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Judges: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

March 20, 2022



Alastair Roberts

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Transcript

The book of Judges begins after the death of Joshua. Before his death, Moses passed on the reins to Joshua, who was appointed as the new leader. Joshua was a rather different leader from Moses.

Whereas Moses represented the Lord more powerfully over against Israel, Joshua represented and related to the people much more directly. However, Joshua didn't appoint a successor in the way that Moses did. John Barrett compares the death of Joshua to the ascension of Jesus in this respect.

Jesus doesn't appoint a new Jesus-like figure to take his place. Rather, leadership is taken up by the apostles and the elders. The book of Judges begins with the Israelites inquiring of the Lord more directly themselves, rather than Moses or Joshua doing it for them.

The beginning of Judges is similar to the beginning of the book of Joshua. However, the similarities also serve to highlight the differences. At the beginning of Judges, the people are taking much more agency themselves.

The Lord doesn't directly instruct a leader over them. Rather, they must inquire of the Lord themselves. The first chapter of Judges sets the tone for much of what follows.

It's a chapter of occasional and partial victories and of various failures. Whereas the book of Joshua generally struck a more positive note regarding the success of the conquest, in Judges we see just how much remains to be done. There is a difference between taking

territory and possessing it.

Israel has gone throughout the land, defeating cities as they went. However, when they moved on, Canaanites would regroup, rebuild and reoccupy territory that had been taken earlier. At the end of Joshua, we discover that there were still many Canaanites in the land.

And in the beginning of Judges, we see just how many. The rest of the book of Judges will be about securing and consolidating the gains of the conquest. If the book of Joshua is like Abraham, moving throughout the land and building altars and digging wells, the book of Judges is like Isaac, who has to consolidate the work of his father, redigging or re-establishing wells of his father that have been lost or taken.

The Lord had previously said that they would not take the land in one fell swoop. In Exodus 23, verses 29-31 I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possessed the land.

And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines and from the wilderness to the Euphrates. For I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. But Israel was also given a warning in Numbers chapter 33, verses 55-56 But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell.

And I will do to you as I thought to do to them. In Judges chapter 1, we see both the gradual character of the conquest, but also the failure of Israel to drive out the Canaanites and possess the land, and the ongoing problems that produced. Many of the details described recall or repeat earlier accounts from the book of Joshua.

Working out the chronological order of events in Joshua and Judges relative to the fixed points of the entry into the land and the death of Joshua is not straightforward. In Joshua, some events seem to occur prior to the death of Joshua that here seem to occur afterward. The material in both Joshua and Judges is ordered less with a concern for chronological clarity than with a concern for the meaning of the events being recounted.

Although Judges chapter 1 begins with the death of Joshua, chapter 2 recounts the death of Joshua again. My suspicion is that much of the material from verse 3 to the end of the chapter might have occurred in the 40 years or so that probably intervened between the entry into the promised land and the death of Joshua, rather than subsequently. The ordering of the material is less chronological than geographical and according to the order of the tribes.

The death of Joshua was probably over 40 years after the first entry into the land, and

they are still fighting to occupy some of their territory. This gives some sense of how long the process of the conquest and the consolidation of the possession of the land was. As at the beginning of the initial conquest in Joshua, they start in Jericho as we see in verse 16.

Jericho is the city of palms and they are taking over the land. The Lord declares that the Judahites should go up first. We should probably hear something more in the statement that the land has been given into Judah's hand.

Judah will lead the tribes into battle and the tribe of Judah will also come to lead the nation. The preeminence of Judah among the tribes was already seen in Genesis chapter 49 verses 8 to 10. In Numbers chapter 2 the tribe of Judah was also the tribe that led Israel on its marches.

There is an implicit answer not just to the question of who will lead Israel in the fight against the Canaanites, but also to the question of what sort of rule would emerge after the deaths of Moses and Joshua in time. We should also notice here that the people are dividing more into their tribal groups, without a single human leader over the whole nation or a gathered assembly of the whole nation at this time. The order of Judges 1 is carefully stylized.

It can be divided into two halves. The first half from verses 3 to 21 and the second from 22 to 36. The first concerns the southern tribes, Judah, Simeon and Benjamin.

It's led by Judah and the second concerns the northern six and a half tribes, although no mention is made of Issachar at this point, and they're led by the house of Joseph. Judah and Simeon form an alliance and begin with a great victory over Adonai Bezach, where they defeat over 10,000 of his men, a round number that clearly seems numerically significant for its suggestion of completeness. It's a resounding victory.

Simeon's territory as a tribe lies within the borders of Judah and the pact between the two leads to the absorption of the former into the latter in time. They cut off the thumbs and the big toes of Adonai Bezach. This is an act of justice.

It's testified to by Adonai Bezach himself, as he had done the same thing to 70 rulers. Adonai Bezach is, beyond being an important defeated enemy, something of a representation of the brutality of the Canaanites and the reason why the Lord sent Israel to destroy them. Adonai Bezach rules over 70 rulers, perhaps reminding the reader of the 70 nations of the world, mentioned in chapter 10 of Genesis.

The Judahites capture the city of Jerusalem and set it on fire. The mention of Jerusalem at this point is important. It will later be the royal city where the kings of Judah will reign.

Both in the opening reference to the preeminence of Judah and the presence of Jerusalem in the narrative, some royal themes are starting to emerge in a book that will

be about a period in which there was no king in Israel. It will not be until 2 Samuel chapter 5 that Jerusalem is finally properly taken by David. Caleb was a leader of the Judahites and in Joshua chapter 14 verses 6 to 15 he was granted the territory of Hebron by Joshua.

In Joshua chapter 15 verses 13 to 19 we have the same story of Aksa, Caleb's daughter, that we have here. Arthaniel captured Kiriath-sephir for Caleb and won Aksa's hand. Aksa's request to Caleb is one of the great land-grant narratives in the book of Joshua.

She requests springs of water and perhaps this should remind us of the connections between women and water sources in Genesis and elsewhere. We also discover at this point that some of the descendants of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, were among them at this time. Later, the wife of one of these Kenites, Jael, will play an important part in the story.

The story of Judah's possession of the land is generally positive but they failed to take the lowland as the inhabitants of the plain had iron chariots. Also, while the Judahites captured Jerusalem and put it to the sword, the Benjaminites, in whose territory it lay, couldn't drive out the Jebusites who lived there. After the southern struggle for possession led by Judah, we have the northern struggle for possession led by the house of Joseph.

Judah goes up first in the first attack upon the south and then in verse 22 the house of Joseph then goes up. Judah and Joseph were the leading tribes as we see in the preeminence of Judah and Joseph in the blessings of Genesis chapter 49. Judah and Joseph were also formally represented by Caleb and Joshua respectively.

As in the case of the conquest of Judah, this story begins with an important city. In the former account it was Jerusalem and this time it's Bethel or Laz. Bethel was a prominent city in the stories of Abraham and particularly of Jacob.

Jacob had the vision of the ladder there and had called it Bethel at that time. The house of Joseph spy out the city, much as the spies spied out Jericho at the beginning of the book of Joshua. They are helped by a man whom they spare, much as the Israelites spared Rahab.

However the stories diverge at this point. The story of the defeat of Jericho ends with a curse upon the person who tries to rebuild the city and with Rahab living among the Israelites. However this story ends with the man moving to the land of the Hittites and building a city named after the original Canaanite name of the city of Bethel.

This is not a promising sign. The northern tribes are a great deal less successful in their attempts to occupy their land. While they generally dominated the Canaanites dwelling in their territories and sometimes reduced them to forced labour, they could not expel or

assimilate them.

In some cases we are told that the Canaanites lived among them. In others that they lived among the Canaanites. In verse 33 for instance the Canaanites are referred to as the inhabitants of the land.

Dan has particular difficulties overcoming the Amorites and were repelled in their attempts to capture the lowland, being driven back to the hill country. The northern tribes can achieve little more than a fragile hegemony. By the end of the chapter the confidence with which it began has sunk and the situation of Israel looks rather bleak.

Israel has failed to live up to the promise of the conquest. A question to consider. Taking stock of the situations that the various tribes find themselves in at this point what might have been the greatest challenges and temptations that they would have felt? The beginning of Judges chapter 2 needs to be read as the conclusion to chapter 1. Judah and Joseph go up and then the angel of the Lord goes up in chapter 2 verse 1. The identity of this figure is a matter of some debate.

Literally the messenger of the Lord, a case could be made for him being a prophet, an angel or a theophanic manifestation of God himself. Back in Exodus chapter 23 verses 20-24 the angel of the Lord was introduced. Behold I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice. Do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. It seems most likely to me that this is the figure that we encounter in Judges chapter 2. The angel of the Lord goes up from Gilgal to Bochem. Perhaps we are to identify the angel of the Lord here with the same commander of the army of the Lord that Joshua met near Gilgal at the end of Joshua chapter 5. The angel casts judgment upon Israel for its failure.

He recounts the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and condemns Israel for its failure to destroy the altars of the people of the land and their breaking of the requirement not to enter into covenant with them. As a consequence of their unfaithfulness, the Lord will not drive out the Canaanites before them. Rather, the Canaanites will be a continual threat to them in fulfilment of the warning in Numbers chapter 33 verses 55-56.

But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you then those of

them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell and I will do to you as I thought to do to them. However, we should note that in the angel of the Lord's speech the people are not judged for failing to drive out all of the Canaanites rather it is their failure to tear down the false worship of the Canaanites and to refrain from entering into covenant with them that they are condemned for. Israel's response to the angel's indictment suggests some degree of remorse or contrition for what they have done they even name the place after their weeping.

However, as soon becomes apparent, even though they weep and make sacrifices there is no significant and deep change. Bochem was most likely near Bethel as the two are identified in the Septuagint. The visit of the angel might also recall the judgement upon Adam and Eve in the garden.

What is this you have done? The land now yielding thorns and thistles that will make their labour difficult for them. Verse 6 is a jarring break with the flow of the narrative presuming that we are reading the preceding verses as having occurred after the death of Joshua. It seems that after the encounter with the angel at Bochem Joshua dismisses the people.

However this is likely a flashback the first chapter had focused upon Israel's military failure the second chapter focuses more upon their religious failure and their going after false gods. Joshua dies at the age of 110 it's the same age as Joseph died at. If Joseph brought Israel out of the land it was Joshua, a descendant of Joseph who returned them.

Moses lived to be 120 12×10 , a number suggesting a full measure of Israel however 110 is 10×11 falling short from 12. There is a sense of incompleteness here. Indeed as James Jordan and James Bajon have observed multiples of the number 11 occur at several points in the book of Judges and here in Judges we certainly get a sense of the way in which the work of Joshua was incomplete.

And we also see reminders of the original situation of the Exodus when we are told that Joshua and his generation died out and a new generation arose who did not know the Lord or what he had done for Israel especially when we consider the parallels between Joshua and Joseph Exodus 1 6-8 reads, Then Joseph died and all his brothers and all that generation but the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them now there arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph it's the same sort of thing that's happening here the people of this new generation did not know the Lord they also have a very different character from the generation that preceded them they have not experienced his deliverances generations that have not had certain formative experiences can easily forget the lessons painfully learned by past generations so much of the Pentateuch was devoted to memorial, to remembrance and to institutionalisation of events precisely in

order to guard against such a scenario to ensure that Israel never forgot the Lord in such a manner never forgot the lessons that they had been taught in the time of the Exodus the failure of Israel on the military front their failure to drive out the Canaanites in chapter 1 was bad enough however here we see far more serious failures as Israel goes after the gods of the Canaanites, the Baals and the Ashtoreth these are the gods of the people of the land, they're foreign gods that Israel had not known, these are gods that had not delivered them that they had not experienced in salvation before Barry Webb notes the succession of verbs here that put the gravity of their sin into the sharpest relief served, abandoned, went after, prostrated themselves, abandoned and served we should consider that they probably served these gods in large measure as a form of treaty making, an assimilation to the ways of the Canaanites who continued to dwell in their midst, religious syncretism alliances and intermarriage went together and were the sort of strategies that people in Israel's precarious position in the land would be extremely tempted to adopt, the prospect of remaining distinct from the people in whose midst they dwelled or who dwelt in the midst of them was one that probably scared many of them, such people could easily turn against them if the balance of power shifted, so it seemed to make sense to worship their gods, to enter into treaties with them, to intermarry with them and in all ways possible to get on good terms with the neighbours as a result of their unfaithfulness the Lord gave them into the hand of plunderers and acted against them, the Lord however took pity upon his people, even in their unfaithfulness and raised up judges to deliver them, he heard their groaning much as he had heard the groaning of the Israelites in Egypt, the judges were raised up as deliverers for Israel, they also as implied by verse 17 served to proclaim the truth of the Lord and to establish some sort of true worship, however even if Israel temporarily improved in the days of a judge, they would soon return to their unfaithfulness becoming even worse than they were before and as a consequence of their disobedience and unfaithfulness they would not enter into the full possession of the land, the Lord had declared by Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 11 verse 24, every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours, your territory shall be from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the river, the river Euphrates to the western sea, however now their territory would not expand beyond the gains made by Joshua there would be people left in the land and they would become a snare and thorns in their side, a question to consider, what lessons might we draw from Judges chapter 2's portrayal of the providence of God in the affairs of men in history, Judges chapter 3 begins with a list of the nations that were left to trouble Israelites in the land we are told that the reason for leaving these nations was so that the Israelites might learn war, Israel needed to recognise the existence of a fundamental conflict, preserving a seed of the woman required the maintenance of enmity between them and the seed of the serpent and war was a means of achieving this, had Israel enjoyed peace with the people around them, they might have been even more tempted to assimilate to them, learning war in this context also meant learning dependence upon the Lord, when you're at peace and at ease and enjoying bounty, it's very easy to lose sense of your need for God, God can use crisis and death as means to

keep a forgetful humanity looking to him, a people that forgets war typically also forgets the cost of things and the virtues required to defend them, a people that have not experienced war can easily become decadent, when you must put your life on the line for your country for instance, you need to consider yourself in a different way, considering yourself as part of a story that exceeds your own lifespan, considering the legacy of those who have gone before you that you are guarding and the generations to come for whom you want to protect that legacy, in the absence of war it is easy to forget those who have gone before and those who come after and to become decadent the virtues manifested and forged in the crucible of warfare are certainly not the only virtues and there are some virtues that are best developed in times of peace, the great exemplars of wisdom in scripture for instance, people like Joseph, Solomon and Daniel were not warriors, wisdom may most thrive in times and places of peace, however the main leaders of the people of God in scripture tended to be men who were acquainted with war and characterised by courage and zeal, such men were better aware of the life and death stakes the remaining nations would serve the purpose then of testing Israel to see whether they would obey the Lord and trust in Him the temptation was between abandoning the commandment of the Lord for the seemingly strategic approaches of intermarriage, making covenants with the people around them and religious syncretism, obeying the commandment of the Lord was an option that did not allow Israel to hedge their bets they had to depend upon the Lord's power, provision and promise trusting Him to deliver them and living in dependence upon Him we should remember that this dependence also included the modes of war that were open to them, Israel was forbidden to build a war machine of chariots and horses in Deuteronomy chapter 17 verse 16 people don't usually like to be in such a position of dependence upon God and Israel was no exception to this, they ended up intermarrying with the Canaanites and serving their gods for this reason the judges that the Lord raised up were civil leaders who would settle disputes but they also functioned as deliverers and avengers they were not hereditary leaders but they seemed to hold their position for their entire lives, we shouldn't think of the judges as if they all came one after another, the judges were primarily regional figures operating in specific parts of the land rather than the whole, after the death of Joshua all Israel went to their various parts of the inheritance and Israel's life took on a more tribal, local character, a number of the judges were probably acting at the same time in different regions of the land, the first judge that we hear about is Othniel, Othniel is either the son of Kenaz and Caleb's younger brother or Caleb's nephew the son of his younger brother, Othniel has already been mentioned back in Judges chapter 1 where he married Caleb's daughter Axa, this might make more sense if Othniel was Caleb's nephew and it seems to me that 1st Chronicles chapter 4 verses 13-15 gives weight to that particular reading, Othniel continues the legacy of Caleb as a brave Judahite leader, he had won the hand of Caleb's daughter by defeating Kiriath-sepha and now the Lord uses him again Othniel is filled with the spirit of the Lord for the purpose of delivering the Israelites from a Mesopotamian king, maybe we should remember Abram's victory over the kings in chapter 14 of Genesis, again from

Mesopotamia, the Israelites had served for 8 years under Kushan-Rishithayim and the land enjoys 40 years of rest after the deliverance brought about through Othniel that's 5 times as many years as they had been troubled Eglon, the king of the Moabites comes next, he's joined by the Ammonites and the Amalekites against the Israelites, the Moabites and the Ammonites were the descendants of Lot, they lived to the east of Israel special restrictions had been placed upon their becoming part of the nation back in Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 3-4 Amalek was the sworn foe who had sought to destroy Israel at its greatest point of weakness this is mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 17-19 They capture Jericho, the city of palms Jericho is presumably a site of habitation at this point although it hasn't been rebuilt as a fortified city after its destruction by Jericho. Israel's subjection to Eglon continues for 18 years, they have to pay tribute to him and Ehud is appointed to bring it. Ehud is described as a Benjamite he's bound in his right hand, which means he's apparently left-handed.

There's an irony here because Benjamin means son of the right hand later in Judges chapter 20 verse 16 we meet 700 more Benjamite southpaws. There are a lot of odd weapons in the book of Judges, so Benjamites who fight with their left hands fit right in. Ehud is a cunning assassin because he's a left-handed man he can hide a dagger in a place where people would not expect it.

His outwitting of Eglon and his attendance is also given a lot of narrative attention because it has symbolic purpose he claims that he has a secret word for the king which might play upon the word for sting. He literally brings a secret sting. Eglon's gross obesity is also an important element of the narrative.

He's described as a gluttonous devourer who has grown large and is eating up the inheritance of the people of God his name reminds us of a calf who has been fattened in preparation for slaughter. They are giving him their tribute, presumably of grain and the manner of his death which foregrounds the dagger's entry into his stomach and the disgorging of his stomach's contents is a sort of poetic justice. He has been devouring the people of God and now what he has consumed is brought out in the most disgusting manner Likewise Ehud is able to escape because the servants of Eglon think that their devouring monarch is relieving himself of course the dung has come out of him but not in the way that they think Ehud, after he makes his escape, rallies the people to him in Ephraim.

Like Joshua he's associated with Ephraim and James Bajon notes the way that his name might recall the unusual word for the authority invested in Joshua in Numbers chapter 27 verse 20. This gives us two judges with associations with the two great men of the conquest generation. Othniel with Caleb and Ehud with Joshua.

They defeat 10,000 Moabites much as Judah defeated 10,000 men at Bezach in the first battle recorded in chapter 1. The land then has rest for 80 years, twice as long as the

rest that Othniel gave and here 18 years of oppression, 8 plus 10 years gives way to 80 years of rest, 8 times 10 years. The chapter ends with the strange character of Shamgar, associated with Ehud, who may not be an Israelite at all. He's the son of Anath.

He kills 600 Philistines with an ox goad. While Ehud killed the fattened calf, Shamgar kills the Philistines with an instrument used for herding oxen. Once again there's poetic justice here It's also an instrument of work and he wields it as an instrument of war.

Israel's weapons were often regular instruments and tools, things that were to hand. They weren't things specially fashioned for war. As James Jordan observes in this connection Israel was not a people primarily ordered towards military conquest but towards working on the land.

A question to consider in what ways might we be in danger of not knowing war? Judges chapter 4 begins with the usual depressing refrain that runs throughout this book, and the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Ehud has died and the peace that he bought for Israel has passed too. Once again the Lord sells them into the hand of a cruel enemy.

One would think after a few iterations of this that Israel would be thankful to serve the Lord, but this doesn't seem to be the case. This time Israel is oppressed by Jabin king of Canaan who reigned in Hazor. Hazor was a powerful city in the north of Israel near Galilee and this king is a reminder of the ground that Israel has lost.

They had already fought a king Jabin who ruled in Hazor back in Joshua chapter 11. There they defeated him. Now they are losing to old foes again and this is a very bad sign.

Jabin's military commander is called Sisera who has a war machine of 900 iron chariots, the latest military hardware as Barry Webb puts it. Back in chapter 1 Judah hadn't been able to control the plains as the inhabitants of the lowlands had chariots and of course Pharaoh had pursued Israel with chariots when they left Egypt in the exodus. Chariots are clearly a problem for Israel.

