

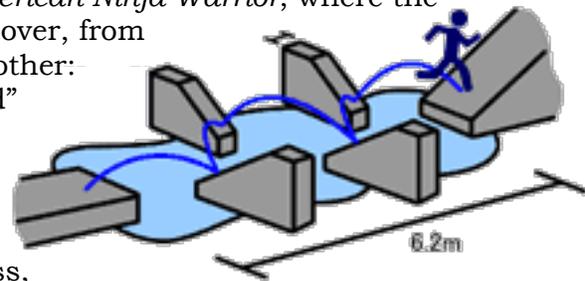
Sunday

# BACK TO SCHOOL

## Bible-study: 2020/11/15 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Judges 4:1-7

[Ask for volunteer to read passage.]

The race is over! (This is our final week of Sunday “school.”) Since the Spring, the Lectionary – our schematic of Bible readings – has had us engaged in an exploration of its foundational stories; the oldest, most important events of the ancient past. As the weeks passed, we “sprang” from major episode to the next, neglecting a great deal along the way: it has been a little like that obstacle the “Quintuple Steps” from the TV show, *American Ninja Warrior*, where the contestant must jump, nimbly, over and over, from one sloped, treacherous “platform” to another: which is to say, as soon as we’d “situated” ourselves in a text from *Genesis* or an *Exodus*, we were abruptly moved on, forwards in time, leaving some questions unanswered, and much undiscussed. But I hope that, nonetheless, you’ve learned some new things? Even more than that, I hope I’ve given you reason and evidence to trust the Holy Scriptures from which we’ve heard.



Well, today we’re offered a single “slice” from (the Book of) *Judges*. And it is the only one in the *entire* three-year cycle. And that’s astonishing, really! When you consider how many famous stories it contains. But then we’ve talked before – *speculated*, really – about the agendas that seem to have shaped the work of the “Lectoneers,” and it is very possible – I think probable – that these agendas struggled to embrace a book that Tim Keller, the renowned Presbyterian preacher, admitted ‘can be described as “despicable people doing deplorable things” and as “trashy tales about dysfunctional characters”...’<sup>1</sup> He’s referencing, of course, the often perplexing escapades of the so-called “judges” themselves – ‘members of noble families from different tribes, exercising some form of legal jurisdiction over all Israel’:<sup>2</sup> Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. These individuals were ‘raised’ up by God [e.g. 2:16; 3:9,15] to continue the good work begun – but left unfinished – by Joshua, of leading the Israelites in the fight against the Canaanites: [1:1]; to clear them from Abraham’s inheritance. But what is made clear (by our author) almost immediately is how these men – who, specifically, we’re told, ‘grew up’ in ‘another generation’ from the one that executed the actual invasion of the “Promised Land” [2:7-10] – were of a diminished “calibre.” And so were less successful in their respective efforts.

<sup>1</sup> *Judges For You* (2014), Epsom, Surrey (U. K.): The Good Book Company, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Alt, Albrecht (1966), *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, translated by R. A. Wilson, New York, N. Y.: Doubleday, 102.

Which isn't to stay that they were equally *ineffective*. In fact, as leaders, observes Gordon Wenham, they 'seem to degenerate as the story unfolds.'<sup>3</sup>

Another scholar – Gregory Wong – agrees: 'A careful examination of this narrative...reveals that...[it] is organised along two distinct trajectories. First, there is a geographic trajectory that moves roughly from south to north according to the location of the tribes as their military exploits are recorded. The account thus begins with Judah... Along with this...is also a corresponding downward trajectory that represents the decreasing ability of the tribes to take full possession of their land.'<sup>4</sup> Which is to say: (after a wonky, much discussed – with reason – *double*-prologue which has Joshua dying *twice* [1:1 AND 2:8]), the book begins with the "judge" Othniel leading a great revolt against King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim [3:8f.]; that is, against 'a Mitannian king' (from northern Mesopotamia).<sup>5</sup> As such, this was an impressive defensive endeavour against a *significant* foreign power which appears to have marched through Israel to attack Egypt at a peculiar time 'when it was too weak to maintain its political hegemony in this traditional tributary area.'<sup>6</sup> This was, then, an *international* conflict with Geopolitical consequences; a major crisis affecting the Middle East at large. An affair of a scale that might, perhaps, surprise us – given how obscure it is, only fleetingly treated in *Judges*: just three or four verses. And 'Othniel is a kind of precursor of David'.<sup>7</sup>

