TEACH THE TEXT
COMMENTARY SERIES

Judges *and* Ruth

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To my precious children: Schuyler, Bradford, and Lila.
May you and your generation do what is right in the eyes of the Lord.

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Welcome to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

Why another commentary series? That was the question the general editors posed when Baker Books asked us to produce this series. Is there something that we can offer to pastors and teachers that is not currently being offered by other commentary series, or that can be offered in a more helpful way? After carefully researching the needs of pastors who teach the text on a weekly basis, we concluded that yes, more can be done; the Teach the Text Commentary Series (TTCS) is carefully designed to fill an important gap.

The technicality of modern commentaries often overwhelms readers with details that are tangential to the main purpose of the text. Discussions of source and redaction criticism, as well as detailed surveys of secondary literature, seem far removed from preaching and teaching the Word. Rather than wade through technical discussions, pastors often turn to devotional commentaries, which may contain exegetical weaknesses, misuse the Greek and Hebrew languages, and lack hermeneutical sophistication. There is a need for a commentary that utilizes the best of biblical scholarship but also presents the material in a clear, concise, attractive, and user-friendly format.

This commentary is designed for that purpose—to provide a ready reference for the exposition of the biblical text, giving easy access to information that a pastor needs to communicate the text effectively. To that end, the commentary

is divided into carefully selected preaching units (with carefully regulated word counts both in the passage as a whole and in each subsection). Pastors and teachers engaged in weekly preparation thus know that they will be reading approximately the same amount of material on a week-by-week basis.

Each passage begins with a concise summary of the central message, or "Big Idea," of the passage and a list of its main themes. This is followed by a more detailed interpretation of the text, including the literary context of the passage, historical background material, and interpretive insights. While drawing on the best of biblical scholarship, this material is clear, concise, and to the point. Technical material is kept to a minimum, with endnotes pointing the reader to more detailed discussion and additional resources.

A second major focus of this commentary is on the preaching and teaching process itself. Few commentaries today help the pastor/teacher move from the meaning of the text to its effective communication. Our goal is to bridge this gap. In addition to interpreting the text in the "Understanding the Text" section, each unit contains a "Teaching the Text" section and an "Illustrating the Text" section. The teaching section points to the key theological themes of the passage and ways to communicate these themes to today's audiences. The illustration section provides ideas and examples for retaining the interest of hearers and connecting the message to daily life.

The creative format of this commentary arises from our belief that the Bible is not just a record of God's dealings in the past but is the living Word of God, "alive and active" and "sharper than any double-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12). Our prayer is that this commentary will help to unleash that transforming power for the glory of God.

The General Editors

Introduction to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

This series is designed to provide a ready reference for teaching the biblical text, giving easy access to information that is needed to communicate a passage effectively. To that end, the commentary is carefully divided into units that are faithful to the biblical authors' ideas and of an appropriate length for teaching or preaching.

The following standard sections are offered in each unit.

1. *Big Idea*. For each unit the commentary identifies the primary theme, or "Big Idea," that drives both the passage and the commentary.
2. *Key Themes*. Together with the Big Idea, the commentary addresses in bullet-point fashion the key ideas presented in the passage.
3. *Understanding the Text*. This section focuses on the exegesis of the text and includes several sections.
   a. The Text in Context. Here the author gives a brief explanation of how the unit fits into the flow of the text around it, including reference to the rhetorical strategy of the book and the unit's contribution to the purpose of the book.
   b. Outline/Structure. For some literary genres (e.g., epistles), a brief exegetical outline may be provided to guide the reader through the structure and flow of the passage.

c. Historical and Cultural Background. This section addresses historical and cultural background information that may illuminate a verse or passage.
d. Interpretive Insights. This section provides information needed for a clear understanding of the passage. The intention of the author is to be highly selective and concise rather than exhaustive and expansive.
e. Theological Insights. In this very brief section the commentary identifies a few carefully selected theological insights about the passage.

4. *Teaching the Text*. Under this second main heading the commentary offers guidance for teaching the text. In this section the author lays out the main themes and applications of the passage. These are linked carefully to the Big Idea and are represented in the Key Themes.
5. *Illustrating the Text*. At this point in the commentary the writers partner with a team of pastor/teachers to provide suggestions for relevant and contemporary illustrations from current culture, entertainment, history, the Bible, news, literature, ethics, biography, daily life, medicine, and over forty other categories. They are designed to spark creative thinking for preachers and teachers and to help them design illustrations that bring alive the passage's key themes and message.

Preface

What a pleasure and a privilege to write this commentary on the books of Judges and Ruth! I pray that, despite any shortcomings, it would make known and bring honor to the "Judge of all the earth," who ultimately brings justice and deliverance to his people. I must also express deep gratitude to many colleagues and their communities for contributing to this work on multiple levels.

First, Lori Way has lived with the books of Judges and Ruth by virtue of being married to me, and her influence is represented in every pericope. For her ongoing logistical support, theological conversations, editorial feedback, emotional inspiration, and love, I am immeasurably indebted.

Second, my first mentor in Old Testament studies and the general editor of this unique series, John Walton, took a risk by inviting this young scholar to contribute a volume. He generously offered wise guidance and warm support throughout the writing process, and he helped me to clarify and refine many remarks. He also introduced me to the expert team at Baker Publishing Group, especially Brian Vos and James Korsmo.

Third, my local Christian family at Granada Heights Friends Church in La Mirada, California, provided a rare environment of nurture for this commentary. Pastors Ed Morsey and Michael Sanborn preached masterfully through every section of Judges. They also spent time in weekly study on Judges with me alongside my colleagues Mark Saucy and Tom Finley.

Fourth, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, generously contributed funds and granted me both a research leave (fall 2010) and a sabbatical (spring 2014) so that I could write this commentary. Special thanks must be expressed to my deans (formerly Dennis Dirks and Mike Wilkins; presently Clint Arnold and Scott Rae) and my department chair (John Hutchison).

Fifth, I had the personal privilege of presenting this material in a variety of settings. These included teaching elective courses at Talbot (spring 2010; 2013), presenting papers at a Biola faculty integration seminar (summer 2011) and at the Society of Biblical Literature (fall 2011; 2014), teaching Sunday school lessons at La Habra Hills Presbyterian Church (January 2011; 2012), and preaching sermons at Granada Heights Friends Church and Biola University (chapel, spring 2010; 2015). Many people at these diverse venues offered constructive feedback and raised helpful questions that facilitated my writing and research.

