

## STUDIES IN JUDGES No. 3

Judges 2:6-3:6

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### Review

Last time we considered the first half of the introduction or prologue of the book, 1:1-2:5. We pointed out that it was a survey of the efforts of various tribes (beginning with Judah) to take possession of the territory allotted to them by Joshua in the division of the Promised Land. The distinctive character of this summary, as opposed to the similar material in Joshua, is that it lays stress on Israel's *failure*, not her success at driving out or destroying the Canaanites, the peoples who possessed the land before her. In fact, the concluding paragraphs of this summary of the conquest lay rhetorical stress on the fact that as a result of Israel's failure to take full possession of the land, a failure that was rooted in her lack of faith in God, she now lived *among* the Canaanites instead of having *displaced* them. In other words, the stage is now set for the corruption of Israelite life and worship by the Canaanite influences that Israel had permitted to survive and even flourish in what was supposed to be a land devoted entirely to the worship and service of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All of this is confirmed by the evaluation provided by the messenger of the Lord in 2:1-5. The Canaanite morality and the Canaanite worship, allowed to remain in and among the Israelites will prove a snare to them. Judges, as we said in introducing the book, will be about the "Canaanization" of Israel, about the spiritual folly of her accommodation with the paganism around her, and the consequences that ensued.

We said last time in conclusion that the rhetorical impact of this opening historical survey is to set before us this single alternative: we must choose between God's covenant and the Canaanites. We cannot have both – much as we are tempted to want to try – we must choose. If we make peace with the Canaanites; if we choose the world's way of life, its principles, its morality, its values, its religious culture – even if we only tolerate such things – in time it will absorb us and our children, and, all our protests to the contrary, at last we will be Canaanites not Christians. What is more, the choice of God's covenant is demonstrated not by words only or even chiefly, but by the active opposition, the spirit and principle of death before dishonor, the repelling of the culture and its influence in our lives and our families all the time. If there is not a driving out or a destroying by spiritual warfare there *will be* an accommodation and an absorption.

### 2:6-3:6 Text Comment

What follows is a theological analysis of what is contained in the remainder of the book. It amounts to the author's philosophy of history, so to speak, his explanation of why things unfolded as they did. In other words, the narrator follows his historical *summary* with a theological *analysis* of that history.

v.6 "After Joshua dismissed the Israelites..." This is a flashback, a nearly verbatim repetition of Joshua 24:28. We are now picking up the thread of the narrative as it closed at the end of Joshua.

- v.7 During Joshua's lifetime and that of the next generation, the people who had witnessed the Lord's mighty works in the wilderness and the early stages of the conquest of the land, Israel was faithful to the Lord, by and large. We have already, in the prologue so far, read of specific instances of the failure of faith, but by and large Israel worshipped the Lord faithfully and served him in obedience.
- v.11 The specific means of the corruption of Israel's faith was false worship, the accommodation of her worship to the principles and practices of the nations whom she had allowed to remain in the land.

The description of Israel's doing evil that we have in vv. 11-13 will be repeated in very similar words seven times in the book, the next in 3:7 and 3:12.

As we said in the introduction of the book, much of this language is carried over from Deuteronomy. It has long been noticed that there is a close connection between the book of Judges and the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy there is much emphasis placed on the importance of God's people keeping his covenant and upon the warning that disobedience will lead to the Lord's displeasure and thus to his judgment. And this is the message of Judges over and over again and often in the very words we find these commands and these warnings in Deuteronomy. Judges is proof of the truth of what God told his people in the great covenant document of Deuteronomy (the book we might well call the Romans of the OT). What this demonstrates is that the punishment that God visited upon Israel was perfectly in keeping with the warnings he had previously given. He is only being true to his word. And Israel had no excuse, for she had been clearly warned of the consequences of infidelity. [Webb, 110]

- v.14 The oppression of Israel by her enemies is not simply the outworking of moral principles embedded in the nature of human life – one exposes himself to a germ, one gets sick – rather, God himself hands *his people over to their enemies*. This is an act of divine judgment. And so regularly in human affairs. Paul says the same thing in Romans 1: three times he says that on account of man's sin "God handed sinful men over to a depraved mind, to shameful lusts, and to sinful desires." As in Romans 1 so here, sin is often the punishment of sin, being handed over to more sin, to greater sin is the judgment for choosing sin in the first place.
- v.15 The result of Israel's infidelity to God was his judgment, revealed particularly in her inability to defend herself against enemies whom, with God's help, she should have been able very easily to dispatch. But now Israel found that *God* was her *enemy*!
- v.16 The Lord's faithfulness to his people remained, however, and, even in his judgment, he sought to help them. He gave them "judges." This was his answer to their being in distress. It is interesting and important that the narrator speaks of God's mercy to Israel without any indication that Israel had repented of the sins he had just described.

