

The Deuteronomic History

Joshua - 2 Kings

In the Hebrew Bible, these books make up the "Former Prophets". They were received not so much as history, but prophecy - the word of the Lord. Modern scholars refer to them as the "Deuteronomic history" because the outlook of the editors or compilers is very similar to that of the book of Deuteronomy. This is either because the history was compiled by the same group who compiled Deuteronomy or because the compilers were themselves influenced by Deuteronomy or a combination of both. Every so often there is an "editorial passage", which reveals the outlook of the compilers. The clearest examples are Judges 2:11-23 and 2 Kings 17:7-41.

The date of the work of the compilers probably varies. The whole work would have come into being over a period of time. 1 Samuel 9:9 is an interesting addition, which reveals the gap of time between the original story and the work of the editor. The amount of editorial involvement varies a good deal. There are long passages in which the original sources are left wholly to speak for themselves, most notably 1 Samuel 13 - 2 Samuel 6 and 2 Samuel 12 - 20. In other places, the narrative itself seems to have been written up by the editors. Examples are Joshua 1, 1 Samuel 2:27-36 and 1 Kings 8.

God speaks to us not only through the events themselves but through the ways in which they were interpreted and the stories retold to future generations.

Joshua

The book of Joshua records the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). Under Joshua, the people of Israel receive the land God promised, while the allocation of the land to the twelve tribes in chapters 13-21 points to the fulfilment of the second part of the promise, Abraham's descendants.

In the same way that the giving of the Law is ascribed to Moses and the Psalms to David, the history of the conquest is given its unity by means of

the figure of Joshua. The problem with this is that it makes the history of these years too "neat". There is plenty of evidence in the book itself that the picture is far more complicated than one series of campaigns. Joshua is credited with taking places such as Hebron and Debir, whose conquest is elsewhere ascribed to others (Joshua 10:36-39; Judges 1:10-11).

Many of the stories of conquest collected here were probably told originally at Gilgal, which was the main shrine for all Israel in the time of Saul; that is why most of the first 8 chapters concerns events in the part of Israel which became the territory of Benjamin, the tribe to which Saul belonged. The stories of Gibeon and Hazor in chapters 10 and 11 come from other sources, and the accounts of the tribal boundaries and the town lists probably date from the time of David and Solomon, when firm Israelite control was first established.

Thus, although the narrative outline attributes to Joshua the complete conquest of Israel, the true picture is that there remained very large areas of land to be taken over (13:1; see 23:4-5 and Judges 1). Although the narrative outline presents a picture of united action under Joshua, the amount of tribal unity is probably exaggerated; in Judges, the tribes act independently or in alliance and as early as 1 Samuel 11:8 we find the basic division between Israel and Judah which was to last throughout the monarchy.

Nevertheless there was a common focus in the worship of the Lord based on a consciousness of covenant relationship with him, and this is emphasised throughout the book (1:1-9; 7:10-12; 8:30-35; 23:1 - 24:27).

Approximate date for the Conquest: 1250-1200 B.C.

Day 52. Psalm 114; Joshua 1:1 - 5:1

Crossing the Jordan

Psalm 114

A psalm of celebration, preserving the memory of God's mighty acts in bringing Israel into the promised land.

Joshua 1

The main theme is announced at the start of the book: the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, to give the Promised Land to his descendants (1:3-6; see Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-15; 15:18-21; 17:8).

Joshua's task is to complete the work of Moses, by bringing the people into the Promised Land. The words with which God commissions him set the tone for the whole of the Deuteronomistic history to come: if Israel's leaders trust in God, obey the Law and act courageously they will be successful and God will bless them in all they do. If they do not, they forfeit God's blessing. We are to see this principle demonstrated over and over again throughout the history.

Joshua 2

In contrast to Numbers 14, when Israel failed to enter the Promised Land under Moses, it is the Canaanites rather than Israel who are struck with fear (2:9; 5:1). Rahab epitomises the attitude of the convert; she renounces the nation to which she belongs in favour of Israel, for the sake of the Lord, whom she acknowledges as the true God (2:11). She recognises the coming destruction of her former way of life and throws in her lot with the future, thus escaping the judgement.

Joshua 3:1 - 5:1

The crossing of the Jordan is a new crossing of the Red Sea for the new generation, none of whom had come out of Egypt. But the confidence of Joshua and the people is in marked contrast to the faithlessness of the previous generation (see Exodus 14:10-14, and contrast 2:24 with Numbers 13:26-29). The miracle at the Jordan confirms Joshua's authority as the crossing of the Red Sea had done for Moses (compare 4:14 and Exodus 14:31).

The participation of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh, the role of the ark and the priests carrying it, and the twelve stones as a memorial emphasise the covenant and the united action of the twelve tribes. The discrepancy between 4:9 and 4:20 as to where the stones were placed probably arises because two different versions of the story were passed down, one perhaps local to Gilgal, the other more widespread among the tribes. Rather than discard one, both have been included.

Day 53. Psalm 18:1-3; Joshua 5:2 - 8:end

Jericho and Ai

Psalm 18:1-3

God the strength of his people in battle.

