

STUDIES IN JUDGES No. 13

Judges 10:1-11:11

October 17, 2004

We have already encountered one short note concerning a man who did exploits on behalf of Israel, though we are told very little about him. That was Shamgar, to whom is devoted one verse at the end of chapter 3. There are five more such minor characters named in Judges: two here, and three at the conclusion of the Jephthah material at end of chapter 12. Several things have been noticed about these last five figures, the two immediately *before* the Jephthah narrative and the three immediately *after* it. First, they bring the total number of governors named to 12, which may be the author's way of indicating that his book was a description of the fortunes of the entire nation of Israel. It is certainly not the case that there is a judge from each tribe, but we have learned to look for the number 12 and think of what it might mean. Second, none of these men seems to have been a warrior or to have delivered Israel from a foreign oppressor. In each case, rather, they seem to represent Israel enjoying a more normal life. They form a contrast to the chaos that occurs when Israel is invaded by foreign powers. Remember the book of Ruth is also going to give us a picture of a more peaceful time during the time of the Judges. Being placed before and after Jephthah, we will see that they serve as a foil to him and his rule.

Text Comment

- v.2 There is no record of any military exploit. Perhaps the fact that it is noted that he came after Abimilech is intended to suggest that he *saved* Israel from the chaos that Abimilech's violence had created.
- v.5 Jair is a Gileadite which prepares us for Jephthah who is also a Gileadite. In all likelihood, the report of his thirty sons riding thirty donkeys is intended to convey the sense of peace and prosperity enjoyed during Jair's rule. So the turmoil to follow is in contrast with the serenity which went before it.
- v.6 This is the most elaborate description of Israel's apostasy in the book of Judges. The author seems to be indicating to us that her spiritual apostasy has gotten worse and worse and is now a fixed principle of her character.
- v.7 Interestingly, and something any Israelite reader would immediately notice, God has now sold Israel into oppression by nations on either side. They are now to be squeezed between the Philistines – who lived between the central Palestine ridge and the Mediterranean coast – and the Ammonites who lived across the Jordan. What any careful reader also notes is that the Philistines do not figure in the Jephthah episode. They are the antagonists in the Samson material that follows. So this statement really introduces not only the Jephthah narrative, but the Samson narrative as well.
- v.10 The Jephthah account then begins in what we now recognize is the typical way. Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord by adopting the faith and worship of the Canaanite world and God punished his people by handing them over to a foreign oppressor. Here Israel says that she forsook *our* God to serve the Baals. There is still some understanding of her

relationship to Yahweh. Remember, two and ½ tribes had settled on the east side of the Jordan River. Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh.

- v.14 An entirely reasonable response on the Lord's part, we think. After all, how many times already has the Lord delivered his people in such a situation when they cried out to him? Did they ever learn their lesson? Did they forsake the false Gods and learn to trust the Lord alone? Why should he intervene to help them? Israel's cries to God in the past have proved to be utilitarian only, not the expression of true repentance.
- v.15 The addition of "now," literally "this day," takes the bloom off Israel's repentance: "Of course we are really sorry; now, get to work Lord and get us out of this mess."
- v.16 The last part of v. 16, as it is translated in the NIV, suggests that the Lord will intervene *not because he finds Israel's repentance genuine* – he knows it is not – but because of his compassion for his people in their present misery. However, the translation of the sentence is a matter of some controversy among scholars of Hebrew. It could also mean that the Lord couldn't bear Israel's hypocritical efforts to persuade him to help her in her crisis. He couldn't bear his people's efforts to manipulate him into doing what they wanted. It will be interesting to observe, for example, that the text will nowhere say that the Lord raised up Jephthah to be a deliverer for Israel. So far as the narrative is concerned, he will rise to that role by what seem to be purely human means. In the case of every other judge the Lord was decisively involved in his emergence as a deliverer. However, on the other hand, the narrator will say that the Holy Spirit came upon Jephthah and that in that way he gained victory over the Ammonites. So the Lord does, in fact, deliver his people as they plead for him to do. Perhaps we can say that he delivered them but at a distance. We will return to this question later.

We are, in any case, not going to be surprised that Jephthah reproduces the history of Gideon in his own life. Both are nobodies at the beginning and both end up tyrants who brutalize the people of Israel. [Block, 343] Still less surprising is it that Jephthah is even more like Abimilech than he is like Gideon. Both are the sons of foreign women (or so it seems; if not, at least a sinful woman); both were opportunists who gathered around themselves a force of violent and reckless adventurers (cf. 9:4; 11:3); both end up killing their own relatives, and so on.

