despite all pressures upon him to stay even longer, however, he determined to depart for home (8,9); but as events later proved, it would have been better for all concerned if he had taken his father-in-law's counsel and stayed another night. As the story unfolds, we shall see the fateful consequences of the well-meant and generous hospitality lavished upon him by a grateful father-in-law.

98) 19:10-15

We now see the Levite on his journey homewards from Bethlehem. The city of Jebus (Jerusalem) was only about six miles from Bethlehem, a journey of about two hours, so that, with the day by then far spent (11) they could hardly have begun their journey much before mid-afternoon (10). The Levite's servant was for spending the night in Jebus, but he declined this suggestion, intent on reaching one of the cities of Israel, and made for Gibeah about four miles north of Jebus, in the land of Benjamin. They went to the open place of the city, a traditional site where they would be seen by the city dwellers as travellers, and where they would expect to be offered hospitality. This, however, was not given them - an evidence of the boorishness of the Benjamites and an indictment upon the tribe for their failure in social duty - a matter of considerable importance in eastern lands. The writer is intent on exposing the culpability of the men of Gibeah, whose attitude, as the Tyndale commentary points out, was an ominous warning of things to come. One can readily imagine the Levite's servant thinking within himself, as they waited in vain for some lodging place, "We would surely have had better treatment than this in the heathen city of Jebus". The Tyndale commentary adds: "We must admire the consummate skill of the narrator, whose delicate hints build up the atmosphere and add point to the crime of the inhabitants of this Benjamite city."

99) 19:16-21

The two travellers were saved from the ignominy of this lack of hospitality by the timely intervention of an old man, himself a native of Mount Ephraim, but a stranger in the city, who came to their aid and generously offered them the hospitality of his home. Matthew Henry comments: "Of all the tribes of Israel, the Benjamites had most reason to be kind to poor travellers, for their ancestor, Benjamin, was born upon the road, his mother being then upon a journey, and very near to this place, Gen xxxv.16, 17. Yet they were hard-hearted to a traveller in distress, while an honest Ephraimite had compassion on him, and, no doubt, was the more kind to him, when, upon enquiry, he found that he was his countryman, of Mount Ephraim likewise." The emphasis on the fact that he was an old man may be meant to indicate to us there were still remnants of the older piety, with its attendant qualities of courtesy and compassion in those of his generation. If this be so, what an indictment this was upon the rising generation, for whom worthwhile tradition clearly meant little or nothing. The old man's attitude may also have been influenced by what the Levite said about going 'to the house of the Lord' (18), and if this be so it again reflects well upon him, in his desire to honour one who by his family connection would be assumed to be committed to the service of the sanctuary. At all events, his generosity was liberal towards the travellers, and he brushed aside the Levite's protestation that he had plenty provender on the asses he had with him and that no one who gave them lodging would lose by it. Tyndale comments: "The fears which attended their journey must have been quite relieved by this hospitality, and the storm which followed comes as a greater shock, precisely as the narrator intended."

100) 19:22-30

The story now in these verses explodes into one of utter horror and bestiality. The men of Gibeah showed themselves for what they were, men of no principle, utterly corrupt and depraved, and given over to a reprobate mind (cf Rom 1:24-28) echoing and repeating in their foul, unspeakable actions the atrocities of Sodom and Gomorrah which brought down the judgment of God upon the cities of the plain (Gen 19:4 ff). Here, however, no angels appeared to thwart the men of Gibeah's evil intentions. To modern minds, and particularly Christian minds, the attempt made by the old man to prevent them from committing such unnatural vice (23, 24) seems not only weak but perverse and to compound the ugly felony, but we should bear in mind the standards of the time, and the fact that for him anything would be preferable to the horrible crime the men of Gibeah were intent upon committing, and particularly against his house guest. The Levite's attitude towards his concubine was more heartless and reprehensible, however, and he seems to have been little concerned about her fate at the hands of these evil men, since he was able, apparently to take his rest until the morning (27). His curt command (28) to the lifeless figure lying at the door seems quite incredible, knowing as he must have done how she would have been abused. It was only when he realised she was dead that the enormity of the outrage came home to him. The whole incident is deeply shocking and terrible, and clearly made a lasting impression upon Israel for many generations as Hosea 9:9, 10:9 shows. Its more immediate repercussions are unfolded in the chapter which follows.

101) 20:1-7

The call made by the Levite to the tribes of Israel (19:29,30) was responded to by the whole nation, who gathered together in assembly at Mizpah where it was agreed that steps should be taken to deal with the situation. It is important to realise that this was a judicial assembly, and that it was formal, judicial action that was to be taken, to purge the land of bitter things. The princes of Israel took depositions in the matter, and formally enquired into the evil thing (2, 3), and the men of Benjamin heard that the council was in session. The Levite gave his evidence which, as we see from 4-7, corresponds with the story in chapter 19, with the additional information (5) that the Gibeahites purposed his death. It was reasonable for him to have assumed this: their intentions with him were abandoned enough, in all conscience. He ended his statement by an appeal (7) for justice to be done at law.