And in this context we're introduced to the character of Deborah. Deborah is a judge but not like the judges that we have encountered to this point. She is someone who settles disputes and adjudicates in difficult cases but she is not herself a deliverer.

In this story the role of deliverer is principally played by Barak. Deborah's calling as a judge is closely related to the fact that she is a prophetess, someone who could deliver the word of the Lord to Barak and to others. While most of the judges were primarily military men going out before Israel leading them against their enemies, the dynamic with Deborah was different and perhaps more akin to figures like Samuel or Moses, other prophetic judges.

Deborah sat under her palm tree and delivered judgment upon the cases brought to her by the children of Israel. We might be surprised at seeing a woman judging Israel, and indeed it is surprising. There was no other woman as a judge in Israel's recorded history, and no reigning queen among the 42 monarchs in the subsequent history of Israel or Judah save for Athaliah the murderous usurper, who is not included among the official number.

The surprise that the Lord is going to deliver Israel, with two women being the great heroines of the hour, is part of the significance of this text. Deborah and Jael are surprising instruments in the hand of the Lord, much as Shamgar's ox goad or Samson's donkey's jawbone. Much of Judges is about the Lord's proof that his deliverance of his people doesn't depend upon those things and persons that we would usually rely upon or look to.

The stories of Scripture so often depend upon the most surprising characters. The story of the kingdom begins with a woman praying in the temple, a woman whom no one notices even the high priest thinks that she's just drunk. Yet it's through Hannah's prayer that the story of the kingdom begins.

The crushing or the suppression of the virility of a nation was always one of the most important concerns for an impressing power. Remove the weapons, kill or enslave the males, and emasculate and subjugate their leaders. That was the way in which one nation could be brought under the domination of another.

Scripture presents us with a number of such moments in history, the Exodus being one example. Pharaoh enslaves Israel, kills their boys. And in this situation, deliverance arose from women.

As women delivered the infant Moses and protected the Israelite boys from Pharaoh, women protected the seed that would crush the serpent's head. And Deborah is associated with the other women who lived at such times, with Jochebed, Miriam, the Hebrew midwives, with Hannah, with Esther, with Elizabeth and Mary. All these characters who, in times of great desperation, rose up to save their people.

Throughout the Book of Judges there is a lot of wordplay. Anyone interested in this aspect of the text, I highly recommend that you read James Bajon's notes that work through the Book of Judges and give a special attention to this feature of it. Deborah's last name means bee, and she will sting the Canaanites, much as Ehud brought sting to Eglon in the preceding chapter.

The Canaanites might dismiss women like Deborah in jail, yet they have a deadly sting. Deborah seems to be based in the region of Benjamin and Ephraim in the middle of the land. The battle is fought towards the north of the land in the territory of Naphtali, Zebulun and Issachar.

They assemble not too far from the bottom of the Sea of Galilee. A number of the tribes participated in the battle, but the tribes in Gilead seem not to have been involved, and there is no mention of Judah. It's a battle of the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, Zebulun and Naphtali.

Deborah summons Barak to her and gives him the word of the Lord. He is to gather his men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 men from Naphtali and Zebulun. The Lord will draw out Sisera to the river Kishon, where he will be given into Barak's hands.

Barak was instructed to go to battle, but he suffered a minor judgement when he requested that Deborah accompany him. Partly because she was unlike the typical male judge and partly also because she was one who was a prophetess primarily, not primarily a deliverer, Deborah was expected to be absent from battle. We see the same sort of thing in the case of Samuel.

He's not a deliverer in the way that someone like Barak or Saul or some of these other figures were, and so he's not expected to be at the battle in the same way. Deborah is neither a warrior nor a military commander, and the judgement upon Barak for calling Deborah to accompany him was that the opposing general would be delivered into the hands of a woman, who would do Barak's job for him. He presumably thinks this is going to be Deborah, but it turns out to be someone different.

Had Barak courageously followed the word of the Lord and not called for Deborah to accompany him, she would not have gone into the battle and Sisera would have been delivered into Barak's own hands, galvanising Barak's authority in Israel. Akin to a figure like Joan of Arc, Deborah is a prophetic woman who leads a movement to restore the rule of her nation at a moment of crisis and the utter breakdown of its power. She's not an ordinary leader in time of peace.

Barak is like the Dauphin, who must be helped to achieve his victory, after which the security and power of the nation can be restored under his rule. Sisera goes out to the river Kishon, where Barak and his men go down to attack him with Deborah, and Sisera was given into his hands. But before we hear about this, we are introduced to the character of Heber the Kenite, a descendant of Jethro or Hobab, the Midianite, and Moses' father-in-law.

The reminder of Moses at this point is probably not insignificant. The chapter doesn't explain how the victory came about. We have to wait to discover that until the next chapter, where we get some hint in verses 20-21.

From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon, march on my soul with might. The strength of Sisera's chariots became a liability with the flooding of the Kishon.

Deborah could be compared to Moses in this battle. She presides over the new birth of a nation when all had seemed lost. Like Moses, she is the divinely instructed prophet who directs the battle from behind the scenes, leading to a miraculous victory over a powerful army of chariots through a sudden torrent of water.

The chariots of Pharaoh were swept away by the waters of the Red Sea, and the chariots of Jabin and Sisera were swept away by the river Kishon. Like Moses, she sings a song of victory afterwards. The parallels are very important and they give some indication of the significance of Deborah's work.

Sisera flees to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, where he thinks he will find shelter. However, he has a surprise coming. There are themes of motherhood throughout this story, which continue into the next chapter where they are even more prominent.

Deborah styling herself a mother in Israel. Jael treats Sisera like an infant. She soothes him, lays him down, covers him with a rug, gives him milk to drink, protects him, and puts him to sleep.

And then she drives a tent peg through his temple. Once again, the victory is won for Israel by a strange instrument and an unexpected person. This is a story where the glory is won by the women.

In both cases, there is a sort of deception involved. In the case of Deborah, it's in the drawing out of Sisera's army into a position of danger, a trap that he's not aware of. In the case of Jael, it's in deceiving Sisera with the false appearance of hospitality.

She acts as a tender mother, yet like Deborah, she is a deadly hornet sent before the people of God. Jael's slaying of Sisera was associated with Barak's failure to assume his proper role. Crushing the head of the serpent Sisera was the task of the seed, which Barak was supposed to be.

He was supposed to be the deliverer of his people. However, since the seed was not yet powerful enough to crush the serpent's head himself, the woman had to do it for him, the mother. This was a sign that the woman's task in raising the seed was not yet completed.

Yet Jael deceiving the serpent Sisera and crushing his head is a poetic reversal of the great deception, the serpent's deception of Eve. It's a minor fulfillment of the promise of Genesis chapter 3, 15, the crushing of the serpent's head by the seed of the woman. Jael's slaying of Sisera occurs not as she goes out into the battle, but as she invites him into her tent, deceives him with the apparent extension of hospitality, then pierces his head with the domestic tool of a tent peg.

Jael, not being a fighter, employs the tactic of cunning deception, which is characteristic of women in their struggle against the serpents in history. Sarai against Pharaoh,

Rebecca against Pharaoh and Abimelech, Rachel against Laban, Tamar against Judah, the Hebrew midwives against Pharaoh, Rahab against the king of Jericho, Michael against Saul, Esther against Haman, etc. The Song of Deborah does not class with the warriors, but with women in tents.

The point of all of this is not to suggest that women cannot be heroes, that heroism is restricted to the front line of battle. Rather, the point is to show the heroism of the mothers of Israel, the way in which they will fight against the serpent and win the victory. Here, this occurs through deadly means, but elsewhere in Scripture, it repeatedly occurs through the means of prayer, through the means of wisdom and cunning.

The front line warriors in the Lord's battles are not the people that we expect. A question to consider, how does Deborah's character as a prophetess make her stand out from many of the other judges? The Song of Deborah in Judges chapter 5 is one of the few songs of victory in Scripture, perhaps most comparable to the Song of the Sea in Exodus chapter 15, the song that Moses and Miriam sing after the victory over the Egyptians at the Red Sea. Here there is another victory and another song to go with it, and the events that lead to this song are similar to those that led to the Song of the Sea, where a military force of chariots was overwhelmed by water in a miraculous act of the Lord.

Like Moses, Deborah sings a song of praise in response. Although Barak accompanies her, Deborah seems to be the lead singer of this song. The verb for the singing of the song is feminine singular.

There aren't many parts of Scripture that are authored by women. Interestingly, it is in the songs and the poems of the narratives of Scripture that we might most commonly encounter the voices of women, in things such as Miriam's voice in the Song of the Sea, the prayer of Hannah, Mary's Magnificat, the voice of the woman in Song of Songs, the acrostic poem given by Lemuel's mother at the end of the Book of Proverbs, and then here in the Song of Deborah. In song we see something of the union of male and female voices in the text of Scripture.

The Song of Deborah exhibits many of the features with which we are familiar from Hebrew poetry, most notably parallelism. Such parallelism is often captured in Christian worship through antiphonal singing or chanting, where singers or chanters take up lines alternately. The song presumes that the hearer is familiar with the story of Deborah and Barak from the previous chapter.

As Barry Webb observes, the song elaborates many of the scenes of the narrative that precede it, scenes that don't have the same detail in the prosaic telling. It interprets and further dramatises the event, but it also memorialises them in the form of praise. While Deborah is the most prominent figure in much of chapter 4, in the song it is the work of the Lord in the victory that is most emphasised.

It is often argued that the song is one of the oldest texts in the Bible, due to its poetic form and its archaic and unusual terminology, translating it often presents challenges. There are various theories about the shape and structure of the song too, with various divisions into distinct stanzas having been suggested. James Jordan, for instance, argues for three stanzas, verse 2-11, 12-22 and then 23-31.

Barry Webb argues for five, verses 2-8, 9-13, 14-18, 19-23 and 24-30. Trent Butler divides it into ten short stanzas, and various other suggestions have been made. Whatever structure we settle upon, we can largely agree upon the song's contents.

It opens with Deborah's praise to the volunteers who willingly offered themselves to the cause. The meaning of the first line of verse 2 is unclear, ESV translates it as that the leaders took the lead in Israel. However, others, such as Webb and Jordan, have suggested a reference to loosed hair.

This is strange until we consider the connection between long hair and Nazirite vows of dedication to the Lord. The reference to uncut and loose hair might be a reference to the long hair of Nazirite warriors, people who have been completely devoted to the cause of the Lord. It might explain the parallel with the willing self-offering to the Lord that's being spoken of.

This is followed by a summons to the kings and the princes of the nations to give their attention to the works of the Lord recounted in the song. It's a shot across their bows, as it were, a warning that they need to hear, lest they too seek to rise against the people of the Lord. The Lord arrives on the scene in a theophanic manner, as the Lord of the storm, with the mountains quaking at His presence and the clouds bursting with rain.

He comes up from the south, from the region of Edom, up from Sinai. The Lord comes in a way that the Canaanites might have associated with the Baals, as they presume them to be the lords of the storm. The song then proceeds to set the historical scene that led up to the battle.

The Canaanites are oppressing the Israelites, and people need to travel using backroads in the hill country, because the Canaanites dominate in the highways and the plains. Rural inhabitants dry up, as the Israelites have to take refuge in walled settlements against the predations of the Canaanites. Trade and farming are limited.

Rather than turning to the Lord, however, the Israelites seem to be making covenants with false gods in their desperation. Even so, war is within the gate, as the Canaanites prey upon the helpless Israelites. Weapons are rare within the land.

This is described as the days of Shamgar and Jael, one of whom fought with an ox-goat, and the other who crushed Zisra's head with a tent peg. These are not typical weapons, because typical weapons were not to hand. In this terrible situation, Deborah arises as a

mother in Israel.

Where Israel lacks leaders and strength, Deborah arises as a mother figure, someone who through her instruction and maternal authority will raise up sons like Barak to fight for and to lead Israel. Her prominence on the front line is irregular, and was not the ideal. The public life of Israel was typically dominated by men, and this was regarded as a healthy and positive state of affairs.

It was only as Israel's public life was crippled by oppression, without leaders or warriors, that that space was created for someone like Deborah to take the most prominent position. And Deborah's concern was not to establish a situation of gender equality in public life, but to establish Israel's strength again by raising up sons to fight. No one was better off when the nation lacked effective deliverers and guardians.

Living in an individualistic society like ours, where the sexes are so often pitted against each other, we can struggle to understand why Deborah considers herself less as an individual woman acting for her sex against the patriarchy, and far more as a mother who's trying to raise up sons to fight for the defence of her people. The heroism of Deborah is not to be in any way lessened by this. However, what we should see is that her heroism is less that of a woman breaking the Israelite glass ceiling of the patriarchal power structure, and is rather a maternal heroism, a sort of heroism that typically lacks public prominence, but which women more generally widely exercise.

Rather than presenting heroism as more proper to male realms, with a few women struggling to enter those realms to be heroes too, perhaps in Deborah we see a feminine heroism coming to the foreground, but a heroism that has always been there in various forms. We also learn something about the more immediately visible heroism of men, that the quiet and typically unsung heroism of mothers lies behind the more noticed heroism of their children. One striking feature of the biblical narrative is the number of times we are made to witness this quiet heroism of women, so that we might better consider that what appears to be the front line of human activity in our perspective as human beings is not in fact what God sees.

And from stories like this, a story of Deborah's heroic motherhood, we should learn to see the heroism in motherhood more generally. As we go through this song, Deborah's motherhood will also be contrasted with the wicked motherhood of Sisera's mother. People, rich and poor, are called to join in and to consider the song of Deborah and its message, to ponder this great deliverance of the Lord.

And verses 12-13 are a call to battle, summoning the willing people to action. It describes the primary role played by Deborah. Deborah is the singing prophet, who rouses Israel to action.

Barak is the one who acts in response to this, and in the light of Deborah's prophetic

guidance. This is followed by a roll call of those who respond to it, separating Israel into those tribes and groups that responded to the call, the groups who were blessed for their commitment and action, and those who failed to join in, who are subject to dishonour for their failure. The Israel that fights is a remnant of the brave survivors of the oppression, facing off against mighty opponents.

This part of the song also gives us some window into the shape of Israelite life at that time, the centripetal force of a single site of worship seems to be only weakly operative. It isn't a strongly unified nation, but functions as a broad coalition of tribes, chiefly the northern ones. Israel's unity is weak and vulnerable during the period of the judges.

There is no single leader over the nation, no one like Joshua or Moses. The judges are mostly regional figures. There is no single national mission, although such moments of a special military need should have spurred the tribes to a renewed recognition of their brotherhood.

From chapter 1, we already get an indication of a nation divided along the lines of northern and southern tribes, with Judah dominating in the south, and the house of Joseph in the north. In Joshua chapter 22, we saw the fracture that the Jordan represented between the two and a half tribes dwelling outside of the land and the nine and a half dwelling within. In this story, both of these divisions in the nation seem to have an impact.

Judah and Simeon are not mentioned, perhaps suggesting that the southern part of the nation was largely doing its own thing. The Transjordanian tribes are challenged for their failure to get involved, although Mekhi, a part of the half tribe of Manasseh, sent commanders. However, the mighty kings that fought against them gained no victory or spoil.

The Lord fought against them with the very elements, fighting on behalf of his people against foes that they could never have defeated in their own strength. The battle isn't clearly described, but we get the sense that the Lord defeated the Canaanites through a storm. This is similar to some other victories that we read of in the history of Israel.

The river Kishon overflowed with the extreme rainfall and washed away the Canaanites or turned the land into marshland so that their chariots became a liability rather than an advantage. The similarity with the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea should not be missed here. It is not clear what Meraz was.

Was it a representative Israelite city that failed to come to the aid of the battle? The curse on Meraz is juxtaposed with the blessing upon Jael. The incident with Jael and Sisera probably has sexual connotations. She gives him milk instead of water and he sinks between her feet.

The language is that of an erotic relationship, but it is used to describe a death. The deception of Jael is praised here and her deception is highlighted by subverting the expectation of the reader. Reading of a Canaanite military commander entering into the private tent of a woman, we're braced for a rape scene.

There are sexual elements present, but there is a most surprising subversion for Sisera is the one who is penetrated with a tent peg. In the song, the fact that Jael gets Sisera's scalp rather than Barak is not presented as a judgment upon Barak as it is within the narrative. Rather, it is another case of divinely instigated poetic justice.

This reading is given further support by the description of Sisera's mother that follows, which heightens the irony. Sisera's mother is waiting for him to return. Sisera's mother is juxtaposed with Deborah as a mother in Israel.

She's a mother of the Canaanites. She's surrounded by her attendants and court ladies who assure her that her son Sisera will simply be dividing spoil with his men and raping some Israelite maidens. Nothing is amiss.

However, unbeknownst to them, in a judgment of the Lord, Sisera has been penetrated by a potential rape victim. The curtain falls abruptly at this point. The worried mother of Sisera has not yet received the news of her son's death, yet she and her women have revealed their willing complicity in his wickedness.

If Deborah's song foregrounds the bravery and heroism of women, it also foregrounds their potential wickedness. The triumph of Deborah, a mother in Israel with her sons, and Jael, the potential victim, over Sisera's mother and the cruel son that she raised and encouraged is now seen to be complete. The song ends with a statement declaring the desire that all of the Lord's enemies would suffer the same fate as that of Sisera, his men, and the Canaanite women who raised and praised them.

After the defeat of Jabin and his commander Sisera, the land enjoys rest for forty years. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which the song of Deborah functions as a declaration of the power of the Lord against the Baals? In Judges chapter 6 we move on to a new judge, Gideon, and with him a new enemy of Israel.

Othniel fought against a king of Mesopotamia, Ehud against a Moabite king and his Ammonite and Amalekite allies, Shamgar fought against the Philistines, Deborah and Barak against a Canaanite king from Hazor, and now the threat comes from the people of the east, from Midianites and Amalekites. These deliverers were also based in different parts of the country. Othniel lived in the territory of Judah in the south, Ehud was a Benjaminite, Shamgar likely wasn't an Israelite, Deborah lived in the south of Ephraim in the middle of the land, Barak in the very north of Naphtali in the top of the country, and Gideon is from the western half of the tribe of Manasseh.

Once again we shouldn't presume that these judges arose in succession one after another. There were a number of different enemies oppressing different parts of the land, a land that had prior to the coming of the Israelites been occupied by several nations. The Israelites' identity as a nation would be forged in part through the fact that the land had regions with very different terrain and enemies, occupied by different peoples and tribes.

Successfully occupying the land required warding off predatory nations and peoples on various fronts, and developing a shared identity as a people would depend heavily upon their recognition of a bond of brotherhood, coming together to each other's aid in times of trouble, and also upon their practice of shared worship. In times of oppression and apostasy however, one could imagine the shared identity of Israel being largely eclipsed as each region and tribe had to fight their own battles. The threat of the Midianites was so severe that the Israelites had to hide in mountain dens and caves and strongholds.

The Midianites are described like a plague of locusts descending upon the land, numerous like the locusts and voracious like the locusts. In chapter 8 an army numbering 135,000 people is described, an immense number that Israel could never hope to repel. The Midianites seem to come on specific occasions, they devour the harvest and they take the livestock.

The Midianites seem to descend upon Israel from the Jezreel valley down to the limits of their settlements in the south in Gaza, territory that would largely later be under Philistine control. Israel was surrounded by a number of groups of people that were related to them, both closely related and more distantly related. The Edomites in the south were descended from Israel's twin brother Esau and the Horites.

Moab and Ammon to the east were descendants of Lot. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham by Keturah and here they are accompanied by the Amalekites who came from one of the lines of Esau's descendants. The Midianites had previously troubled Israel when in Numbers chapter 22 to 25 they had been involved in Balak and Balaam's actions against Israel.

They seem to be enjoying many of the blessings promised to the descendants of Abraham, not least in their vast numbers. Israel had been compared to Locust at the time of the Exodus and the plague of Locust seems to be a symbolic presentation of Israel within the land of Egypt. They were a numerous people, covering the face of the earth but now they face another such people.

The Midianites lay waste to the land. Like Locust, their intent does not seem to be to dwell in the land, rather they are simply devourers of the produce of others. Israel is suffering the curses of the covenant that was mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 38 to 42.

Now in that reference they are probably referring to actual physical insects but these nations are compared to insects and they have a similar effect upon the produce of the people. Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 49 to 52 takes things further. ... Israel is not here experiencing the full force of that curse but they do have some limited experience of it.

