

The Judges of Israel

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INTRODUCTION

The Judges were really military dictators, deliverers of their people, raised up providentially when emergencies demanded. [*The conduct of some of the Judges will startle the reader. It is therefore suggested that the CONCLUSION of this booklet be consulted where an explanation will be found.*] The name is a translation of the Hebrew word *shophet*, which has a wider meaning than our word **judge**. It includes the idea of governing as well as that of judging. The Judges were primarily rulers, and except in the case of Debora (Judges 4, 5) there is little in Sacred History of the exercise by them of judicial arbitration or indeed of legal functions of any kind. There was nothing regular about their selection; no ordered succession in the institution. Personal courage and cleverness were the principal qualities which put them at the head of affairs, and made them religious and national heroes. It is this above all that lends such startling originality to the Judges and such interest to their period.

THE BACKGROUND

Josue had completed his mission before he died, and so he named no successor. The men who formed Josue's council ruled the nation after him. This amounted to a return to the patriarchal mode of government. While Josue's memory was fresh all went well, but after a time the various tribes took back their independence. The federal unity (which was centred in the council) weakened, and the council became ineffective. Then there arose bickerings and jealousies between the tribes when their interests collided.

Each tribe was divided into "families and houses" (Numbers 2, 34)—a division based on common descent from one ancestor. The oldest members of these tribal units ruled the community, whence the term **ancients**. Justice was administered at the city gate in a rather informal way. Decisions were based on the written law in the light of precedent and tradition. Conditions of living were primitive and simple. They had no international relations, no organised commerce or industries. The people were all engaged in farming or herding; each village or town with the surrounding territory was fully self-supporting.

Despite the divine command, so frequently and so sternly repeated, the Hebrews failed to drive out the Chanaanites. In some places delay had left them unable (Judges 1, 19); but even where they were still able, they chose to keep the native races as "tributaries" (Judges 1, 28). They had something to gain by this. The Chanaanites were highly civilised from a material point of view; much more so than the Hebrews, who until lately had been nomads. The Chanaanites knew the arts of building and agriculture. To have people of this kind as subjects seemed very feasible policy to the Hebrews. But they had much to lose also. The Chanaanites soon realised their superiority over their masters, and gradually asserted it. The Hebrews inter-married with them. Worse still, the

seductive idolatrous worship of the Chanaanites, with its external splendour, its lewdness, its glamorous feasting and revelry, so fascinated the Hebrews that time and again they were led into idolatry. Bitterly the sacred writer bewails the fact that "They forgot their God and served Baalim and Astaroth" (Judges 3, 7). The warning of Josue to his people was sadly justified: "they shall be a pit and a snare in your way and a stumbling block at your side, and stakes in your eyes..." (Josue 23, 13).

THE SOURCES

The Judges were sixteen in number. This includes Barac, who was military leader under the woman Judge, Debora; and Abimelech, who was a usurper. Their history is found in the Books of Judges, Ruth and 1 Kings, chapters 1 to 7. The Book of Judges gives a sombre picture of the state of religion in Israel. But it must be remembered that the theme of the sacred writer is God's Providence shepherding the Chosen People—punishing them for idolatry, and when they repented, delivering them from their foes through means of the Judges. Naturally then, he places strongly in relief the sins of Israel. But these were occasional lapses rather than a continuous state of religious decadence. Long intervals of peace are dismissed briefly: "the land rested eighty years" (Judges 5, 30). The Book of Ruth gives the other side of the picture—the peace and order and fine religious sentiments of these intervals of rest which cover more than three-fourths of the whole period of the Judges.

Following the numbers in the Vulgate text we tentatively put this period from about 1384 B.C. to about 1054 B.C. [See number 2 of this series, page 13. The numbers above do not differ greatly from those of Professor John Garstang (*JOSHUA, JUDGES*)—1367-1025 B.C.—who arrives at his calculation by another route and from other data. The difficulty of dating biblical events with certainty is still great in this period. Thus, Père Lagrange, O.P. (*Le Livre des Juges*) gives 345 years for the Judges; Monsignor Pelt (*Histoire de l'Ancien Testament*), following P. Hummelauer, S.J., gives 310 years; Milman (*History of the Jews*) gives "about 460 years"; R. Cornely, S.J. (*Compendium Introductionis*) gives 400 years for Josue, the Ancients and the Judges combined.] During this period the famous Tutankhamon (1356-1350 B.C.) ruled as Pharaoh in Egypt.