The manner in which the Levite summoned this assembly (6, cf 19:29) seems particularly gruesome to us. A similar act in 1 Sam 11:1-8 involved the hewing of oxen in pieces with a similar purpose in view, but that a human body should be thus desecrated seems terrible. Certainly it brought home the awfulness of the desecration that had taken place. The Tyndale commentary suggests that "originally it may have had magical associations, involving the curse of blood on those who failed to respond", and goes on to point out that the word 'divide' in 19:29 is used of ritual dissection (Ex 29:17; Lv 1:6, 12; 8:20). The point was surely to show the extent of the violation and outrage committed upon the woman, but.... was this the only way the message could have been got home to the nation?

102) 20:8-17

The assembly's decision to take action was a unanimous one. They were united as one man against the nameless atrocity that had been perpetrated. What is called 'the folly....wrought in Israel' (10) is regarded by one commentator as "a technical term signifying a violation of the divine law then in force in the tribal society, which was especially strict in sexual matters, in direct and intentional contrast to Canaanite practices (cf Gn. 34:7; Dt. 22:21; Jos 7:15; 2 Sam 13:12)." The arrangements outlined in 10 indicate that they realised they were in for a considerable undertaking, since they knew that they would have to deal with the whole tribe of Benjamin. They, the Benjamites, had not come to the assembly (cf 3) - if they had, it would have meant that they also abhorred the action of the men of Gibeah within their tribe. That they did not come was evidence that they acquiesced in their foul deed. It was a matter of guilt by association. The council first of all approached Benjamin, to give them a chance to do justice themselves, by delivering up the Gibeahites. This they failed to do, refusing to take sides against their own countrymen. But to condone such a thing, in their own people surely made them totally culpable in the sight of God. Such an attitude has a strangely modern ring about it - but wrong is wrong, whoever commits it, and it is not less heinous simply because those nearest or dearest to you have committed it. Unlimited solidarity is too great a price to pay when absolute standards are at stake. It would have been far better for the Benjamites to have yielded up the men of Gibeah to justice, however regretfully, than to do as they did.

103) 20:18-28

The remainder of the chapter describes three encounters that Israel had with the Benjamites, the first two of which (18-23 and 24-28) are recorded in these verses. Preparations for battle were made, and counsel was sought of the Lord (18). This is probably some evidence of Israel's recognition of the hazardous nature of the operation. Gibeah of Benjamin was well fortified in hilly country, and the situation would favour the defended city rather than its attackers, with numbers as such not very important in such an enterprise. Judah is nominated as the spearhead of the attack, as being used to hilly terrain and renowned for its fighting qualities. But to no avail. Israel was drastically defeated by Benjamin in this initial encounter, and lost a great many men. They were not, however, discouraged, but resolutely set themselves in array for another attack, although they wept before the Lord (23), asking Him whether there was any point in continuing the battle. But God said 'Go up' once again, which they did, and once again met with disaster, with further grievous losses. How, then, are we to explain the double defeat, when Israel was acting in a judicial capacity as the Lord's ministers of justice? Was He testing Israel, to find out just how much they wanted rid of this foul thing that had raised its head among them? Was God saying, "When you want it enough, it will be done"? What a lesson there is here! It is an exhortation to tireless and persistent endeavour and labouring for one's goal. One recalls Tennyson's words,

One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will,
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Never to give up, always to go on, never to be ultimately discouraged! And indeed, the assurance finally came, in 28b, 'Tomorrow I will deliver them into thine hand'.

104) 20:29-48

One wonders whether there had been a measure of carelessness on Israel's part in the first two encounters with Benjamin. At all events, they were more careful in the final engagement. This time they used subtlety and guile. Some think this guile was less than justified, and morally questionable, but there seems no need to suppose this to be so. The implication of these verses is that God blessed their careful tactics and planning. In 30-32 it is clear that the Benjamites were completely taken in by the stratagem, and even at 34 they had not tumbled to it. In 35ff the story is amplified, and the extent of the deception made clear, with the 'smoke signal' (38, 40). The tactics were simple: the main part of Israel's army confronted Gibeah to draw their warriors out, while a smaller task-force lay in wait to attack the advancing Gibeahites coming upon them from the rear when the smoke signal was given. The moment of truth for the Benjamites came in 41 and the devastation was complete (43, 44). When a remnant of Benjamites, some 600 men, fled to the wilderness, to the rock Rimmon (47), Israel's reaction seems to have been to turn upon the other Benjamite cities which had given support to the men of Gibeah, and burned them with fire (48). Since most of their men of valour would have been on the battle-field, this action of Israel's must surely represent an excess of vengeance and a slaughter of helpless women and children which, on the evidence of the next chapter, they were to regret bitterly. The tragedy of it all is that this was an internal judgment, within the body of Israel itself, and an even greater tragedy that it needed to have happened at all.