Finally, I must thank some additional colleagues for their various forms of influence. Stephen Kaufman, about fifteen years ago, guided my reading of Judges and Ruth in a Hebrew prose course at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. More recently Ed Curtis, Ron Pierce, and Moyer Hubbard, authors of other Teach the Text volumes, offered encouragement, accountability, and advice during the writing process. Garry DeWeese, Gary Manning, Bruce Seymour, and Mark Hansard also offered wise feedback in numerous conversations over parts of the manuscript.

For all these fellow laborers I am deeply grateful.

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	Dan.	Daniel
Exod.	Exodus	Ezra	Ezra	Hosea	Hosea
Lev.	Leviticus	Neh.	Nehemiah	Joel	Joel
Num.	Numbers	Esther	Esther	Amos	Amos
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Job	Job	Obad.	Obadiah
Josh.	Joshua	Ps(s).	Psalm(s)	Jon.	Jonah
Judg.	Judges	Prov.	Proverbs	Mic.	Micah
Ruth	Ruth	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Nah.	Nahum
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Song	Song of Songs	Hab.	Habakkuk
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Isa.	Isaiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
1 Kings	1 Kings	Jer.	Jeremiah	Hag.	Haggai
2 Kings	2 Kings	Lam.	Lamentations	Zech.	Zechariah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Eph.	Ephesians	Heb.	Hebrews
Mark	Mark	Phil.	Philippians	James	James
Luke	Luke	Col.	Colossians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
John	John	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Acts	Acts	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Rom.	Romans	1 Tim.	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	2 Tim.	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Gal.	Galatians	Philem.	Philemon	Rev.	Revelation

General

ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research	ca.	*circa*, about
		cf.	*confer*, compare
b.	Babylonian Talmud	chap(s).	chapter(s)
BC	Before Christ (= BCE, Before Common Era)	e.g.	*exempli gratia*, for example

esp.	especially	kg	kilogram(s)
etc.	*et cetera*, and others	lb.	pound(s)
ft.	foot/feet	v(v).	verse(s)
Heb.	Hebrew	vol(s).	volume(s)
ibid.	*ibidem*, there the same	//	parallel passages
i.e.	*id est*, that is		

Ancient Versions and Manuscripts

BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*	4QJudg[a]	Judges manuscript A from Qumran Cave 4
LXX	Septuagint	Vulg.	Vulgate
MT	Masoretic Text		

Modern English Versions

CEB	Common English Bible
ESV	English Standard Version
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
JPS	*The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917.
KJV	King James Version
MSG	*The Message*
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NET	The NET Bible (New English Translation)
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJPS	*The Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985.
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

Modern Reference Works

ABD	D. N. Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
ANEP	J. B. Pritchard, ed. *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
ANET	J. B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Third edition with Supplement. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
ARM	*Archives Royales de Mari* (Mari Royal Archives)
COS	W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger Jr., eds. *The Context of Scripture*. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002.
DCH	D. J. A. Clines, ed. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. 8 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–2011.

DDD	K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P. van der Horst, eds. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
IVPBBCOT	J. H. Walton, V. H. Matthews, and M. W. Chavalas. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000.
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
NIDOTTE	W. A. VanGemeren, ed. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

Introduction to Judges

Have you ever watched a movie that was rated PG-13 or even R? Have you ever felt slightly sick or disturbed after viewing a depiction of intense violence or behavior that was immoral or illicit? I raise this question because I believe such movie experiences are in some ways analogous to what a Bible reader experiences when he or she encounters the biblical book of Judges.

In fact, one could debate whether Judges should be assigned a PG-13 or an R rating. The Motion Picture Association of America explains that "a PG-13 motion picture may go beyond the PG rating in theme, violence, nudity, sensuality, language, adult activities or other elements." Furthermore, "There may be depictions of violence in a PG-13 movie, but generally not both realistic and extreme or persistent violence." On the other hand, the R rating is reserved for those movies that include "intense or persistent violence."[1] The book of Judges certainly depicts intense violence (sometimes of an "adult" nature), which is, relatively speaking, most palatable at the beginning of the book and most repulsive at the end. Perhaps one should assign a PG rating to the opening chapters, a PG-13 rating to the midsection, and an R rating to the concluding narratives. As the book unfolds, Israel's illicit behaviors continue to increase, and by the end the reader is left with that disturbed or sick feeling.

Judges is in fact a dark and disturbing book. It was meant to be so. It is a book that is preoccupied with inverted accounts—stories of reversal where the teachings of Deuteronomy are often unknown or ignored altogether by the characters.[2] The stories of Israel's so-called heroes are mostly stories of scandal presented with billowing intensity.

I often remind my students that it is helpful to ask strategic questions of the book of Judges, such as "What is wrong with this picture?" and "Where

Kenneth C. Way, Judges and Ruth
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is God in this story?" These two interpretive questions are the keys that will be employed in this commentary to unlock the big ideas and the theological themes of each pericope (i.e., the passage or coherent literary unit). But before unpacking the meaning of the respective pericopae (which is the aim in the rest of this commentary) it is necessary to briefly introduce the literary structure, theological contribution, and historical setting of the book of Judges.

Literary Structure

There is a virtual consensus in recent scholarship that Judges has a tripartite structure. There is clearly an introduction (1:1–3:6), body (3:7–16:31), and conclusion (17:1–21:25). Since the early 1980s many scholars have observed thematic and semantic connections between the introduction and the conclusion. For example, Gooding demonstrates that there is a two-part introduction that corresponds to a two-part conclusion, together forming the pattern A-B-B′-A′ (1:1–2:5; 2:6–3:6; 17:1–18:31; 19:1–21:25).[3] Gooding also suggests that the Gideon narrative (6:1–8:32) is the central pivot (F) of a chiasm that accounts for the arrangement of the entire book (A-B-C-D-E-F-E′-D′-C′-B′-A′).[4]

Recently, anthropologist Mary Douglas has made a significant contribution to our understanding of complex chiastic devices in eastern Mediterranean literature, and she calls these patterns "ring compositions."[5] While she has identified ring structures in many short biblical passages, she is most known for theorizing that the entire book of Numbers is arranged in a ring.[6] Based on her exposition of the essential components of a ring composition, I suggest that the entire book of Judges also follows the same pattern (see the figure).[7]

According to Douglas, there are seven characteristics of a ring.