- v.17 As the next verses will make clear it was not the whole of the nation that was threatened and or that responded. It was primarily the men of Gilead, the hilly area of the Transjordan between the Yarmuk and the Jabbok. But they have no leader and they know it. They are desperate enough to offer to their champion the leadership of the people. Unfortunately for the Gileadites, they either had no takers or those who came forward were obviously unfit for what they needed done. In any case, they don't look to the Lord; they look to one another.
- 11:1 The next three verses are, in effect, a flashback. We are introduced to the man who is to become the focus of this history.

- v.2 We have a striking similarity to the Abimilech history. A man had sons both by his wife (or wives) and by another woman (a concubine in one case, a prostitute in another). There was animosity between the legitimate sons and the illegitimate son. Being the son of a prostitute, Jephthah had less standing in the community and his own brothers wanted to be sure that he got nothing of his father's estate. No matter who this woman was, of course, Gilead, Jephthah's father, was, obviously enough, not a righteous man either. And neither were his legitimate sons righteous men, for in Israelite law, the right to inheritance was passed through the father, not the mother.
- v.3 Jephthah was, simply put, a bandit. He lived on plunder. But he was a successful bandit, a brave man and a fighter, and that made him appealing to the men of Gilead when they found themselves facing a force of Ammonites.
- v.6 The "some time later" now connects back to the appeal of the leaders of Gilead for someone to step forward as their leader. Enough time had passed that it had become clear that there was no qualified volunteer. They were desperate; they needed someone who could fight and, without any faith in the Lord, they couldn't be choosy as to the character of this leader. But notice that they don't at first make the promise that he could be the leader of all Gilead. They want to get him as cheaply as they can. They offer him command of the army only.
- v.7 Jephthah knows he holds the cards so plays hard to get. He regards the guilt for his being driven from his father's home as belonging to all the citizens of Gilead. Perhaps Jephthah's skill as a fighter had already been manifested in some way and it had been the act of the community as a whole to get rid of him. It wasn't just that his brothers didn't want to share the inheritance. The community was afraid of him and so forced him to leave. The "fear of his domination may have been the unexpressed motive behind his expulsion." [Webb, 51] Now, however, the same reasons that had made them fear him in the first place made them want him for a commander in battle.
- v.8 The leaders have no choice: they make Jephthah the offer of the leadership of their people.
- v.9 Now it appears that Jephthah is really driven by self-interest. Remember we saw that in Gideon as well. Jephthah sees an opportunity for himself here. That is all. No one is thinking about the Lord or his will.
- v.11 The Lord's name is invoked in the ceremony. Whether this is also simply another effort to manipulate the Lord to their own advantage, we do not yet know.

Now, the challenge presented the preacher in preaching through a book like Judges is precisely that the same thing, or nearly the same thing, is said over and over again. How can the preacher fail to lose the attention of his congregation when the message is the same week after week? We knew going into this study that it would be largely the same message week after week because in the prologue of the book we were already told what the great theme of the book would be. We were told that the individual narratives of each judge were going to tell largely the same story:

the story of Israel's spiritual decline, her apostasy, her refusal to repent even when God repeatedly delivered his people from their enemies. Judges is an account of God's faithfulness and his people's failure. Each part of the book contributes to this same over-arching theme.

Judges, in this way, is a book like Jeremiah. We are told at the beginning what Jeremiah's message would be – God's impending judgment for Israel's apostasy – and we are told that Israel would not heed the message that Jeremiah preached. Jeremiah can seem wearying to a reader precisely because the same thing seems to be said so many times. The Bible is a large book that moves slowly. There is much repetition. *But that repetition nowadays, in a way that might not have been true years ago, prompts us to look for the differences of detail.* We are more alert to the skill with which the Bible has been written, the sophistication of its narrative artistry, the subtlety with which it makes its points and teaches its lessons. Everything is there for a reason. Nothing is simply padding.

And so when scholars have looked more carefully at these narratives, they have found that the author has more to say than they might have thought. There is, to be sure, a basic sameness. The great themes of the prologue are certainly reinforced in each narrative and in the career of each judge. But there is also detail and, as we so often say, the devil is in the details. We have already noticed how many different lessons have been taught in these various narratives and in how many different and important ways the same lessons are taught.

In this case, what we are given, as we noticed, is greater detail in the account of Israel's apostasy. We saw that in the description of her idolatry in 10:6 but still more in the conversation between Israel and the Lord in vv. 10-16, a conversation much more lengthy and elaborate than any other in the book. But what is still more striking about that conversation is that it is doubled or mirrored in the exchange between the leaders of Gilead and Jephthah in 11:4-10. [Webb, 53-54] I had never noticed that before, but when it was pointed out to me in the study of Judges by the Anglican evangelical, Barry Webb, it was immediately obvious, so obvious that it could not be accidental.