At this point the Israelites cry out to the Lord for deliverance. For a second time in the book, the Lord sends a messenger to Israel, this time a prophet who recounts what the Lord did for Israel and how they have rejected him and disobeyed his voice. The Lord then sends a messenger to Israel, a prophet who recounts that they have disobeyed the most fundamental of the commandments.

Rather than obeying the voice of the Lord and worshipping him alone, they have served the gods of the Amorites. Gideon receives a call from the Lord. It's a call that's similar to that which Moses received back in Exodus chapter 3 and 4. There the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses who felt insufficient and inadequate for his calling.

Yet he received authorization and confirming signs from the Lord. The angel of the Lord comes to meet Gideon at the Terebinth in Ophrah, sitting under the tree as Deborah sat under her palm. Gideon is beating wheat in the winepress to hide from the Midianites, far from the most ideal place to beat wheat.

At the end of the next chapter some of the enemy will be found hiding in a winepress, so the site where Gideon is found prepares us for the turning of the tables that will occur. The activity of threshing, separating wheat and chaff, maybe gives a sense of the activity for which Gideon is being set apart. He will thresh Israel and its enemies, dividing them as wheat from chaff.

The threshing floor can be described as a place of judgment in scripture, a judgment place for the enemies of the Lord. For instance, in Micah chapter 4 verses 11 to 13, Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, Let her be defiled, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion. But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord, they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor.

Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion, for I will make your horn iron, and I will make your hooves bronze, and you shall beat in pieces many peoples, and shall devote their gain to the Lord, their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth. The angel of the Lord greets Gideon with a surprising greeting, referring to him as a mighty man of valor. Gideon seems anything but this.

Gideon requests some explanation for the statement of the Lord's being with him. If the Lord is indeed with Gideon and Israel, why is the nation in such dire straits? Why do the great acts of the Lord for the deliverance of his people seem to be a matter of the past? Gideon requests a sign from the angel of the Lord. The identity of the angel of the Lord

seems to be an important part of the story here.

The revelation that the angel of the Lord is some sort of divine theophany is a demonstration of the Lord's presence with Gideon and with Israel, much as the angel at the burning bush or the commander of the army of the Lord near Gilgal. Gideon's awareness of the identity of the angel only slowly dawns on him, however. Gideon is acutely aware of his own limitations.

He is from a weak Manassite clan, and he is the least in his father's house. We later discover that he has a son who is at least in his mid-teens, in chapter 8 verse 20, he also has at least ten servants, so he is not a man altogether without resources, nor is he especially young. However, relatively speaking, there are very many who are greater than him.

Gideon has very weak faith. He requests a sign to which request the Lord consents. He prepares a large meal, which serves as a sort of peace offering.

The angel of the Lord directs him to place the elements of the meal upon the rock and to pour the broth over it. The angel of the Lord then touches the meal with the tip of the staff that he is carrying, and it is burned up, as if an offering on the altar. This is a sign of the Lord's acceptance of Gideon and his work.

When the angel disappears, Gideon fears, as he has seen the angel of the Lord face to face. But he is reassured by the Lord at this point. He builds an altar at the place where the Lord burned up his offering, as it had already functioned as an altar.

He names the altar, The Lord is Peace, to memorialise the event that had just occurred. The Lord then instructed Gideon to take his father's bull. It isn't immediately clear whether there are one or two bulls involved here.

It seems most likely to me that there was only one bull, described as the second bull, perhaps in reference to rites involving two bulls, where the second bull served as an offering for the community, such as in Leviticus 4, verse 21, or Numbers 8, verse 8. The age of the bull is stipulated, seven years old. Israel has been oppressed by the Midianites for seven years as a result of their idolatry. Now that bull must be used to tear the false altar of Baal down, and then be sacrificed on the Lord's altar.

The bull deals with the sin of Israel's idolatry, for which they had suffered for seven years, and then that bull is offered for atonement. Gideon's own name means hewer, and he hews down the Asherah pole. Again, there's some poetic justice here.

When Gideon's action comes to light in the next morning, Joash his father comes to his defence. If Baal really is a god, he should be able to look out for his own interests and avenge himself. The result is an even greater humiliation of the false god Baal, whose impotence is demonstrated by his failure to destroy Gideon, who thereafter bears

testimony to the humiliation of Baal in his own new name, Jeroboel.

The Midianites and the Amalekites cross the Jordan and they camp in the valley of Jezreel again, but this time the spirit of the Lord comes upon Gideon, and he summons the Abiezrites by sounding the trumpet, and then gathers people from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. Gideon clothed by the spirit is a rather different Gideon from the Gideon that we first encountered. But Gideon once again requests a sign.

Gideon's faith remains weak, but the Lord doesn't rebuke him for requesting a confirming sign. The Lord can be gracious to people of weak faith, helping them with their unbelief, and as a sign there was probably some meaning to be discerned in it. It's a fleece laid out on a threshing floor, much as Gideon himself was threshing at the beginning of the story in the winepress.

The first night, God's dew falls upon the fleece only, leaving it sodden, while the rest of the threshing floor is left dry. And at this point Gideon requests a second sign. In the second sign the fleece is completely dry, while the surrounding ground of the threshing floor is wet with the dew.

Here the fleece might symbolise the acceptable sacrifice of the Lord, while the threshing floor is Israel. That's something that James Jordan claims. But I would suggest that the fleece is the spirit-blessed leader.

It represents Gideon himself. As the anointed leader is then wrung out, the whole nation is washed in the same spirit. The threshing floor here becomes the site of the heavenly dew of blessing.

The two stages of the sign represent first of all the spirit coming upon Gideon, and then through Gideon, as Gideon is wrung out in his service, the entirety of the nation being drenched with the dew of the spirit. A question to consider. At how many points in this account do we see the Lord making accommodations to Gideon's hesitancy, his uncertainty and his fear? What lessons could Israel take from this? And what lessons can we take from it? In Judges 7, verse 1, Gideon is initially spoken of as Jerobael, the name that he was given after the destruction of Baal's altar and the removal of the Asherah pole.

He encamps with his men beside the spring of Harod in the valley of Jezreel, while the Midianites are to the north of them. He has a large crowd with him, 32,000 people, but the Lord doesn't want them to boast, so he drastically limits their numbers. First, they lose 22,000 people by applying the test of Deuteronomy, chapter 20, verse 8. And the officers shall speak further to the people and say, Is there any man who is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own.

So all the people who are trembling are removed. And the place name is Harod, which is the same Hebrew consonants as the verb for tremble used here. And it's not an accident that we have this parallel.

Only 10,000 remain at this point, and this seems an auspicious number. It's the same number of the Canaanites and Perizzites who were defeated in chapter 1, verse 4, or the number of the Moabites killed in chapter 3, verse 29. However, it is far too many for the Lord.

He establishes a further test, applied as the men are taken down to the water. All of the men who lap the water like dogs are to join the company. As Peter Lighthouse suggested, this connects with the name of Caleb, which means dog.

The Lord wants 300 Caleb-like men. James Berjan notes that as they are hunting a raven, Oreb, and a wolf, Zeb, dogs are appropriate. The Lord is testing his people, and the test is not an arbitrary one.

The first test selects for people of faith, and the second test for men that remind us of Israel's faithful hero, Caleb. John Baruch compares this to the process of threshing Israel. Gideon is separating the wheat from the chaff.

However, these aren't crack troops selected for fighting skills so much as people who are selected for qualities associated with faith. We might also think of Samson, who in a few chapters' time, in chapter 15, will use 300 foxes with torches to cause chaos among the Philistines. Here, 300 dogs with torches will do the same.

The Lord instructs Gideon to go against the camp of the Midianites, but once again, he graciously gives him a sign first. With his servant Peura, Gideon goes down to the camp of the Midianites and overhears a man telling another his dream, and the man's companion giving its interpretation. A cake of barley tumbles down into the camp of Midian and overturns the tent, presumably the tent of the commander of the army.

The barley bread is poor food. It represents presumably the Israelites, and the loaf rolls into the camp. It takes the initiative and strikes unawares against the camp, rather than directly facing the Midianites in battle.

The loaf is extremely small, but it has a huge effect. It overturns the tent. Perhaps there are Jewish feasts playing in the background here as well, as next chapter we will encounter Sukkoth.

The Midianites are clearly fearful of Israel, but perhaps more than that, Gideon's name and reputation has preceded him, and this would have been a source of great encouragement for him. Gideon then divides his men into three separate groups, gives them trumpets, and empty jars with torches. They come to the camp in the middle watch of the night, and they make a commotion with the trumpets and breaking the jars.

The torches are then revealed, and this would suggest 300 companies of men surrounding the camp. The people in the camp are woken up and startled. It's the middle of the night, seeing other armed people running around, they start attacking each other.

The Lord has struck terror upon them in panic, and so they end up destroying each other. The blowing of the trumpets clearly reminds us of Jericho, another occasion when God acted on behalf of his people, and the way that they stand in their place while the Lord wins the victory might also recall the Red Sea. After the Midianites are confused and kill many of each other, the Israelites come to complete the victory.

They trap the Midianites as they try to cross back over the Jordan. Gideon summons the Ephraimites to help with this. Oreb and Zeb, the raven and the wolf, are captured at the rock and the winepress respectively.

The Israelites were hiding from the Midianites in the rocks in chapter 6 verse 2, and Gideon was hiding in the winepress in chapter 6 verse 11. So now the tables have completely turned. The event of the defeat of the Midianites is recalled later in scripture, most notably perhaps in the book of Isaiah chapter 9 verses 3 to 5. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy, they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle, Tumult, and every garment rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for the fire. And then in chapter 10 verses 26 to 27, And the Lord of hosts will wield against them a whip, as when he struck Midian at the rock of Oreb.

And his staff will be over the sea, and he will lift it as he did in Egypt. And in that day his burden will depart from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck, and the yoke will be broken because of the fat. In Isaiah then, the defeat of the Midianites is an example of the sort of defeat that God will win over his enemies in the future.

It's one of the great victories that God has wrought. It's also referenced in the New Testament in a far more subtle and poetic way. In 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 6 to 10, We are, according to Paul, like jars of clay containing light within them.

Much as Gideon won his victory with weak jars of clay hiding light, So we are those who have light within us, and we will be used by God to win his victory again. Even though we are greatly outnumbered, the surpassing power does not belong to us. It belongs to God.

James Bajon has observed a fascinating further example of a place where we have an echo of this story. It's in 1 Kings chapter 18, where in verse 22 we read, But Baal's prophets are 450 men. Now, what's significant about that is the fact that Gideon's men were outnumbered 450 to 1. And just as Gideon was famous for opposing the worship of

Baal in pulling down Baal's altar and in cutting down the Asherah pole, so Elijah has a great conflict with the priests of Baal and the priests of Asherah on Mount Carmel.

It would seem that we're invited to compare these two events. The courageous stand of Elijah is comparable to the courageous stand of Gideon and his men. In both occasions the Lord demonstrates his power, in part through the weakness of the people that he has chosen to fight for him.

A question to consider, what further parallels can we see between this story and the story of 1 Samuel chapter 11? What might we learn from the comparisons between the character of Saul and the character of Gideon? In Judges chapter 8, Gideon has just won the battle against the Midianites, and in the mopping up stage he summons people from other tribes to assist, particularly the Ephraimites, who deal with the Midianites at the fords of the Jordan. The Ephraimites, however, are annoyed that they were not summoned at first. They were denied a part of the glory of the battle.

Now the victory of Gideon was not one that was achieved for his own glory. Had the Ephraimites been with him, they would have been whittled down just like everyone else, and there would only have been a small number who would ever have taken part in the battle. He responds in a very gracious manner.

The Ephraimites had captured two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeb, the raven and the wolf, and the grape harvest of Abieza, Gideon's people, was eclipsed by the supposed gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim. Even though Gideon's men and Abieza supposedly enjoyed the harvest, and only left the gleanings for the Ephraimites, the gleanings far exceeded in quantity the actual harvest. Gideon and his men themselves had not captured any of the leaders, but the Ephraimites had.

By this gracious response, Gideon didn't play a competitive honour game, and he mollifies the Ephraimites' anger. It's not a good sign of the relationship between Ephraim and the rest of Israel, though. Gideon and his men pursue the remaining body of the army of the Midianites, and their leaders, Zeba and Zalmanah, and while on the way, they need aid.

They need support and food and provisions, and these two towns of Succoth and Penuel refuse to provide any. The towns refuse to provide aid, as he does not have Zeba and Zalmanah in his possession. If he had, then they would feel safe doing so.

However, as long as the Midianites are free, they fear that if they help Gideon, the full wrath of the Midianites will descend upon them in vengeance for helping and aiding their enemy. Gideon's response, considering that at the start of the story he was afraid to act, and was hiding from the Midianites, could have been one of mercy. But instead, it's not a very gracious response at all, and it's quite cruel.

He threatens to thresh Succoth with thorns from the wilderness, and to tear down Penuel's tower, removing their defence. Zeba and Zalmanah are captured, and their army is thrown into panic. They have already lost 120,000 people.

Israel has taken its large portion from their numbers. This is 12 times 10,000. Great victories over the Canaanites and the Perizzites in chapter 1 verse 4, and the Moabites in chapter 3 verse 29, involve 10,000 people being defeated or killed.

Now it's 12 times that number. It's a great victory blown up to Israelite proportions. This is a truly devastating defeat of the locust army of the Midianites.

It's one of the reasons why it's recalled in later history, as a paradigm of God's victory over his enemies. Gideon returns by the ascent of Herod's. He avenges himself upon the towns of Penuel and of Succoth.

However, he finds that Zeba and Zalmanah have killed his brothers at Tabor. Gideon at this point makes it a matter of family honour and vengeance, and he instructs his firstborn son Jether to kill Zeba and Zalmanah. This is not the justice of the Lord's warfare.

He had been willing to spare them on that account. But this is personal vengeance and a vendetta. We might also contrast his initial willingness to let Zeba and Zalmanah live, and the way that he treated Succoth and destroyed Penuel.

These are not the actions of a wise and good and gracious leader. As James Bajon notes, the name of Zeba, Sacrifice, and Zalmanah, Refuge is withheld, fit with their fate. The spoil from the war becomes a snare.

This is not the first time that this has happened, it will not be the last. They want to make Gideon into a king, and he rightly rejects this. The Lord is their king.

However, his motive seems to be apathy. While he gives an appropriate and pious reason, his real reluctance lies elsewhere. This is suggested by the parable in the following chapter, in verses 8-15.

And the trees said to the fig tree, You come and reign over us. But the fig tree said to them, Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees? And the trees said to the vine, You come and reign over us. But the vine said to them, Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees? Then all the trees said to the bramble, You come and reign over us.

And the bramble said to the trees, If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade. But if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon. In response to their request that he be their king, and his refusal, Gideon offers an alternative.

He requests their earrings. We've heard this story before, back in Exodus chapter 32, verses 1-4. When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, Up, make us gods who shall go before us.

As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. So Aaron said to them, Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons and your daughters, and bring them to me. So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.

And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. In Exodus chapter 32, the golden calf is a replacement for Moses, who seems to be lost at the top of Mount Sinai.

Here, the ephod is a replacement for Gideon. Instead of depending upon Gideon to lead the people, they're going to look to the ephod. The way that these two events are described in similar ways invites us to consider parallels between them.

Yoram Hazonian, his book, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, discusses the way in which similar stories invite us to reflect upon uniting themes. Of this particular instance, he observes, What a newly liberated people want more than anything else, the narrative suggests, is to have someone above them again, someone who can bear responsibility for them, so that they do not have to shoulder this terror and dread themselves. And when this man, this Moses or Gideon, proves unwilling to play a role so similar to that played by their recent oppressors, this people will seek something that is more solid than man, something enduring that will not abandon them in need, the calf, the fetish.

Even leaders such as Aaron or Gideon, who have been the agents of God's will and know the folly of mistaking anything else for God, are not less in danger than the people themselves, since their ear is given to the people's needs, and they are moved to give the people what they want, ostensibly so that they will not do yet worse things. On this view, the act of liberation carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction, tending immediately to tear open a void in the lives of those who have been freed that is most easily filled by idolatry, whether of one form or another. The ephod was something that contained the orim and the thamim, and it was a means of determining the will of the Lord.

It would be a form of divination for Gideon's house. It functions, then, as a sort of idol. Gideon had once removed the Asherah pole and the altar of Baal, and now he creates a different snare in their place.

This snare is also a snare in part because it challenges the exclusivity of the tabernacle as the site of Israel's worship. It establishes a rival site that people come to receive the

word and direction of the Lord, and Gideon, presumably, is set up as a sort of priest-judge. In an exceptional way, the Lord had instructed Gideon to establish an altar earlier on and to sacrifice upon it, but this was not supposed to be a normal way for Gideon to act, for Gideon to establish himself as a sort of priest as an alternative to the Levitical priesthood.

The judge or the king was supposed to guard the integrity of the worship of the Lord, and yet here Gideon is doing the exact opposite. He's undermining it at a fundamental level. He's setting up something in competition to the true worship of the Lord.

And he starts to act the part of a two-bit ancient Near Eastern ruler. He establishes a harem for himself. He has 70 sons.

These numbers are related to the number seven, which is common throughout the Gideon narrative. Now, at the end of his life, he has brought 40 years of rest. It's the last time such rest is mentioned in the Book of Judges.

And when Gideon dies, the people end up just returning back to the Baals. They don't even honour Gideon's family for what the Lord did for them through Gideon. They forget Gideon, just as the people forgot Joseph earlier on in the story of the Exodus.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we can erect idolatries to protect us from having to deal with God and our responsibility as free people before him? In Judges chapter 9, we get to know the character of Abimelech, the son of Gideon, by his Shechemite concubine. Abimelech means my father is king.

Gideon rejected the kingship when he was offered it, but this name suggests that he did not entirely reject the pretensions of it. It is a good name for a prince. And it's also the name of a number of Canaanite kings in the Book of Genesis.

Abimelech is the son of a concubine, possibly a Canaanite concubine. She is from Ephraimite territory, whereas Gideon was a man of Manasseh. After the death of Gideon, the Israelites had made Baal-bereth, Lord of the Covenant, their god.

And the worship of Baal-bereth seems to have been concentrated in the city of Shechem. Shechem was a Levitical city in Joshua chapter 21, verses 20-21. As to the rest of the Kohathites belonging to the Kohathite clans of the Levites, the cities allotted to them were out of the tribe of Ephraim.

To them were given Shechem, the city of refuge for the manslayer, with its pasture lands in the hill country of Ephraim. This might make us wonder what has happened to the Levites. Their city of refuge has become a site of idolatry, a center of idolatry.

Abimelech presents himself as one who ought to be king over them. He sees himself as their flesh and their blood, and so for this reason he is an apt ruler. And they support

him.

They support him with the coffers of their god Baal-bereth. And the money that he gets from this false god he uses to destroy 70 of his brethren. His claim for kingship arises out of the sacrificial murder of his 70 brothers, all funded out of the coffers of Baal-bereth.

He kills his brothers on one stone in Ophrah, his father's house. Could this be the same stone as the altar? One way or another it is an ugly reversal. Jotham, the youngest son of Jerobael, or Gideon, escaped, and he turns up later on.

Abimelech is made king by the oak of the pillar at Shechem. We previously encountered this place in the narrative. In Genesis chapter 12 verse 6, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreth.

At that time the Canaanites were in the land. In Genesis chapter 35 verse 4, So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem.

Joshua chapter 24 verses 25 to 26, So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.

On each of these previous occasions, the terebinth, or the oak at Shechem, plays an important role in covenant establishment or renewal. And now it's being used for this perverse act of creating Abimelech, the slayer of his brothers, as the king over the Shechemites, who have committed themselves to the idolatry of Baal-Bareth. At this point, Jotham, who has escaped, brings a parable to the people.

He stands on Mount Gerizim. It's the mountain of blessing. This is a gracious act of God.

If they listen, they will be blessed. In his parable, the trees are looking for another tree to rule over them. And they ask each tree in turn, and they reject.

All of the great and good and worthy trees are offered rule, but they all have other productive things that they are invested in, and they do not wish to rule. Perhaps they are a bit apathetic. Perhaps they don't want the commitment.

One way or another, the bramble, the least worthy of all the trees, is the one that actually wants to wield authority. The trees clearly represent men of differing character, with the bramble representing the cursed man or the man who brings the curse. The bramble doesn't seem to be a fitting tree to provide shade to others, as a kingly tree was supposed to do.

Brambles also burn very easily and spread destructive fire. The bramble's desire for rule

is cautionary. Often it's the people who are least suitable for authority who desire it the most.