(1) *Exposition or prologue* (1:1–3:6): This section "states the theme and introduces the main characters. . . . It is laid out so as to anticipate the mid-turn and the ending that will eventually respond to it."[8] The primary concepts that are introduced in the prologue of Judges are Israel's military and religious failures with respect to the tribes, leadership, and covenant and the cyclical pattern of apostasy, oppression, and God's deliverance through a leader. The relationships between the prologue, mid-turn, and ending are specifically treated under characteristics 5 and 7 below.

(2) *Split into two halves* (1:1–7:25 and 8:1–21:25): "If the end is going to join the beginning the composition will at some point need to make a turn toward the start. . . . An imaginary line . . . divides the work into two halves, the first, outgoing, the second, returning."[9] The deliverer stories in the first half of the book (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah/Barak) are depicted in a relatively positive light, whereas those of the second half are decidedly negative (Abimelek, Jephthah, Samson). The transitional account of Gideon is a mixed portrayal

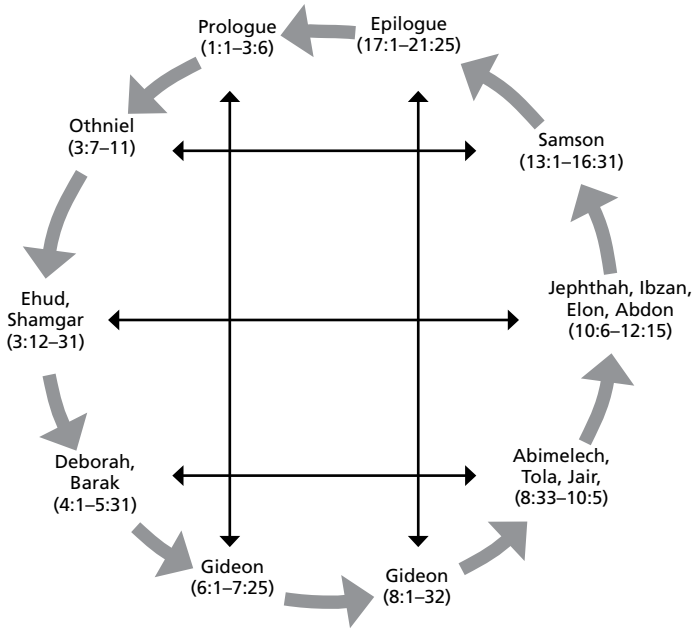

Figure 1. The Ring Structure of the Book of Judges

of both positive/ambiguous and negative elements. It is rightly observed that the body of Judges moves from triumph (3:7–7:25) to tragedy (8:1–16:31), with the shift occurring in the middle of the Gideon narrative.[10] Also, in the first half of the book (including the transitional account of Gideon) the land is said to have rested *x* number of years (3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28), whereas in the second half leaders are merely said to rule/judge *x* number of years (9:22; 12:7; 16:31), and the land apparently has no rest.

(3) *Parallel sections* (3:7–11 // 13:1–16:31; 3:12–31 // 10:6–12:15; 4:1–5:31 // 9:1–10:5): "Each section on one side has to be matched by its corresponding pair on the other side."[11] Interesting semantic and thematic correspondences will be explored in the commentary, such as the roles of marriage in the Othniel/Samson accounts, Ephraimites in the Ehud/Jephthah accounts, and female warriors in the Deborah/Abimelek accounts. The geographical orientations are also the same for each parallel section: Othniel/Samson are set in the south, Ehud/Jephthah deal with eastern (Transjordanian) people groups, and Deborah/Abimelek are set in the north.

(4) *Indicators to mark individual sections*: "Some method for marking the consecutive units of structure is technically necessary," including "key words," "specific signals to indicate beginnings or endings of the sections," "repeating a refrain," and "alternation."[12] The sections are clearly indicated in Judges primarily through the inclusion of formulaic opening refrains and

concluding summaries (3:7 with 3:11; 3:12 with 3:30; 4:1 with 5:31; 6:1 with 8:28–32; 10:6 with 12:7; 13:1 with 16:31). The opening and closing indicators for the Abimelek narrative, while clearly marked (8:33–35 and 9:22–24, 56–57), are different in form from the other narratives (likely for intensified rhetorical effect).

(5) *Central loading* (6:1–8:32): The "middle . . . uses some of the same key word clusters that were found in the exposition. As the ending also accords with the exposition, the mid-turn tends to be in concordance with them both."[13] The Gideon account serves as a transitional pivot for the entire book, and its themes clearly echo those of both the prologue and epilogue (see table 1).

Table 1: Correspondence between Central Pivot and Peripheral Frame

Prologue	A	Israel fights enemies (1:1–2:5)
	B	Israel faces idolatry (2:6–3:6)
Center of Ring	B	Gideon faces idolatry (6:1–32)
	A	Gideon fights enemies (6:33–7:25)
	A	Gideon fights Israel (8:1–21)
	B	Gideon forges idolatry (8:22–32)
Epilogue	B	Israel forges idolatry (17:1–18:31)
	A	Israel fights Israel (19:1–21:25)

Notice especially how both enemies and idolatry transition from the outside to the inside of Israel in the Gideon story as well as in the outer frame.

(6) *Rings within rings*: "The major ring may be internally structured by little rings. . . . A large book often contains many small rings. They may come from different sources, times, and authors."[14] Smaller rings are in fact quite prominent in Judges (e.g., see 4:1–24; 17:1–13; 19:1–30). Numerous literary scholars have identified complex chiastic devices—many of which may qualify as "rings"—in many passages of the book.[15]

(7) *Closure at two levels* (the double-prologue in 1:1–3:6 and the double-epilogue in 17:1–21:25): "By joining up with the beginning, the ending unequivocally signals completion. . . . Just arriving at the beginning by the process of invereted ordering is not enough to produce a firm closure. The final section signals its arrival at the end by using some conspicuous key words from the exposition. . . . Most importantly, there also has to be thematic correspondence."[16] The themes of Israel's military and religious failures saturate the outer framework of Judges, and many key words/phrases are readily apparent in episodes such as Judah going up first (1:1–2; 20:18), acquisition of wives (1:11–15; 21:1–25), application of the ban (1:17; 21:11; cf. 20:48), Jebusites in Jerusalem (1:21; 19:10–11), and Israel weeping (2:4–5; 20:26).