But: 'By contrast Othniel's successors are more parochial in their military operations'.<sup>8</sup> They fight 'inconclusive battles' against their neighbors – 'petty [pagan] princes'.<sup>9</sup> And these confrontations become 'less and less honorable'.<sup>10</sup> And so by the time we reach the final "judge" of *Judges* – Samson, he is a 'parody' of holy heroism, remarks Wenham:<sup>11</sup> 'Basically all Samson's skirmishes with the Philistines are individualistic personal acts of revenge.'<sup>12</sup> Gregory Mobley concurs: '[T]his hairy force of nature' 'appears motivated by nothing more than amorous wanderlust';<sup>13</sup> 'more interested in sex than national liberation.'<sup>14</sup> "More interested" in marrying Philistine girls, that is, than repelling their soldiers back into the sea. Consequently, his legacy – the events of the last chapters of *Judges* – its epilogue – is anarchy: Joshua's dream – the LORD's

<sup>3</sup> Wenham, Gordon J. (2000), *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, Ltd, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Wong, Gregory T. K. (2006), *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 150.

<sup>5</sup> Billington, Clyde E. (2005), 'Othniel, Cushan-Rishathaim and the Date of the Exodus', in Carnagey, Glenn A., Sr.; Carnagey, Glenn A., Jr. & Schoville, Keith N. (Eds.), *Beyond the Jordan: Studies in Honor of W. Harold Mare*, Eugene, O. R.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, pp. 117-132, 123.

<sup>6</sup> See: Malamat, A. (October, 1954), 'Cushan Rishathaim and the Decline of the Near East around 1200 B.C.', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Volume 13, No. 4, pp. 231-242.

<sup>7</sup> Amit, Yairah (1999), *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*, translated by Jonathan Chipman, Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston, M. A.: Koninklijke Brill NV, 165.

<sup>8</sup> Wenham (2000), 60.

<sup>9</sup> Harris, Stephen L. (2003), *Understanding the Bible*, New York, N. Y.: McGraw-Hill, 173.

<sup>10</sup> Sharp, Carolyn J. (2009), *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, Bloomington, I. N.: Indiana University Press, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Wenham (2000), 65.

<sup>12</sup> *Supra*.

<sup>13</sup> 'Judges' (2011), in Coogan, Michael D. (Ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible – Volume I: Acts - LXX*, Oxford, New York, N. Y.: Oxford University Press, Inc., pp. 516-531, 256.

<sup>14</sup> Lee-Thorp, Karen (2012), *Story of Stories: A Guided Tour from Genesis to Revelation*, Downers Grove, I. L.: IVP Books (InterVarsity Press), 90.

plan – for Canaan had become a ‘nightmare’,<sup>15</sup> with the Israelites not only *not* fighting who they were supposed to be fighting – the interlopers squatting in their homeland, but actually turning on each other, raping, pillaging and murdering among themselves.

To put it simply: ‘After three centuries of judges, Israel was worse off at the end of the period than at the beginning.’<sup>16</sup> And that’s because, by-and-large, as Karen Lee-Thorp concludes, one or two exceptions notwithstanding, the “judges” were ‘losers’.<sup>17</sup> What’s going on, then? What purpose could there be to preserve any memory of them? After all, we approach this text – the texts of the Old Testament generally, of course – expecting it lift high for our admiration and emulation “shining” examples of godliness, no? We understand that, unlike Christ, they will have flaws; shortcomings, but we imagine their presence in the Canon is because of how they already anticipate His virtues and character.

The reason, many scholars claim – and they may very well be right – is that *Judges* was ‘intend[ed] to highlight the need for strong and united leadership as provided by the monarchy’ in a subsequent historical era.<sup>18</sup> This argument is part of a larger platform that *Judges*, basically, is cobbled together from at least three parts: the main part where the tales about Gideon, Samson, etcetera are found, is the most ancient. It is dubbed “The Book of Deliverers.” It is conspicuous as a standalone creation by six cycles of ‘a fourfold formula: sin, servitude, supplication and salvation.’<sup>19</sup> To this were appended by a later editor the first chapters and the last. And according to Janet Tollington – an old professor of mine – and Rebekah’s – in Cambridge: ‘I suggest that an appropriate context for the compilation...is among a community seeking the restoration of the monarchy in the post-exilic period. ...such hopes existed in the time of Haggai and Zechariah before the rebuilding of the temple was completed in 516 BCE. These hopes were focused on Zerubbabel, the appointed governor, who was of the Davidic line.’<sup>20</sup> And what *Judges* did, in the new form it was given – the “form” we see now – was ‘presented a [political, i.e., *dynastic/hierarchical*] programme for the restored community in Jerusalem [by] graphically illustrat[ing] the dangers and chaos into which any other form of society would degenerate.’<sup>21</sup> (Such as the earlier egalitarian, oligarchic pattern post-conquest.)