Joshua 5:2-end

The theme of these chapters is the dependence of Israel on the Lord. Everything takes place within the framework of the covenant, by which Israel acknowledge themselves as God's people (5:2-8; 8:30-35). However, the vision of 5:13-15 reveals a God who is more than a local tribal God; he is not simply the God of Israel, but has a purpose which embraces all the nations. That is why he can give the Canaanites over to destruction and their land to Israel (5:13-15; 6:2,16-19; see Genesis 15:13-16).

The crossing of the Jordan, circumcision, the Passover and then the cessation of the manna bring about the change from desert wandering to the settlement in the Land. It is the land of Canaan which is now the people's home, even though they have not yet taken it.

Joshua 6

The manner in which Jericho is taken emphasises to Israel the need for dependence on the Lord and for holiness. In their first battle, Israel is not asked to fight. They simply have to obey the Lord's instructions and the city is theirs. The spoil from this first encounter is to be entirely devoted to the Lord. This follows the principle of first-fruits, whereby the dedication of the first part of the harvest releases all the rest to be used.

Joshua 7:1 - 8:29

Immediately after the victory at Jericho Israel loses both holiness and dependence on the Lord. The course of events implies that the slide into self-confidence of 7:3 as well as defeat and consequent loss of God-given confidence of 7:4-9 were the result of Achan's disobedience. Israel was executing the power of life and death at God's command, so it was vital that they remained holy before him.

The covenant was not between God and each individual but between God and the people as a whole; violation of the covenant by one man, therefore, affected the whole people. Corporate responsibility is emphasised by the

punishment of the whole family. This is an exemplary punishment, for the first infringement of the covenant unity and holiness of Israel. There is a similar exemplary punishment in Acts 5:1-11.

Joshua 8:30-end

Following the Lord's instructions in Deuteronomy 27:1-8, as soon as Shechem is taken and before the conquest of the rest of the land, Joshua and Israel ratify the covenant.

Day 54. Psalm 18:31-42; Joshua 9 - 12

Defeat of the Kings

Psalm 18:31-42

Thanksgiving for victory in battle. The singer in this psalm is probably the king, and the psalm is attributed to David himself in 2 Samuel 22.

Joshua 9

Chapter 9 begins with the announcement of the alarm of the kings and their determination to fight Joshua. But significantly, no kings are mentioned in the story of Gibeon. Instead, the Gibeonites have "elders" (9:11). Not all the Canaanite inhabitants would have been in the same position. Some were rich and others poor; some had much to lose from the Israelite invasion and others much to gain. Among the cities were several who were under oppression from the kings of the larger cities nearby, and the four cities mentioned in 9:17 were probably vassals of Jerusalem. They would have had reason to make common cause with the invading Israelites and joined them, perhaps also adopting the worship of Yahweh. Like Rahab the harlot in chapter 2, these Canaanites had heard of the fame of the Lord (9:9) and perhaps saw in him a chance to share the freedom Israel had won from Egypt.

Joshua and the leaders of Israel are tempted into an alliance with the Gibeonites (9:4,14). This gave them control of an important strategic area without a fight. But the idea of Joshua making common cause with any of the Canaanites does not fit well with the editors' point of view and they need a satisfactory explanation. This is given by the place of Gibeon as "the great shrine" of Solomon's time (1 Kings 3:4). No doubt this was a Canaanite shrine taken over by Israel, whose original Canaanite inhabitants now served the worship of the Lord (9:27).

By the time of David and Solomon, the conquest of the land was complete, but the Canaanites had not been wiped out. Many of them are found amongst their soldiers and officers. These also may well include some who threw in their lot with Israel to escape from the oppression of others (1 Samuel 22:1-2).

Joshua 10 - 12

If the Gibeonites were trying to escape from their former overlords, it is not surprising to find the king of Jerusalem putting together a coalition to punish Gibeon and to repulse the invaders whose presence was causing sedition. Joshua's humiliation of the kings before their execution (10:24) was an important symbol of the liberation he was bringing.

Chapter 10 presents a series of victories over a coalition of Canaanite cities in the south of the country, chapter 11 a series of victories over a similar coalition in the north. Although the impression is given of a conquest of the whole country, no mention is made of campaigns in the central area, but 11:18 tells us that the war against the northern kings went on for a long time.

The conquest came about because of the action of God. It was God's purpose to give his people the land of Canaan, and to achieve this he hardened the hearts of the kings so that they would fight and be destroyed (11:20). This hardening compares with what happened to Pharaoh (see Exodus 3:19-20; 4:21; 7:2-5; 14:17-18). God's purpose was to bring salvation to the world through Israel, but the realisation of this purpose meant judgement on those people who opposed him.

Day 55. Psalm 67; Joshua 13 - 21

Settlement of the Land

Much of this section can be read at speed. The passages to concentrate on are 14:6-end; 15:13-19; 17:14-end; 20:1-end.

Psalm 67

When God blesses his people all the earth will know and fear him. 67:1 is an echo of the high priestly blessing (Numbers 6:24-26).

Joshua 13 - 21

In 13:1, the atmosphere changes abruptly from that of the first twelve chapters. Chapter 12 ends with the conquest completed (11:23), but here there is still much land to be possessed. The whole land is to be allocated tribe by tribe and from now on it will be the business of the individual tribes to possess their inheritance.