Interestingly, this is the only place in the entire book in which this term "judge" is used for the leaders described in the book of "Judges." None of the individuals whose exploits

wewillstudyisexpresslyidentifiedasa שופט (shōpēt). Wererightto refer to them as ‘judges,’ because the use of the term here and in vv. 18 -19 indicates that the term does refer to the men who will occupy much of the narrative that follows. Also the verb ‘to judge’ is used to describe the activity of four of the primary figures in the following narrative – Othniel, Deborah, Jephthah, and Samson – and five of the secondary figures whose careers are not described in any detail – Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. But of all of those only Deborah is ever said to have done any ‘judging’ in the ordinary sense of the term, that is, presiding at hearings and rendering verdicts. So, in this book, the term ‘judge’ apparently carries little of the legal, judicial connotation that it does in other uses in the Bible and that it does still today. It means rather ‘leader,’ ‘governor,’ and ‘deliverer’ which it does in some other of its uses in the OT (cf. 1 Sam. 8:1 -3).

- v.17 The people did not listen to their judges. The implication is that the judges made some sort of effort to purify the nation’s life and worship though this is by no means clear in the narratives that follow. But to the extent that the judges also proclaimed the law of God to the people and urged them to keep God’s commandments they were ignored by the people. Even during the lifetime of the judge, therefore, the apostasy of the people was not stayed. The concept of ‘prostitution’ builds on the idea, found frequently in the Bible, that God’s relationship with his people is like a marriage. Israel is like an unfaithful wife.
- v.19 The people’s response to the Lord’s delivering them from their enemies, however, was not gratitude expressing itself in faithfulness. No, as the cycles of oppression and deliverance follow one upon the other the people become *more* corrupt and *more* incorrigible. What Judges describes is a downward spiral of faith and morals.
- v.20 So, the question is: if Israel continues to be so stubborn in her rebellion, what will God do? The answer comes in a short speech by the Lord. The Lord no longer speaks *to* the Israelites, as in 2:1-3 but *about* them. ‘God is angry but tight-lipped.’ [Webb, 113]

By the way, the statement that ‘Israel has violated the covenant’ is all the more important as a way of speaking because God has already said in 2:1 that he would *never* violate his covenant.

- v.21 The covenant God made with Israel included the promise to drive out the nations before them. But because Israel has violated the covenant the promise is forfeit. Indeed, in the following narratives, none of the nations that is defeated in battle by a judge is actually driven out of the land or destroyed. Their oppression of Israel may be broken, but there is no definitive victory achieved. [Block, 133]
- v.23 In one way this answer on the Lord’s part to Israel’s unwillingness to learn her lesson after being judged repeatedly by the Lord for her infidelity to his covenant and being delivered by the judges he raised up for her is another mark of his patience and love. He ‘tests’ her, that is, gives her an opportunity to learn and put her behavior right.

Note well the ‘the Lord allowed.’ God is in control of Israel’s destiny!

v.3:1 As we have learned is common in Hebrew narrative, a repeated word, serves to tie a section together. This is what Martin Buber, the Jewish scholar famously called the ‘leitwort’, or key word, style of Hebrew narrative. Unfortunately, translations often obscure the connection because it can be difficult to use the same word in all of its uses. Here the key word is “to know” but you are not able to tell that from reading the NIV. In v. 1 we read of the Israelites who did not *know* war, in v. 2 of God’s intention that they should learn to *know* war, and then, we read in v. 4, God will *know* whether they will ever obey his commandments and keep his covenant.

This short paragraph, vv. 1-6, is an exposition of 2:23 and the Lord’s statement that he intends to leave the pagan nations in the Promised Land to test his people.