But though this may be true about the book, are there reasons *within* the judges’ stories that expose why they *as individuals* failed to follow more closely Joshua’s example? Let’s consider Samson in more detail, for a moment (since the Lectionary, apparently, won’t give us excuse on another occasion). → As a “judge,” we hear the most about his life. And he seemed, at first, *especially*

<sup>15</sup> See: Phillips, W. Gary (2004), *Holman Old Testament Commentary – Judges, Ruth*, Nashville, T. N.: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>16</sup> See: *The Holman Illustrated Study Bible* (2006), Nashville, T. N.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 294.

<sup>17</sup> Lee-Thorp, Karen (2012), *Story of Stories: A Guided Tour from Genesis to Revelation*, Downers Grove, I. L.: IVP Books (InterVarsity Press), 90.

<sup>18</sup> Mayes, A. D. H. (1985), *Judges (Old Testament Guides)*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Stronstad, Roger (2018), *Spirit Scripture and Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective (New Expanded Edition)*, Bagulo City, Philippines: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 29.

<sup>20</sup> ‘The Book of Judges: The Result of Post-Exilic Exegesis?’ (1998), in de Moor, Johannes C. (Ed.), *Intertextuality in Ugarit and Israel: Papers Read at the Tenth Joint Meeting of the Society for Old Testament Study and Het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap in Nederland en België, held at Oxford, 1997*, Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston, M. A.: Koninklijke Brill NV, pp. 186-196, 195.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

promising, given the supernatural manner of his birth, and so on; the fact of his being made a ‘Nazirite’ “warrior-monk” with “magical” strength: But [Barry] Webb makes the intriguing case that Samson is not so much indifferent to his Nazirite status as he is resentful of it.’<sup>22</sup> (Which is why, you see, rather than live a “pure” life of an austere *über*-Israelite in a remote cave, far from the pollution of foreign peoples and their idols and confusion, Samson ‘has an unexplained draw to be in Philistine territory and [to] mix with the Philistine people, he attempts to learn Philistine culture and customs, and he has an irresistible attraction to Philistine women’.<sup>23</sup>) Biblical commentator David Beldman calls this ‘[the] key insight into the inner psyche of Samson’.<sup>24</sup> And the interpretation pivots on one phrase – the one where he tells his wife, Delilah: ‘If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me; I would become weak, and be like anyone else.’” [16:17b] Webb suggests that ‘this is what Samson, in his heart of hearts, has wanted his whole life’.<sup>25</sup> And this certainly would explain why he reveals this secret to a person who was *very obviously* trying to entrap him. ← Her allies had already made two attempts on his life, using information from supposedly “private” conversations that she had had with her husband. There could have been no doubt in his mind, then, that she was conspiring to have him killed. *Yet he tells her the truth anyway.* Hence what Webb suggests, which is it appears ‘Samson’s Naziriteship [sic.] [was] an unbearable burden. That is why he told Delilah...[, in essence,] make me normal.’<sup>26</sup>

The fact that, as we perhaps now see with Samson, the “judges” are ‘complex characters’<sup>27</sup> as *real* people usually are, is important to appreciate because it is overlooked by those sceptics who argue the (earlier) highlighted formula – the repetitious language and repetitious events of *Judges* – is evidence that they are fictitious. Archaeologist Israel Finkelstein, for example, wonders if Samson isn’t just the same person as one of his predecessors, Shamgar?<sup>28</sup> Both “judges” use an animal’s jawbone to slay a multitude of their enemies. Additionally, Carolyn Pressler argues that these ‘absurd yarns’ ‘bear the marks of folklore: humor, outrageous antics, hyperbole.’<sup>29</sup> Because actual existence has none of these things? *That’s* what is absurd. She obviously hasn’t lived through a Donald J. Trump presidency! Which isn’t to say that it isn’t remarkable that Samson and Shamgar should have performed *such* a similar, savage feat; but one should be careful not to “gloss over” the enormous differences between the men: in every other regard they are *nothing* alike. Indeed, Shamgar wasn’t even an Israelite: ‘[H]is name...appears to be Hurrian’.<sup>30</sup> (A people-group from northern Syria.) And “Anath” – the person

<sup>22</sup> Beldman, David J. H. (2020), *Judges (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary)*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 176.