Jotham's parable speaks of fire coming out from the bramble and devouring the cedars of Lebanon, the proud and the great trees of the land. Jotham here acts as a sort of prophet, declaring a prophetic type of judgment. Jotham's name might mean the Lord is loyal, and loyalty and disloyalty are key themes of his message.

Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and then again, if you have acted in good faith and integrity with Jeroboam and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. Those expressions, good faith and integrity, take up the language of a previous occasion at this same location. The language of Joshua chapter 24, verse 14.

Now therefore, fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. They have not, however, dealt faithfully with the house of Jeroboam, with the descendants of the man who delivered them from the Midianites.

This is related to their treatment of the Lord in chapter 8, verses 34 to 35. And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side. And they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jeroboam, that is Gideon, in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

If they have not been faithful, Jotham calls for fire to come out from Abimelech, and to devour Shechem and Bethmilo, and for fire to come out from Shechem and Bethmilo, and to devour Abimelech. Jotham then flees and settles in Be'ah. After three years, the Lord sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the Shechemites.

God brings discord to the wicked. Now this may be an actual evil spirit, or it might be a spiritual force by which the Lord is creating disunity and opposition between the two groups. The Shechemites prove to be treacherous and troublesome.

They act like bandits in the mountains, causing trouble for Abimelech. Whether they set ambushes in the mountains designed to attack Abimelech himself, or whether they are doing it for the sake of Abimelech, it isn't entirely clear. The result is that the land is brought to a sorry state, similar to that in the time of Deborah, where people can't move around freely.

Then Gael comes on the scene, and the Shechemite rulers turn to him. They have a harvest festival and revile Abimelech. Gael argues that they should be serving a Canaanite, a son of Hamor.

Remember that Hamor, the father of Shechem, was the leader of the Shechemites back in Genesis chapter 34, when it was a Canaanite city. Abimelech had already claimed that

he was a fitting ruler, as one who was kin of the Shechemites by his mother. Presumably she was a Canaanite.

Now Gael reminds them that Canaanite mother or no, Abimelech is still a son of Jerobael. Zebel, Abimelech's right-hand man and the ruler of the city, hears about this and sends messengers to Abimelech. Abimelech then sends an ambush against the city.

He divides his men into four companies, according to the council of Zebel. Gael sees men coming down from the mountaintops, and he goes out to fight the men of Abimelech, but he is defeated by Abimelech and by Zebel, who supports him. The next day Abimelech ambushes the men of Shechem, as they go out to their fields, trapping them and killing them.

He then razes the city and sows it with salt. Fire has come out from the bramble of Abimelech and destroyed the men of Shechem. The ambushes of Abimelech remind us of the ambushes set by his father Gideon against the Midianites, especially when he divided his men into three companies.

James Bujon notes the contrast between Gideon's men with their empty pitchers and Abimelech's band who are described as empty men. The rulers have taken refuge in the tower of Elbereth, the bale that they have served. Abimelech gets bundles of brushwood with all of his men and burns the tower down with all within it.

The manner of his destruction of the Shechemites should remind us of Jotham's parable. Irrespective of Abimelech's wickedness, the Lord is also striking a great blow against Bael here and his worship within the land. Abimelech then goes on to attack Thebes, where the men, women and leaders hole up in the tower.

While besieging the tower, a woman drops an upper millstone on Abimelech's head. The one man to rule them all of verse 2 is slain by the one woman of verse 53. He has killed his brothers on one stone.

Now one stone falls upon him. He is also a serpent whose head is crushed by a woman. Sisera's head was also crushed by a woman using a tool as a weapon as Jael went through his head with a ten peg.

Abimelech does not want the shame of being killed by a woman, so he asks his armour bearer to run him through with his sword. However, the deed of the woman is recorded for us. Abimelech's death might also bring to mind the death of Saul, which is similar in certain ways.

The evil of Abimelech for what he did to his brothers returns on his head, quite literally, and the evil of the men of Shechem returns upon their heads too, according to the curse of Jotham. A question to consider. Of which defeated king in the Book of Judges might Abimelech remind us, and why? Pay attention to the numbers.

What might we learn from the comparison between the two? In Judges chapter 10 we start to encounter a lot more minor judges. These judges have very few details given about them. Perhaps one of the more interesting things here is the chiasmic pattern that we can see from chapters 10-12 in the pattern of the judges.

Gideon has 70 sons. Tola has none. Jair has 30 sons.

Jephthah has a son but no daughters and, as it tragically ends up for him, no heir. Ibsen has 30 sons. Elon has none.

Abdon has 40 sons and 30 grandsons, which makes 70. So Abdon is comparable to Gideon with 70 sons. Elon, comparable with Tola, both of them have none.

Ibsen and Jair both have 30 sons. And then in the centre is Jephthah, the guy who has no heir. By centring on Jephthah in this way and framing his lack of an heir compared to people like Abdon and Gideon and Jair and Ibsen, we see something of the significance of that particular story.

Increasingly the matter of dynasties is starting to emerge. These people have sons. They don't seem to establish strong dynasties but this issue is starting to come to the surface.

Tola is the first of the judges mentioned here and Tola and Pua are both words referring to Scarlet Dye as James Berjon has noted. Also, they're prominent names of the tribe of Issica as we see in 1 Chronicles 7. The sons of Issica, Tola, Pua, Jashub and Shimron, four. A previous character called Jair is mentioned in Numbers chapter 32.

He also has a number of cities in the region of Gilead named after him. And in the New Testament we meet a character called Jairus so this name seems to belong to that region. Jair is another judge discussed only briefly, most notable for his sons, their donkeys and the cities.

The words used here for the donkeys and the cities are similar. Jair has many sons presumably because like other of the judges he multiplies wives. This is not a good sign.

It's direct disobedience of the law for the kings which by analogy should apply to the judges too. There are further changes in the ways that these judges are spoken of. John Barrett has noted that there are no references to battles, no reference to rest but reference to their death and the location of their burial.

They accomplish something but they don't bring full rest, they are cut off. James Bajon also notes that they are said to arise rather than being raised up by the Lord. The Lord's agency in their deliverance is less pronounced and the activity of the judges seems to be less effective.

Death overtakes them and they do not ultimately bring rest. The people of Israel do evil

in the sight of the Lord. They serve seven different sets of gods and this is an act of great treachery and betrayal.

The Lord is angry with the jealous anger as a result of it. He sells them into the hands of the Ammonites for eighteen years. This can be paralleled with chapter 3 verses 13-14.

He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites and went and defeated Israel and they took possession of the city of Palms and the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years. There's another eighteen years here and once again the Ammonites are involved. God has delivered them from seven different nations only for them to give themselves over to seven different gods.

And at this point the Lord simply refuses to save them. They come to the Lord in times of their distress once again but they abandon him the moment that times are good. God seems to be there to bail them out when they're in trouble.

They use him to deliver them rather than committing themselves to him. The Israelites respond to the Lord's refusal to deliver them at this point by a more serious expression of repentance and change of course. They put away their false gods and they serve the Lord.

And the Lord at this point becomes impatient with their suffering and their misery. The Lord is a jealous God but he's not a vengeful God. He does not delight in seeing his people suffer.

The chapter ends on a cliffhanger. The Ammonites turn up and encamp in Gilead while Israel encamps at Mizpah. This is in the region of the Transjordan not that far from the Jabbok.

The leaders of Gilead are desperate. Whoever is able to lead them in battle will beheader over them all. The desperation with which they are reaching out for a leader in the time of their distress is similar to the desperation with which they reach out to the Lord whenever they're in trouble.

A desperation that is not matched with faithfulness when it really counts. A question to consider. What lessons about the character of true and false repentance might we learn from this chapter? The situation at the start of Judges chapter 11 is pretty dire.

The Ammonites have assembled and have encamped in Gilead and the Gileadites are looking for someone to lead them in the battle. The Lord seems to have abandoned them to their fate and there is no judge to go before them. Chapter 10 then ended with this cliffhanger and at the beginning of chapter 11 we're introduced to the character of Jephthah.

Jephthah was the son of Gilead. Gilead is the name of his father but also the name of his

region. He seems to be a specific person but the person also stands for the region that he belongs to.

Jephthah was the son of a prostitute. His father, Gilead, had been with a strange woman just as the people in Gilead had been going after strange gods. Jephthah was hated by his brothers.

He was regarded as the son of the prostitute and not a legitimate heir and they had driven him off. They drove out Jephthah but they could not drive out the Ammonites. While Jephthah is in the land of Tob, worthless or empty men gather around him.

Men described using the same word as those that gathered around Bimelech. However, they may not be entirely bad people. You can think of the similarities with David here in 1 Samuel 22 verses 1-2.

David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Bedolom. And when his brothers and all his father's house heard it, they went down there to him. And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him.

And he became commander over them. And there were with him about four hundred men. The groups surrounding are described as empty men.

As empty men they might be wicked and unfaithful but they might also just be incredibly poor. They might have no standing or status. They are a rabble with no leader or standing within the wider nation.

The Gileadites summon Jephthah back. They realise that they need a leader and that Jephthah is the sort of man that could do the trick. The relationship between the people of Gilead and Jephthah and the relationship between the people of Gilead and the Lord is not dissimilar.

The people despised the Lord and went after others. The people despised Jephthah and cast him out. And now they want to turn to the Lord and they want Jephthah because they're in trouble and they need to be bailed out.

Jephthah is the one who was despised and rejected but he becomes their leader when he returns. Jephthah is shrewd with the Gileadites. He expects them to make him their head if he delivers them from the Ammonites.

The one they had sought to deprive of any inheritance is now going to be their leader. Before entering into battle with the Ammonites, Jephthah first sends them a message to try and forge some peace. The Ammonite contention was that the land that they were in had formerly been Ammonite land but it had been subsequently taken by the Amorites.

The Amorites had then attacked Israel and Israel had dispossessed them. By this point Israel had lived in that area for almost 300 years. So it was strange for the Ammonites to claim that they had been wrongly treated.

They had lost the land before Israel came on the scene. And the Lord had given the land into the hands of the Israelites by causing the Amorite kings to attack them. Jephthah tells the Ammonites to look to their god Chemosh and see what he will do for them.

His point here is not that Chemosh is a true god but if the land is truly theirs Chemosh should be able to get it for them. However, it will be the Lord who will judge in the matter. Jephthah speaks as one who wants peace.

He's not trying to make a contention with the Ammonites but he is resisting their unreasonable demands. The Ammonites do not heed him though. And then the Spirit comes upon Jephthah impelling him to act.

The Spirit leads Jephthah to do three things in succession. He passes through the various territory of the land, he advances towards the Ammonites and he makes his vow. Vows are not inappropriate.

We have several examples of vows within the scriptures. For instance in Genesis chapter 28 verses 20 to 22. Then Jacob made a vow saying, In Numbers chapter 21 verse 2. And then in 1 Samuel chapter 1 verse 11.

Jephthah speaks about whatever comes from the doors of his house first to meet him. This would presumably not just be an animal. Jephthah presumably is not thinking about offering some pet to the Lord.

Speaking about whatever comes to meet him suggests most likely a human being. This story has been seen as a horrific one by many. Jephthah it seems makes a rash vow and then offers his daughter, his only child, as a burnt offering to the Lord.

This seems fairly horrific even in the context of the book of Judges. Perhaps especially so because this is a man that seems to be faithful. He refers to the Lord on a number of occasions within the chapter.

And he also took this vow as the spirit of the Lord came upon him and as a sort of dedication of his house and himself to the Lord. Now Jephthah more generally does not seem to be a rash man. The way that he deals with the Gileadites, the way that he deals with the Ammonites.

He doesn't rush into battle. He tries to make peace with them first and reason with them. This is not the action of a rash man.

And then there's the fact that the spirit seems to prompt the vow and it includes a

prayer which the Lord answers. Is the Lord playing a sick joke on Jephthah at this point? We have no evidence of human sacrifice being practised in Israel at this point. And no evidence of human sacrifice practised in the name of the Lord.

There is no mention explicitly of killing her either. Would the priests at the tabernacle have performed a human sacrifice for the Lord? There seems to be no consequences either. And he continues as a judge.

He's mentioned as a man of faith in Hebrews chapter 11 verse 32. And as a man sent by God in 1 Samuel chapter 12 verse 11. All of this seems very strange if he makes this rash vow and ends up doing the gruesome and evil act of sacrificing his daughter.

However, whatever his vow entails, he must honour it. That is why this is so tragic. He did not envisage that it would be his daughter.

Numbers chapter 30 verse 2 speaks of vows. It might be worth reflecting first upon why Jephthah makes the vow. Jephthah had been driven out of his inheritance by his brothers.

And then he was called back. And he was made the head over the Gileadites on the condition that he drove out the Ammonites. He has been promised headship.

And he wants to be head, as we see in verse 9. But he wants his headship to be dedicated to and blessed by God. And so he seems to want to dedicate his house. The first out of the doors of his house represent the whole house.

The first to come out of the doors of the house is also connected with the first to come out of the doors of the womb. There's a connection in scripture between leaving a house and leaving the womb. What Jephthah seems to hope here is that as he wins this battle, with the aid of the Lord, he will dedicate his house to the Lord.

His house will be established as a house for God's service. And when his house is dedicated, he can start to establish a dynasty. The man who was removed from the inheritance and disowned by his brothers will have children who get the inheritance and lead their brothers.

So the fact that his only child is the one that comes out of the house makes it so tragic. Jephthah is now denied the possibility of setting up a dynasty, of having anyone of his flesh to succeed him in the leadership of the Gileadites. The Lord has blessed him in the battle, but the Lord in his providence has denied Jephthah the opportunity of having a dynasty.

The ascension, which is translated as burnt offering, need not imply killing. Animals are killed, but for instance in the case of the Levites, they are dedicated to perpetual tabernacle service in replacement for the firstborn. Someone like Samuel could be

dedicated to the Lord, belonging to the Lord.

In Exodus chapter 38 verse 8 we see that there were serving women associated with the tabernacle. They weren't priests, but they would presumably have assisted women with their sacrifices and with some of the rituals that they had to perform. There were certain cases where human beings were dedicated to the Lord and were put to death.

The judgment upon the Canaanites was such a thing. All of their cities were to be destroyed and they were to be destroyed also. Leviticus chapter 27 verses 28-29 speaks about this.

The Canaanites then fell into that category. However, although many things devoted to the Lord were entirely destroyed, many were set apart for his perpetual service. The Levites were devoted to the Lord in such a manner.

We might also remember that in the rebellion of Korah, as they were burnt up and judged, certain elements that were not destroyed were dedicated to the Lord's service through that judgment. They became holy to the Lord, were withdrawn from common use and were dedicated to his service entirely. For wicked persons to be dedicated to the Lord would mean utter destruction.

But for a person who was a righteous and faithful member of Israel to be dedicated to the Lord, it could mean lifelong service. A sort of perpetual Nazarite vow. In the case of Jephthah's daughter, I believe this would have entailed perpetual service at the tabernacle.

As a result of this, she went to mourn her virginity for two months with her companions. Her companions were presumably the young women who would have been her bridesmaids had she been married. She has to mourn her virginity at this point because she would not be able to mourn when she was in the Lord's service.

Leviticus chapter 21 verses 10-12 gives us some indication of this. The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointed oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor tear his clothes. He shall not go in to any dead bodies, nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother.

He shall not go out of the sanctuary, lest he profane the sanctuary of his God, for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is on him. I am the Lord. When Jephthah carries out his vow, it is said that his daughter had never known a man.

It is something that she feels to be tragic. Not so much that she has not had sexual relations, but that she has not been able to bear a child. Verse 40 is parallel to verse 38, and on the surface of it, it might appear to give some weight to the idea that he killed his daughter.

However, it can be read differently. Young's literal translation translates it as follows. From time to time, the daughters of Israel go to talk to the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days in a year.

Just as after she had dedicated Samuel to the service of the tabernacle, Hannah would go up from time to time to see him and bring him new clothing, so the companions of Jephthah's daughter would go up on occasions to meet her and to speak to her. We have previously noted the presence of a pattern in the number of heirs that the various judges had. Gideon has 70, Tola has none mentioned, Jireh has 30, Jephthah loses his only heir, Ibsen has 30, Elon has none mentioned, and Abdon has 40 sons and 30 grandsons, summing up to 70.

This is a book-ended pattern, or a chiasm, and at the very centre of it is Jephthah, who had wanted to set up a dynasty, and yet been denied the possibility of doing so. Jephthah finds himself in the position of a eunuch-type figure. He is denied children of his own, and so he must be entirely committed to the kingdom of another.

He is not going to build up his own kingdom, he must serve the kingdom of the Lord. That is the only place where his legacy lies. A question to consider, what are some other occasions in scripture where the doorway is associated with birth? In Judges chapter 12, following Jephthah's battle against the Ammonites, the Ephraimites got angry with Jephthah for not calling them to the fight.

We've already seen the Ephraimites causing trouble like this back in Judges chapter 8 verses 1-3. Then the men of Ephraim said to him, What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian? And they accused him fiercely. And he said to them, What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abieza? God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, or Ebenezeb.

What have I been able to do in comparison with you? Then their anger against him subsided when he said this. Gideon had assuaged the Ephraimites' anger, appeasing them with a soft answer. But the Ephraimites are far more aggressive in their attitude to Jephthah, threatening to burn him alive.

Jephthah had crossed over the Jordan during part of his fight against the Ammonites, not confining the fighting to the Transjordan. However, he hadn't involved the Ephraimites. A great battle had been won in Israel, but the Ephraimites hadn't received the share of the glory from it that they believed with Zerjhu as the dominant northern tribe.

Ephraim seemingly have an exalted sense of their importance. But we are also seeing the fact that the Jordan is a fault line in the land, between the Transjordanian tribes and the tribes of the Promised Land proper. Ephraim are none too pleased to see a powerful leader arising in Gilead.

This might threaten Ephraim's dominance. Unlike Gideon, who was in the middle of his battle against the Midianites and could not afford direct conflict with the Ephraimites, Jephthah has defeated the Ammonites, so he can afford to deal with the Ephraimites far more directly. Unlike the Ephraimites, however, Jephthah isn't spoiling for a fight.

He begins, as he did with the Ammonites, by trying to communicate with them, with an act of diplomacy. The Gileadites were the ones that had conflict with the Ammonites, and he argues that he called for the assistance of the Ephraimites at that point, when they really could have made a difference and aided their brothers. But they did not provide any help.

They had left Gilead to its fate. When there was a risky and costly battle to be fought, they were nowhere to be found. However, when there was glory to be won, they were concerned to be first on the scene.

As they hadn't come to Jephthah's initial summons, he didn't summon them when there was far easier glory to be gained. Jephthah, without the aid of the Ephraimites when he had needed it, had taken his life into his hands. However, the Lord had assisted Jephthah in the battle, even when the Ephraimites had not.

The Ephraimites presumably did not respond favourably to Jephthah's message, because the next thing we see, he is gathering all of the men of Gilead for battle. Jephthah led the Gileadites in battle against the Ephraimites. There are times when people fall out over a seemingly secondary matter, and it blows up into a great argument, in which someone says something, in which a deep underlying tension between them erupts, and is brought to the surface.

And this seems to have happened here. The Ephraimites declare that the Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim. It isn't exactly clear what their taunt means, but it might be suggesting that the Gileadites had no true identity of their own, and were little more than illegitimate outcasts of Ephraim and Manasseh.

The fault line between the tribes in the Promised Land and the tribes in the Transjordan had been apparent in Joshua chapter 22, in the incident with the altar. Here we see it again. And we should see the parallels between what Gilead is to the Ephraimites, and what Jephthah is to the sons of Gilead, in chapter 11, verses 1-3.

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah, and Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.

Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tov, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him. The sons of Gilead didn't recognise

Jephthah as a true brother and heir, but made him a fugitive and an outcast. The Ephraimites treat the Gileadites in the same way.

Fittingly, the conflict occurs at the Fords of the Jordan, which is the ugly scar dividing the face of the nation. The tribes of the Transjordan on one side, and the tribes of the Promised Land on the other. And there is a sort of immediate poetic justice here.

The Gileadites capture the Fords of the Jordan. It's a hugely strategic location. It's mentioned in Judges chapter 3, verse 28, in Ehud's conflict with the Moabites, and in chapter 7, verse 24, in Gideon's battle against the Midianites.

While the Ephraimites had accused the Gileadites of being fugitives, now the Ephraimites are the fugitives, inspected by the Gileadites. They are all tested at the Fords. If they could pronounce the word Shibboleth, they could cross.