Douglas's seven characteristics of ring compositions are all demonstrably present in the book of Judges. This is not surprising given the common employment of the term "cycle" to describe the patterns evident in this period of Israel's history. But the term "cycle," or even the term "ring," may not actually go far enough in characterizing the structure of the book of Judges. On both the micro and the macro levels (i.e., regarding the smaller rings and the comprehensive ring) there is a movement from positive to negative portrayals—either from good/ambiguous to bad or from bad to worse. Thus the term "spiral" is also used appropriately to characterize the book (cf. 2:19). The beginning of the ring (prologue) is on a higher moral/political plane than the end of the ring (epilogue), just as the first triad of judges is higher than the second triad, and as the early Gideon stories are higher than the latter ones. This descending progression is even demonstrated in themes such as the changing portrayal of women in the book, ranging from honorable (Othniel's wife in chap. 1) to horrific (Benjamite wives in chap. 21).[17] The structure of the book of Judges when viewed from the side therefore reveals a spiral, whereas the structure when viewed from the top or from the bottom reveals a ring.

The movement from positive to negative presentations is also evident in the proportion of verbiage that the narrator devotes to each literary unit. Thus Younger observes: "The more moral, the less verbiage; the less moral, the greater the verbiage."[18] This insightful observation certainly characterizes the sequence of the six major parallel stories of the ring structure. The best

Table 2: Relationship between Verbiage and Morality in the Book of Judges

Literary Units			Verse Count	Word Count[a]
Framework and Pivot	Prologue	1:1–3:6	65	1,390
	Gideon	6:1–8:32	97	2,371
	Epilogue	17:1–21:25	147	3,473
Parallel Panels	Othniel	3:7–11	5	108
	Ehud	3:12–30	19	417
	Deborah/Barak	4:1–5:31	55	1,023
	Abimelek	8:33–9:57	60	1,272
	Jephthah	10:6–12:7	60	1,396
	Samson	13:1–16:31	96	2,291
"Minor" Judges	Shamgar	3:31	1	24
	Tola, Jair	10:1–5	5	87
	Ibzan, Elon, Abdon	12:8–15	8	117
Totals	Whole book	1:1–21:25	618	13,969

[a] The word-count totals were computed in Bible Works software (based on the Hebrew text, search version WTM).

Thinking in Circles about the Book of Judges

When interpreting the Bible, it is important to keep in mind that the biblical text is often not structured according to modern or Western literary conventions. Rather, the Bible preserves conventions that are both ancient and Eastern. Just as linear outlines may be present in modern Western compositions, so also circles, cycles, and chiasms (not mutually exclusive) may be present in biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts. These structures can be intentional or unintentional, explicit or implicit. I suggest that the book of Judges offers a fine example of an intentional ancient Near Eastern ring composition.

and shortest account (Othniel) is eclipsed by that of Ehud, which is eclipsed by Deborah/Barak, which is eclipsed by Abimelek, which is eclipsed by Jephthah, which is finally eclipsed by the worst and longest account (Samson). But Younger's observation about the "major" judges (i.e., what I call the "parallel panels") is also borne out in the remaining sequences of the ring structure (see table 2).

As for the framework and pivot, the prologue is eclipsed by the size of the Gideon account, which is finally eclipsed by the massive epilogue. The same building sequence is even apparent for the so-called "minor" judges: Shamgar is relatively better than Tola and Jair, who are relatively better than Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.

Theological Contribution

Israel's Failure

The downward spiral is the most extensive structural mechanism used by the narrator to convey his point. As a reader, it is difficult to miss the impression that this period was a "dark age" (cf. 1 Sam. 3:1–2), or perhaps an "intermediate period,"[19] in the history of Israel. The message is that the generations following the death of Joshua have increasingly failed to uphold the torah/covenant. This failure is illustrated in all levels of Israelite society. All the people, especially the religious and military leaders, are guilty of disobedience and apostasy. Block aptly describes this failure as "the Canaanization of Israel,"[20] which captures the idea that Judges essentially recounts a reversal of Joshua's conquest.[21]

Refrains

The narrator explicitly makes his point through the use of refrains. The first refrain—that the Israelites did "evil in the eyes of the Lord"—occurs seven

times, once in the prologue (2:11) and six more times in the body of the book (3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). The so-called major judge cycles are meant to be interpreted through the lens of this refrain. The narrator is essentially telling the same story seven times,[22] even though the characters and circumstances keep changing and the stories keep growing in depth and length. Moreover, the opening formula for the Abimelek story ("When Gideon had died the Israelites relapsed and whored after the Baals" [8:33; author's translation]) is a variant form of this refrain that signals an intensification of the apostasy for the second triad of parallel stories.

The second refrain is introduced in the extended epilogue of the book. It has two related components, and it is employed in four places corresponding to the four units of the epilogue. The first and final occurrences, which form an inclusio for the epilogue, are stated in full—"In those days there was no king in Israel; each would do what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25; author's translation)—whereas the two middle occurrences are truncated so that the second component is implied by ellipsis (18:1; 19:1).[23] Again, this refrain is intended as an interpretive lens for viewing the stories of chapters 17–21.

The relationship between the two refrains of chapters 3–16 and 17–21 should not be missed. The descent from shallow to deep waters, which is the narrator's operative principle of literary arrangement, may also describe the shift from the first refrain to the second. Doing evil in the eyes of the Lord is a description of breaking covenant (i.e., disobeying God's commands; see 2:11–13, 20), and it is difficult to imagine what could be worse than that. But indeed the second refrain goes even further. Doing what is right in one's own eyes, as if there were no authority structure whatsoever, is worse than breaking covenant, because it implies that God's word and works have been left entirely out of the picture! Thus in the epilogue the reader deeply senses the *absence* of God's covenant and presence.[24] Israel is depicted here thinking and acting as though the torah does not exist, which poses the question, "Is there any difference between an Israelite and a Canaanite?"

God's Faithfulness

So far the above discussion has mainly focused on the negative message of Judges. But there is an ironic twist to this dark presentation. By emphasizing Israel's *un*faithfulness, the narrator subtly reveals *God's* faithfulness. While Israel's judges are increasingly depicted as failures, readers are ironically reminded that Yahweh is the ultimate "Judge" (11:27). Moreover, while Israel wrestles with the meaning of kingship, readers are reminded that Yahweh shall ultimately "rule" (8:23). After all, God alone is the one who graciously delivers Israel time and time again (e.g., 1:2, 4; 2:16, 18; 3:9–10, 15, 28; 4:14–15; 6:36–37; 7:7, 9, 15, 22; 10:12–14; 11:9, 32; 12:3; 15:18), not because Israel

deserves it but because God chooses to preserve his covenant people.[25] Thus God is revealed in Judges as the consummate Rescuer of his people, which is among the greatest themes of Scripture (e.g., Pss. 3:8; 68:19–20; Isa. 33:22; 43:3, 11; Hosea 13:4; Matt. 1:21; Luke 2:11; 19:10; Acts 4:12).