CHAPTER I

FROM OTHONIEL TO GIDEON

(Judges 3, 1-8, 21).

Josue and his generation were dead; the memory of the miracles at the Jordan, Jericho and Hai had grown dim. The mass of the Hebrew people, although they knew the divine law, "did all things contrary" (Judges 2, 17). God punished their crimes by permitting Chusan Rasathaim, king of Mesopotamia, to conquer Palestine. For eight years the Hebrews groaned under foreign rule, paying a heavy annual tribute. The hardship and humiliation of their servitude brought them to repentance. They returned to God and prayed for deliverance, and God sent them a saviour in the person of Othniel of the tribe of Juda, nephew of Caleb. He defeated Chusan Rasathaim in battle and freed the Hebrews. Othniel lived for forty years after his victory, and maintained order and peace in the country.

AOD AND SAMGAR

Again, however, the people abandoned their religion, and again they paid the penalty. This time Eglon, king of Moab, allied with Ammonite and Amalecite tribes invaded southern Palestine; occupied part of the country; made his residence at Jericho, and forced the Hebrews of the south to pay a heavy tribute. This lasted for eighteen years, until, thoroughly humbled, the people repented of their idolatry. Then the second of the Judges, Aod of the tribe of Benjamin, freed them from foreign domination.

Aod had strength, courage and cunning. He was ambidextrous, i.e., he could use the left hand equally well with the right. He went as head of the embassy which brought the eighteenth (and last) annual tribute to the oppressor at Jericho. He carried a small two-edged sword beneath his cloak on his right thigh. This diverted suspicion for the sword was usually worn on the left thigh. He and his companions presented their tribute with the usual ceremonial, and then retired. Together they returned as far as Galgal. His companions would now be safe in case his plan failed; so Aod returned alone to the fortress-palace at Jericho. There was a shrine at Galgal, and Aod told Eglon that he had received there a divine message intended for him (Eglon) alone. Neither Eglon nor his minions suspected that this lone and (to their thinking) unarmed man who had just paid the tribute for his people could be harbouring any dangerous designs. Also Eglon was superstitious. He, therefore, ordered his bodyguard to retire from the upper-room and leave him alone with Aod. He then rose from his couch to show honour to the oracle. This was the very thing that Aod wanted. As soon as the king prepared to stand Aod drew the sword with his left hand and in a flash plunged it, blade and hilt, into the obese body of Eglon, killing him outright. Then carefully fastening the door of the king's room Aod boldly went away. The king's servants heard no sound of a struggle, and it was some time before they grew suspicious. When at last they forced their way into the upper-room and discovered that the king had been killed Aod was well on his way to Seirath.

When Aod told of his exploit the people rallied to him, and he proclaimed war on the invaders of the country. He foresaw that panic would seize the Moabites at the death of their king; so with a force of hastily armed men he took up his position at the Jordan fords leading to Moab. When the Moabites made to return to their own country Aod and his men fell upon them and slew ten thousand. For eighty years after this adventure the Hebrews had peace.

After Aod we have the briefest mention of Samgar, the son of Anath. Only one exploit of his is recounted: he slew six hundred Philistines with an ox goad [*Our (Douay) version from the Vulgate has "a ploughshare." But the Hebrew word means a goad for driving oxen when ploughing. The goad would be a stout pole about eight feet long, shod with bronze or iron—an effective weapon.*] (Judges 3, 31). Already the Philistines are asserting their power in the south-west. Before long they will become the most dangerous of all Israel's enemies.

DEBORA AND BARAC

The next oppressor of the Chosen People was Jabin, a Chanaanite king who ruled in Asor at the north of Palestine. His predecessor of the same name [*Jabin (the sage), like Pharaoh, Abimelech, Caesar, is a title for kings rather than a personal name.*] had been defeated by Josue. He had allies in the neighbouring Phoenicians, and their combined armies boasted nine hundred chariots. For their idolatry the northern tribes were punished by twenty years of subjection to the harsh rule of Sisera, the general of Jabin's forces. Again they were brought to repentance, and a woman of the tribe of Ephraim became Judge of Israel.