As the conquest sees the fulfilment of God's promise of the land to Abraham, the settlement looks forward to the fulfilment of God's promise of numerous descendants (21:43-45). However, the detailed descriptions of the tribal territories make it clear that many of the Canaanites remained in the land as a threat to the people of Israel (13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12-13). As we saw in the previous passage, these people were gradually assimilated, until in the kingdom of David and Solomon, most were accepted as Israelite citizens.

The tribal boundaries are probably based on traditions which predate the monarchy, passed on by word of mouth and underlying the system of jurisdiction in the period of the judges. While many of the towns are also very ancient, the lists probably come from the time of Josiah, save those of the Levitical towns and the cities of refuge, which are also very early. There are fuller accounts of the laws governing the cities of refuge in Deuteronomy 19:1-3 and Numbers 35:6-34.

The theme of confident faith, so prominent in the first twelve chapters, is not absent from this section. It underlies the stories of Caleb and his daughter Achsah (14:6-end and 15:13-19), the Joseph tribes (17:14-18) and Joshua himself (19:49-50). God has given his people the promise of an inheritance but they are required to go in his strength to win it for themselves.

Day 56. Psalm 16; Joshua 22 - 24

A Covenant People

Psalm 16

A faithful follower of the Lord rejoices in his promises.

Joshua 22

This chapter comes from a much later period in Israel's history, and is written as a warning against the two great dangers which had been Israel's downfall in the intervening years: division and apostasy. After Solomon, the confederacy of twelve tribes was broken into two nations, Judah and Israel, and because the Temple at Jerusalem was the royal shrine of the kings of Judah, the kings of Israel promoted alternative places of worship (1 Kings 12:25-end).

The river Jordan was such an obvious boundary that the danger of division between the tribes east and west of it was particularly great (22:24-25). When the east Jordan tribes set up what appears to be their own altar, the others naturally fear that this is the first step towards apostasy and the break-up of the confederacy. The answer of the east Jordan tribes teaches what the writer thought should be the ideal situation: the local shrines are not to be used; they are only to be reminders of the one central place of worship. The focus of Israelite unity is to be the Law (22:5) and the single central place of worship (22:27).

Joshua 23

The book began with the Lord telling Joshua to obey the Law and promising to bless him and give him success if he did so. Now Joshua tells Israel to do the same (23:6-8). God is faithful to his promises and well able to carry them out, but it is up to Israel to decide how to respond.

Joshua 24

As in Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 8, Shechem is the scene of covenant renewal. Joshua assembles "all Israel" in the person of their leaders. First he reminds them of the Lord's goodness to Israel with special emphasis on the worship of "other gods" in former times (24:2-13). Then follows the question: Which gods will Israel serve? followed by the challenge to affirm their exclusive loyalty to the Lord (24:14-15). The people's acceptance of their covenant obligation is recorded in writing and signified by the setting up of a pillar. This serves as a standing rebuke to later generations. They could not complain that the terms of God's covenant were too difficult, since their ancestors had emphatically accepted them (24:19-24).

Judges

The title "Judge" has two related meanings. The first is close to the way we understand it today: a person who settles disputes. Israel was a nation whose common life was governed by God's Law, and the judges were the successors of the men appointed by Moses in Exodus 18. But the Hebrew word "to judge" also includes the meaning "to vindicate", so that those whom God raised up to deliver his people also acquire the title of "judge" whether or not they performed any judicial tasks.

In contrast to the book of Joshua, in which the whole people of Israel is portrayed as acting together under a single leader, each deliverer leads only a few of the tribes (3:26-27; 4:6,10; 6:34-35; 7:24; 11:29; 12:1). Judah is heard of only briefly (at 1:1-10) and the rest of the action concerns the northern tribes. In a similar way, it is probable that the jurisdiction of the "minor judges", the ones about whom no exploits are recorded, and others of whom we never hear, was limited to particular tribes or geographical areas. Thus, although the book reads as if it is the record of a single connected history, it is probable that the work of some of judges overlapped. The whole time period involved could not have been longer than 200 years.

Period of the Judges: c.1200 - c.1000 B.C.

Philistine ascendancy: c.1100 - c.1000 B.C.

Sack of Shiloh (1 Samuel 4): c.1050 B.C.

Day 57. Psalm 124; Judges 1-3

The Period of the Judges

Psalm 124

A community thanksgiving, acknowledging dependence on God and thanking him for deliverance.

Judges 1:1 - 2:5

The local traditions recorded in chapter 1 give a picture of the situation in the years following the entry of Israel to the Promised Land. Tribes and families operate either on their own or in co-operation with their neighbours, but in a piecemeal fashion. Sometimes they displace the local Canaanite inhabitants, but in other places they are content to live side by side with the Canaanites as neighbours (1:27-36).

Although it is recorded that Judah took the cities of Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron, by the time of Saul these cities were firmly in the hands of the Philistines. 1:8 claims that Judah took Jerusalem although 1:21 records that Benjamin failed to do so. The final conquest of Jerusalem by Judah did not come until the time of David.

Judges 2:6 - 3:6

This is a passage by the compilers of the book giving an overall theological view of the period of the judges. It is quite different from the picture given in the book of Joshua. The task is to explain the failure of Israel to subdue the land despite God's promises. The answer given is Israel's lack of faithfulness, and its result in compromise and eventually idolatry. The pattern is traced of disobedience, distress, deliverance and further disobedience.