God's Kingship

This theocentric perspective may help to explicate the meaning of the refrain "no king," which is the theme of the epilogue. Is this refrain merely referring to monarchy as the preferred polity for ancient Israel, or is it also subtly referring to theocracy (the kingship of God) as the ideal for any Israelite polity? Perhaps the reader does not need to decide between theocracy and monarchy. If the ambiguity is intentional, then the point may be that Israel needs a theocratic monarchy in which the human king helps the people to do what is *right* in God's eyes (in accordance with Deut. 17:14–20; cf. 1 Kings 15:5), rather than to do what is right in their own eyes (as illustrated in Judg. 17–21).[26]

Canonical Reflections

There are a number of important theological relationships that may be noted in the canonical juxtapositions of the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and Samuel (see table 3).

Table 3: The Canonical Position of Judges

Hebrew Canon	Joshua	Judges	Samuel	
Greek Canon	Joshua	Judges	Ruth	Samuel

First, the prologue of Judges is clearly related to the book of Joshua. While Joshua emphasizes the total fulfillment of God's promises regarding the conquest and allotment of the land (see Josh. 21:43–45; 23:14–15), Judges 1:1–3:6 emphasizes Israel's partial/failed conquest of the land due to Israel's disobedience. Second, the epilogue of Judges is clearly related to the book of 1 Samuel. Both Judges 17–21 and 1 Samuel explore the relationship between theocracy and monarchy: the former serves as preface for the latter. This relationship is best appreciated in the arrangement of the Hebrew/Jewish canon, in which Samuel immediately follows Judges. Third, the book of Ruth, which is included among the Writings in the Hebrew/Jewish canon (see the introduction to Ruth), is positioned between Judges and Samuel in the Greek/Christian canon. This latter arrangement is also important because Ruth appears to qualify the negative message of Judges with the clarification that there were in fact some bright moments of faithfulness during the dark "days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1). Ruth thus serves a transitional function

Judges as a Mirror for the Church?

"No book in the Old Testament offers the modern church as telling a mirror as this book. From the jealousies of the Ephraimites to the religious pragmatism of the Danites, from the paganism of Gideon to the self-centeredness of Samson, and from the unmanliness of Barak to the violence against women by the men of Gibeah, all of the marks of Canaanite degeneracy are evident in the church and its leaders today. This book is a wake-up call for a church moribund in its own selfish pursuits."[a]

[a] Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 586.

by accounting for the eventual rise of a person like David from Bethlehem (cf. Ruth 4:17, 22).[27]

Methodology

If the book of Judges is primarily about both the unfaithfulness of Israel and the faithfulness of God, then there are important methodological implications for preaching and teaching the book. First, God is the only real hero; therefore, interpretation and application must primarily be theocentric.[28] It is always appropriate to ask, "What does this story teach about God?" Second, the human characters are not role models, either for positive or negative examples. The point is never to (not) be like Samson or even to be like Othniel, whose brief record is pristine in Judges. Rather, Scripture exists to reveal God's character so that his people can know him and become like him.[29] Third and finally, the human condition has not changed. The propensities of disobedience and infidelity among God's people are, sadly, just as rampant today as they were in the days of the judges. Throughout the book, one deeply feels humanity's desperate need for a restored relationship with God—a need that can now be met directly through Jesus Christ.

Historical Setting and Composition

The period of history covered by the book of Judges spans from roughly the death of Joshua to the coronation of King Saul. While most scholars agree that the end of the judges period (or the beginning of the monarchy) was in the late eleventh century BC, there is ongoing discussion regarding the beginning of the judges period. This question is complex due to several factors.

First, there is debate concerning the date of the exodus-conquest.[30] If the exodus occurred in the middle of the fifteenth century BC, the so-called judges period would begin in the early fourteenth century. But if the exodus occurred in the mid-thirteenth century BC, the judges period would begin in the early

twelfth century. The difference between these two views can be as much as two centuries, and one's interpretation depends in large part upon crux passages such as Exodus 1:11 and 1 Kings 6:1.

Second, the years of oppression, peace, and judging provided in the Masoretic Text of Judges total as many as 410 years,[31] but this span is too long even for those who hold to an early exodus date. A certain degree of overlap between the judges is therefore acknowledged by most contemporary interpreters. Indeed, the narrator of Judges appears to be more concerned with selectively presenting regional/tribal (as opposed to national) stories in a highly structured literary pattern than with presenting an exhaustive historical account in strict chronological sequence (e.g., see Judg. 10:7, 11–12).[32]

Third, numerical figures may be rounded or employed in a hyperbolic or symbolic manner, in keeping with the conventions of biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature.[33] For example, a biblical generation, which is typically construed as forty years, may account for the prominence of the number forty (and its divisions/multiples) in the book of Judges (see 3:11, 30; 4:3; 5:31; 8:28; 13:1; 15:20; 16:31; cf. 1 Sam. 4:18). Similarly, while Jephthah's three hundred years (Judg. 11:26) could be understood as a round number or as a symbolic reference to a few generations (see Gen. 15:13, 16, where a century may stand for a generation), it may also be a hyperbolic expression in the context of his politically charged speech. In any case, such numbers may offer limited help for historical reconstruction.

To compound the problem, these three factors are all interrelated. Determining the date of the exodus depends in large part on the degree of overlap between individual judges and on the interpretation of numbers as either literal or figurative. Since this is not the proper venue to try to settle this dispute, the matter must be left unresolved. For the purpose of this commentary, historical data may be considered from the whole range of possibilities—that is, from the early fourteenth century to the late eleventh century BC. In archaeological terms this period spans the Late Bronze Age II (ca. 1400–1200 BC) and Iron Age I (ca. 1200–1000 BC). At the end of the Bronze Age, Canaan was overshadowed by the mighty Egyptian Nineteenth Dynasty, but the early Iron Age was characterized by Egyptian withdrawal and a power vacuum in which many people groups (including Philistines and Israelites) were vying for survival.[34]

Even more complex than the dates for the historical context of Judges are the possible dates for the composition of the book. The composer is ultimately unknown, although Jewish tradition maintains that the author is the prophet Samuel.[35] Recent proposals for the composition date range from the late tenth century to the sixth century BC.[36] Since the book clearly displays editorial activity, it is possible that some portions originated as early as the eleventh century BC (e.g., 1:21) but that the final shaping took place in the

eighth century BC or later.[37] This is indicated by the remark in 18:30 about "the time of the captivity of the land," which can refer to either the Assyrian or Babylonian exile, although the former is more likely.