<sup>23</sup> *Supra*.

<sup>24</sup> Beldman (2020), 176.

<sup>25</sup> *The Book of Judges (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)* (2012), Grand Rapids, M. I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 405.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>27</sup> Groves, J. Alan (2005), ‘Judges, Book Of’, in Vanhoozer, Kevin J.; Bartholomew, Craig G.; Treier, Daniel J. & Wright, N. T. (Eds.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Grand Rapids, M. I.; London: Baker Book House Co., pp. 410-415, 414.

<sup>28</sup> *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel* (1994), Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society; Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 317.

<sup>29</sup> Pressler, Carolyn (2002), *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, Louisville, K. Y.; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 209.

<sup>30</sup> Beldman (2020), 80.

named in the text as a parent [3:31] – ‘is the name of an adolescent warrior goddess in the Canaanite pantheon.’<sup>31</sup> Her name is commonly found inscribed on indigenous (bronze) arrowheads for, presumably, good luck. Thus, as one observer notes, ‘we now can be pretty confident that Shamgar, the warrior credited with killing many philistines, was a Canaanite member of a Canaanite warrior gang roaming the highlands administering justice like some sort of Conan the Barbarian figure.’<sup>32</sup> *In the name of Yahweh*, that is; the *true* God,

Either way – whatever we may feel about the historicity of *Judges* – which *a priori*, need not be doubted<sup>33</sup> – what is interesting is that, as Lee-Thorp points out, in *Judges*, ‘Israel’s only really noble leader in several centuries was a woman.’<sup>34</sup> The ‘remarkable’<sup>35</sup> *Deborah*<sup>36</sup> – who I mentioned in passing at the beginning, and about whom our few verses this morning were concerned. Reflecting on this fact was one factor that led feminist author Adrien Janie Bledstein to propose that the agenda of *Judges* is, in fact, to satirize male

<sup>31</sup> See: “Nat” (14<sup>th</sup> of October, 2017), ‘Shamgar son of Anath’, available at <https://biblicalhistoricalcontext.com/conquest-of-canaan/shamgar-son-of-anath/>, (accessed November 12, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> *Supra*.

<sup>33</sup> [M]ost historians of Israel’ argue that *Judges* is ‘problematic as a source for ancient Israelite history.’ (Brettler, Marc Zvi (2002), *The Book of Judges*, London: Routledge, 6.) It is sometimes compared to ‘the Icelandic sagas’, or to *The Iliad*, and: ‘There is broad consensus today that the texts of Homer are grounded in [a more ancient] oral tradition.’ (Miller, Robert D. (2011), *Oral Tradition in Ancient Israel*, Eugene, O. R.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 29-30.) That is to say, *The Iliad* isn’t just a “frozen” or “fossilized” report of the truth immediately committed to “hardcopy” by an eye-witness. And so we should ask questions – or at least not be naïve – about what may have happened to the stories of the “judges” in a period of transmission. Of course, I also want to remind you that it has long been recognized that “Mycenaean Relics” – evidence or ‘heirlooms’ of the very period in which the poems are set – abound in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. They ‘describe in accurate detail places and objects which never existed in the world after the Mycenaean era.’ As such: ‘We know that the Greek Epic extends back into the Mycenaean era’ (in some form). (Page, Denys Lionel, *History and the Homeric Iliad*, Berkeley, C. A.: University of California Press, 218-221. My emphasis.) *Let that sink in!* Similarly, Donald Schley says: ‘[The tales about the] *Judges*, whatever their ultimate date of composition, preserve the memory of a pre-monarchic order.’ (*Shiloh: A Biblical City in Tradition and History* (1989), Sheffield, U.K.: JSOT Press, 138.)

<sup>34</sup> Lee-Thorp (2012), 90.

<sup>35</sup> Shroeder, Joy A. (2014), *Deborah’s Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1.