Debora was already famed as a prophetess, i.e., a woman inspired by God. Beside her home between Rama and Bethel was 'the palm-tree of Debora,' in the shade of which she held her unpretentious court. Hither the Hebrews came from near and far for her decision in disputes and her advice in difficulties. Acting under divine inspiration she sent to Cedes in Nephtali and summoned Barac. She ordered him to gather an army of three thousand men from the tribes of Nephtali and Zabulon and to lead them to Mount Thabor. Barac agreed to do so on condition that the prophetess would accompany the army.

Sisera soon heard that the Hebrews were preparing for war against him. Full of confidence in his well-trained army and especially in his chariots, he led his soldiers towards Mount Thabor. But at their first sight of Barac a supernatural terror seized the Chanaanites. Sisera himself leaped down from his chariot and ran from the battlefield, and his soldiers followed him. Barac pursued. A thunderstorm added to the confusion of the fugitives. Blindly they fled towards the north—their own country. Great numbers were drowned in the torrent Cisson which was swollen from the heavy rains, and their corpses were swept out to the Mediterranean.

Meantime Sisera, in awful terror, took refuge in the tent of Jahel, the wife of Haber, a Cinite. These Cinites were a nomad tribe—descendants of Hobab, the brother-in-law of Moses. They were not actually at war with Jabin, but their sympathies were with the Hebrews. Jahel proffered shelter and hospitality to the terror-stricken Sisera, and when he fell asleep in her tent she took a tent-peg and with a mallet drove it through his temple and into his brain. When Barac came in pursuit of his enemy Jahel showed him the dead body of Sisera in the tent. Barac followed up his victory, and the Chanaanites were completely and finally conquered. Forty years of peace followed this campaign.

THE MADIANITES

Once again the Hebrews fell away from God, and the divine chastisement followed their defection. This time they were punished by the Madianites and their allies—the Amalecites. These were hardy, ruthless nomads from the Arabian deserts in the south. They moved rapidly from place to place. They finally became so bold that the Hebrews had to make and fortify for themselves refuges in remote parts of the mountains of central Palestine. Their method was not organised warfare, but raids on flocks and crops. The result of a visitation from a horde of these wandering tribes is compared to the havoc wrought by a plague of locusts (Judges 6, 5). They wasted everything in their path. Crops, sheep, cattle disappeared. This condition of affairs went on unchecked for seven years, and the Hebrews were sorely tried. They cried to God for help, and in His mercy He heard their prayer. He sent a prophet to rebuke them for their sins. They repented, and God raised up Gideon, the greatest of the Judges, to free them from the raiding Madianites.

GIDEON

Gideon was the son of Joas of the tribe of Manasses. One day he was threshing wheat in a hidden place through fear of a Madianite raid, when an angel in human form appeared and spoke to him, and appointed him to free Israel from the Madianite terror. Gideon pleaded that he was the least brave of his family, and his family the humblest in their tribe, and so he required a supernatural guarantee of the reality of the vision. He asked that the angel would remain until he (Gideon) would return with food. [*Mincha in Hebrew. It means an unbloody sacrifice, but it can also mean an offering. Our version translates it sacrifice here (Judges 6, 18), but the context makes the meaning of offering preferable.*] Gideon killed and boiled a kid, and returned to the place where he had left the angel, bringing the meat and the broth in which it had been boiled. The angel commanded him

to place the meat on a ledge of rock and to pour the broth over the meat. Then the angel touched the meat with the staff which he carried, and at once a miraculous fire consumed the offering. Gideon was convinced of the reality of the vision and of his divinely-given mission.

Next Gideon was inspired to pull down the altar of stone which was in his father's land, erected there in honour of an idol; to destroy the grove of trees around the altar; and to raise an altar to the True God on the same site. Gideon with ten servants did so secretly by night when Joas and the people were not aware. Next morning there was great indignation at this insult to the local idol. It was discovered that Gideon was responsible, and the people demanded that Joas should surrender his son to be put to death. Joas protected Gideon from the mob, and cleverly suggested that if Baal (the idol) were worthy of worship he ought to be able to avenge himself. It goes without saying that no vengeance was forthcoming from Baal, and in a short time the people rallied to Gideon.

Soon after these events the Madianites came on one of their plundering expeditions. They crossed the Jordan near Bethsan, and proceeded straight to Esdrelon. Esdrelon, the scene of many battles, is a rich plain stretching thirty miles east to west from the Jordan to Mount Carmel, and fifteen miles north to south from Nazareth to Gelboe. Here the Madianites encamped. Gideon gathered about him the fighting men of his own tribe of Manasses and sent messengers to Aser, Zabulon and Nephtali to invite their help. He soon had a large army, and he prepared to do battle against the invaders.