But if they used a characteristic Ephraimite mispronunciation, Sibboleth, they were killed. The Ephraimites, despite seeing themselves as the greatest of the tribes, presumably, and perhaps elevating their dialect over others, as maybe they received pronunciation of Israel, could not pronounce the word Shibboleth correctly. This also reveals that the tribes are sharply divided by dialect, in a sort of mini-Babel.

And, for all of their self-importance, the Ephraimites are the ones with the mispronunciation. 42,000 Ephraimites were killed. About 40,000 of the Transjordanian tribes had crossed over the Jordan to fight for their brothers in Joshua 4, verse 13.

And now the Ephraimites, who had denied the Transjordanians part in the nation, lost 42,000 people at the crossing of the Jordan. Is there a significance to this number? Beyond being a weak reminder of the 40,000 Transjordanians who crossed the Jordan to fight in Joshua, 42,000 is also 12,000 multiplied by 3 and a half, a broken 7. I can't see much significance, but there might be something there. This was a truly devastating defeat.

It would likely have left Ephraim as a spent or crippled military force for decades afterwards. Following this, Jephthah establishes dominance over the Ephraimites and judges Israel for six years. But in this great civil battle we see how fractured Israel has become.

The account of Jephthah is followed by records of three judges, Ibni, Ilaan and Abdon. They complete the chiasm or the bookend pattern that began with Gideon. 70 sons, no sons, 30 sons, no sons, 30 sons, no sons, 70 sons and grandsons.

This pattern foregrounds the issue of aspirations to dynastic succession, something that is a central aspect of the stories of both Gideon and Jephthah. However, it is also subtly present in the details of the other stories. The large numbers of sons suggest the multiplying of marriages, and the involvement of the sons in ruling cities or riding on

donkeys suggests proto-dynastic elements emerging.

Ibn gives 30 daughters outside of his clan and he brings 30 daughters in. This reveals a man who was shrewdly developing patriarchal marriage alliances between different groups, treating his children as chips that he could bargain for greater power politically. He was multiplying wives so that he could multiply children so that he could multiply marriage alliances so that he could gain power.

Abdon is only a judge for 8 years, but he already has two generations of potential princes lined up. A question to consider, what are some of the reasons why dynasty building might be a problem? What are some of the obstacles that the Lord presented to pursuing it? In Judges chapter 13 we see Israel under the oppression of the Philistines, except that the Philistines don't seem to be especially oppressive. The people don't cry out, there seems to be intermarriage, as we see in the following chapter.

As oppressors go, the Philistines are fairly civilised and tolerant, and keeping their head down under Philistine rule seems a much better option than starting any sort of rebellion. However, God is going to shake things up through Samson. He's going to cause Samson to be an annoyance, not just to the Philistines, but also to many in Israel.

When Samson actually goes about causing trouble for the Philistines, the Judahites complain and try to hand him over to them. The situation here is a bad situation where there is little enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, so God has to raise up a troublemaker to introduce a bit of much needed enmity and antagonism. They are given over to the Philistines for 40 years.

Perhaps we are to see the events of this chapter as occurring near the beginning of that period, in preparation for deliverance later on down the line, because works of deliverance are often a great many years in the making. This is an annunciation and birth story. It's the only one of its kind in the Book of Judges.

There are various birth stories in the Book of Genesis, and also some annunciations for the birth of Ishmael and Isaac. In the Book of Samuel that comes after this, there's a birth story, in the case of Samuel's birth to Hannah. The most famous birth story in the Old Testament is that of Moses.

In the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke begins with two birth stories, with John the Baptist and with Jesus, both of which have an annunciation, with the angel Gabriel bringing news of the birth. Here it is the angel of the Lord, which I believe should be understood to be the second person of the Trinity, and also to be the commander of the army of God. The Lord is going to start a fight against the Philistines, and the angel of the Lord, the commander of God's hosts, comes in order to announce the birth of one who will lead this fight.

Manoah's wife, Samson's mother, is barren. She is told that she will have a son, and that her son should be a Nazarite. The other two lifelong Nazarites in Scripture, John the Baptist and Samuel, were born to mothers who were barren.

The law of the Nazarite is given in Numbers chapter 6. In Numbers 6 verses 1 to 8 we read, He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink, and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins.

All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall touch his head. Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the Lord, he shall be holy. He shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long.

All the days that he separates himself to the Lord, he shall not go near a dead body, not even for his father or for his mother, for brother or sister if they die, shall he make himself unclean. Because his separation to God is on his head. All the days of his separation he is holy to the Lord.

As a Nazarite, the child of Manoah's wife would be a lifelong dedicated servant of the Lord. He would have to avoid wine, like the high priest he would have to avoid death. He would be a dedicated warrior.

His head is consecrated, with the hair upon it belonging to the Lord, and the crown of hair upon his head will have to go to the Lord. Manoah and his wife, the father and mother of Samson, live in the land of the Danites, but the initial land, before they moved. No name is given for Manoah's wife, which is interesting.

She's the woman, and as the woman she highlights for us the importance of women in the story of Samson. Samson's life is defined by his relationship with women, for good and ill, and mostly for ill. Like the patriarch's wife, she struggles in conceiving, and the angel comes to her when she is alone.

Manoah is not involved, he can't take credit for what happens. The woman then tells her husband Manoah, and he prays for a second visit of the man of God. And the man of God visits again, the angel of the Lord.

This time, once again, he appears to the wife of Manoah when she is alone, and then she has to summon her husband. Even though the angel of the Lord comes again, in answer to the request of Manoah, Manoah's part in the whole situation is downplayed. The Lord is going to achieve this by his power, not by the power of Manoah.

And when the angel of the Lord delivers his instructions to Manoah, it's mostly just to reiterate what he has already told the woman. One might imagine Manoah feeling a little frustrated. Manoah offers the angel of the Lord some hospitality, not realising that it is

the angel of the Lord.

And the angel of the Lord refuses, but accepts an offering to the Lord. This reminds us, I think, of the story of Gideon as well, where the angel of the Lord recedes an offering. However, while there was a peace offering there, there is no peace offering of the same kind here.

There's a whole burnt offering, and the angel of the Lord ascends in the smoke of the burnt offering to the Lord. At this point, Manoah is afraid, and his wife has to speak some sense into him. Manoah fears that God is going to destroy them, since they've seen the Lord.

Manoah's wife explains that, if God did want to destroy them, he would not have accepted their offering, he wouldn't have displayed such wonders to them, and he wouldn't be giving them a son. The woman bears a son, and his name is called Samson. Little son.

S-U-N. As he grows, the Lord blesses him, and then the spirit of the Lord comes upon him to equip him for his work of deliverance. James Bergeon observes of the Samson story that there is a symmetry to it.

He writes, And it begins with a secret which is kept from the first woman in Samson's life, and ends with a secret which is discovered by the last woman in Samson's life. That our text begins and ends in similar ways is not merely a literary flourish. In many ways, it is reflective of the judgeship of Samson.

Samson's exploits end on a rather hollow note. It is not really clear what Samson achieves in his time as Israel's judge. He leaves Israel much as he found her, her problems unaddressed.

A question to consider. Why of all the judges in the book of Judges, is Samson the one to have an annunciation and birth narrative? Samson begins his ministry between Zorah, meaning Hornet, and Eshter from the root to question. He ends up being buried at the same place.

And the spirit of God stirs him up at the end of chapter 13, and one of the first results of this is his journey down to Timnah in chapter 14, where he sees one of the daughters of the Philistines and wants to take her as his wife. This isn't the same Timnah as in Genesis chapter 38, but the fact that it shares the name might be significant. Samson's parents are obviously concerned about this decision.

Taking a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines seems to be a departure from the way of the Lord. Samson was supposed to be set apart, to be a Nazirite to the Lord from his birth, and now here he is marrying one of the uncircumcised Philistines. It does not seem appropriate.

Even though the Philistines were not the Canaanites, and it was possible in principle to take one of them as a wife, it did not seem to be a wise thing to do, or a righteous thing to do. Surely Samson would be much better off taking a daughter of his own people. This isn't the only way that he seems to be bending or breaking the rules of a Nazirite in this chapter.

He goes after one of the daughters of the Philistines, he leaves the path to go into a vineyard, he takes honey from the carcass of a lion, and a few chapters later he ends up having his hair cut. Yet the Lord is using Samson, the Lord is seeking an occasion against the Philistines, and Samson is a tool in his hand. Even in his recklessness and his lust he ends up serving the Lord's purpose, creating enmity between Israel and the Philistines.

He goes down to Timnah a second time with his parents this time, and on the way, when his parents are not with him, he encounters the lion in the vineyard. It's a dreadful wild beast where one would not expect to encounter one. We might ask what Samson himself is doing in the vineyard, he's supposed to stay away from all products of the grape, and yet he's walking off the path in a vineyard.

It seems strange. There is of course no reference to him actually taking the fruit of the vineyard, and there may be some symbolic purpose to it. The vineyard represents Israel, and Samson, although he does not eat the fruit of the vineyard, is one who guards the vineyard, and appropriately he's going to be the one that rids the vineyard of the beast that prowls within it.

That this incident with the lion is symbolic is suggested by the next chapter. First of all in this chapter we read in verses 5-6, Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. In the next chapter in verse 14, When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting or roaring to meet him.

Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. There's a parallel between these two statements. The lion in the first case, in the vineyard, is paralleled with the Philistines in the next chapter.

Israel, the vineyard of the Lord, is being possessed by this lion of the Philistines, and Samson, one stronger than the lion, has to come and rid the vineyard of the creature that prowls within it. Samson doesn't tell his parents about what he did to the lion. The themes of knowing and not knowing, and telling and not telling, are very prominent ones throughout this chapter.

The woman was right in Samson's eyes. This has been a refrain and will be a refrain throughout the rest of the book of Judges, doing what is right in their eyes. It's not a positive indication.

It suggests that Samson is following his lust rather than wisdom or the way of the Lord here. A few days later, Samson returns to take the woman, and turns aside to see the carcass of the lion, and there's a swarm of bees and some honey inside it, and he sees, he takes, he eats, and he gives to his parents, who do not know where the honey has come from. He defeats the lion in the vineyard, like the serpent in the garden, but then he takes and he eats, and he listens to the voice of his wife, who has been led by the serpents in a way that brings a loss of clothing.

Maybe there are themes of the fool here. The taking, eating and giving certainly do remind us of the forbidden fruit, and as Samson should keep himself from a dead body, the fact that he's getting food from the carcass of a lion is at the very least seeing how close he can get to the fire without being burned. So there are possible themes of the fool here.

In the book of Judges there are progressive fool themes. So we start off with idolatry in the form of Gideon's ephod, then there's the murder of brothers in the story of Abimelech, and then there's intermarriage in the story of Samson. In the wedding that follows, there are 30 companions selected for Samson after they see him.

Perhaps Samson has an imposing physique corresponding to his physical strength, and so they feel the need of 30 men to surround him. Numbers related to three are also prominent in the Samson narrative, while numbers related to seven are prominent in the Gideon narrative. The marriage feast lasts for seven days, and there's a riddle given for 30 linen garments and changes of clothes under and out garments.

Now, as most people would only have one of such pairs of garments, this was a pretty costly wager. To lose it would be fairly devastating. It serves as a natural occasion for conflict.

It provokes the Philistines. They are unable to solve the riddle for three days, and on the fourth day they approach the wife of Samson. They threaten Samson's wife.

They'll burn her and her father's house with fire, all the people within her father's household. They are very angry at her, as they stand to lose a lot, and so she pleads with and accuses Samson of not loving her. The foreign women in Samson's life give his enemies a lot of leverage over him, and this case is no exception.

Finally, Samson gives in, and at the very end of the appointed time the men interpret the riddle. Now they are described as the men of the city, not just the 30, and their answer is a sort of riddle of its own. It's posed as a question.

What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion? Now on one level this could be read as a straightforward answer to Samson's question. On another level it could be read as a riddle of its own. What is stronger than a lion? Well, we know.

Samson. Samson is like a lion himself. He's like the sun with a great mane and incredible strength.

What is sweeter than honey? Love. Samson himself is the lion, who ends up being defeated by love and sweetness when he could not be defeated by strength. This is a foreshadowing of Samson's defeat through Delilah.

The woman of Timna, the prostitute of Gaza, and Delilah are far more powerful against Samson than any of the strength of the Philistine lion. It's the honey from the carcass of the Philistines that really causes the trouble. Just as it seemed that Samson compromised his Nazirite vow to eat the honey from the lion, so he will compromise his Nazirite vow with Delilah later on in the story.

This foreshadows the way that Samson will meet his demise. And we might perhaps see the story of Israel playing out here. Israel was set apart from their birth as a special people to the Lord.

Their birth was announced by the angel of the Lord, and the spirit of God came upon them to defeat their enemies with great power. Yet they could not resist the honey of false gods and foreign wives, and ended up suffering great loss as a result. Samson's response to the 30 men is an angry one.

If they had not ploughed with his heifer, they would not have discovered his riddle. In speaking of a heifer, he's clearly referring to his wife in a very unflattering way, and in referring to ploughing, there may be some implication of sexual violation. This also sets the scene for the way that Samson will get his revenge in the next chapter.

The spirit of the Lord now rushes upon him again. He kills 30 men of Ashkelon, and takes their garments, and gives those to the 30 Philistines. Then he returns to his father's house, his marriage in tatters.

His wife is given to his best man. It seems to me that there are more things going on in this story than we see on the surface. First of all, it foreshadows what will happen in Samson's own life.

The story of the lion, the bees, and Samson gives some indication of how his story will play out. It also relates to the story of Israel more generally. Beyond this, I think there is another passage in scripture that might shed some light upon it.

In Genesis chapter 38, verses 1-2 we read, It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adolamite, whose name was Hira. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shewa, and he took her and went into her. Once again, there is a story of someone going down, seeing a daughter of a foreign people, and wanting to take her as his wife.

That story continues in verses 12-16. Judah then offers her a kid. Later on in the story, she is threatened with being burned with fire.

In the next chapter, Samson comes with a young goat to try and meet his wife again, and fails, much as Judah failed to bring the goat to the presumed prostitute in chapter 38 of Genesis. The woman of Timnah ends up being burned alive, as Tamar nearly was in Genesis. There seem then to be similarities between these stories.

In both cases, a man goes down from his people, meets a woman of a foreign people, marries her, is diverted from the road on the way to Timnah, is led astray by his lust, and ends up being humbled as a result. In both cases, we have elements that are similar. A goat being sent to reconnect with a woman, and a threat to burn the woman with fire.

When we consider further that Judah is related to the lion in chapter 49 of Genesis, in a passage that alludes back to the events of chapter 38, and that Samson defeats the lion here in chapter 14 of Judges, and is compared to the lion as well, it would seem that there are some deep connections to be explored. Samson, like Judah, is the lion brought low. In both cases, perhaps, these men represent the sovereignty and power and might of Israel.

They are the lions of the nation, and yet they are brought low by their lust for foreign women, and in giving their strength to strange women, they end up forfeiting their effectiveness. A question to consider. Samson is a man of the tribe of Dan.

Where do we see Dan compared to a lion? By the beginning of Judges chapter 15, Samson's marriage has failed, but he doesn't yet realise what has happened. He is seemingly unaware of the fact that his wife has been given to his best man. So he goes down to try and visit his wife with a young goat to reconnect with her.

This might remind us of Judah's failed attempt to send the goat to Tamar, or the woman he thought was the prostitute, in Genesis chapter 38. When Samson realises that his wife has been given to another man, he is furious with the Philistines. He has been denied his bride, and he is going to be avenged.

However, as John Barrett observes, Samson does not run amok. Samson brings violence and chaos, but he does so in a very determined and calculated manner. They have denied him his wife, denied him his seed.

His wife was earlier threatened by fire, and 30 men of the Philistines were responsible for this. Catching 300 foxes or jackals or whatever they were is no mean feat. It would take a considerable amount of time and effort.

If Samson were merely furious and wanting to strike out at the Philistines, this would not be the way that he would choose. This is a very calculated and considered action, one that requires a great deal of premeditation and planning and organisation. If he just

wanted to commit arson, for instance, there would be far easier ways to do it.

That he chooses this bizarre way to do so suggests that there is some importance or meaning or symbolic purpose to it. What might that purpose be? We can try and work it out. There are 300 foxes with torches.

Earlier we've had the story of Gideon with 300 people associated with dogs with torches. Maybe there's some connection there. But there is another connection nearer to hand.

It was 30 Philistine men who got the information about Samson's riddle from his wife. They were the men who started this whole thing. The result of their action was that he was prevented from marrying, and having seed, he was prevented from having his harvest.

How did they obtain the information? They obtained the information, according to Samson, by ploughing with his heifer. They extracted the information from his wife. In Exodus 22 verse 1, the punishment for stealing oxen is five oxen for an ox, or five heifers for a heifer.

While there are 300 foxes, the foxes are divided into pairs, so there are 150 pairs of foxes. They are ploughing the fields with fire. 150 pairs of foxes is 5 times 30 foxes.

By this point it should be apparent that there is a logic to Samson's action, that there is some sort of eye-for-eye judgement here. The amount of thought and deliberation and planning that Samson must have put into this action might suggest that many popular portrayals of his character are mistaken. Far from just being a hothead who loses his temper, Samson is someone who can engage in a great deal of forethought and planning, and there is, at the very least, some sense of justice behind Samson's action.

There is a measure to it. There is an attempt on Samson's part, at the very least, to give some sort of proportionate judgement or vengeance, some sort of fitting or appropriate response to the wrong that has been committed against him. When the Philistines discover what has happened and who was responsible for it, they burn the Timnite woman and her father with fire.

Samson once again claims that he will be avenged upon them, and he attacks and kills a great many. Then he hides in the cleft of the Rock at Etam. All of this has stirred up the Philistines, and this is not something that is popular among the Israelites.

The Israelites do not want the Philistines to be stirred up. They want to be at peace with them, to live under their yoke without being oppressed too much. And when the Philistines go up to attack Judah, the Judahites end up sending 3,000 men to capture Samson in order to deliver him into the hands of the Philistines.

Samson is a troublemaker, and the Judahites do not want a troublemaker around. He's

just going to make things difficult for them, and cause the Philistines to attack them, when really they just want to live at peace. Samson, however, escapes from the bonds that the Judahites have placed upon him.

In verse 14 we read, Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. This parallels with his encounter with the lion in the previous chapter in verses 5-6. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring.

Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. Samson fortuitously finds a jawbone of an ass, a fresh jawbone, and uses it to attack the Philistines. With it he strikes 1,000 men.

This might remind us of Deuteronomy 32, verse 30. How could one chase a thousand, and two put 10,000 to flight, unless their rock had sold them, and the Lord had given them up? After this great victory, Samson sings a sort of victory song, one that plays upon the word for donkey, which is the same word for heap. At the place called Lehi, or jawbone, Samson fights with a jawbone, and with the jawbone of an ass, he creates heaps of defeated enemies, ass being the same word as that used for heaps.

While at the beginning of this episode the Philistines are comparable to a lion, by the end of it they're more comparable to a pile of dead donkeys. Samson has successfully made asses out of them. This whole series of events started off with Samson going down to Timna and seeing the daughter of the Philistines.

One thing has led to another, and it has escalated to the point that he has killed well over 1,000 Philistines. Fittingly, a story beginning with riddles and taunts ends with a victory taunt over the Philistines. Samson then names the place after the jawbone, and now he's thirsty and calls out for the Lord to deliver him.

The Lord responds to Samson's prayer and brings water out from the rock. This is something that has happened before, in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20. The story of Samson might remind us of Israel's story once again.

A question to consider. In Hebrews 11, verse 32, we're told that Samson was a man of faith. There is much debate among commentators concerning the character of Samson.

Some see him as a man just driven by anger and lust, and others try and paint a very flattering portrait of him, trying to give some more spiritual rationale for most of his actions. How ought we best to do justice to the complexities of such a character? At the beginning of Judges 16, Samson pursues a harlot, and it's a story similar to the story of Joshua's spies that are sent to the city of Jericho. An Israelite goes into a city and goes to a prostitute.

The men of the city hear about the Israelite in the city and try to capture him. The man escapes, and then there is damage done to the defences of the city. In the story of Jericho, the city walls are brought down, and in the story here, Samson takes the gates of the city.

However, unlike the spies in the story of Joshua, it seems that Samson is not being faithful here. He's being driven by his lust once again. And while he takes the gate of the city, no victory is won.