The passage also gives a second explanation for the presence of the Canaanite tribes. When the Israelites were faithful to the Lord, they would be successful in driving out the Canaanites; if unfaithful, they would become subject to Canaanite oppression. Thus, the presence of the Canaanites becomes a test of Israel's faithfulness (2:3; 2:20-3:4) and in particular an opportunity for training in continued vigilance (3:1-4).

The same problem exists today in different forms: God is our deliverer, yet the battle continues. We still face temptation, sickness, failure, spiritual warfare and opposition of all kinds and God often uses these to discipline us, to build our faith or to train us for further service.

Judges 3:7-end

The stories of Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar probably come from separate local traditions, and have been fitted into the overall theological interpretation of the period. Each deliverer is from a different part of Israel, Othniel from the north, Ehud a Benjaminite from the south near Jericho and Shamgar fights the Philistines who were based on the coastal plain. Benjamin was well known for its left-handed men at this time (Judges 20:16).

Day 58. Psalm 68; Judges 4 - 5

Songs of Victory

Psalm 68

Most of the great Israelite victories would have been commemorated in songs which would have been passed down through the generations, though many of these have not survived. Both Judges 5 and Psalm 68 are songs of victory. Two others are to be found in Exodus 15 and 2 Samuel 22.

Psalm 68 is written for a procession, during which the ark of God was carried into the city and into the Temple. The opening lines echo the words of Moses, from Numbers 10:35, when the ark set out in front of the people of Israel in the desert. The main victory remembered in this psalm is the entry of the people of Israel from the wilderness into the Promised Land (68:7-14). The Lord appears here and in Judges 5 as the "God of Sinai". There may also be some particular recollections of battles in the rain or the snow (68:7-9,14). Here and in Judges 5, there is also a celebration of tribal unity (68:27; Judges 5:13-18).

The victory of Israel over her enemies is taken to be the Lord's victory over other gods. Yahweh, the God of Israel is celebrated as high God above all gods (68:32-34). Yahweh's sanctuary on Mount Zion is thus more highly honoured than any of the other mountains in which the gods dwell.

Judges 4

The rapid rise of Hazor may be a hint that the defeat by Joshua was less than complete. Hazor was a city of chariots, its power over the surrounding territory founded on superior military technology (Judges 4:3, Joshua 11:4).

A feature of this story is the role played by women, Deborah the prophetess, who was the judge and Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite, who struck the fatal blow to kill Sisera. It is the women who show more courage and resolution than the men. The writer would understand this as an indication of the weakened state of Israel at the time.

Although the numbers of Sisera's troops are not given the mention of his 900 chariots is intended to show that Barak's 10,000 men were heavily outnumbered. The chapter does not say *how* the Lord routed Sisera (4:15). These details are filled in by the victory song in chapter 5.

Judges 5

The Song of Deborah is one of the earliest texts in the Old Testament, a victory song that can be linked with a particular battle.

Verses 2-5 serve as an introduction, describing the power of the Lord in conventional terms as the God of Sinai and the bringer of rain (compare Psalm 68:7-8). Verses 6 and 8 describe the disruption of everyday life in a time of oppression. Villages are abandoned, travel becomes difficult and the Israelites adopt the gods of their oppressors.

In verses 13-18, the tribes are remembered by name; the purpose here is to affirm the unity of the confederacy, even though some of the tribal representatives are absent, perhaps because of the difficulties of travelling. Meroz (5:23) is probably a village whose people did not join the fight. Many would have been tempted to stay at home in case the outcome went against them and further oppression resulted.

Verses 19-31 provide a poetic complement to the prose account in chapter 4, showing how the battle was won. It implies that the weather was the decisive factor, the "stars in their courses" fighting against Sisera. At the moment of Barak's descent, a sudden storm of rain turned the Kishon, normally a small stream, into a raging torrent, clogging the wheels of the Canaanite chariots and making them ineffective (see 4:15).

Day 59. Psalm 129; Judges 6 - 7

Gideon

Psalm 129

Israel asks for vengeance on her enemies.

Judges 6 - 7

The Midianites and Amalekites were nomads. Their aim in attacking Israel was to drive out the agricultural settlers in order to find more room for their livestock, tents and camels (6:3-5).

When the Israelites cry out in distress, the Lord's response is to send them a prophet (6:7-10). It is not enough simply to save them; first they must hear the Word of God. They must realise where they have gone wrong and turn back to the Lord. In a similar way, the first thing Gideon has to do before he fights the Midianites is to restore the exclusive worship of the Lord in his own family (6:25-32).

Two themes run through the Lord's dealings with Gideon: the first is faith and doubt, the second weakness and strength. When the Lord speaks to Gideon his first response is one of doubt (6:13) his second to protest his weakness (6:15). As the story unfolds, a pattern emerges in which God allows Gideon to test him, but then God tests Gideon by setting him a difficult task. First comes the sign of fire from the rock by which Gideon is allowed to make sure it is God speaking to him, then he is told to pull down the family altar. Next, he is allowed the test of the fleece, then he is told to reduce his army to 300. Finally, the night before the battle he is allowed to take encouragement from the Midianite's dream.