Before undertaking the campaign Gideon asked for another proof of the divine favour. He placed a sheep's fleece on the ground and prayed that next morning the fleece should be covered with dew, the ground around it remaining dry. This miracle was granted to him. Again he asked that the contrary should happen—that the fleece remain dry and the ground around it be covered with dew. And this also was granted.

Then Gideon led his numerous but ill-trained army to the fountain of Hared (modern Ain-Djaloud) at the foot of the Gelboe range of mountains. God commanded him to send away the "fearful and timorous" (7, 31); and this reduced the number by twenty thousand. *[These numbers seem to be altogether too great for a small country in remote times, and Professor Garstang on archaeological evidence declares them to be impossible (JOSHUA, JUDGES—pages 120-121). This difficulty about the numbers in the Old Testament occurs again and again. Various reasons have been suggested to account for it: mistakes of copyists; confusion in translating the Hebrew word eleph which may mean a family group or a thousand persons; the ancient method of writing numerals by letters of the alphabet and of using contractions for large figures which easily gave rise to misreadings in manuscripts. There are divergences even between the Hebrew text and the ancient Greek translations of it. Textual study, which is now receiving more attention, will doubtless shed light on this problem, but in the meantime we give the numbers in the Hebrew and the Vulgate with the above reservation.]* There was still too many, for it was to be a miraculous victory. So, acting again under divine inspiration Gideon watched his soldiers while they drank water from a well. Three hundred hardy warriors of the whole host hurriedly lapped a little water from their cupped hands. These Gideon kept with him. All the remainder who went down on their knees and drank long and leisurely were disbanded and sent home.

Gideon and the three hundred provided themselves with food and went forward to battle. They rested on the slope of a mountain beyond which the Madianites could be seen encamped in the valley to the north. Acting under divine guidance again Gideon went down the hillside at night with

only his servant Phara, and crept within earshot of the enemy outposts. He overheard a Madianite telling a comrade of a dream: "I dreamt a dream, and it seemed to me as if a hearth cake of barley bread rolled and came down into the camp of Madian, and when it was come to a tent it struck it, and beat it flat to the ground" (Judges 7, 13). The other promptly interpreted the hearth cake of the dream to mean "the sword of Gideon." Gideon returned much encouraged, and he roused his three hundred men for the attack. He gave to each of them a trumpet, a torch, and an empty earthenware jug in which to conceal the torch. At midnight in three divisions they stole cautiously into three different parts of the Madianite camp. The sentries were taken by surprise. Then Gideon and his men suddenly broke the jugs, waved the torches aloft, blew loudly on the trumpets, and shouted in unison: "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon" (7, 20). The stratagem was completely successful. The sleeping Madianites were thrown into complete confusion. In the *melée* some turned their arms against their own comrades and slew them. The remainder fled shrieking towards the Jordan. Gideon sent to the Ephraimites to intercept them at the fords. They did so, and there was great slaughter. The Ephraimites pursued those who had already crossed the river, and captured and slew their two emirs, Oreb and Zeb. Gideon and his men went in pursuit also—determined to capture the kings, Zebbee and Salmana. They crossed the Jordan and followed the retreating foes as far as Jegbaa on the border of the Syrian desert. Fifteen thousand Madianite fugitives were resting there, thinking that at last they were beyond danger. Gideon again swooped down on them by night and routed them hopelessly. A hundred and twenty thousand had been slain already. Now Zebbee and Salmana were captured. Gideon slew them with his own hand, and took all their spoils. The Madianites were completely ruined, and from that day they never again appear in history as a nation.

CHAPTER II

FROM ABIMELECH TO SAMSON

(Judges 8, 22-13, 1).

After Gideon's decisive victory over the Madianites the people wished to make him king. It is the first hint that we have of the future monarchy. Gideon, however, refused to accept the office of king: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you, but the Lord shall rule over you" (8, 23). Gideon retired to his native Ephra with rich spoils of war, and there forty years later he died at an advanced age.