105) 21:1-9

In this concluding chapter of the book of Judges we are given the sequel to the gruesome episode in Israel's history unfolded in the previous chapters; and a strange and complex sequel it is. The Tyndale commentary makes a useful observation here: "When the heat of the battle was over and the memory of the shameful events of the first two days had been set in a healthier perspective by the ultimate victory, the Israelites had occasion to reflect and to repent. Their action had been necessitated by the outrage of the men of Gibeah, and the war was, in a sense, a holy war. But it had brought in its wake a sense of shattered brotherhood and a realization that, in the heat of the crisis, some of their vows had been extreme." One vow, made at Mizpeh, is referred to in 1, regarding the giving of any of their daughters in marriage to men of Benjamin. Another vow made at that time is mentioned in 5, concerning any tribe that had failed by default to appear at the convocation of the tribes (20:1ff). The action of this chapter centres on these two vows. The weeping in 2 can only mean that Israel were now having second thoughts about what they had done, in practically annihilating the tribe of Benjamin. What they did had certainly been in a judicial capacity, but when they had time to reflect, they realised that there had been no call to destroy them completely, and that personal vengeance had entered in far too much following their twofold defeat in their first two encounters with Benjamin. They had carried what was meant to be the punishment, righteously administered, of an evil thing into a war of extermination, which was neither commanded by law nor justified by the circumstances. More about this in the next note.

106) 21:1-9

Further, there may well have been bitter regret about their rash vow (1) not to allow any inter-marriage between Benjamin and the daughters of Israel. In the cool light of day they felt both shame and remorse, and the sense of the impossible situation that they had by their rash vow made inevitable. Hence their distress, and their strong feeling of national unity - it was intolerable to them that, even though they had sinned Benjamin should simply be exterminated (but they should have thought about this, should they not before, and not after, the terrible slaughter). The remembrance of their 'other' vow in 5 compounded their distress. But a possible solution of the dilemma presented itself, in relation to this second vow: if some tribe had not turned up, they would be put to the sword (i.e. the men of the tribe), and wives from that tribe could be procured for the Benjamites. Jabesh-Gilead was found to have defaulted; and they were put to the sword (10-12), and further bloody slaughter was sanctioned against another tribe of God's people. It seems incredible to us that such slaughter should have again taken place, even in the context of Israel's grief and distress, and some comment will require to be made about this, in a later Note. But there was more to follow, as we shall see in 16 ff, and we need to look at the unfolding story before saying anything further.

107) 21:10-23

The expedient that was adopted was to procure 400 maidens from among the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead for the men of Benjamin. But this still left 200 unaltered for (14), 'they sufficed them not'). What to do next? What they did is explained in 16-23. And the men of Shiloh were 'absolved' from their participation in the vow not to give the Benjamites their daughters to wife, since they did not break it voluntarily, but had it broken for them by the elders of Israel. (16). Well! What a snarl! What a mixture of sincere motives and mixed-up ideas we see here. The fact of the matter is - and this is the message of the these chapters - things were at such a low spiritual ebb that all they did seemed to tainted with sin, and even when they seemed to be doing right, and were intent on doing right, they were inevitably ensnared in sin. Everything they did here seemed to bring a train of unhallowed circumstances with it - it was right to exercise their judicial function, but it was wrong the way they did it; it was right to want to help the hapless Benjamites, but it was wrong the way they went about it, compounding their sin in the process. They blundered from one sad error to another, from one morass into another, and then another. What a trail of unhappiness and distress they caused! Ah yes, when we are low spiritually this is what happens: everything we touch, even with the best will in the world, seems to go wrong and he tainted with evil.

The writer of Judges mentions that all this happened because there was no king in Israel, and every man did what was right in his own eyes. No central authority to guide, and keep people right - and therefore everything going wrong, however hard they tried.

108) 21:10-23

If there had been true rule in Israel the people would have been guided aright, and taught (a) not to make rash vows, or (b) instructed to break them when they were bad and wrong. Delitzsch says: "The oath itself was an act of rashness, in which there was not only an utter denial of brotherly love, but the bounds of justice were broken through", and he adds a further comment by another commentator: "Wherefore they would have acted far more uprightly, if they had seriously confessed their fault and asked forgiveness of God, and given permission to the Benjamites to marry freely. In this way there would have been no necessity to cut off the inhabitants of Jabesh from their midst by cruelty of another kind (Buddeus)". It will be noticed that the elders of Israel sanctioned the breaking of the (law of the) oath in the case of the men of Shiloh (22). Well, if the oath could be broken that way, it could have been broken altogether. This is certainly what should have been done, acknowledging their rashness openly, freeing themselves and the nation from an oath that had been taken in such sinful haste, and cast themselves on the mercy of God. Nothing could show the confusion in their thinking more clearly, and their lack of spiritual perception. They were in bondage to the letter of the law that caused endless distress in the fulfilling of it. Calvin's words on vows are definitive, and we add them in full in the next note for careful study.