Thus although Gideon was allowed these tests to build up his faith he had to pay for it in the difficult tests God set for him. The reason God was able to use Gideon despite his doubts was that he was obedient. When God gave him the difficult tasks, he obeyed.

The second theme is the one of strength in weakness. The choice of Gideon illustrates the principle that God does not rely on human strength but frequently chooses weak men and women to accomplish his purposes (see 1 Corinthians 1:26-31). In this way, God aims to prevent us from thinking that we can accomplish anything for him by means of our own virtue (see 7:2).

Gideon had to learn to see himself in a different way. He thought of himself as a weak and insignificant man; God had to show him that he was actually powerful. First came the greeting (6:12,14), then the order to pull down the altar of Baal in which, helped by his father, Gideon has to stand up to his family and friends. Later he has to tell several thousand volunteers to return home and go into battle with only 300 picked men.

At this stage in Israel's history, when the Spirit of the Lord came upon someone it was seen as a special gift for a special task. It was the Spirit who not only gave Gideon the strength he needed but brought about the response by which the formerly terrified Israelites gathered to fight.

Day 60. Psalm 80; Judges 8 - 9

The Dangers of Kingship

Psalm 80

A prayer for restoration using the image of the vine, which became very important as an image of the people of Israel for the people of Israel (see Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 19:10-14; John 15:1-8). Like Psalm 67, this psalm echoes the priestly blessing (80:3,7,19; Numbers 6:24-26)

Judges 8

Even in victory, the tribes and towns of Israel are jealous and suspicious of one another. Like Deborah and Barak, Gideon had called out only the tribes closest to the scene of the conflict (6:35). But the tribe of Ephraim had begun to assume a leading role and its members were jealous of others acting without involving them (see also Judges 12:1). By the time of the divided kingdoms "Ephraim" had become a synonym for Israel (see Isaiah 28:1-4; Hosea 5:3; 6:4,10). The towns of Succoth and Penuel were also wary of giving their support, unwilling to see Gideon become too powerful, but their political gamble backfired when Gideon defeated the Midianite kings without their help.

Although in 8:22, Gideon refuses the kingship, it seems clear that he did exercise a kind of kingly authority, even if over a limited area and number of tribes or clans. His control over the division of the spoils, the making of the ephod (a means of discovering God's will and thus achieving some religious legitimation), and the large number of his wives, concubines and sons are all signs of this, as is the dynastic struggle which ensued after his death.

Judges 9

Shechem was the place of the covenant ceremony where the covenant between God and the twelve tribes was ratified (Joshua 8:30-end, 24:1-27). But at this time the Canaanite population were again in the ascendant and the local shrine had reverted to Baal Berith, "the Lord of the covenant".

The compiler of Judges was very interested in the right attitude towards kingship. The real ruler of Israel is the Lord (8:23) and kingship can only be right if the king is the man of God's choosing. Abimelech was an example for him of the worst excesses of the attempt to set up kingship without the sanction of the Lord. His seizure of the kingship was part of a conspiracy in which the leading citizens of Shechem also hoped to increase the standing of their own city in Israel. Jotham's parable shows that the subsequent conflict between the upstart king and his erstwhile supporters is the Lord's judgement (9:23-24).

Day 61. Psalm 83; Judges 10 - 12

Tribal Division and Power Politics

Psalm 83

Israel looks back to the victories of Deborah and Barak and of Gideon and asks for the same help from God against their enemies.

Judges 10 - 12

The breakdown of tribal unity, the threat from external enemies and the influence of Canaanite culture exacerbate the problems of power politics which began in the aftermath of Gideon's victory. The "judges" are now those with a sufficient power base to dominate particular areas. Their power is both demonstrated and consolidated by having many sons (which assumes several wives and concubines). Jair has a local dynasty and power base (10:3-5), Ibzan tries to extend his power outside his own clan (12:8-10) and Abdon also has many offspring (12:13-15).

When Jephthah is asked to lead the Gileadites his reward is to be political power (10:18, 11:8-10). In contrast to Abimelech, whose origins were similar, Jephthah, is invited to be leader rather than imposed. The agreement is ratified before the Lord (11:11) and Jephthah immediately turns to the task of fighting the Lord's enemies. But his understanding of the battle to come is a Canaanite one. He sees the political power game in which he is involved extending to the realm of the gods. When Israel defeated the Amorites, it was a victory of the Lord over their gods, and now he challenges the Ammonites to take whatever Chemosh can give them (11:23-24).

Like Gideon, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Jephthah, as a result of which he recruits an army and goes out to fight (11:29). But Jephthah is not content to rely on the Spirit. He also makes a foolish vow to secure the Lord's support, and in the aftermath of the victory there is no one with the wisdom to challenge Canaanite convention with Israelite morality.

By defeating the Ammonites, Jephthah consolidates his own power and that of his Gileadite followers. The result is a challenge from Ephraim, still aiming to dominate the other tribes (12:1-6, see 8:1-3).

Day 62. Psalm 144:1-8; Judges 13 - 16

Samson

Psalm 144:1-8

A warrior praises God for his strength and prays for deliverance.