ABIMELECH

Deprived of the good influence and wise advice of Gideon the Hebrews again lapsed into idolatry. Confusion was increased by a self-appointed Judge. This was an illegitimate son of Gideon, named Abimelech. He was more than willing to take the office of king which Gideon had refused. He gathered about him a band of destitute and unscrupulous vagabonds from the environs of Sichem whence came his mother. He then returned to Ephra with the deliberate purpose of murdering all Gideon's sons—seventy in number. He came to them unawares, and of the seventy only Joatham the youngest escaped by hiding. All the others were slain in cold blood. Abimelech now felt that his path was clear, so he returned with his disreputable followers to Sichem, and the Sichemites formally proclaimed him king.

Nothing good could be expected from such a ruler, and after three years of Abimelech's reign the Sichemites grew disgusted with their king and impatient of his tyranny. In the city and about it anarchy soon prevailed. Then an adventurer named Gaal came to Sichem and roused the people to revolt against Abimelech. But Abimelech was no coward. He marched against Sichem, met and defeated Gaal outside the city gate, and drove him back to the city. Later, Zebul, who ruled the city in Abimelech's interest, expelled Gaal and his followers from Sichem. Gaal here disappears from history, but this did not end the incident. Abimelech was embittered by the revolt of the Sichemites, and after a time when they were unprepared Abimelech and his warriors swooped down on them suddenly, massacred all those who were working in the fields, took the city after a short siege, and put all the inhabitants to the sword. The "tower" (or fortress) was able to hold out for a short time, but Abimelech succeeded in setting it on fire, and a thousand persons were killed when it fell. He levelled Sichem to the ground and "sowed salt in it" (9, 45)—to show his hatred and chagrin. [*To sow salt signified that the conqueror wished a defeated city to be so utterly destroyed as not to be even a fertile field henceforth.*]

Abimelech next went to Thebes, a neighbouring city also in revolt against him. The inhabitants barred the gate and prepared to resist. Abimelech led his army up to the very wall of the city. Then a woman threw a millstone from the rampart. It struck him on the head, fracturing his skull. But he was brave to the last—summoning his ebbing strength he called his armour-bearer (or personal attendant in war) to kill him with the sword, lest it should be said to his disgrace that Abimelech had been killed by a woman. So ended Abimelech and his inglorious attempt to found a monarchy in Israel.

THOLA AND JAIR

The sacred writer hurries over the next two Judges, giving the merest outline of their careers and nothing of their exploits. Thola of the tribe of Issachar ruled for twenty-three years; he was an uncle of Abimelech. Jair, a Caladite, ruled for twenty-two years.

After them religion again waned in Israel. At no former period, in fact, did the Hebrews go so far in their worship of idols. They adopted the vile fertility worship of the Phoenicians, and the degraded idolatry of the Moabites, Ammonites and Philistines. The divine punishment for this was long and severe. For eighteen years the Ammonites harassed the tribes of the Jordan, and Juda, Benjamin and Ephraim in Palestine. The people were brought to repentance at length; they threw down their idols, and returned to the true religion and to the worship of Jahwe. Then a deliverer was found.

JEPHTE

Jephthe was a strange character indeed, and he had a strange career. The illegitimate son of a certain Galaad of Trans-Jordan he was driven from home by the lawful children of Galaad's subsequent marriage. He went to live in Tob on the border of the Ammonite country. A fugitive from his own people and a natural enemy of the Ammonites he was forced to a life of plunder. He was "a valiant man" (11, 1), however, and before long, he found himself leader of a considerable band of outlaws, who looked up to him and obeyed him willingly. Their resistance to the Ammonites soon became known in Israel. Meantime the Trans-Jordanic tribes determined to unite their forces and make a stand against their national enemies, but when they assembled there was no capable man to lead them to the war. The ancients went to Tob and invited Jephthe to lead the army of Israel. Jephthe saw his opportunity of acquiring power among the people who had once rejected him, and he used his

advantage. He would accept the leadership in war only on condition that he retain it afterwards in peace. To this the ancients agreed on oath. And so Jephthe became Judge until his death.

Before entering on war Jephthe first tried to gain his purpose by diplomacy. He sent an embassy to the Ammonite king to protest against the latter's unjust attacks on the Hebrews. The Ammonite king returned an insolent reply—claiming as his right the territory between Arnon and the Jaboc rivers. Jephthe sent a second protest denying this claim; giving the history of the defeat of the Amorrites and the conquest of the land in question, and pertinently asking the reason why this claim had not been urged before this—for the Israelites had now been in peaceful possession for three hundred years. The Ammonite king paid no heed to this protest. In any event it was unanswerable. So Jephthe led his army from Maspha and opened war on Ammon.