Synopsis of Contents in the Book of Judges

Military Failure (1:1–2:5): Israel's failure to supplant the Canaanites and to occupy the tribal allotments is because of covenant disobedience after Joshua's death.

Religious Failure (2:6–3:6): Israel's failure to keep the covenant after Joshua's death is demonstrated through the cycle of sin, oppression, and deliverance and through God's testing of Israel by the nations.

Othniel (3:7–11): Due to Israel's apostasy, God gives them over to a distant northern oppressor and delivers them by the power of his Spirit through the foreigner Othniel.

Ehud (3:12–30): God providentially delivers Israel from Moabite oppression through the risky and tricky schemes of Ehud even though Israel has neglected God's commands.

Prose Account of Deborah and Barak (4:1–24): God is the ultimate hero who commands Israel and miraculously delivers Israel from the Canaanites while God's people are faith challenged and their participation is partial.

Poetic Account of Deborah and Barak (5:1–31): The song of Deborah and Barak reveals the kingship of God by celebrating his miraculous acts of deliverance and the blessings that are received by the individuals and tribes who participate.

Gideon's Rise (6:1–32): God affirms his presence with Gideon, commissions him to deliver Israel from the Midianite oppression, and initiates him through direct confrontation with Baal.

Gideon's Battle (6:33–7:25): God gets the glory by empowering Gideon to conscript Israel, reducing the number of troops and defeating Midian while Gideon is doubtful, controlling, fearful, and egotistical.

Gideon's Demise (8:1–32): Gideon leaves behind God's miraculous defeat of the Midianites and is consumed with selfish vendettas, aggrandizement, and the consolidation of economic and religious power in Ophrah.

Abimelek (8:33–9:57): Israel's worship of Baal-Berith and Abimelek's three-year oppression are followed by God's retribution on both Abimelek and the Shechemites for their violence against Gideon's house.

Israel's Problem (10:6–16): God responds to Israel's habitual apostasy by sending more oppression, refusing to deliver them, and rejecting their superficial repentance as a manipulative ploy.

Jephthah's Rise (10:17–11:28): Jephthah emerges as a leader in Gilead despite his sordid past, selfish ambitions, and theological ignorance, and Jephthah exclaims that God is the ultimate Judge who can bring justice in Israel's dispute with Ammon.

Jephthah's Fall (11:29–12:7): God delivers Israel from the Ammonites but passively lets Jephthah and the Israelites destroy themselves through gratuitous acts of human sacrifice and civil war.

Minor Judges (3:31; 10:1–5; 12:8–15): The minor judges reinforce the progressive patterns and themes of the book, provide thematic transitions between cycles, and bring the total number of leaders to twelve in order to indict all Israel.

Samson's Beginning (13:1–25): God graciously raises up Samson from an apathetic Danite family, and God equips him in order to initiate Israel's deliverance from the Philistines.

Samson's Marriage (14:1–20): God's plans against the Philistines are accomplished through Samson even though he is self-absorbed, marries a Philistine, and is disengaged from God.

Samson's Revenge (15:1–20): God's plans against the Philistines are accomplished in spite of Judah's opposition and Samson's vengeful and selfish behavior.

Samson's End (16:1–31): God's victory over Dagon is accomplished by graciously empowering Samson despite his foolishness with Delilah, his apathy toward God, and his vengeance against the Philistines.

Micah's Shrine (17:1–13): The story of Micah's shrine shows that Israelite worship was indistinguishable from Canaanite worship because of a disregard for God's authority and instruction.

Danite Migration (18:1–31): The story of the Danite migration shows that judgment is inevitable when religious leaders and whole tribes reject God's presence and revelation and live for their own interests.

The Levite's Concubine (19:1–30): The disturbing story of a concubine's rape and murder shows a degenerate religious leader and a Canaanized Israel who operate apart from God's authority and according to their own self-interests.

Israel versus Benjamin (20:1–48): God judges Canaanized Israel as the tribes precipitously unite under the Levite, consult God on their own terms, and apply the ban to the Benjamites because of the reported atrocities at Gibeah.

Wives for Benjamin (21:1–25): Israel's spiraling descent into Canaanization reaches its lowest point as God lets Israel partially destroy itself through hateful oaths, increased genocide, and the violent exploitation of women.

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Judges 1:1–2:5

Military Failure

Big Idea

Disobedience can result in hardship and the failure to appropriate God's promises.

Key Themes

- God selects the tribe of Judah to lead the nation.
- Victory comes from the Lord.
- Israel's tribes are all unfaithful to the covenant.
- God is faithful to uphold his covenant promises.
- Obedience leads to successful occupation of the land.
- Disobedience leads to foreign oppression and loss of land.

Understanding the Text

The Text in Context

The book of Judges continues the story of the conquest, which was introduced by the book of Joshua. Whereas Joshua emphasizes God's faithfulness in giving the land to Israel, the book of Judges—especially chapter 1—emphasizes Israel's ongoing responsibility and delinquency in occupying the land. The apparent differences between the accounts of Joshua and Judges should be viewed not as contradictory but as complementary accounts that serve distinct theological purposes.[1]

The prologue to the book of Judges consists of two parts, 1:1–2:5 and 2:6–3:6. These two passages focus, respectively, on the military and religious failures of Israel and set the theological stage for the "deliverer" stories that will follow in 3:7–16:31. The general theme of chapter 1 is Israel's military fight against their external enemies. Midway through the book, this same theme will be first revisited and then reversed in the Gideon narrative (in 6:33–7:25 and 8:1–21, respectively). Then at the very end of the book, in the second part of the epilogue (19:1–21:25), the theme of chapter 1 will be mirrored so that Israel's military fight is against their *internal* enemies.