Take a look at the two conversations yourself. 1) Each begins with a plea for help: Israel to God and the men of Gilead to Jephthah. 2) In each case the plea amounts to an effort to gain help from the one they had rejected: Israel had rejected God and Gilead had rejected Jephthah. 3) Each plea is initially rebuffed on the grounds of the manifest insincerity or hypocrisy of those making the request. God reminds Israel that as often as he had helped them, so often had they betrayed him. And Jephthah reminds the men of Gilead that it was they who had betrayed him and driven him from his home. 4) In each case there is the same kind of argument employed: in 10:12-13 God says to Israel: "...did I not save you from their hands? But you have forsaken me;" in 11:7 Jephthah says to the leaders of Gilead: "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house?" In other words, "Why should I intervene on *your* behalf, given how you have treated me?" 5) In each case the one making the plea ignores the initial rebuff and presses the request once again. 6) Israel, in 10:15-16, confesses the Lord as their only God and then removed the foreign gods among them and reformed their worship to express their loyalty to God alone. In 11:8-11 the men of Gilead swear their allegiance to Jephthah and make him, in a solemn ceremony, ruler over all their people.

What is all of this conversation? Well, it seems rather clearly to be, in both cases, an elaborate manipulation. The language, even the actions once taken, seem pious enough. They say the right things to some degree. Israel protests her repentance and seems to demonstrate it by removing the idols. The men of Gilead seem to demonstrate a real change of heart toward Jephthah. Indeed, the word they use in 11:8, when they say, as the NIV has it, “we are turning to you” is the usual word for “repent” [שׁוּב]. It means not simply “turn” as the NIV has it, but “turn back” or “return.” Why should they say that they are “returning” to Jephthah when *he* was the one who had left Gilead and who would be the one who was returning there? The term is loaded. It is suggestive of a change of mind or attitude in relation to Jephthah on the part of the men of Gilead. Jephthah has just accused them of hating him and driving him out and pointedly asked them why they should come to him, of all people, now that they are in trouble. And they reply that they have *returned* to him. “They [have adopted] the language of repentance” just as Israel had with God himself. [Webb, 53] Both conversations seem to be efforts to manipulate persons into acting according to the wishes of those who are speaking.

Why then is all of this conversation recorded for us to read? Why all of this record of repentance on the part of both Israel and the men of Gilead, when it is not, in fact, a true repentance? Well there are two possibilities. One is that we are to see a difference between the conversation that Israel has with the Lord and the conversation that the men of Gilead have with Jephthah. We noted at 10:16 that the Lord never explicitly agrees to help Israel, even after they protest their loyalty and offer their repentance. They get rid of their idols in 10:16, but we never hear that the Lord has agreed to help his people in this case. He doesn’t raise up Jephthah, they do. On the other hand, if the NIV is correct in its translation of the second half of v. 16, there is the suggestion that the Lord has determined to help. Very clearly, Jephthah *is* finally persuaded to help. After the men of Gilead protest their loyalty he agrees to return to Gilead and lead their army in battle in exchange for the rule of the people. Taken that way, if we are to see the silence on the Lord’s part as indicative of his refusal to heed his people’s pleas, the Lord’s refusal to accede to Israel’s request is the one inconsistency in the otherwise parallel conversations. In that way the Lord’s refusal is highlighted and we are being shown in another way that God has lost patience with his people.

The other possibility is that the parallelism is assumed and that, although there is no explicit statement to the effect that the Lord agreed to help Israel, events will prove that, in fact, he did agree. In that case the conversation in chapter 11 interprets the conversation in chapter 10. Both the Lord and Jephthah were prevailed upon to heed the plea of those who came to them. Both aware of the hypocrisy of those coming to them in their distress, they obviously did not accede to these requests because of the genuineness of the requests. The Lord responded because he is faithful to his covenant and because he loves his people. He is patient and he abounds in mercy. Jephthah, on the other hand, accedes to the request of the men of Gilead because he wanted the power.

But what is clear enough in either case is that the narrator does not regard the “repentance” of either party – Israel or the men of Gilead – as genuine, heartfelt, spiritually-minded, and permanent. Israel is, once again, in a fix and they cry out to God for the same reason they always cry out to him. They need him to deliver them from a powerful enemy. They *sound* pious enough, though the “please rescue us now” in 10:15 gives them away, but as we already

know from the prologue and from the entire course of the narrative to this point, they will return to their idols as soon as the danger is past.