<sup>36</sup> The story of Deborah may be pertinent to questions about “the Bible’s” view of gender. E.g.: Gilbert Bilezikian argues that Deborah is one of ‘many indications that the time of male rulership [abundantly visible throughout the “O.T.”] would come to an end [with the coming of Jesus and His Kingdom], and that men and women would be able to enjoy again [as in Eden] the parity [in all things] for which they had been created.’ (See: *Beyond Sex Roles* (2006), Grand Rapids, M. I.: Baker Books, 51f.) For those who think along “these lines,” she is, therefore, totemic as far as the matter of women in the clergy is concerned. And those advocating for equal access to “the collar” – or at least to the pulpit – frequently point to Deborah ‘to directly challenge literalist readings of 1 Tim[.] 2:11 and 1 Cor[.] 14:34-35.’ (Shroeder (2014), 153.) On the other hand, J. Cheryl Exum – another feminist biblical scholar – argues that the tale actually perpetuates traditional gender expectations: ‘Not just in these chapters but in *Judges* as a whole, men are warriors; they are expected to fight and to be brave.’ (See: ‘Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?’ (1995), in Yee, Gale A. (Ed.), *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, Minneapolis, M. N.: Fortress Press, 71.) But in this episode they categorically fail to live up to this calling. Thus, it is possible that God anointed Deborah as judge precisely because the men of her time failed in their responsibility. She is a goad! And Exum shares this interpretation with Wayne Grudem, a very conservative, *Reformed* theologian: ‘[S]he affirmed the rightness of male leadership. ...Deborah refused to lead the people in military battle, but insisted that a man do this (*Judges* 4:6-7,14).’ (*Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (2004), Wheaton, I. L.: Crossway, 132-133.) Consequently, if we scrutinize the battle account against Sisera and the forces of Hazor closely, what we find is that she is nowhere *explicitly* mentioned in participation, but a man is: ‘Barak’.



propensity for violence.<sup>37</sup> Could this be true? It is an intriguing approach to the book. And it makes a degree of good sense. Firstly, given the previously stated “trajectory” of increasingly poor “judgeship,” it renders predictable that the worst of the worst would be Samson who was ‘a walking, talking incarnation of a certain brand of hypermasculinity’.<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, it provides a tidy justification for why *Judges* is ‘filled with unusual women.’<sup>39</sup> Women who are ‘a thing of fear and unnerving disquiet for the men’.<sup>40</sup> Consider the incident with the Kenite matriarch, Jael: ‘The narrator of *Judges* draws upon the epic convention. As a seductress, Jael invites Sisera [– general of the army of Hazor, which was not ‘utterly destroyed’ in the time of *Joshua*, notice!<sup>41</sup>] into her tent [after he had lost a battle to the Israelites] ...she covers him with a blanket...serves him milk. [And, without offering any thanks whatsoever, h]e commands her to stand guard and to dissemble regarding his presence. These actions [by Jael] are aligned with the expected behaviour of a woman as lover, advisor, mother and loyal servant. However, in *Judges* 4, the type-scene now inverts: ‘Jael wife of Heber took a tent pin and grasped [a] mallet. She approached [the now sleeping Sisera] and drove the pin through his temple till it went down to the ground. ...So he died’ (4:21).’<sup>42</sup> And if you haven’t realised it yet yourself, what happens here, claim lots of authors, has ‘a good deal of...innuendo.’<sup>43</sup> Or maybe this is just what happened, no (pornographic) subtext intended? What do you think?

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<sup>37</sup> See: ‘Is Judges a Woman’s Satire of Men Who Play God?’ (1993), in Bronner, Athalya (Ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 34-54.

<sup>38</sup> Mobley (2011), 256.

<sup>39</sup> Bellis, Alice Ogden (2007), *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible (Second Edition)*, Louisville, K. Y.: Westminster John Knox Press, 98. (My emphasis.)

<sup>40</sup> Guest, Deryn (2006), ‘Judges’, in Guest, Deryn; Goss, Robert E.; West, Mona & Bohache, Thomas (Eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary*, London: SCM Press, pp. 167-189, 179.

<sup>41</sup> I’m alluding, of course, to last week’s discussion about the “special” language or genre of *Joshua*, which renders its “genocidal” claims of military victories suspect. See:

[http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Bible-Study-20201108-St.-Matthews-Episcopal-Church-McMinnville-Joshua-24v1-3a14-25\\_BTR.pdf](http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Bible-Study-20201108-St.-Matthews-Episcopal-Church-McMinnville-Joshua-24v1-3a14-25_BTR.pdf), 4.

<sup>42</sup> Bledstein (1993), 40.

<sup>43</sup> McKenzie, Steven L. (2010), *Introduction to the Historical Books: Strategies for Reading*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Wim. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 70.