109) 21:10-23

"As timid and inexperienced consciences, even after they are dissatisfied with a vow, and convinced of its impropriety, nevertheless feel doubts respecting the obligation, and are grievously distressed, on the one hand, from a dread of violating their promise to God, and on the other, from a fear of incurring greater guilt by observing it, it is necessary here to offer them some assistance to enable them to extricate themselves from this difficulty. Now, to remove every scruple at once, I remark that all vows, not legitimate or rightly made, as they are of no value with God, so they ought to have no force with us. For if in human contracts no promises are obligatory upon us, but those to which the party with whom we contract wishes to bind us; it is absurd to consider ourselves constrained to the performance of those things which God never requires of us: especially as our works cannot be good unless they please God, and are accompanied with the testimony of our conscience that He accepts them....Therefore, if it be not lawful for a Christian man to attempt anything without this assurance, and if any one through ignorance has made a rash vow, and afterwards discovered his error, why should he not desist from the performance of it? Since vows inconsiderately made, not only are not binding, but ought of necessity to be cancelled....Hence we may conclude, that vows which have originated in error and superstition, are of no value with God, and ought to be relinquished by us." (Calvin).

110) 21:24-25

Even in the midst of this sad catalogue of distress and disaster, and even in the light of the ominous words in 25, "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" we must still bear in mind that the moral indignation expressed in the vows that were made, however rash and ill-advised, was just and laudable, as Delitzsch points out. The paradox, if not contradiction inherent in this situation prompts the following reflection made by the Rev. William Still in his concluding comment in his Bible Notes on the book of Judges:

"How do we reconcile this contradiction? By recognising that the righteous zeal displayed is that of the whole nation working in single-minded indignation against a mortal sin. This contains a lesson for us: the isolated and individualised Christian has not sufficient zeal to order his life according to the holy law. In this sense it is true to say that there is 'no salvation outside the Church', for we are saved into fellowship, and it is in fellowship only that we are being saved. The person who tries to live his life singly in the sight of God without regard to his fellows will surely go astray, however godly his intentions may be, for to despise the fellowship and dispense with the fact of common need, is to despise one's fellows, and to try to come to God on one's own. That can never be, for the attempt is born of an attitude of pride and contempt which God can never honour. The person most loyal to the fellowship is most pleasing to God, and will find strong compulsions to be good which will make it far easier to keep within the bounds of holy laws."

III) 21:24-25

Two further points may be made as we leave this study. The first relates to the parallel that these final chapters give to modern conditions today, when no action in the political or economic scene seems right, and every action, even done with the best intentions, seems fraught with potential for harm and evil. Does this not point to the truth that the need of our time is for a spiritual dimension to enter the conduct of affairs in public life? The second point is this: even in this parlous condition and state we have only to look onwards to the message of 1 Samuel - the next part of the story of Israel - to realise that revival and reformation became gloriously possible. After the terrible declension from Joshua's glorious regime to the situation described here in 25 there came the wonderful restoring of the fortunes of Israel. But we must above all take note of how this came about - it was by the restoring of the Word of God to the people (1 Sam 3:19-21). And if there is anything calculated to give us hope today in our present, parlous situation, it is that God is giving back His Word once again to our land. Herein lies our hope - our only hope - for the future.

112) 21:24-25

As a postscript we include the final comment made by the Tyndale Commentary on the book of Judges: "The book closes with the reflection of the editor that the absence of the strong hand of a king was largely responsible for the disorders of the land in this earlier age. The editor thereby shows his own background to be one of stability and security, conditions which obtained in the major part of David's reign and in the earlier part of Solomon's reign, when, most likely, this portion of Israel's history was completed. However, the historical perspective of the editor was not to be the final assessment, for the monarchy itself was to deteriorate and proved to be no lasting remedy for the evils of the land. Moreover, it is to a judge, not a king, to whom we must look for the final improvement, for it was Samuel who led his people out of the period of the judges into the period of the monarchy; out of the turbulence and apostasy of the period of the judges and into the relative stability which confronts us when we consider Saul and his successors. But the reader must take up this story in another book.

'Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their back....and they wrought great provocations.

Nevertheless in thy manifold mercies thou didst not make a full end of them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God (Neh 9:26, 31, RV).'