In the same way, the men of Gilead do not run off to Tob because they had come to feel bad about how they had treated Jephthah. They were in a fix. They needed a brave, even a ruthless man to lead their army into battle against the Ammonites and couldn't find anyone else. They had already looked for someone else and couldn't find anyone able to do the job. So they held their noses and went to find Jephthah.

In both cases, but especially in the first, the conversation that really matters, the one between God's people and the Lord himself, we have the most complete example in the book of Judges of a pretense of piety in the service of manipulation. There is a great deal of this in the Bible, of course, and a great deal more in history since. People saying the right things to or about God in hope of securing some favor from him.

You have heard of what is called fox-hole Christianity: the poor young soldier in the fox-hole, bullets flying all around, who, paralyzed by fear of death, promises anything to God if only he will spare his life. When I was in seminary, during a January inter-term I took a class from Dr. Gordon Clark in religious epistemology – the study of the foundations of religious knowledge. How do we know that God exists, that the Bible is true, and so on? Dr. Clark was a genius. That word is often thrown around in our day, but he actually was. He made his reputation as a scholar while still very young, translating ancient Greek philosophical texts than had never been translated before. He wrote a philosophy text that was for years in widespread use in American universities. Carl F.H. Henry, the late dean of American evangelical scholars wrote that he owed much of his mental life to the teaching of Gordon Clark. When I knew him, before the internet, Dr. Clark carried on games of chess through the mail with chess masters. Dr. Clark had a very intimidating manner in the class room. He got control of his class on the first day and never relaxed his grip. Students were afraid of him. They worked hard in his classes for fear of being humiliated. The first day of this class, Dr. Clark handed out a list of recommended readings in the subject of epistemology. I thought, "Well, that is interesting. I'll file that away and years from now be able to pull it out to recollect what texts Dr. Clark thought were most important." The next morning after the opening prayer, Dr. Clark looked down at the first name on his class register and said, "Mr. Baker, did you read Augustine's *De Magistro* last night?" "Well, no," answered Mr. Baker. "Well did you read the *First Meditation* of Descartes?" "Well, no." He was just going down his reading list, one item after another. After listing five or six works and getting the same answer, he said, "Mr. Baker, what *did* you read last night?" All of us in the classroom, and I especially, were praying in our hearts, "Lord, if you will just keep him from calling on me, I'll serve you for the rest of my life!" That's fox-hole Christianity.

In almost every case, once the fear of death has disappeared, the pretensions of piety disappear as well. Israel was a fox-hole Christian during the time of the Judges.

For some people this pretense of piety is not something that appears but once, or very seldom – only when a crisis comes – but is the ordinary, the usual character of their religious life. They sow their wild oats Monday through Saturday and come to church on Sunday to pray for crop failure.

What Judges is reminding us is that the pretense of piety, especially pious speech, is a commonplace of religious life, even among the church, the people of God. There is a great deal of speech that sound quite good and means nothing at all. “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” The Lord said that of Israel and, in saying it, summed up a thousand years of her history. It was more often true than not in the life of Israel and perhaps we can say the same of the history of the church ever since.

It is not enough to say the right things. One’s life will tell the tale. One’s conduct is the measure of one’s words. This has been a theme of our morning studies in Matthew on any number of occasions. A special subject of that first Gospel is the nature of true discipleship and over and over again Matthew distinguishes between mere words and real loyalty to God.

“Not everyone who *says* to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who *does* the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

The Lord said as much to Israel time and time again during the days of the Judges. Our text this morning had a similar theme. Real faith, real discipleship, real salvation can be seen in the results that it produces in a person’s life: the bearing of fruit, some thirty, some sixty, some hundred fold.

One of the reasons, I am sure, that there is so much emphasis on this in the Bible, whole books devoted to this question of true and false discipleship – and, within a book like Judges the point being made over and over again – is because we are so easily self-deceived. I’m sure the Israelites in chapter 10 thought they meant what they said. It couldn’t have been an entirely simple thing to get rid of their foreign gods. Such worship was part of the social and economic structure of life in those days. It would have cost some people money, some others difficulties within their families, and so on. But they did it. But they didn’t really mean what they said or mean what they did. And it wasn’t long before the gods were back and the Lord had been forgotten once again. The long reach of one’s life is ordinarily what tells the tale.

We have been given a more detailed picture of Israel in conversation with God and of the men of Gilead in conversation with Jephthah *precisely so that we can see what hypocrisy looks like*. We are given to see that so that we can detect it in ourselves if it should be there.