Judges 13 - 16

The Philistines were a people who entered Canaan from the Aegean at about the same time as Israel were entering from across the Jordan and established themselves on the coastal plain of Judah in the cities of Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron and Gath. Apart from the early exploit of Shamgar (Judges 3:31) little is heard about them until late in the period of the judges. Then the Philistines began to expand aggressively into the hills. They were the first people in the area to use iron extensively and while their iron tools increased their prosperity from agriculture their iron weapons made them stronger than the bronze-using peoples of Canaan, including Israel.

Samson was the man specially chosen by God to halt the Philistine advance. Usually a Nazirite vow was made for a set period of time (see Numbers 6:1-21) but Samson was to be a Nazirite from birth. His special strength was to flow from his dedication, expressed in abstention from fermented drink, avoidance of contact with dead bodies and long hair which was never cut. As a result of his vow and that of his parents, the Spirit stirs in him when still young (13:25) and comes upon him for special exploits (14:6,19; 15:14).

In adulthood, God uses Samson's personality to lead him into action against the Philistines - his weakness for Philistine girls, love of riddles and practical jokes, his touchiness, tendency to violent anger and exaggerated desire for revenge. But although dedicated by his vow, Samson is never really dedicated to the Lord in heart. He disregards his vow when he returns to the carcass of the lion and his weakness with women leads to his final downfall when seduced by Delilah. Through his lack of self-discipline he fails to achieve all he should have done. In particular, he failed to rally the tribes and make them willing to fight (15:11). When the Spirit came upon Gideon and Jephthah, they drew others into battle, whereas Samson only performed individual exploits. Because of this Philistine domination went unchecked and the tribal confederacy of Israel almost came to an end (see 1 Samuel 4).

Day 63. Psalm 58; Judges 17 – 19

The Sanctuary at Dan and the Outrage at Gibeah

Psalm 58

A prayer for vengeance on wicked rulers

Judges 17-18

This story recounts the origins of the tribal sanctuary at Dan in the north of Israel. When the kingdoms of Judah and Israel divided, Dan was one of the principal places of worship set up by the kings of Israel in opposition to Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:26-30). But this story indicates that it must already have been an important shrine, which perhaps explains why people would go "even as far as Dan," to worship (1 Kings 12:30). Part of the writer's purpose is to show the dubious nature of its foundation as a place of worship.

The fact that the Danites were still looking for a place to settle some time after the other tribes, suggests that the process of settlement was not as straightforward as suggested in the book of Joshua. The Danites appear at this stage as quite a small family group, still nomadic or semi-nomadic and able to move about as one unit.

Because the 1,100 shekels of Micah's mother had been the subject of a curse, she had to consecrate them in some way, by setting aside the first portion. This is why she made them into an idol and ephod and set up a family shrine. Later this shrine is dignified with a family priest. The ephod was a distinctly priestly garment, connected with the use of the sacred lots to find out God's will. This is how the Levite enquires for the Danites in 18:5-6. These arrangements fall far short of the ideal which later came to be accepted as the norm for Israel's worship.

Judges 19

This chapter is the prelude to the story in chapters 20 and 21 of civil war between Benjamin and the other tribes. Like the previous chapters, it recounts an injustice to someone from the hill country of Ephraim, but neither mentions the claims of Ephraim to leadership of the tribes.

Hospitality, still so important to Middle Eastern culture today, is given lavishly in Bethlehem but breaks down in Gibeah until the arrival of an old

man from the same area as the Levite. But the most striking feature of chapters 19 to 21 is the way women are treated with callous disregard. The Levite appears to view his concubine simply as a piece of property. He and his host are willing to sacrifice their daughter and concubine to save themselves from violence. The narrator's explanation is signalled by the repeated mention of the lack of a king (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). It appears that he is saying: "These are the kind of things that take place in the absence of just rule."

It is not clear why the quartered remains of the concubine should be sufficient to summon the tribes, as happens in 20:1, but Saul does something similar in 1 Samuel 11:7. Perhaps it was understood as a call to arms.

Day 64. Psalm 12; Judges 20 - 21

Civil War

Psalm 12

A prayer in the face of the wickedness of society.

Judges 20 - 21

These chapters portray the situation of Israel early in the time of the judges, before the apparent disintegration associated with Abimelech and Jephthah's dispute with Ephraim. "All Israel" of 20:1 is probably a shorthand way of describing an assembly of tribal elders. Dan in the north and Beersheba in the south were the conventional limits of Israelite territory, with Gilead being east of the Jordan. There is an accepted mechanism for calling the leaders together and this assembly has the power to make decisions binding on all the tribes and to back its decisions by calling on force of arms. As well as the gathering at Mizpah, the elders also go to Bethel, the current location of the ark, to consult the oracle. God's will was made known by the use of the sacred lots, "Urim and Thummim" which were kept by the priests. The presence of Phinehas also suggests an early date (although 20:27b-28a may be a later addition to the text).