- v.2 Here the narrator is simply explaining what God meant in 2:22 about ‘testing’ Israel by leaving the nations among her.
- v.5 In other words, Israel failed at every point. Many pagan nations were left in the land; none was destroyed or driven out.
- v.6 In other words, Israel utterly failed the test. Far from learning to fight the influence of the Canaanites, she embraced those influences for herself, even allowing herself to be mixed together with the pagan peoples of the land through inter-marriage, expressly forbidden in Deut. 7:3-4. The accommodation of Israel to the surrounding paganism is no longer passive – simply failing to drive the nations out or destroy them – but active, intermarrying with their sons and daughters. Here distinctiveness as the people of God is now in jeopardy. She would rather be like the peoples around her than like God her Savior. God had said to her: “Be holy for I am holy.” She was saying to him, I’d rather be like the folk around here!

What is clear as the prologue ends is that Israel has proved so weak in her loyalty to God, so ready to accommodate herself to the surrounding spiritual and moral culture that the fact that Israel maintains any distinct identity as the people of God by the end of the book is entirely due to God’s interventions on her behalf, interventions she did not deserve.

Now what we have before us for a text this evening is a statement of a biblical philosophy of history or of human affairs such as we find many times in the Bible. We don’t, of course, have an entire philosophy of history here, but we have some of its salient features. In the time that remains this evening I want us to take note together of several elements of the Bible’s philosophy of history as they are laid out in this second half of the prologue of the book of Judges. We have time only to mention some of them but it is worth our fixing them in mind because, as is clear, the narrator is here explaining the principles that will govern his interpretation of the history he is about to record in the remainder of the book. And, as history is of a piece, the philosophy of history we are taught here is that which we should bring to our understanding of our own time and world.

Before we begin, let me remind you of the immense practical importance of having this larger view of things. We see it here, of course, and everywhere in the Bible. Large movements and great issues in human life finally descend to intensely particular and individual matters. Our lives are profoundly influenced by what is happening in the world of our time. The lives of our children are in some respects the products of their historical moment. But, still more, here questions of war and peace, the affairs of nations, finally are resolved in the weddings of individual young men and women and, as we shall see as the book goes along, the life and death of thousands upon thousands. The principles that govern human life on the largest scale are the same principles that govern it on the smallest. We find this everywhere we look in the Bible. God treats nations as if they were individuals and Paul treats churches as if they were individuals. The philosophy of history in the Bible is a unified account of human affairs that embraces the largest and smallest features of human life together. It is for history what science has yet been unable to discover for physics: a unified theory of everything.

Now, then, let me mention a few important elements of the biblical philosophy of history that are featured in the theological analysis of the history of the judges period that the narrator provides as a prologue to his history.

1. The first feature and an important one in biblical teaching generally is that of the centrality of the church. In this case this is revealed in the fact that the great, the chief importance of the history of the nations of the world is found in how those nations influence, effect, and shape the history of the people of God, the church. It takes faith to see this, of course. The newspapers don't see it. You don't ever hear this perspective on the television news. You don't read it in most histories either. We can be mesmerized by the affairs of nations nowadays as people have been throughout history. The achievements of nations – including our own – their power, their conquests, and their eventual decline and fall; all of this seems so consequential in and of itself. But, according to God's word, what *really* matters, the true significance of any nation's history is how it bears on the kingdom of God, the progress of the gospel, the spiritual welfare of God's people. Nations come and go because of the purpose God has for them in the life of his people.

What made Assyria or Babylon so important in ancient times was the use God made of those great powers to judge his people. Israel seemed to be of little consequence in the ancient Near Eastern world of that day, certainly compared to the mighty imperial powers of Nineveh and Babylon, but it was Israel that stood in the center of world history and Assyria and Babylon were bit players, brought on stage to fulfill a role in the history of the great protagonist of human history, the church of God.

You have that perspective here in Judges 2 and 3. What is the really interesting thing, the memorable thing about the nations of Canaan? It is the role they played in the spiritual life of God's people; in this case, their moral and spiritual corruption being used by God to test his people. Now, no doubt, the Canaanites did not think of their nations in this way or their national history in this way. Indeed, it would seem offensive, condescending to them to be told that their only real importance lay in God's use of them to judge his people. But it is the way God thinks of it and the way we should think of it too. The New Testament has the same viewpoint. Christ is head over all things *for the church* Paul says. And in the grand

historical overview of the book of Revelation we see all the nations of the world only insofar as they impinge upon or are in some way taken up into the history of the kingdom of God and in their role as revealing either the justice or the mercy of God.