JEPHTE'S VOW

Before the campaign Jephthe made a strange vow to God: "If thou wilt deliver the children of Ammon into my hands, whosoever shall first come forth out of the doors of my house, and shall meet me when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, the same will I offer a holocaust to the Lord" (11, 30-31). In the war which followed Jephthe was everywhere victorious. He captured twenty cities, and, in the words of the poet, "Hew'd Ammon, hip and thigh, from Aroer on Arnon unto Minneth." [*Tennyson gives eighteen stanzas of his poem A Dream of Fair Women to the subject of the daughter of Jephthe.*]

He then returned to Maspha in triumph; but the joy of victory was suddenly changed to sadness when, as he came towards his home, he saw his daughter (his only child too) coming out to meet him—the first to leave the house at the head of a group of girl companions. Joyfully they came singing and dancing to congratulate him on his victory. At once Jephthe recalled the rash vow which he had made, and he was filled with remorse and grief. He told his daughter. The brave girl made no complaint, but calmly accepted the terrible situation. She asked for only two months' delay in the fulfilment of the vow, so that she might go apart into the mountains of Galaad with her girl companions—there to mourn her virginity. This respite was granted her, and at the end of that time she returned to her father, and surrendered herself for the sacrifice which he had so foolishly vowed. For long it was a custom in Israel to keep the anniversary of this tragedy, "from year to year the daughters of Israel assemble together, and lament the daughter of Jephthe for four days" (11, 40).

JEPHTE'S SACRIFICE

The text and context of Judges 11 seem clearly to speak of human sacrifice. The vow mentions a holocaust, and the word 'holah,' which is translated holocaust is always used of a literal sacrifice—of the shedding of the blood, the taking of the life, and the complete immolation of a living victim. For sacrifice in a figurative sense as applied to prayer (Psalm 49, 3), or to contrition (Psalm 50, 19) the word used in Hebrew is not *holah* but *zebah*. Again Jephthe's mourning grief and the annual mourning ceremony seem to require that the girl victim was put to death. This also is the traditional explanation: "Jewish opinion from the earliest times took the vow in its plain and literal sense, and held that the maiden was actually slain and offered up upon an altar."

The following passage bridges the gap left by the two pages (14–15) that are absent from every known scan of this pamphlet. It has been reconstructed in the author's manner and at his approximate length, and is offered only as an editorial bridge — it is not Father Felix's original wording.

Yet the matter is not beyond dispute. A number of Catholic interpreters, unwilling to charge so signal a servant of God with a crime which the Law itself abhorred (Deuteronomy 12, 31), have held that Jephthe did not put his daughter to death at all, but consecrated her to the service of the sanctuary in perpetual virginity. On this milder view the "holocaust" was the entire surrender of her life to God, and the yearly lament of the daughters of Israel was for a maiden who would now never marry nor bear children in Israel—no light sorrow among a people to whom motherhood was the crown and glory of womanhood. The words "she knew no man" (11, 39), which the sacred writer sets down with evident emphasis, are urged in favour of this gentler reading.

The question cannot be decided with certainty, and grave authorities are ranged on either side. So much, however, is clear: Jephthe's vow was rash, ill-considered and unlawful, and the sacred writer neither commends it nor excuses it, but records it in his sober way as one more instance of the rude and untutored piety of the age. Whichever opinion be adopted, the daughter of Jephthe remains one of the most touching figures in the whole book—a model of obedience, of courage, and of generous self-surrender to what she believed to be the will of God.

ABESAN, AHIALON AND ABDON

Once more the sacred writer passes rapidly over three Judges of whom he has little to relate. Abesan of Bethlehem ruled for seven years. He had thirty sons and thirty daughters, and he found wives and husbands for them from among the other tribes—a detail which the historian notes as a mark of his wealth and consequence. After him Ahialon the Zabulonite judged Israel for ten years. Last of the three was Abdon of Pharathon, in the land of Ephraim, who ruled for eight years, and whose forty sons and thirty grandsons rode upon threescore and ten ass colts—once again a sign of rank and substance in those simple times. Of the exploits of these three men we know nothing whatever; they belong to those quiet intervals of peace which, as has already been said, fill by far the greater part of the period of the Judges.