It is a great exploit, but apart from irritating the Philistines, it achieves nothing. After this escapade, Samson goes to the valley of Sorek, where there's a woman that he has fallen in love with, a woman named Delilah. Delilah's name might remind us of night, Layla, which has been mentioned a number of times in the chapter already.

Samson's name associates him with the sun, and this relationship between the sun and the lady of the night is not an auspicious one. Indeed, Delilah's whole purpose in this chapter is to lull Samson to sleep, to cause the sun to sink, and finally that Samson's eyes that had been closed in sleep might be plucked out, and Samson be left in complete darkness. Delilah may be a Philistine, but not necessarily.

She does seem to be known to the lords of the Philistines, though. Maybe she's a woman of high status. They each offer her 1,100 pieces of silver to betray Samson.

In the next chapter, Micah takes 1,100 pieces of silver from his mother. This surely is not an accident. At the request of the lords of the Philistines, Delilah seeks to discover what the source of Samson's strength is, and he plays a game with her.

He keeps misleading her, quite likely knowing that she has some design against him, but taking his chance. He is flirting with extreme danger here. And the details of this game are interesting.

They're strange. It should suggest to us that the details are important, that there's some significance in the specifics. The first suggestion is seven fresh bowstrings, that if they're tied around him, he will be unable to release himself.

The second is using new ropes. And then the third, and then the third involves weaving the locks of his hair and fastening it with a pin. What is the significance of all of this, then? The most compelling explanation I've heard is that these are symbolic ways of representing the encounters that he's had with the Philistines to this point.

The first, the seven fresh bowstrings, represents his marriage, the seven days of his marriage. It seemed at that point that the Philistines had the upper hand. At the end of those seven days, they solved the riddle, and Samson had to get them 30 sets of clothes.

However, Samson can snap the bowstrings, as flax is snapped by the fire. The second episode, the one with the new ropes, has a more obvious parallel. That's connected with his deliverance over to the Philistines by the men of Judah.

In Judges chapter 15, verses 13 to 14, they said to him, So they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock. When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that had caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands.

This is the exact same attempt to subdue him as Delilah tries for the second time. The third attempt, the weaving with the web and the pin, connects with the episode at the beginning of this chapter. The broken gate pulled up with the bar.

Samson's hair is woven into the loom, and that verbally plays off Samson being ambushed at the gate. Hair and gate connected, and woven and ambushed connected. He plucked up the doorposts, and he plucked out the pin.

So in these three episodes, Samson is representing the previous attempts of the Philistines to subdue and overcome him. This final attempt, however, is a bit more concerning, because it involves his hair. Delilah is getting closer to the truth.

Finally, like the woman at Timna extracted from him the meaning of the riddle, Delilah extracts from Samson the secret that was first revealed to Samson's mother in chapter 13. And once again, she gets him to fall asleep, and now she gets someone to shave his head. And the result is that he loses his strength.

Delilah is in many respects like Jail. The word for tent peg and the word for the pin that's used for the weaving, they're the same. She does much the same thing.

She defeats a man by putting him off his guard. She sends the man to sleep. Judges chapter 5 verses 24 to 27.

Samson is like Israel. He defeats the lion in the vineyard, yet he falls for the bees in its carcass. He calls out to the Lord and receives water from the rock.

He overcomes the walls or the gates of the prostitute city. But as he seeks after prostitutes and unfaithful women, just as Israel sought after false gods, he ends up grinding grain for his enemies and being made a mockery in a false god's temple. In the distress of exile, however, his hair begins to grow again, and he calls out to the Lord to remember him.

Blind Samson is directed to the pillars that are holding up the temple, and in his final act, with a great feat of strength, he brings it down. The upper and the lower levels of the temple collapse, with all the Philistines in it, 3,000 men. Perhaps there is some

connection between the 3,000 mentioned here and the 3,000 men of Judah mentioned in the preceding chapter.

If there is, I'm not sure what it is, but I wouldn't be surprised if there were something to discover. Samson wins this great victory in his death, but his story is ultimately a tragic one, a story of failure. Chronologically speaking, it is also probably the last story in the book of Judges.

The stories that follow are all flashbacks, stories that give some greater indication of where it all went wrong for Israel. A question to consider. What similarities and contrasts do we see when we hold the stories of Samson and Christ alongside each other? The concluding chapters in the book of Judges are some of the most puzzling and troubling chapters in the whole of the Bible.

While chapters 17 and 18 are not as troubling as the chapters that follow, they still raise many questions for the reader, not least concerning the reason for the story being included in this particular form. If we pay close attention to the details that we are given later on in chapter 18, the narrative seems to be dischronologized, out of chronological sequence in the events in the book of Judges. If we were going to put it in its proper place, it would be very early on in the book.

Then there is the strangeness of the story. Why the reference to the mother's curse and the very specific sums of money? Why is the story told from the perspective that it is told? Micah doesn't seem to be that important a figure at all. He's not a leader of the people, and he's more acted upon than acting.

Why, given the specific details that we receive on some fronts, do we not have details on other fronts, such as the name of the mother? What happens to the money? Only 200 pieces of the silver that are promised seem to be given, leaving us with the question of what happens with the rest. We should also ask how this narrative relates to the narratives around it, to the Samson narratives, and also to the story of the Levite and the concubine. We can see many points of contact between the story of chapters 17 and 18 and the chapters that precede, the story of Samson and Delilah.

Delilah was given five sums of 1,100 pieces of silver, one for each of the lords of the Philistines. In chapter 18, the Danites come on the scene, and in the preceding chapter, the story of Samson was a story of a Danite. In chapter 18, the Danite spies come up from their brothers between Zorah and Eshterial, which is the location where Samson was buried at the end of chapter 16.

Both stories also mention Mahenadan. There are very few stories of Danites in scripture. There are only two narratives that make a reference to 1,100 pieces of silver.

The twin locations of Zorah and Eshterial are only mentioned on a handful of occasions,

and Mahenadan is only mentioned in the story of Samson and in the story of Micah and the Levite. It seems to me that there is evidence here for some connection between the two stories. As Tammy Schneider notes, some commentators have argued that the mother of Micah is none other than Delilah, and Micah had stolen one of the sums of money that was given to her by the Philistine lords.

Such an identification, however, would run contrary to details in the text in chapter 18 that would suggest an earlier date for the events of this chapter. Looking closely at the story of chapters 17 and 18 and the story of chapters 19 to 21, we can also see a number of points of contact. Both of the stories involve a man from the hill country of Ephraim and someone from Bethlehem.

In both cases, one of them is a Levite. There is seemingly a grandson of Moses in one of the stories and a grandson of Aaron in the other. As we will see when we study it, the many numbers of chapters 19 to 21 also connect with the sum of Micah's mother's money in all sorts of different ways.

Both stories also contain several details that are reminiscent of the curse upon and the death of Rachel. Tragic events take place near to the site of her death near Bethlehem. There is the pursuit of stolen teraphine.

There is the near death of Benjamin. There is an unwitting curse upon a child concerning a stolen item. There is terroring at the house of the father-in-law.

And just as silver was prominent in the stories of Rachel's two sons, Joseph being sold for 20 pieces of silver, and Benjamin seemingly taking the pieces of silver in his sack and also the silver cup, so silver is prominent in the relationship between the mother and the son here. Both stories also have an emphasis upon the threshold or the doorway. Both stories are also stories of extreme violation of hospitality.

We might also recognize ways in which this story reminds us of previous stories within the book of Judges. The rash curse of Micah's mother that ends up falling upon her son might remind us of the rash vow of Jephthah which ends up casting him his daughter. Paying attention to all of the strangeness of the narrative then, there seems to be good reason to believe that this is an account that serves a secondary parabolic or allegorical purpose in addition to being a historical record.

We have similar accounts to this in places like 1 Kings chapter 13, with the old prophet of Bethel and the man of God from Judah, a story in which the two figures represent the northern and southern kingdoms respectively. Micah confesses to his mother his theft of the sum of money from her, yet she had declared a curse concerning it and that curse would seem to rest upon him. So in response to his confession, she seeks to reverse the curse.

First of all, she declares a blessing upon her son in verse 2, and then as Micah restores the money to her, she seeks to dedicate the money to the Lord for her son in order to avert the curse falling upon him. Yet of the 1,100 pieces of silver, she only takes 200 pieces of silver, gives that to the silversmith and he makes a carved image and a metal image with it. These two images were in the possession of Micah.

For the images, Micah built a shrine and ephod and household gods. He created a false house of gods with an image of the Lord being surrounded by teraphim in a sort of polytheistic pantheon. Judges here return to its common refrain, In those days there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

This statement seems to come from Deuteronomy chapter 12 verses 8-9, You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes. For you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that the Lord your God is giving you. The reference there seems to be about the right form of worship of the Lord in a central sanctuary in ways that avoid the sort of idolatry that Micah represents.

We might also see in Micah something similar to the story of the golden calf. His silver images play a similar role to the golden calf made by the Israelites in Exodus chapter 32. In the second half of the chapter a new figure comes on the scene, a Levite who comes from the region of Bethlehem in Judah.

Although not a Judahite, he was dwelling in that region, presumably as one ministering to Judahites as a Levite. He wanders away from Judah looking for a new place and as he journeys he comes to the house of Micah in the hill country of Ephraim. When the Levite makes known his intention to Micah, Micah invites him to stay with him and to become a father and a priest to him.

He will be paid every year with ten pieces of silver, be provided with room and board and also be given a suit of clothes. The Levite is pleased with this offer and takes him up on it. Though a young man we are told that the Levite was originally to become like a father to Micah.

The Levites were supposed to be overseers to give direction to the people of Israel. Yet in verse 11 the Levite becomes as one of his sons. Micah ordains him to his office and the young man serves him as his priest.

Rather than being a minister of the Lord, the Levite has become a servant of Micah. There is a sort of serious inversion that has taken place here. Micah is also confident that since he has this mercenary Levite in his employ, the Levite replacing one of his own sons who he had earlier ordained to the ministry of this sanctuary that he had set up, that the Lord would bless and favour him.

Micah, whose name ironically means who is like the Lord, was seemingly unaware of the severity of his idolatry. At the end of this chapter then we have a false house of gods that had been set up and also a false priesthood. As the author notes in saying that everyone did what was right in their own eyes at this time, this is representative of the largest spiritual state of the nation.

As I noted earlier, the prominence of the relationship between a mother and her son might make us think back to the story of Rachel and her two sons. In that story in Genesis, the fate of the mother and her two sons was powerfully shaped by the father's unwitting curse of his daughter concerning the stolen teraphim and the silver for which her sons were nearly taken from her. Genesis chapter 35 begins with burying household gods beneath the tree and then ends with the death of Rachel giving birth to Benjamin.

All of this recalls the curse or judgement of Laban in chapter 31, giving the death sentence to the person who stole the teraphim. Rachel's two sons also live under the shadow of this death sentence. Camels from Gilead, Rachel having been seated upon a camel at Gilead when she was confronted by her father, come down and take Rachel's oldest son Joseph into Egypt in chapter 37 of Genesis.

There there's an allusion to the teraphim in the statement of the father that Joseph is surely torn. In chapter 44 there's another recollection of this story as Joseph engineers a situation where Benjamin and the brothers are pursued and searching their possessions from the oldest to the youngest as the possessions had been searched in chapter 31 of Genesis. Joseph's men find the silver cup, the instrument of divination, in the possession of Benjamin.

Another recollection of the story of Rachel and the stolen teraphim, not least because there's a similar death sentence declared on this occasion. In the story of Micah and his mother we might have a recollection of this story from Genesis. Once again a curse hangs over the child and as we see in this story it represents the state of the nation more generally.

The sons of Rachel, men of Ephraim such as Micah and also the men of Benjamin in the chapters that follow are also facing a sort of death sentence. Perhaps beyond the recollection of the story of Genesis there is an anticipation of a story that is yet to come. A story with similar figures but with a very positive outcome in contrast to this one.

There another mother from the hill country of Ephraim makes a dedication to the Lord. Hannah dedicates her son Samuel to the Lord and he serves as a Levite in the house of the Lord. Every year she makes him a new garment and he also wears an ephod and serves as a son to Eli, one who replaces Eli's unfaithful sons.

In many respects we might see this as the reversal of the story of Micah, his mother and the Levite from Bethlehem. While the story of Judges chapter 17 is the story of a woman

from Ephraim and her son taking a Levite to serve as a false priest. The story of the opening chapters of 1 Samuel is the story of a woman from Ephraim giving her son to serve as a true priest of the house of the Lord, not of a false house of gods.

A question to consider, the 1,100 pieces of silver might well remind us of the preceding chapter where Samson is betrayed for five such sums of silver. What other associations in scripture do we have with numbers that are related to 1,100? Numbers for instance like 11 or 110. Do any of these numbers potentially shed light upon the meaning of the 1,100 pieces of silver? The story of Judges chapters 17 to 18 is a surprising one.

It begins with an unknown woman's curse upon a stolen sum of money, 1,100 pieces of silver. Unbeknownst to her, the thief is her own son Micah, a man of the hill country of Ephraim. When Micah discloses the fact that he was the thief, his mother seeks to take back her curse, declaring a blessing over him instead.

Further to avert the effect of the curse, she expresses her intention to dedicate the returned money to the Lord for the sake of her son. However, she only uses 200 pieces of silver, with which money she gets a silversmith to produce a carved image and a metal image. The images are placed in the house of Micah, who produces a shrine for them with an ephod and household gods.

Micah ordains one of his sons to minister there, and in the second half of chapter 7 we read of a young unnamed Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, who is wandering north looking for a new position. Micah hires him to be a priest of his idolatrous shrine. When reading biblical narratives, we need to pay close attention to the ways that they are told, the details that are and are not given to us, the ways that other stories are recalled or anticipated, the ways that the figures within them are characterized, and other such features.

We also need to consider the very different ways that one could narrate the same underlying events. In Judges chapter 18, when the Danites come on the scene, a story of one family's false dealings and private idolatry becomes a story with direct ramifications for the wider people. If we were telling this story, we would likely exclude Micah and his mother as just unnecessary prologue, and jump straight to the events with the immediate bearing upon Israel as a people, with the northern migration of the tribe of Dan.

The fact that the story begins where it does and with whom it does, however, suggests that the author of Judges wants us to trace the rot of idolatry, which moves here from a private family and individual actions to a whole tribe and the national stage. The book of 1 Samuel is another story of national significance which begins with the domestic drama of a woman in the hill country of Ephraim. There, however, Hannah's prayer for a son is presented as the seed for the establishment of the kingdom.

Here, Micah and his mother sow poisonous seeds of idolatry and betrayal, which will bear bitter fruit for them and for the entire nation. Sin doesn't always begin at the top, it can spread up from the roots. As James Jordan argues, in Judges chapters 17 and 18 we have a replay of certain themes from Israel's history, but in a perverse and parodic form.

In chapter 17 a false house of gods was built and a false priesthood was set up, much as there was a tabernacle set up in Exodus and a priesthood for it set up in Leviticus. In chapter 18 there is the spying out of a false land, followed by a conquest in which the first city is burnt, reminiscent of the city of Jericho in the book of Joshua. In Joshua the territory of the tribe of Dan is described in chapter 19 verses 40 to 48.

The seventh lot came out for the tribe of the people of Dan, according to their clans, and the territory of its inheritance included Zorah, Eshteral, Ur-Shemesh, Sheolaben, Eolon, Ithla, Elon, Timna, Ekron, Eltecha, Gibethon, Beolath, Jehud, Beni-Birak, Gath-Rimon, and Mijarcon and Racon with the territory over against Joppa. When the territory of the people of Dan was lost to them, the people of Dan went up and fought against Leshem, and after capturing it and striking it with the sword, they took possession of it and settled in it, calling Leshem Dan, after the name of Dan their ancestor. This is the inheritance of the tribe of the people of Dan, according to their clans, these cities with their villages.

We also read of Dan's failure in Judges chapter 1 verse 34. The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain. Dan wasn't successful in maintaining control of their allotted portion in the land, so they sought out a different land for themselves.

Depending on our dating of this passage, this might be referring to an earlier period of the history recorded in the book of Judges, or to some period after the death of Samson, the most famous Danite in scripture. If the latter were the case, we might speculate that Samson stirred up so much trouble for his tribe with the Philistines, without successfully driving the Amorites and Philistines out, that a large contingent of the Danites sought to relocate. The Danites here are setting out from a location strongly associated with Samson in the preceding chapters, the five Danite scouts head north, where they stop off at the house of Micah.

While there, they hear the voice of Micah's Levite, and recognise it. Some commentators believe that this is because the Levite was famous, and indeed later we learn that he likely had notable ancestry. However, another possibility mentioned by Trent Butler is that they recognised the Levite's accent.

He presumably had a Bethlehemite accent, which would have been strange to hear in that region of Ephraim, arousing the Danite's curiosity. When the Danite spies questioned Micah about his reasons for being in such a place, about what his situation was, Micah told them his story. They asked Micah to enquire of God concerning the

success of their mission for them, and Micah gave them a favourable response.

When they went up and spied out the region of Laish, the Danite scouts were impressed by their peaceful life and sense of security. This was a very good sign. The security of the people of Laish suggested both that they were easy pickings for Danite invaders, but also that the region was a relatively untroubled one, in stark contrast to their own tribal territory, which was heavily contested by various peoples.

Returning to the Danites at Zorah and Eshterol, they bring a positive report, exhorting them not to delay, but to invade the region immediately. Their description of the land, a land not apportioned to them by the Lord, even though part of the territory of Israel more generally, is reminiscent of the ways that the Lord described the Promised Land to the people. This land could be seen as a false parody of the Promised Land.

Dan is taking a territory that is not its own. The 600 Danite armed men are reminiscent of the 600,000 Israelites who first conquered the land. Military companies are connected with the number 5 or 50, and 600 suggests a military company of Israel, 120 groups of 5 men, or 12 groups of 50.

In Exodus and Joshua we learn that the Israelites were ordered in 5s or 50s, both as they left Egypt and as they entered the Promised Land. In a few chapters time we will encounter another company of 600 military men who were trying to escape a region where they were under threat. The Danite armed men camp near Kiriath Jirim at a site that came to be known as Mahana Dan, a location also mentioned in the story of Samson.

The reference to this location is another connection back to the story of Samson the Danite, the preceding story in the Book of Judges. On their way north they pass by the house of Micah again, and the 5 scouts tell the rest of the company about Micah's shrine and his gods, suggesting to their brethren that there was an opportunity to be taken here. They turn aside to the house of Micah and the 600 armed men standing at the entrance of the gate.

They steal all of Micah's images, his ephod and the teraphim from his idolatrous shrine. The Levite, here spoken of as a priest, stands with the 600 men and asks them what they are doing. They refuse to heed his protests but tell him to join them as a father and a priest, the same invitation that Micah had given to him in the preceding chapter.

Recognising that serving a whole tribe as priest, even if a small one, is a step up in the world from serving merely one man's household, the Levite jumps at the opportunity and joins the Danites. We should consider the ways that Micah's sins are coming back upon his own head here. He had betrayed and stolen the money from his mother, and now he himself is betrayed by the Levite, someone he considered as his son, and his silver images that were constructed with the returned stolen money are themselves stolen.

We should also recall that the 1,100 pieces of silver was money for betrayal in chapter 16. Perhaps there is some significance to the fact that the Danite group, 600 armed men and 5 scouts, makes up 605 persons. That is 11 squared times 5, once again reminiscent of the 1,100 stolen pieces of silver and the 5-fold sum of that money in chapter 16.

There are several subtle reminders of the sum of silver taken from Micah's mother in the chapters that follow, suggesting that the sum of money is a hint to a deeper level of meaning in the text. James Bajan has done extensive work on the numbers of the book of Judges and sees in the repeated 11s of these concluding chapters of the book a repeated troubling indication that something is missing. Israel is supposed to have 12 tribes, but these recurring numbers related to 11 suggest that something is badly wrong in the nation.

This tallies well with the surface reading of these narratives. Chapter 18 is a story of one tribe's apostasy and a sort of false exodus, conquest and establishment of worship. Chapters 19-21 describe the near death of another tribe, Benjamin.

We might also consider other associations that related numbers have. Both Joseph and his descendant Joshua die at the age of 110, and the death of Joshua is associated with the burial of Joseph's bones at the end of the book of Joshua. Joseph's age comes at the completion of the numerical sequence of the ages of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

It's a positive number in that context. However, while the completion of this sequence, Joseph is also the great lost son and the nation will only be made whole as he is restored, his bones being returned to the land. At the end of the book of Judges, with these parts or tribes of the nation seemingly being lost to it, perhaps we have a return to the same sorts of themes.