The main focus of the story now is the civil war between Benjamin and the rest of the tribes. Benjamin was a small tribe but famed for its warlike quality (20:15-16, see Genesis 49:27). Moreover, it was sandwiched between the powerful tribes of Judah and Ephraim. These rivalries may provide an underlying situation of tension which would explain why the outrage at Gibeah provided the spark which led to all-out war. On the other hand there was also a well-developed moral code in Israel, especially in regard to sexual relations, which contrasted sharply with that of the surrounding peoples (see for example Genesis 34 and the notes on that chapter). The tribal elders may have felt they were upholding the integrity of Israel as well as punishing a moral outrage. For later generations, the story of Gibeah and the near extermination of Benjamin as a result was a forerunner of the later judgement of God on all Israel when they abandoned his laws (see Hosea 10:9).

On the other hand, the near destruction of Benjamin leads the elders to realise the value of the tribal confederacy. If any tribe were to be seen as dispensable by the others, that would lead to pressures for the break-up of

the confederacy. So the elders take steps to provide wives for the surviving Benjaminites without violating their oath. The link with Jabesh Gilead and perhaps the reason why no one from there had come to fight is part of a wider picture of friendly relations between that town and Benjamin, which comes into play in the reign of Saul, who was a Benjaminite (see 1 Samuel 11:1-7; 31:8-13).

Throughout the narratives of Judges, Samuel and Kings, there is a tension between contrasting attitudes to the monarchy. The writer who inserted 17:6, 18:1, 19:1 and 21:25 was obviously strongly in favour of it. He would see the monarchy as given by God and the guarantee of unity and stability. Other writers saw the tribal confederacy in which the only king was the Lord as the ideal and the unfaithful kings of later times as the reason for Israel's downfall.

Day 65. Psalm 123; 1 Samuel 1 - 3

The Call of Samuel

Psalm 123

An attitude of listening dependence upon God and a prayer for deliverance in time of trouble.

1 Samuel 1:1 - 2:11

The house of the Lord at Shiloh, where the ark was, was the tent of meeting which had travelled with Israel in the desert. Elkanah would have had many other local shrines to choose from. But by making the pilgrimage to Shiloh he was identifying himself with the tradition of God's saving acts and the law given at Sinai, rather than the local gods and Canaanite ethos of the other shrines.

Running throughout Scripture is the theme of God as the reverser of fortunes. In particular he chooses as his servants those with a humble heart, who are usually unimportant or despised in the eyes of the world. This is expressed in the Magnificat, the song of Mary, which has many resemblances and may be based on Hannah's song (see Luke 1:46-55; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

Childlessness was universally taken as a sign of God's displeasure, so Hannah is likely to have seen herself as unimportant and unacceptable. She was despised by Peninnah; Elkanah, although he tried to comfort her, did not understand or enter into her sorrow; and Eli misjudged her. When she turns to the Lord in desperation, it is without any support. Unlike Samson's mother, who called her husband to help her, Hannah has to take the initiative and carry the burden herself. The fruitfulness of Samuel's life as a prophet and leader of Israel began with Hannah's spiritual struggle and her dedication of him to the Lord's service.

1 Samuel 2:12 - 3:end

In the period of the judges, the penalty for Israel's unfaithfulness was to be dominated by their enemies, until they turned to God in repentance and he raised up someone to deliver them. Now there is a new development. The prelude to deliverance from the Philistines is to be judgement on the unfaithful house of Eli. This will mean the end of the current priestly dynasty and the destruction of the sanctuary at Shiloh. In the long term this

took place when Eli's family was finally displaced from the priesthood by Solomon to give way to the family of Zadok (2:35; see 1 Kings 2:26-27). In the short term it takes place as the Lord raises up Samuel to lead Israel.

Samuel did not know the Lord because Eli had not taught him. Although Eli tells him to answer with the Lord's name, Samuel replies only, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (3:9-10). An experience of "the numinous", the awesome presence of God, may be and often is misinterpreted because those who have it do not have the framework of belief with which to understand their experience.

Day 66. Psalm 78:56-66; 1 Samuel 4 - 7

The Capture of the Ark

Psalm 78:56-66

Israel remembers the darkest hour of her early history, when the tabernacle was destroyed and the ark of God captured.

1 Samuel 4 - 7

As Samuel grew to manhood and began his ministry as prophet and judge, Israel faced threats from two directions. Externally, the failure of Samson had left the Philistines dominant, while internally Eli and his two sons had failed to teach Israel the Law. It was the second of these that God chose to deal with first, even though it meant the destruction of Shiloh and the capture of the ark. The story suggests that external enemies in fact posed no threat whatever; it was the unfaithfulness of his people that caused God the greatest problem, so great that he had to resort to the destruction of his own sanctuary to remedy it.

Unlike the period of the judges, Israel was loyal to the Lord, to the extent that they even called for the ark to go into battle with them. But this did not secure victory because God had determined to judge the house of Eli before restoring the prosperity of the people. Samuel was waiting in the wings (4:1) and God used defeat to clear the way for him to take over as judge and restore the people's wholehearted loyalty.

Like the people of Jericho (Joshua 2:8-11) and Gibeon (Joshua 9:9-10), the Philistines knew the reputation of the Lord and feared him (4:6-8; 6:4-6). Like the sailors in the story of Jonah, they acted as reverent pagans caught up in and helping to further the Lord's greater purpose, namely to discipline his people (see Jonah 1:7-16). The sequel to the capture of the Ark proved as decisively as victory in battle would have done that the Lord is more powerful than all other gods. For the present day, it reminds us that Christ is victorious over the principalities and powers (Colossians 2:15). The only thing holding back the progress of God's Kingdom is the faithlessness of God's people.