THE PHILISTINES

We come now to the last, and by far the most formidable, of all the oppressors of the Chosen People. The Philistines were not a Semitic race like the Chanaanites, but a people of invaders who had come by sea from Caphtor [*Cf. Amos 9, 7 and Jeremias 47, 4, where the Philistines are said to have come out of Caphtor.*]*—the island of Crete and the neighbouring coasts of the Aegean—and had planted themselves upon the southern shore of Palestine, to which land, indeed, they have given their name. They were a warlike, sea-faring and enterprising people, well armed, skilled above their neighbours in the working of iron, and of a comparatively high [The reconstructed passage ends here; the original text resumes.] civilisation. From now onward they come continually into our history as enemies of the Hebrews, until both are conquered by the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C. The Philistines held five city-states in the Shephelah (low-lying country) on the Mediterranean coast: Ascalon, Gaza, Azotus, Accaron, Geth. [JOSHUA, JUDGES. By John Garstang. HASTINGS' DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE, under the word Philistines.] These troublesome neighbours had imposed their rule on the tribes of Juda, Dan and Simeon for forty years when at length in return for the repentance of His people God sent them a deliverer in the person of Samson of the tribe of Dan.*

CHAPTER III

SAMSON, HELI, SAMUEL

(Judges 13-21; Ruth; I Kings 1-7).

Gideon, not Samson, was the greatest of the Judges, but Samson is certainly the most famous of them all. Like Isaac heretofore, and Samuel later, he was "a child of promise." An angel appeared to the childless wife of Manue and foretold that she would give birth to a son. From his infancy the child was to be dedicated to God as a Nazarite. Accordingly he was to abstain from wine and all unclean food, and to let his hair grow long (Numbers 6, 2-8). The angel also foretold that he would free Israel from the Philistine rule.

From his early youth in Mahaneh-Dan Samson showed extraordinary physical strength, but his first recorded exploit was in Thamnatha, where he tore to pieces a young lion which attacked him. A few days later he found a swarm of wild bees and their honey in the carcase of the dead lion.

The Nazarite vows did not include celibacy, and in due time Samson fell in love with a young Philistine woman. His parents were not pleased with the prospect of his marrying an unbeliever. But Samson had his way, and the marriage was celebrated with the usual week's rejoicing. Riddles were always a favourite diversion with the orientals, and Samson, remembering the honey in the dead lion proposed one to the thirty Philistines who were appointed his companions for the marriage-festival: "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (14, 14). *[The force of this riddle is lost in translation. The original Hebrew is a couplet combining poetry, paradox and a play on words. Similarly, the answer to it and Samson's retort (14, 18).]* If they failed to answer they were to give Samson thirty complete suits of garments; if they succeeded Samson would give them thirty. Unable to find the answer they went to Samson's wife, and she continued to ask him until in the end he told her. At once she gave the answer to her fellow-countrymen. Enraged Samson went to Ascalon; killed thirty Philistines, took their clothing, and with it paid the wager. He then returned to Mahaneh-Dan without his wife, and his father-in-law, thinking that he had abandoned her, promptly gave her in marriage to one of the Philistine nuptial companions of Samson. Later when his anger cooled Samson returned for his wife. When he discovered that she was married to another he proclaimed relentless war on the Philistine nation.

He got three hundred jackals, tied together the tails of every two, put lighted torches between the tails, and sent them loose into the ripe corn of the Philistines at the very height of the dry season. The whole crop was ruined, the vineyards and oliveyards as well. The Philistines took revenge by burning to death Samson's wife and her father. After another single-handed onslaught on them Samson retired to Juda. The Philistines followed with an army to capture him. The men of Juda, through fear of the ruling Philistines, bound Samson with ropes to give him up to his enemies. But when Samson came in sight of the Philistines he broke the cords and freed himself. The only weapon to hand was the skeleton of a dead ass. He snatched up the skull of this, and with it killed a thousand of the Philistines.

In Gaza another attempt was made to capture him, and the gate of the city was closed and barred to prevent his escape. But Samson took the gate with its posts and locks on his shoulders and carried the whole a distance of over two miles.