Leaving Micah's house with the stolen items from his sanctuary, the Danites adopt an unusual formation, sending the more vulnerable parties ahead and positioning the military men as a rear guard for the company. Presumably they are braced for trouble from Micah and preparing themselves for a pursuit. Indeed, Micah and his neighbours assemble and pursue the Danites.

However, when they overtake the Danite company, the Danites threaten them with lethal violence. Micah should just accept his loss and seeing that he is greatly outnumbered, he stands down and retreats. The attentive reader is probably quite justified in recognising similarities between this story and the story of Jacob, Rachel and Laban.

In both stories household gods are stolen. In both cases a defrauder is defrauded. In both cases there is a pursuit but the gods are not recovered.

In both stories weaker parties are sent ahead of the rest of the company. In both stories

a parent unwittingly curses their child concerning a theft. Themes from the tragic story of Rachel and her children seem to be near to the surface in the concluding chapters of this book.

Once again a matriarch who is flirting with idolatry and her children are under threat. In this recollection of the Genesis narrative something about the state of the nation as a whole is being characterised. Coming to Laish, the Danites burn the city with fire, much as Israel had done with Jericho at the first invasion.

However in contrast to Jericho, here the city is immediately rebuilt and inhabited. Commenting upon the description of the forefather Dan as born in Israel, Jordan sees a subtle insinuation that the Danites are abandoning Israel at this time. There are a number of recollections of the earlier chapters of Judges in these concluding chapters.

It is possible here that we should hear an echo of chapter 1 verses 20-26 in the account to Bethel which was formerly called Luz. Dan would come to be a focal point of idolatrous worship in the north and in this narrative we have a story of its origins. Later after the division of the kingdom, Jeroboam the son of Nebat would establish one of his two golden calves at Dan.

Jeroboam's intention was to protect the northern kingdom from the centripetal force the temple would exert by establishing a new religious cult for his kingdom. The Danites here, in establishing their own cult, are turning their backs on one of the things that held the tribes together as a single people, a common sanctuary at Shiloh. Finally, at this point, the author reveals the identity of the Levite.

The identity of the Levite is important. It turns out that he is a grandson of Moses himself. Some translations read Manasseh but I think we should favour Moses as the reading here.

This is yet another indication of how far the nation has fallen. However, the fact that the identity of the Levite is not given to us at the beginning of the story is worthy of note. Why is it left until this point? The Levite of the story is significant, not merely as the descendant of a notable line, but also as typical of the Levites more generally.

This is a Levite who represents the role that the Levites were playing, or failing to play, within the whole period represented by the book of Judges. Such unfaithfulness among the Levites and the priests can also be seen at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel. The idolatrous worship established by the Levite with the stolen images of Micah persists in the region of Dan until the captivity of the land.

It is not immediately clear what captivity might be in view here. Is it the Assyrian invasion of the north in 722 BC or is it something earlier? Given the reference to the period of time that the house of God was at Shiloh in the final verse, I think it makes

most sense to see this as the period of time prior to the Philistine victory at the battle of Aphek. A question to consider, where might we see instances of irony within the story of Micah and his images? The story of Judges chapter 19 and the subsequent chapters are some of the most shocking and appalling accounts in all of the scriptures.

The callousness of the Old Host and the Levite and the monstrous brutality of the men of Gibeah leaves us feebly scrabbling for words by which to surmount our dumbfoundedness. Yet the actions of the Old Man and the Levite in chapter 19 are only some of the initial events in a litany of cruelties, crimes and catastrophes as the evils of that night in Gibeah exploded into a conflagration that engulfed the entire nation and almost eradicated the tribe of Benjamin from Israel. Despite the violence and wickedness of Judges chapter 19 to 21, this dark passage in Israel's history is not excluded from the musical order of scripture.

Rather, its true meaning is only perceived within the broader context established by that order, as within that order it is related to other events and times. Indeed, its presence at the end of Judges, although out of historical sequence as we can see from the presence of Phineas the grandson of Aaron in the following chapter, serves to frame it as a narrative that climactically expresses the moral state of Israel. In such a manner it can bring the themes of the book to a head, much as the events of 2 Samuel chapter 24, although out of historical sequence too, serve to highlight the movement of the themes of the book towards the future establishment of the Temple.

Most attentive readers of this text will swiftly appreciate that it invites extensive comparison with the story of Lot and Sodom in Genesis chapter 19. In both cases, two visitors arrive at a wicked city in the evening. They plan to stay in the open square, but prevailed upon by a man of the city, whose origins were from outside of the city.

They stay in his house instead, where they are fed and given something to drink. The house is then surrounded by men of the city who wish to rape the male visitor. The men of the city are resisted by the host, who offers two women to the crowd instead of the male guest.

All of these things happen in both the book of Genesis chapter 19 and also in the book of Judges chapter 19. In both accounts there is a lot of attention given to the doorway as the threshold between safety and death, and to the contrast between the night and the dawn. In both cases the outcome is the guest's condemnation of the wicked city, leading to its utter destruction, the death of a woman at dawn, followed by an ill-fated or tragic attempt at repopulation.

There are however noteworthy contrasts between these accounts. Locke puts himself in a position of extreme danger to protect his guests, going out to the mob and addressing them directly. He offered his daughters to the crowd in an extreme last-ditch measure designed to protect his guests from this ritual humiliation.

By contrast the old man of Gibeah offered his daughter and the Levite's concubine, one of his guests, and it's possible that the old man only originally extended hospitality to the Levite when he realised that he came from the same region as he did. In the end it was the concubine, a guest, who was cast out to the hostile mob. Locke's sinful willingness to sacrifice his daughters was a wrong marginally mitigated by the fact that he was clearly motivated by the extreme demands of hospitality.

The old man of Gibeah, who seemed to be in no personal danger, was prepared to sacrifice a guest. In Genesis chapter 19 the angelic guests protect those within the house and prevent Locke from coming to harm. Rather than allowing the mob to do whatever was right in their eyes, they struck the eyes of the crowd with blindness.

The Levite by contrast does not act as a guardian but is prepared to sacrifice his concubine for his own skin. The Levite is shockingly callous towards his concubine. The reader is given the impression that he turns in for the night while she is being brutally raped and mistreated outside.

In the morning he wakes up and, eager to get on his way, addresses a rough command to her, without even betraying the faintest concern for her well-being after the horrific treatment she had suffered in the night. Indeed, to increase the horror of the scene, it isn't even clear whether or not she is dead at this point. In the parallels between Gibeah and Sodom, we see that Israel has sunk to the level of repeating the most signal sin of the people of the land who preceded them, a fact that is accentuated by the reality that the Levite purposefully chose to stay in Gibeah rather than in a non-Israelite city in verses 11-12.

In consequence, Gibeah suffered the same destruction as the paradigmatic Sodom and the cities of the plain, its smoke rising up to heaven in the following chapter. This judgement and its unsavoury aftermath bring the era of the judges to its grim nadir. If the golden calf was Israel's initial fall at Sinai, Gibeah is Israel's great fall in the land.

The sin that reveals that they have become indistinguishable from the people that they were sent to drive out. Much as in the story of Sodom, we might also see here a sort of inversion of the story of the Passover. The threat at the doorway, death outside and life inside, death coming at night and safety being enjoyed in the morning.

We've already seen a false tabernacle, false priesthood, false exodus and false conquest in the preceding chapters, and here we have a sort of inversion of the Passover. However, before we are enveloped by the thick darkness of Gibeah and its terrors, the account of Judges chapter 19 opens with a peculiar yet faintly foreboding vignette. The Levite's concubine is unfaithful to him and goes to her father's house where she stays for four months.

Seeking the return of his unfaithful concubine, the Levite goes to Bethlehem to win her

back. He finds her and speaks kindly to her, after which she brings him to her father's house, where the Levite is shown generous hospitality. However, in this episode, as in the episode that follows at Gibeah, the relationship seems to be strongest between the two men, the concubine herself being marginal to proceedings.

Several verses are devoted to describing the Levite's towering in the house of his father-in-law. The father-in-law successfully delays the Levite's departure on five different occasions, until finally the Levite insists on leaving. The sense is given of an urgent journey, dangerously delayed.

The lateness of their departure from the father-in-law's house is one of the precipitating factors for the events that follow. If we were the editors of the Book of Judges, I suspect that we would suggest that the author omit almost the entirety of the first half of chapter 19 as unnecessary to the story. Why go into such extensive discussion about the concubine's unfaithfulness, her flight to and stay in her father's house, and the Levite's lengthy towering there? How does any of this advance the plot? Rather, it seems to delay our movement toward the important second half of the chapter, where all the significant things happen.

Yet scripture doesn't waste its words. When we have an account with extensive yet seemingly extraneous details, those details probably are not extraneous after all. As we read on in the narrative, we will see direct symmetries with the opening of this chapter in the events of the following chapter.

These opening verses also suggest that the story is functioning on different levels, drawing the reader's attention to parabolic dimensions within it. In his commentary on the book, James Jordan remarks, We cannot help but notice the way the writer emphasises how the father-in-law tried to detain the Levite. We might expect the writer to say that the girl's father tried to get the Levite to prolong his stay.

But when we read over and over and over again that the father-in-law persuaded him to stay a bit longer, we are alerted to a theme of detaining. Now the Levite was a man with a calling, a task. He was supposed to be pastor of a local congregation in the remote part of Ephraim.

For him to be gone too long would result in a neglect of his task. Thus after three days he wants to depart. The girl's father, however, detains him.

It seems to me that we are reminded here of Laban, how he sought to detain Jacob, and of Pharaoh's detaining of Israel. Once again there is no indication of a moral parallel between this father-in-law and Laban or Pharaoh, but there is a formal parallel. After three days is indeed the proper time for a definitive break, to be out and getting on one's way.

But the father-in-law persuades the Levite to stay. In all, the father-in-law is shown trying to get the Levite to stay five times, in verses 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. The number of verses devoted to this episode and the frequent repetition within them, suggests that it is a more important part of the narrative than often presumed. In verse 13 there is a reference to Rhema, which in Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 15 is associated with Rachel, who died after giving birth to Benjamin on the road to Bethlehem.

Faintly sounding beneath the surface of the text, perhaps we hear the story of Rachel, a woman detained for too long with her husband in her father's house, who later died in an interrupted journey on the Bethlehem road. The treatment of the Levite's concubine by the Benjamites of Gibeah takes on a new level of tragic significance, when the concubine's similarities with Rachel are taken into account. The Benjaminites kill a woman who recalls the mother who once died giving birth to them.

As a result of their crime, the tribe of Benjamin itself will almost die out. We have already seen allusions to the doomed matriarch and her doomed children in the preceding two chapters, with the stolen teraphim, the pursuit and the parents unwitting curse of their child. An account of night time death at the threshold recalls the great events of Exodus as we've noted, as the Israelites prepared for the plague of the death of the firstborn and the celebration of the Passover by marking the door posts and the lintels of their houses with blood.

Several significant themes surround the events of the Passover, not least themes of giving birth and the firstborn. Through the Passover the Lord sanctified to himself all of the firstborn males of Israel. Later he took the Levites instead of the firstborn.

The Levites were charged with guarding the Lord's house and with representing the divine husband to his bride. Through the events of the Exodus, the Levites were set apart as the tribe that had the charge of the threshold. They were the liminal tribe that upheld the boundaries and the appropriate crossings of them.

They defended realms against trespass. They themselves dwelt on the threshold of Israel, depending upon the hospitality of the nation. Neither straightforwardly insiders nor outsiders, they had been set apart from the nation as the Lord's special possession.

Although they had cities, they didn't have territory in the same manner as the other tribes, as their inheritance was the service of the Lord. The cities of the Levites were within other territories and the cities of refuge were all Levite cities. That the primary protagonist in the narrative of Judges chapter 19 is a Levite is worthy of note, not least because it reveals something of the importance of the themes of inhospitality that pervade the narrative.

Although the Levite walks in the house of the Lord, no one will take him into their house. The fact that the visitor was a Levite compounds the inhospitality of the city. The Levite

represents the Lord and is peculiarly cast upon the hospitality of Israel.

That no one should offer him hospitality is a sign of the attitude of the people of the city to the God who gave them their home within the land. It also accentuates the cruelty and wickedness of the Levite in his treatment of the concubine. The Levite is charged with guarding the thresholds of Israel, with protecting the Lord's bride, and with representing the loving divine husband.

The Levite's life is threatened, much as the firstborn's lives were threatened in Exodus, and being on the right side of a protective threshold was all important. However, rather than guarding the threshold, the Levite allows his security to be bought at the cost of his concubine's life. Rather than protecting the bride, the Levite thrusts her out to the dogs of Gibeah to be torn apart.

Rather than representing the divine husband of Israel, the Levite displays an exquisite callousness towards his concubine. It is important to recognize that there are no heroes in this story, nor is there anyone who is not unfaithful or wicked in some respect. Including the concubine herself, within the broader picture of the narrative she is not just an innocent victim, she is also unfaithful to her husband.

The concubine and the Levite are figures for unfaithful Israel and her unfaithful religious guardians. What emerges from this text is a devastating indictment of the religious guardians of Israel. The guardians are indifferent to the safety, well-being and restoration of the Lord's bride.

They have abandoned their post at the threshold and have rendered the very place that is elsewhere associated with new birth a site of death. Israel the bride, having pursued her sin and being greatly mistreated by those who should have guarded her, is now dismembered, cut into twelve pieces. We might also see the way that the people of the city of Gibeah represent the way that the children of Israel have become towards their very mother, in their brutality and inhospitality towards each other.

They were killing their mother, as it were. In 1 Samuel there is a striking retracing of themes from Judges chapter 19 to 21. We saw some of this in the preceding chapters, as the story of Hannah and Samuel looks back to the story of Micah and his mother, a positive account that serves as a strong contrast to the events of chapters 17 and 18.

In 1 Samuel this contrast to the story of chapter 19 and following is as Saul is established as the new guardian of Israel, a story that begins with a lot of promise even though it soon turns sour. The story of the Levite and the concubine begins with the Levite, his servant and two donkeys, why tell us about the two donkeys, setting off to find the lost concubine. The story of Saul begins with Saul and a servant setting off to find some lost donkeys.

However Saul soon learned that the donkeys had already been recovered. The real figure being sought and found was Saul himself, the much sought after bridegroom of the nation, the one on whom was all the desire of Israel in 1 Samuel chapter 9 verse 20. Saul is supposed to be a new guardian of the house of the nation.

Saul himself was a Benjamite, a man from a tribe that had been almost entirely wiped out. When Saul says to Samuel, am I not a Benjamite of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, it is the entire history of Gibeah and the national tragedy that followed that lurks in the background. Indeed Saul comes from the city of Gibeah, the very city whose wickedness had occasioned Benjamin's near obliteration.

However from the ashes of the tribe of Benjamin the Lord laid the foundations of the kingdom. The story of the Levite and his concubine opens with a reference to the fact that there was no king in Israel in those days. In the story of Saul we see this problem being addressed.

Gibeah isn't the only significant place name within the story of Saul. Saul receives the first sign of the kingdom that Samuel foretold by Rachel's tomb. The place where the mother of the tribe of Benjamin had died after giving birth, which has since been associated with the tribe's near destruction, became the site where the first shoot of new life broke the once scorched earth.

In 1st Samuel chapter 11 the city of Jabesh Gilead is severely threatened by Nahash the Ammonite. In Judges chapter 21 the city of Jabesh Gilead was almost completely destroyed for their failure to join the rest of Israel in their fight against the Benjamites. The news of Jabesh Gilead's plight reached Saul in Gibeah.

Like the Levite cut the body of his concubine in pieces and sent it throughout Israel, Saul cut a yoke of oxen in pieces and sent the pieces throughout Israel, calling everyone to respond to his summons or suffer the same fate. However, unlike the Levite, Saul handled the situation justly. As we will see in the following chapter, the actions of the Levite following the rape and murder of his concubine were a continuation of his shameful self-absorption and callousness in many respects.

He treated the body of his concubine as a prop and pursued a destructive vengeance while hiding his own complicity in the matter. He is at the centre of his account of events. The laws of Gibeah rose up against him, surrounded the house because of him and sought to kill him.

He doesn't mention the fact that he allowed his concubine to be cast to the mob, somehow managing to present himself as if he were the primary victim. Had there been a king in Israel, one suspects that these events would have been handled more carefully. Instead we see, as in the case of Dinah in Genesis chapter 34, to which we might hear allusions here in the references to the outrage and abomination in Israel and also to the

speaking kindly to win someone back, the mistreatment of a woman is answered not with true justice but with an outburst of male-focused vengefulness, with further women being caught up as victims as a result, especially as we see in chapter 21.

When Jabesh-Gilead was surrounded by threatening men, calling for them to come out to them and face a cruel fate in 1 Samuel chapter 11, the new guardian of Israel, the spirit of God coming upon him, fought to protect them. The atrocity of Gibeah and its horrific aftermath are overcome as the themes of Israel's sin are taken up and slowly unworked by divine grace. The old associations of wickedness are replaced by the new associations of deliverance and the Lord's goodness.

Jabesh-Gilead becomes the site of rescue. Gibeah, once synonymous with the deepest wickedness of the period of time, when there was no king in Israel, is now Gibeah of Saul. We'll see further connections with Saul in the chapters that follow.

The Levite first sets off from Bethlehem as his concubine had played the harlot and returned to the house of her father. At the beginning of the story it seems as though he was a just man. He doesn't seek vengeance against her but rather sought to speak kindly to her and to win her back.

Unfortunately, as the story unfolds, the Levite is revealed to be other than what he first appears to be. Edith Davidson, in her book *Intricacy, Design and Cunning in the Book of Judges*, closely observes the symmetries of the book. There are episodes, scenes and characters that are very striking yet serve as mirror images of each other.

For instance, there are two women who betray sleeping men with a pin on their heads, one good and one bad. Jill invites Sisera into her tent and then, while he is sleeping, drives a tent pin into his temple. The treacherous Delilah uses a pin upon Samson's hair when she weaves his hair, seeking to betray him to the Philistines.

Davidson notes points of connection between the figure of the concubine and the figure of Axa, the daughter of Caleb at the beginning of the book. Both women are connected with a donkey. In both stories, the dealings between a father-in-law and a husband are important.

In chapter 1, at the beginning of the book, Axa receives a faithful brigam and dismounts from her donkey. In chapter 19, at the end of the book, we have a dead woman placed upon a donkey by her uncaring husband. The manner in which the divided body of the concubine evokes sacrificial themes and other narratives of forms of human sacrifice is observed by Davidson and others.

Jephthah's daughter is one such narrative. Another is the story of the binding of Isaac and it is noteworthy that the Levites taking of the knife to cut up his concubine so closely resembles Abraham's taking of the knife to kill his son Isaac. The events of Gibeah are

only alluded to in one prophetic book, that of Hosea, in chapter 5 verse 8, 9 verse 9 and 10 verse 9. That Gibeah should be referenced in that particular book is probably no accident.

The prophet Hosea is himself instructed to take an adulterous wife, illustrative of Israel's own spiritual adultery towards their divine husband. Hosea's prophetic actions and message declare a God who pursues and graciously restores his adulterous bride. Where priests or kings have both proven negligent or unfaithful in their charge, the Lord will seek and win back his people himself.

The Levite of Judges failed to represent the divine husband as he ought to. However, in the book of Hosea we see the pursuing divine husband, the one whose kind words to his bride do not prove hollow. The Lord comes in person to deliver his bride from the clutches of death.

The book of Hosea is a book of changed names and faiths, where those called not my people are declared the sons of the living God. It anticipates the one who will rewrite the darkest pages of Israel's history in the ink of grace. Rather than throwing his bride to the murderous mob, he will sacrifice himself for her sake.

Beneath the sky scoured of its light, his body will be the one torn and pierced. Unlike that Levite who once lightly surrendered his concubine to the grave, this faithful bridegroom will rest his bride from the grave's grasp. Where once a murder spelled the doom of a people, his life-giving will spell its restoration from the dead.

A question to consider. In the preceding story of Micah and the Levite, there were two figures, one from Bethlehem and Judah, one from the hill country of Ephraim, and one of them a Levite. We have the same thing in chapter 19 of Judges.