God has made the history, the salvation of his people the *raison d'être* of this world. Christians must never forget this. It will keep them from being mesmerized by the great things that nations do and become, none of which matters much at all, except to the extent that those things influence the fortunes of the gospel in the world and serve either to weaken or strengthen the church of Jesus Christ. A Christian should never forget this and all the more every morning when he opens his newspaper and reads about the world from the vantage point of people who have no idea where history is going or what it is for or what really matters or what determines the real importance of events. What heaven sees happening in Iraq, which is to say, what is *really* happening in Iraq, is not at all the same thing the world sees happening there. I do not mean to say that the events as they are reported are not important – every human being and every nation is important – but the great interest and the great purpose of God in history is always the progress of the gospel and the fortunes of the church. The reason we find it useful to know anything at all about the Philistines or the Hivites or the Sidonians, the reasons those nations are of any importance in world history, is because those nations entered the church's space and influenced her life. Otherwise their history is of minor interest, more of a curiosity, people floating aimlessly in an eddy of history, going nowhere, shuffling aimlessly to doom and, like unnumbered peoples like them, utterly unmindful of that fact. It is a hard fact but true.

2. A second element of the Bible's philosophy of history is an emphasis on the organic connection of human life through the generations. We find this here as we find it everywhere in the Bible. Israel's unbelief, her wickedness did not spring up out of nothing, with no connections to what came before or after. It was related to events in the life of previous generations and it fed more of the same in the generations that followed. Israel's apostasy began with failures of faith in the generation of Joshua and continued in greater failures in the generation that followed.

In the history of the judges, our narrator tells us at the outset, things got worse and worse. Principles of evil allowed to flourish in one generation, deepened in the next and still more in the next. There is a descending spiral of unbelief and evil that we will chart as we move through the book. The descent to the deepest evil is not immediate but gradual as the generations come and go. That is what makes intermarriage so deeply evil. It injects into the well-head of a family's spiritual tradition a principle of accommodation with unbelief and with disinterest in God's covenant that *must and will* produce still more intractable unbelief and incorrigible rebellion over time.

There is, to be sure, in the Bible another principle: the principle of individual accountability and of God's grace to individuals. A man can be saved out of generations of unbelief. We see it happen and rejoice to see it. But it remains true that unbelief breeds unbelief and rebellion breeds rebellion. That is what makes family nurture and faithful church nurture so important. It is not the individual alone whose salvation is at stake, but the generations who will proceed from him or her. So much more to say about that, but we hurry on.

3. A third element of this biblical philosophy of history is the centrality of worship in human life and experience and its fundamental significance in shaping the spiritual life of a people. The Bible bears witness everywhere in its pages to the nature of man as *homo adorans*, worshipping man. As a man thinks so he is, the Bible says; but even more often it says that as a man worships, so he is. That is why there is so much about worship in the Bible, both worship with a capital “W,” the liturgical life of man, and worship with a lower case “w,” worship as a man’s pursuit of his loves. This is a great point of emphasis in Judges and in the prophets as well. What was the greatest sin, what was the greatest evil that Israel did? What was the sin that led to her other sins? Over and over again it is said that she worshipped false gods and worshipped Yahweh after the manner of pagan worship. The one is as bad as the other. And by this false worship she corrupted every aspect of her life. Her moral failures derived from her liturgical unfaithfulness.

In Psalm 115 we read one of those typically scathing denunciations of the false worship of the ancient Near East, that worship that beguiled Israel so many times throughout her history.

“...their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. *Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.*”

Well, that was Israel’s fate in the days of the judges. They became like the idols they began to worship: spiritually lifeless, blind, deaf, powerless.

And so it will be, must be for every people. We have our idols today, of course. Money, pleasure, power, etc. These are idols in just the same way images carved from wood or stone are idols, the NT tells us. “Greed is idolatry,” says Paul. Anything we put in God’s place and worship; anything to which we devote our lives. And we too, as a people, will become what we worship as Israel did. This is the story of mankind. Human beings becoming what they worship. Here is a key to understanding so much of what happens in the world, both in the life of nations and the life of individuals: idolatry denaturing human life.