The rhetorical connections between the opening and closing sections of the book include the following: (1) designation of Judah's leadership (1:1–2; 20:18); (2) employment of the key verb "to go up" (1:1–4, 16, 22; 2:1; 20:3, 18,

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The tribal allotments

23, 26, 28, 30–31; 21:5, 8); (3) inquiring of the Lord (1:1; 18:5; 20:18, 23, 27); (4) prominence of women (1:12–15; 19:1–30; 21:1–25); (5) application of the ban (1:17; 21:11; cf. 20:48); (6) attention to all Israel (1:1–2:5; 20:1–21:25); and the mention of (7) Jerusalem/Jebus (1:7, 8, 21; 19:10–12), (8) Bethel (1:22–26; 20:18, 26, 31; 21:2, 19), (9) weeping and sacrifice (2:4–5; 20:23, 26; 21:2, 4), and (10) dispersing "each to his inheritance" (2:6; 21:24; author's translation).

Structure

A great deal of symmetry is evident in this opening passage. It is framed by the assembly of all Israel receiving a word from the Lord: first a word of commissioning (1:1–2) and finally a word of indictment (2:1–5). Between these bracketing units are two sections: one about Judah (1:3–20) and the other about the remaining Cisjordanian tribes (1:21–36),[2] although Issachar is not mentioned. These four units form an A-B-B′-A′ structure, and each unit employs the key verb "to go up" (1:1–4, 16, 22; 2:1).[3]

The geographical progression for 1:3–36 moves from the southernmost tribe to what will become the northernmost tribe (from Judah/Simeon to Dan), but the section dealing only with Judah (1:3–20) moves from north to south. The general south-to-north geographical arrangement of 1:3–36 is paralleled by a good-to-bad pattern in the tribal success rate for possessing the land. Relatively speaking, Judah gains ground while Dan loses ground. Both the south-to-north and the good-to-bad patterns will be utilized again by the composer for arranging the sequence of deliverer stories in the parallel sections of the book (3:7–16:31).

Historical and Cultural Background

The numerous place names in this chapter are prominent in Bronze Age texts (see the "Additional Insights" following the unit on Judg. 2:6–3:6). Perhaps the most important document regarding the historical geography of Judges 1 is the Merneptah Stele (ca. 1209 BC), in which Pharaoh boasts: "Canaan is plundered, Ashkelon is carried off, and Gezer is captured. Yenoam is made into non-existence; Israel is wasted, its seed is not; and Hurru is become a widow because of Egypt."[4] This is the earliest extrabiblical reference to Israel in ancient Near Eastern sources, and it indicates that Israel was an ethnic group (rather than a region or city) that was present in the land at the end of the thirteenth century BC.[5] In a similar fashion, the Israelites are designated as "the *people* of YHWH/God" during this period (see Num. 11:29; 16:41 [Heb. 17:6]; Judg. 5:11, 13; 20:2; 1 Sam. 2:24; 2 Sam. 1:12; 6:21; 14:13).

Interpretive Insights

1:5 *Adoni-Bezek.* This is most likely a title meaning "Lord of Bezek," with the second element designating a place (identified with either Khirbet Salhab or Khirbet Ibzik; cf. 1 Sam. 11:8).

1:6 *cut off his thumbs and big toes.* Physical mutilation of enemies is well attested in biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts[6] and is illustrated in the

iconography of Egypt and Assyria. This wartime practice was intended not merely to punish and incapacitate but especially to humiliate the enemy.[7]

1:7 *Seventy kings.* This number is often employed in royal contexts and should be understood as a figure of speech.[8]

God has paid me back for what I did to them. The words of this Canaanite ruler introduce the prominent theme of retribution. In the first half of the book, justice is often meted out by God (1:7; 2:2–3, 20–21; 5:23), but in the second half revenge often characterizes the Israelites (esp. chaps. 8; 9; 12; 15–16; 19–21).

1:8 *Jerusalem . . . on fire.* Apparently the Judahite razing of Jerusalem is short lived, and the Jebusites quickly assume control (1:21; 3:5; 19:10–12). The site would not become Israelite until David's conquest (2 Sam. 5:6–9). This pattern of initial gain with subsequent loss may also be observed for the region of Philistia (cf. Judg. 1:18–19; 3:3).

1:10 *Kiriath Arba . . . Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmai.* Sheshai and Talmai are Hurrian names, whereas Ahiman is West Semitic.[9] These are the "three sons of Anak" (1:20; cf. Num. 13:22; Josh. 15:14), who are elsewhere described as having "great size" (Num. 13:32; see the "Additional Insights" following the unit on Judg. 2:6–3:6). Arba is also a personal name. He was apparently the founding father of Hebron and is called "the greatest man among the Anakites" (Josh. 14:15) and "the forefather of Anak" (Josh. 15:13; 21:11).

1:16 *City of Palms.* This most likely designates Jericho; see the comments on Judges 3:13.

1:17 *totally destroyed.* See the sidebar "The Ban" in the unit on Judges 21:1–25.

1:18 *Judah also took Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron.* In the Septuagint this sentence is negated ("did not capture"), most likely due to an apparent contradiction between this verse and the following verse stating that Judah was not able to dispossess the inhabitants of the plain (cf. Josh. 13:2–3). But the supposed contradiction between verses 18 and 19 can be resolved by noting the semantic distinction (between the verbs "capture" and "dispossess") and/or by positing a historical gap between the two remarks (perhaps the region was Canaanite in v. 18 and Philistine in v. 19; cf. 3:3). For further reference on the Philistines, see the sidebar "The Philistines" in the unit on Judges 15:1–20.

1:19 *chariots.* The early Israelites who were based in the hill country had little use for chariots, which were employed by the Canaanites and Philistines in the plains (cf. Josh. 17:16, 18; Judg. 4:3). The style of these chariots represented newer technology (cf. 1 Sam. 13:19–21), as they were likely plated or reinforced with iron.[10]

1:21 *to this day.* This phrase, both here and in Joshua 15:63, may indicate that this particular account was composed prior to David's conquest of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6–9).

2:1 *angel of the* LORD. This is apparently the divine messenger promised in Exodus 23:20–23; 33:2. See the "Additional Insights" following the unit on Judges 8:1–32.

Theological Insights

The key to understanding this passage is the speech from the angel of the Lord (2:1–3). His indictment, "Why have you done this?" (2:2), makes explicit what was only implicit in chapter 1, that Israel's military failures are actually the consequences of spiritual failures. Israel cannot blame the Lord for their situation. While the Lord asserts that he is the covenant keeper (2:1) and that Israel is the covenant breaker (2:2; cf. 2:20), he explains that the ongoing oppression and testing is his punitive response to Israel's disobedient behavior (2:3; cf. 2:21–23).