What connections might we see between these stories? How might we take both of the stories together and get a fuller portrait of the dysfunctional and unfaithful character of Israel being parabolically represented? In Judges chapter 19, after the death of the Levite's concubine, in a grisly scene the Levite chops her body into 12 pieces and sends them throughout the land of Israel. An extreme abomination had been committed in the land of Israel and a collective response had to be given to it. Those guilty of this abomination and anyone siding with them had to be utterly cut off lest the Lord's judgment come upon the nation as a whole.

Even in the nation's fractured state, the Lord would deal with them as one covenant people, and where abominations in their midst were not adequately dealt with, the judgment of the Lord would fall upon the entire nation. Such a situation arose at the beginning of the book of Joshua, where the sin of one man, Achan, which was not addressed, led to the whole nation suffering consequences in the defeat at Ai. However, as we read chapter 20, it will be clear that the men of Gibeah are not the only guilty

parties in this situation.

The united congregation of Israel assembles as one to Mizpah, although it seems that members of the tribe of Benjamin are absent. In front of the whole company, the Levite gives his account of what occurred at Gibeah. When, on occasions like this in scripture, events that have been related to us by a narrator are told to us again in the voice of one of the characters, it is important to compare and contrast.

Where does the character place the emphasis in contrast to the narrator? What details are added? What details are excluded? Chapter 19 gave us a very negative portrayal of the Levite, especially in the second half. However, as the Levite describes the situation here, he presents himself as if he were the chief victim, and an innocent one at that. I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night, and the leaders of Gibeah rose against me, and surrounded the house against me by night.

They meant to kill me, and they violated my concubine, and she is dead. The Levite here speaks about the death of the concubine, as if it were a sin committed primarily against him. What's more, of course, he does not mention his own role within the situation, that he was the one who thrust her outside, that he was so callous towards her, and showed little concern to protect her from the mob.

The people take the Levite's account at face value, there seems to be no cross-examination of him, or questioning of the details. So outraged by what they heard, the people of Israel determined that they must purge this evil from their midst. In verse 10 they commit themselves to giving a tenth of their men to fight this battle against Gibeah.

This tenth might make us think of the tithe, the portion of the people presented to the Lord to represent his claim upon them as a holy people to himself. Before they attack Gibeah, they give the Benjaminites the opportunity to purge the people who had committed this abomination from their midst. If they'll only put the guilty parties to death, they could free themselves from any complicity in the matter.

As we see in the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy, guilt in such matters spreads, and so it needs to be stopped as soon as possible. If those guilty of abominations are not cut off from a people, that whole people shares in their guilt. However, the Benjaminites are not receptive to the voice of the other tribes, and they join together to fight against the Israelites in defence of Gibeah.

On account of their loyalty to bonds of blood, they betray the covenant of the Lord. They muster 26,000 men from among the tribe, and 700 men from Gibeah. Interestingly, we are told of 700 men who are left-handed slingers.

There is of course a bit of humour in this fact, as the left-handed slingers are from a tribe

named from its association with the right hand. It might also remind us of the character of Ehud back in chapter 3, another left-handed Benjaminite. The Benjaminites fighting for Gibeah do not come off well in the comparison with Ehud.

Having mustered 400,000 men, the people of Israel enquire of the Lord as to who should go up first. They are told that Judah must lead them. This detail reminds us of the opening two verses of the book.

After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel enquired of the Lord, who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites to fight against them. The Lord said, Judah shall go up. Behold, I have given the land into his hand.

While in chapter 1, Judah was leading the people in a battle against the Canaanites, here Judah is leading the people in a battle against one of their brothers, Benjamin. The next day they go out to battle against Benjamin at Gibeah, but the battle turns against them. They lose 22,000 people on that day.

Distraught at such a terrible loss of life, the people weep before the Lord and ask whether they should go up again the next day, and the Lord instructs them to do so. Yet the next day the situation is much the same. 18,000 fighting men of Israel are killed.

At this point, a whole army goes up to Bethel and weeps before the Lord as a company. They fast and offer burnt offerings and peace offerings. Clearly, although Benjamin is to be judged, there is great sin in their midst, and they are suffering too.

They had given a tithe of the people of the land to fight the battle, 400,000 men, and now the Lord had taken a tithe from that, 40,000 men who had fallen on those first two days of battle. Here we learn that Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, is present with them. Phineas is most famous for events at the end of the Book of Numbers in chapters 25 and 31.

Most notably, in chapter 25 he had stopped a plague by zealously executing the Lord's wrath against a couple who were sinning flagrantly in front of the whole congregation, thrusting them through with a spear. Here he also has the task of leading the people as they seek to execute judgment and purge out evil from their midst. Inquiring again whether they should go out to battle the next day, the Lord instructs them to do so and promises that he will deliver the people of Benjamin into their hand on that day.

The next day they change their approach. Essentially they take the battle plan that Joshua followed against the city of Ai. In Joshua chapter 7, Israel was surprisingly defeated at the city of Ai on account of the sin of Achan, a wicked man in their midst who had committed a trespass, bringing the Lord's judgment upon them as a people.

When they purged out Achan, the next assault upon the city of Ai was successful. On that occasion they tempted the people of Ai out of the city to pursue them, while they

had an ambush behind, who successfully invaded and burnt the city while its main force had been removed from it. The similarity between the defeat of the cities of Gibeah and Ai might suggest that the story of Achan can offer insight into what's taking place here.

Perhaps the Levite who has not confessed his true sin is like Achan in the midst of the people, thinking that they were going to be successful against the Israelites as they had been in the previous two days. The Benjamites went out and pursued them, starting what they considered was another great slaughter of the Israelites. They killed about 30 of them before they realised what had happened.

An ambush had been set, the city had been struck and now they faced destruction themselves. In burning up the city and destroying all of its people, it's treated as one of the Canaanite cities. It had committed a Canaanite type sin, a sin reminiscent of the sin of Sodom, and so it suffered a similar judgement.

The destruction of the Canaanites was never primarily about ethnicity, it was about wickedness or righteousness. Persons within Israel who behaved like the Canaanites would suffer similar judgement. The Israelites surrounded the Benjamites and pursued them.

They were cut down in three different waves, 18,000 at first, then 5,000 of them as they fled on the highways, and then 2,000 more of them at Guidon. Altogether 25,000 of them, rounded down, were killed. 600 of the Benjamites then fled to the Rock of Rimmon where they remained for four months.

James Bujon has done a lot of work on the numbers of the Book of Judges. One of the things that he observes here is our struggle to make the numbers add up. We are given two different totals for the people who are killed on the third day, and clearly this is not a complete number of the Benjamites who were killed in the whole battle because there is a difference between the number of people who are mustered and the number of people who remain at the end, 600 men.

Looking more closely, he observes that there is a difference of 900 between the 26,000 that were gathered out of Benjamin, not including the people of Gibeah, and the 25,100 people who were killed in the battle. If we add the full numbers at the end, we also find a discrepancy between the 26,700 people that were totally mustered by Gibeah and Benjamin together, and the 25,600 men of Benjamin and Gibeah who are accounted for in the final verses. That difference is 1,100.

These differences of 1,100 and 900 clearly remind us of the story of Micah and his mother and the stolen silver. But that is not the only place in the story where we see these numbers seemingly represented. The men of Israel who were killed on the first day were 22,000 men, 20 times 1,100.

On the second day, 18,000, 20 times 900. The number of men killed on those two days together, 40,000, 200 squared. We have already noted the significance of the 1,100 in its connection with the story of Samson.

Is it also significant in its relationship to the story that follows, the story of Gibeah? In chapter 17, we noted the question of where the money went. 1,100 pieces of silver were stolen, and when returned, 200 pieces of silver were given to the silversmith, presumably with 900 pieces of silver left over. Where did that money go to? As the rest of the book presents us with missing numbers and the struggle of adding things up, note the significance of the 200 brides in the next chapter to make up the full number of brides for the Benjaminites.

We might also note that it was 200 shekels of silver that Acham stole in the story of Joshua. There's a further number in the story of chapter 18 that seems to connect with the number here. 600 men of Benjamin flee to the wilderness to the Rock of Rimmon.

In chapter 18, 600 men of the Danites flee north. James Bajon also observes that while we have 600 Benjaminites gathered at the Rock of Rimmon here, in 1 Samuel chapter 14, Saul is on the outskirts of Gibeah in the pomegranate cave at Migron with 600 men. Pomegranate is the same word as Rimmon.

Once again, the character of Saul is portrayed against the backdrop of Gibeah and the history of Benjamin that preceded him. A question to consider. At the beginning of chapter 19, the Levite's concubine fled to her father's house where she remained for four months.

Then when her husband went to get her back, he stayed there for three days and was tempted to stay for two more, being delayed until the fifth day. In chapter 20, it seems that we have one day of mustering followed by two days of battle, bringing us to the third day, Israel having failed to defeat the Benjaminites on those days. Then a fourth day of mourning before the Lord and offering sacrifices, followed by a fifth day of battle where they are successful.

This might remind us of the five days of tarrying at the house of the Levite's father-in-law. And then the four months at the beginning of the story, the period of time where the Levite's concubine was at her father's house, seems to be matched here with the four months that the Benjaminites spend at the Rock of Rimmon. How might the beginning of this story help us to understand more fully the meaning of what happens at the end of it? One of the grimmest stories in the entirety of the scriptures, Judges chapters 19 to 21 tell the story of the city of Gibeah's abominable act and its horrific aftermath.

In Judges chapter 19, the men of Gibeah raped and murdered the Levite's concubine. To provoke the people to address this enormity, the Levites sent her dismembered corpse through the tribes of Israel. The people assembled at Mizpah and sent messengers

throughout Benjamin, calling for them to condemn the guilty men of Gibeah to death.

But more faithful to bonds of blood than they were to the covenant, the Benjaminites refused to do so. Consequently, Israel went to war against one of its tribes. The tribe of Benjamin had become like the Canaanites in the land, to be purged out.

We should remember the way that the Levite passed by Gibeah to stay at Gibeah, preferring to stay in an Israelite city than in the city of the pagan Jebusites. Yet Gibeah could not have been worse than Gibeah proved to be. Israel suffered terrible losses on the first two days of battle against the Benjaminites, losing a tenth of their force, 40,000 men.

As in the battle against Ai, they were engaged in a sort of holy war while harbouring unfaithfulness in their own midst, likely the Levite who greatly distorted the truth in his account of what had happened at Gibeah. After weeping before the Lord and offering sacrifices at Bethel, they returned for a third day of battle. This time they followed the battle plan that Joshua had followed in the successful attack upon Ai.

They tempted the Benjaminites out and away from the city of Gibeah, and then an ambush party took the city and burnt it down. In all, well over 60,000 men lost their lives in this sanguinary civil war. Chapter 20 concluded with 600 Benjaminites fleeing to the Rock of Rimmon in the wilderness.

Chapter 21, the final chapter of the Book of Judges, begins with a problem. The Benjaminites, on account of their siding with the men of Gibeah, had become like Canaanites to the Israelites, being placed under the ban. Their cities were destroyed and the rest of the Israelites had vowed not to intermarry with them, taking the same approach to them as they did to the Canaanite peoples.

However, the outcome of this would be Israel's loss of one of its tribes. Benjamin was the youngest of the sons of Jacob. His mother Rachel had died giving birth to him on the road to Bethlehem.

Both of Rachel's sons had been lost, or nearly lost. Joseph was taken down into Egypt and his family presumed him to be dead. The brothers had thought that Benjamin would be lost too, when, returning from Egypt, the silver cup of the mysterious Egyptian official was found in his possession and he was subject to a death sentence.

Then Judah had interceded for his brother. Now, however, it seems that Benjamin is going to be lost entirely. The final five chapters of Judges seem to allude to the story of doomed Rachel and her sons at several points.

In the parents' unwitting curse of the child, in the unsuccessful pursuit of the stolen teraphim, in the prominence of stolen silver, in the woman's death on the road from Bethlehem, in the towering in the father-in-law's house. Does any hope remain for

Rachel's son? Distraught at the realisation of what the loss of Benjamin would mean for the nation, the people mourn before the Lord at Bethel. As at the turning point of the preceding chapter, after the first two days of unsuccessful battle against the Benjaminites, the people offer burnt offerings and peace offerings and call upon the Lord.

They have bound themselves by two great oaths. The first oath is that they would not intermarry with Benjamin. The second oath was that any part of Israel that did not participate in the judgment upon Benjamin should be put to death.

The logic here is that described concerning apostasy in places like Deuteronomy 13, verses 5-9. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your friend who is as your own soul, entices you secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the peoples who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him, but you shall kill him. Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. Apostate parties and those who commit abominations had to be cut off, lest the Lord's wrath come upon the people more generally on their account.

And all parties needed to participate in and concur with the judgment, lest their failure to stand against the sin lead to them being judged with the guilty party. Those who fail to stand against the wicked can find themselves sharing in the judgment of the wicked. Apostasy is like a sort of gangrene, and it must be removed as a matter of greatest urgency.

If it is not dealt with quickly and effectively, whole parts of the body politic might need to be amputated. Desiring to redeem their brother Benjamin, on the brink of death as a tribe, the Israelites wonder how Israelite wives could be obtained for the remnant of the Benjaminites. At this point there are 600 survivors of Benjamin who have escaped, a number reminiscent of the company of the Danites in chapter 18.

An apparent solution to the problem raised by their first solemn oath presented itself in the second solemn oath that they had sworn. Jabesh-Gilead, one of the cities of the Transjordan, had not sent any of its inhabitants to the mustering, failing to participate in Israel's collective act of judgment upon the Benjaminites. For its sin, Jabesh-Gilead must also fall under the ban.

Its people, all of its men and all of its women who have lain with men, are marked out for destruction. The Israelites determined to strike Jabesh-Gilead with a force of 12,000 men and to take unmarried women captive from the city as brides for the remnant of the Benjaminites. We should recognize here the close similarities with the events of Numbers chapter 31.

Back in Numbers 25, Balaam and the Midianites had provoked Israel to sin and in Numbers chapter 31 the Lord executed vengeance upon the Midianites for their attempt to corrupt Israel. A force of 12,000 men under the leadership of people like Phinehas, the zealous grandson of Aaron, went to attack the Midianites and killed all of their men. However, when Moses discovered that they had allowed the women to live, he commanded them to kill all the women who had lain with the man, arguing that the women had played a key role in causing Israel to betray the covenant.

They were not innocent victims and bystanders, but directly complicit in the seduction of Israel described in Numbers chapter 25. Only the women who were virgins were spared and the Israelites were permitted to marry them. The virgins of the city were seen as the only salvageable tissue of the body politic that could potentially be preserved from the pervasive wrath of its moral corruption.

We might recall the way that, even though they escaped the destruction of Sodom, the daughters of Lot took the ways of Sodom with them and consequently the wickedness of Sodom was not completely eradicated. Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, is also involved in the events of Judges chapter 20 and 21, adopting the same approach to dealing with Jabesh-Gilead as had been followed with the Midianites and Moabites, peoples who, although not Canaanites, had directly tried to subvert the covenant. 400 virgins were found in Jabesh-Gilead and they were brought to Shiloh.

Then the people declared peace to the 600 Benjamite survivors, giving them the spared women of Jabesh-Gilead. However, there was a shortfall of 200. Numbers play a prominent role in the final five chapters of the book of Judges, especially sets of numbers that don't quite add up.

Micah's mother used 200 pieces of silver of the 1,100 stolen pieces of silver to make the images back in chapter 17. In chapter 20 the numbers of deaths don't tidily add up and the numbers 1,100, 900 and 200 might be alluded to within them in different ways. Now, once again, there is a shortfall, the numbers aren't adding up and there is a need for 200 more women.

The Israelites, however, still have the problem that, on account of their oath, they cannot give their daughters to the Benjamites. They ended up settling upon a plan to address the problem that they wanted to give Israelite wives to the Benjamites but could not directly do so without breaking their vow. There was a yearly religious festival in Shiloh and the virgin daughters of Shiloh would come out to dance in the dancers.

The Benjamites were to wait in ambush in the vineyards, perhaps implying, as Trent Butler suggests, that the festival was connected with the grape harvest. And each of the 200 men lacking a wife was to snatch a wife for himself from the Shiloh virgins. By the Benjamites seizing the women, the fathers of the women could be held innocent of breaking the oath.

The women had been taken, not given. Perhaps we are supposed to see some similarity between the Benjamites' ambush and the tempting of people away from the safety of the city and the means of Israel's defeat of Gibeah in the preceding chapter. Verse 22 is a bit convoluted and difficult to interpret with some commentators speculating that the men of Shiloh had taken female captors from Benjamin for themselves or were otherwise responsible for the shortfall of wives for the Benjamites.

As Barry Webb observes, when the men of Shiloh protested, they were to be told to accept the abduction of their daughters and sisters as a *fait accompli*, much as the Danites expected Micah to accept the loss of his images. The story of Judges chapter 21 is reminiscent of the rape of the Sabine women in the early history of Rome. The story of Judges ends in a manner like the end of the book of Joshua with the people all returning to their inheritance.

The problem of the near loss of Benjamin has been addressed but the solution is a very ugly one. A story that began with Benjamites in Gibeah seizing one woman and abusing her ends with them seizing 200 virgins for themselves after incredible intervening loss of life. While in the context this presents itself as a solution to the immediate problem of the Benjamites' need for wives, it raises a host of further unsettling considerations and questions.

There is no clean and tidy response to pervasive iniquity and as we see in Judges chapters 17-21 more generally, sins mutate and compound. Even if we were to believe the abduction of the virgins of Shiloh represented a legally justified solution to the Benjamites' problems, we should recognise that it greatly adds to the number of victims. Where sin is allowed to grow unaddressed, there are no neat solutions to its injustices, just more brutal and bloody blows of the sword of justice.

The story began with one woman being taken by force and even though they haven't been killed like the Levites' concubine, now 600 women have been taken by force, an entire tribe almost lost to the nation. The Book of Judges began with a woman's hand being offered as a reward for a military victory as Caleb gave his daughter Axa to Othniel. It ends with 600 women being taken through such military victory.

Edith Davidson also observes the way that this final episode of the book evokes the memory of Jephthah's daughter. Jephthah's daughter, the unfortunate child who was dedicated through her going out of the door of the house, has similarities to the Levites' concubine who was thrust outside of the door, dedicated as a sort of perverse sacrifice

to save the Levites' skin. Now 200 other women, coming out of their houses and city, are appointed as victims, supposedly to set things right.

Jephthah's daughter's story ended with her lamenting her virginity and with an annual women's feast. The dance at Shiloh also involves annual festivities celebrated by women. However, now the women appointed as sacrifices on account of men's vows are devoted because they are virgins.

Israel may sacrifice its sons in battle and its daughters in forced marriages for its sins, but while such losses may be inflicted by the sword of justice, they can never set things right. Judges chapter 21, in the book of Judges more generally, ends with everyone returning to their inheritance. This ending recalls the end of the book of Joshua where a similar expression is found in chapter 24 verse 28.

The expression suggests that some sort of resolution has been reached and indeed Benjamin has been saved. There is some element of a positive outcome here. The elevens of the preceding chapters have been replaced by twelves, 12,000 men going up against Jabesh-Gilead and 1,200 Benjaminites with their wives.

However, Israel at the end of this chapter is a much reduced Israel, an Israel that has suffered bitterly for its sins. Considering the presence of Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, in these concluding episodes of the book, it is apparent that these events occurred very early in the historical period covered by the book of Judges. It is placed out of chronological sequence, presumably because it helps to characterize the entire period of the Judges.

The stories of Judges 17-21 reveal the way that, when unaddressed, the rot of iniquity can spread throughout an entire nation, bringing judgment upon everyone and producing countless victims. The book concludes with the repeated refrain of the book, In those days there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in his own eyes. We likely find subtle reflection upon themes associated with the kingdom in these concluding chapters.

Gibeah and Bethlehem, the birthplaces of Saul and David respectively, are prominent throughout. There are lots of anticipations of the story of Saul. The fact that the future royal city of Jerusalem has not yet been taken from the Jebusites is highlighted in chapter 19.

Yet the period of the Judges is a dark period, a period within which the people are fracturing and warring against themselves. A book that began chiefly with wars against surrounding nations is increasingly dominated by conflict within the nation itself, Jephthah's war against the Ephraimites and the war against the Benjaminites. Judges is a book that steadily descends into an increasing darkness.

In its final words, the period is characterized and there is an implied anticipation of a better time, of a king who will come to deliver the people from their enemies and ultimately from their own sins. A question to consider, how does the story of Judges chapter 21 help us better to read the story of Saul in 1 Samuel?