4. Fourth, there is this: life is nourished from the past. This is true in church and in families. It is true also of unbelieving people. One faces the world, thinks about life, finds one’s own way according to a view of reality that, perforce, comes from the past. Israel had a past with God that, when she remembered and applied to new conditions, brought her blessing and prosperity. When she forgot that past, she lost her way. The pagan peoples around her also had a worldview based on the past, in their case ancient myths, and those myths determined her faith and her morality, such as it was. But Israel had reality to remember and she forgot it instead.

You find this concern that Israel remember her past everywhere in the OT and the same concern in the NT. Over and again the diagnosis of Israel’s spiritual malaise or her apostasy is that “she forgot the wonders that God had done.” In Deuteronomy, in Psalm 78 and many

other texts parents are put on notice of the catastrophic consequences that ensue when the church's children are not taught her history and are not given the memory of God's mighty acts and, conversely, the wonderful consequences that ensue when children have that history fixed in their hearts and minds.

This is a particularly important point for modern Americans to take note of. We are singularly guilty of the hubris of believing that our age is so sophisticated, so technologically developed that we needn't attend to the past. But the meaning of life is to be found *there* first. The Christian will always be vulnerable to the fashions of his culture – as the Israelites were in Canaan – unless he has a living sense of the past and what God has done in the past.

5. And, finally, there is this. The one true and absolutely reliable standard for the determination of right and wrong, life and death, is the Word of God. How, after all, was Israel to know her actions were evil and that God's judgment would follow? Well, Israel violated the covenant and law of God which had been revealed to her. She was without excuse because God had spoken and made clear his will. In the final analysis, this is the question every nation, every people, as every individual must face: how am I to know what I should believe and how I should live? And the answer given is always the same: "God has spoken! Hear him." This is a lynchpin of the Bible's philosophy of education: that the truth *has been* revealed in the world; God has spoken, and men and women are duty bound to give heed to God's word, to believe it and to practice it. Let this fact be denied or ignored and a division between human beings is opened up that widens and must widen over time. It creates a chasm between believers and unbelievers that cannot be crossed. The authority of God's Word is a watershed. Belief or unbelief here is like two drops of water at the highest point at the very knife-edge of the continental divide. Though the drops of water are so near to one another at that one point, one must go to the west and the other to the east; one must go to the Pacific and the other to the Atlantic. As they travel the further they get from one another. When Israel forsook God's revelation she placed herself on a path that could only lead away from God and his salvation. Israel had God's Word, but they saw their neighbors' highly interesting, even erotic worship. They thought, as many have since and do today, that the world's way was more appealing, more interesting. Israel said, in effect, what Mark Twain had Tom Sawyer say: "Church ain't shucks to the circus." Pagan worship appealed to them, as false worship often does. But God had spoken and to embrace that worship meant forsaking the teaching of God's Word, which meant, which meant precisely, forsaking God himself. That, in turn, meant God's judgment, Israel's diminishment, the spiritual death of generations of people. No one thought that at the time, but that was the result and that is what will always be the result. The authority of the Word of God is the watershed issue of human life.

There we are: the centrality of the people of God in human affairs, the organic spiritual connection of human life through the generations, worship as key to the fortunes of human beings and peoples, the significance of the past for the spiritual formation of people, and the authority of the Word of God as the determinative principle of truth and error in human life. Think of life in these terms and the world looks one way and human life is understood in one set of terms; think of life in any other way and you do not understand it as God does, or as it really is, or as a person must understand it if he is to live rightly in this world.

Here, in our text we find that Israel committed three fundamental acts of betrayal: she lived with the pagans of Canaan instead of destroying or driving them out; she completed her mixing of herself with them by intermarrying; and she embraced their worship and their gods. But she did all of those things because she had lost a true philosophy of history, of her own history and the history of the world. She had lost a sense of her place in the world, of the meaning of her own life. The warning of this book is that we will *do* the same things Israel did and *suffer* what she suffered if we forget what Israel forgot. Judges was written for believers to remind them what they must never forget!