Once the loyalty of Israel was secure and Samuel recognised as leader, the Lord subdued the Philistines (7:2-24). Samuel also set about re-establishing the rule of law and teaching the people God's Law (7:15-17).

Day 67. Psalm 61; 1 Samuel 8 - 10

Israel's First King

Psalm 61

The king prays for God's protection.

1 Samuel 8

In his old age, Samuel's life began to follow the pattern of Eli's. His sons did not follow in his footsteps and he had to hand on the leadership of Israel in a different direction. This time, however, it was to be to a king.

From the beginning, there were two views in Israel about the kingship and both of these are represented in the Bible. One sees kingship in a positive light, and is reflected in passages like 9:16, 10:25-26, 11:14-15, and many of the psalms, which were written for royal occasions. These include Psalm 2, 18, 20, 21, 61, 72, 78 (see verses 65-end) and 132. The king was seen as God's anointed, his representative, who shepherded the people, giving them justice and protecting them from enemies. The other view, however, sees the king as usurping the place of God (Judges 8:23; 1 Samuel 8:7; 12:12). In particular, those who take this view see the court as unnecessary and a burden on the people (8:10-18). Most of chapter 8 comes from a period later in Israel's history, when the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had suffered under unfaithful kings, and Samuel's speech in fact reflects the views of the Deuteronomic compilers. But chapters 9 and 10 are much earlier and were written much closer to the events themselves. Here the Lord provides the king to lead and deliver Israel.

Although these views are opposites, taken together they prepare the way for Jesus. As Messiah he is God's "anointed one", the expected Son of David, who as King is to deliver Israel. But Jesus is also God himself and, like God, he is the king who is rejected by his people (John 19:12-15).

1 Samuel 9 - 10

The sacrifice at Samuel's home town would have been a communal feast. Once an animal was slaughtered, it had to be eaten quickly, since the carcase would not keep. A large animal like an ox would usually be shared, so the sacrifice was an occasion for celebrating and building up community and was known as a "peace offering" or "fellowship offering". As the

honoured guest, Saul was given the best portion. He also had the best place to sleep, on the roof of the house where it would be cooler.

Although outwardly impressive, some of his words and actions suggest that inwardly Saul suffered from an inferiority complex. His first reaction on being told that he was to be king was to protest that he was not important enough (9:21). Later, he tried to avoid being chosen (10:21-24). Like Gideon, another man with a problem with unbelief and inferiority, God gave him a wealth of signs to confirm his call and in addition a "new heart", the ability to see himself and his task in a positive light. But as we shall see in the next few studies, the old habits of thought soon began to reassert themselves and led to his failure (15:17).

Saul made his base in Gibeah (10:26). This town had been destroyed after the outrage of Judges 19-21. It may have been Saul who rebuilt it.

The Beginning of Prophecy

The story in 1 Samuel 9 and 10 gives us some valuable information about Israel's experience of prophesy. Early in Israel's history, prophets were found in groups and associated with worship. They used musical instruments (10:5) and their distinctive mark is the term translated in most versions "prophesying" and in the N.R.S.V. as "prophetic frenzy." This would include singing, dancing and shouting as well as words of praise and prophecy. Throughout Old Testament times guilds or groups of prophets were based at the main shrines, including the Temple at Jerusalem. In the later sources, the books of Chronicles in particular, the "prophets" are seen as Temple musicians (1 Chronicles 25:1).

In 1 Samuel 9:7-12, Samuel is introduced as the "man of God" and "the seer" and a later note tells us that "seer" is the equivalent of what was later known as "prophet". The seer/prophet was a single outstanding figure, who was consulted for information about the will of God. This kind of prophet is frequently found as either adviser or opponent of the king, depending on whether or not the king is willing to listen.

The relationship between the individual prophets or seers and the prophetic groups differed. Despite being a seer, in 1 Samuel 19:18-end we find Samuel leading a prophetic group. Elijah appears as rather a lone

figure, but Elisha is frequently associated with the prophetic groups and on one occasion asks for a minstrel to encourage his prophetic gift (2 Kings 3:15, 6:1-7). When accused of treason, Amos protests that he is not a prophet, meaning not one of the regular shrine prophets, but a herdsman specially called by the Lord (Amos 7:14-15). Jeremiah is treated by the Temple authorities as if he was a member of the prophetic guild and under their authority (Jeremiah 20:1-2; 29:25-27).

Under the monarchy, the role of the prophets in advising or opposing the king became much more important, but there was never a clear-cut distinction between these and the groups of ecstatic worshippers. Ahab summoned the prophetic group to advise him on his war with Syria (1 Kings 22:6), Zedekiah, one of the Temple prophets, opposed Jeremiah (Jeremiah 28:1-4) and Jeremiah and Ezekiel denounced the prophetic guilds for prophesying falsely (Jeremiah 23:9-end; Ezekiel 13:1-16, 22:28). "Prophetic frenzy" continued to be the distinguishing mark of the prophets and frequently means exuberant and ecstatic worship (Numbers 11:24-25; Joel 2:28).