From Judah to Dan, both the level of spiritual offense and the extent of military failure are therefore expressed on a continuum from relatively best to worst. While Judah accomplishes more than any other tribe, they appear to be a reluctant leader since Judah persuades Simeon to join them on their God-given mission (1:3). Block also suggests that Judah's retributive dealings with Adoni-Bezek are very "Canaanite" in character (1:6–7).[11] The final note on Judah is the mixed report that although the Lord was "with" them, Judah did not dispossess the inhabitants of the plain (1:19)—an unacceptable outcome in light of Deuteronomy 7:2, 17–21; 20:1.

God's presence is also affirmed for the house of Joseph (1:22), although they fail to carry out the ban by showing kindness to a Canaanite family from Bethel (1:24–26; cf. Exod. 23:32; 34:12; Deut. 7:2, 16; 20:16–17). Canaanites have persisted to dwell with Manasseh (Judg. 1:27) so that "possessing, they did not in fact possess it" (1:28; author's translation). Canaanites also dwell in the midst of both Ephraim and Zebulun (1:29–30). Rather than hosting the Canaanites, both Asher and Naphtali actually have done the reverse: they live "among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land" (1:32–33; cf. 3:5). The repeated pattern of subjecting Canaanites to "forced labor" (1:28, 30, 33, 35) might sound like a relatively positive outcome if such were not explicitly forbidden in Deuteronomy 20:10–18. Finally, Dan's failures are the greatest because they have been pushed out of their inheritance altogether by the Amorites (Judg. 1:34), who are ironically honored with the only border description in the passage (1:36).[12]

Thus, chapter 1 is a most depressing account on which to begin the book. The period of the judges is characterized by occasional local victories and losses as well as foreign oppression and general political instability. Nevertheless, the angel of the Lord reminds us that God is still in complete control

of Israel's identity and destiny. In fact, any military successes recorded in chapter 1 are wholly credited to God (1:2, 4, 7, 19, 22).

Teaching the Text

Since Judah meets with some success and is depicted in a relatively positive manner in 1:1–20, one might be tempted to apply this passage by upholding that tribe as a faithful model to imitate. But to do so would ignore the other explicit teachings of the text regarding Judah's compromises. After God commissions Judah and promises deliverance, Judah (the largest tribe!) enlists the help of Simeon, possibly treats Adoni-Bezek according to Canaanite terms, applies the ban explicitly to only *one* city (in Simeon's territory), and is intimidated by iron chariots (despite the affirmation of Deut. 20:1; cf. Josh. 17:18).

Clearly, the point here is not that we should be like Judah. Rather we learn that the tribe of Judah, although imperfect, is nevertheless God's choice for leadership after the death of Joshua. Judah is therefore special not because the tribe shows some obedience but because Judah is chosen by God to succeed Joshua. This is part of God's revelatory plan of divine kingship through the Davidic dynasty.[13] Eventually this will be expressed through the coming of Israel's ultimate king in the form of the Messiah. Thus Judges 1 builds on the promises to Judah from the Pentateuch (Gen. 49:8–12; Deut. 33:7; cf. Num. 10:14), and it lays the groundwork for the next phase of God's program, which is the subject of the books of Samuel (cf. 2 Sam. 2:1).

Additionally, a number of principles may be derived from this passage concerning the covenant relationship between God and his people. First, there is no legitimate substitute for obedience. Judah's compromises of their divine calling and the lack of trust in God result in a smaller inheritance (1:19). When God's people have a "mixed" response to God's commands (cf. 1:3–26), the results may also be a mixture of blessing with curse.

Second, God's people must acknowledge that just retribution concerns pagans as well as saints (i.e., the nations as well as God's people). This principle is ironically acknowledged by Adoni-Bezek (1:7), and it is reinforced as the angel of the Lord applies it to the nation of Israel (2:2–3; cf. 2:20–21). Sometimes great hardships in life may come as a direct result of spiritual failures such as foolish choices or actions.

Third, God's agendas are not derailed by the disobedience of his people. God may override the principle of retribution by graciously granting blessings despite compromises or rebellion (cf. 1:2, 4, 7, 19, 22). God is indeed the righteous judge of all people, but he also shows mercy and grace whenever and to whomever he wills (cf. Exod. 33:19; 34:6–7).

Finally, success is not always an indicator of obedience. While the house of Joseph succeeds in occupying Bethel, they do not follow God's instructions related to the ban (1:22–26; cf. 2:2; Deut. 7:2, 16; 20:16–17). Success must be defined on God's terms; or stated differently, the end should never justify the means.[14]

Illustrating the Text

God doesn't measure disobedience on a sliding scale; a small trace can bring big consequences.

Logic: Ask your listeners to consider math, and percentages in particular. Ask if they would be satisfied if they got their way 75 percent of the time. What about 98 percent? Ask if they think God is the same. What if, in 98 percent of circumstances, we say, "God, you are the wisest, and I will yield to you," but in 2 percent we say, "This, however, is an exception; this is one area where I am right and you are wrong." How will that work out for us? With God, doing things 98 percent his way is still 100 percent our way—we are modifying his standard to match our preferences. For a biblical illustration of this principle, cite James 2:10: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

In his graciousness, God often gives blessings in spite of our disobedience.

Parenting: Ask your listeners to consider how parents often give gifts to their children on special occasions such as birthday parties, even when the children are grumpy or otherwise not at their best. This does not mean the parents approve of all their child's behavior—it means that the parents have a gracious, loving relationship with the child that is big enough to eclipse the momentary misbehavior.

A successful end does not justify sinful means.

Sports: Rosie Ruiz Vivas is a Cuban American who appeared to win the female category for the eighty-fourth Boston Marathon in 1980 with the third-fastest time in the world of 2:31:56. Later, questions arose about her performance, as she had not been sweaty, did not appear to be in the same shape as other runners, and had not been seen by the top runners she would have had to pass to win. In the end, it was proved that Rosie had slipped into the crowd near the finish line and only run the end of the race. She was stripped of her title, and the real winner was rewarded. Despite the short-term glory of an apparently successful finish, her illicit means of winning was eventually found out and judged. A similar illustration could reference famous cyclist Lance Armstrong's illicit steroid use.