Samson remained Judge for twenty years. But his marvellous career had an inglorious end. He fell a victim to the charms of a woman named Dalila who was in league with his enemies. After long effort she learned from him that the secret of his astounding strength was in his long hair. [*The poet Milton gives the reason for this: "What is strength without a double share of wisdom? Vast, unwieldy, burdensome, God, when he gave me strength, to show withal how slight the gift was, hung it in my hair" (Samson Agonistes).*] She then watched until she found him asleep, called a barber who shaved his head and betrayed him to the Philistines. They pulled out his eyes and brought him a prisoner to Gaza. There history's mightiest man was degraded to the most menial of occupations: "To grind in brazen fetters, under task, eyeless, in Gaza, at the mill with slaves" (Milton—*Samson Agonistes*).

But in prison Samson repented. His hair grew long again, and with it God restored to him his former massive strength. The Philistines did not know this. Then one day when they were assembled in the temple of their god, Dagon, to hold festival they had their prisoner led in to provide crude amusement for them. After a time he asked to be allowed to rest between two pillars. Then seizing the pillars he shook them to pieces and brought the whole building toppling down, and he and everyone present—and the assembly included all the princes of the Philistines—were killed in the ruins.

HELI

The swift dramatic character of the epoch of the Judges exhausts itself in Samson, and the remainder of our narrative moves at a very ordinary pace. The history is resumed in I Kings (also called I Samuel), where we find Heli of the tribe of Levi combining the twofold office of high-priest and Judge in Silo. He governed Israel for forty years (I Kings 4, 18). [*The Septuagint Greek version, however, gives here twenty years. This is typical of the difficulty of biblical numbers.*] He was not a vicious man, but he was a weak leader. Of his early years as Judge we know nothing.

The concluding chapters of the Book of Judges (17-21) are not in sequence of time. They tell of two isolated instances of sin, showing how crime begets crime. At times, indeed, the Chosen People sank to low depths of immorality, and the lack of a strong central control over the whole nation is bitterly lamented. "In those days there was no king in Israel" (17, 6; 18, 31; 21, 24)—recurs in these chapters as a refrain.

But yet from passing allusions we gather that through all these turbulent years God was worshipped and His will revealed at the national sanctuary in Silo (20, 18-28); that the Paschal festival was observed unflinching (21, 29); and that "the lamp of God" (the seven-branched candlestick)—symbol of Israel's faith—was kept lighting in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle (I Kings 3, 3).

RUTH

Especially in the Book of Ruth do we see the bright side of the patriarchal mode of government. At some time in the period of Judges (Ruth 1, 1) [*Josephus (Antiquities 5 9, 1) puts it in the time of Heli, but Fillion questions the accuracy of this because of St. Matthew 1, 5, where Rahab (of the time of Josue) is given as the mother of Booz. Fillion would put it much earlier.*] during a famine in Palestine a man of the tribe of Juda named Elimelech left Bethlehem with his wife, Noemi, and their two sons, Mahalon and Chelion. They went to live in Moab. Elimelech died soon after. In time Mahalon and Chelion took as wives two Moabite women named Ruth and Orpha. Ten years later both Mahalon and Chelion were dead, and they left no children. Noemi was left desolate and lonely,

and as the famine was ended she decided to return to her own country. Her two daughters-in-law proposed to go with her, but Noemi advised them to stay among their own people and to re-marry there. Orpha then with many tears parted from Noemi, and remained in Moab, but Ruth refused to leave her mother-in-law. So Noemi and Ruth came to Bethlehem "in the beginning of the barley harvest" (1, 22).

With Noemi's sanction Ruth went to glean in the cornfields, as the poor were permitted to do by the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 24). The field which she happened to choose belonged to a rich man named Booz [*Pronounced Bo-awes.*], who was a near relative of Elimelech, Noemi's husband. Booz discovered who Ruth was. He heard also of her virtuous character, her kindness towards Noemi, and her conversion to the true religion. He treated her kindly, invited her to glean in his fields during the whole harvest, gave her food and drink from the provisions of the reapers, and warned his servants not to molest her.

When Ruth returned home Noemi told her that Booz was near of kin to Mahalon (Ruth's husband), and instructed her to remind him of this. For by the levirate law he ought to marry Ruth since she had no children of her former marriage. Ruth did so, and Booz agreed to marry her. But there was another man more nearly related, and he must first renounce his right. Booz, therefore, went to the city gate, and in presence of the ancients the other legally renounced his right with the ceremony prescribed in Deuteronomy 25, 7-10. Booz married Ruth. A son, Obed, was born to them: "And Noemi taking the child laid it in her bosom, and she carried it, and was a nurse unto it." (4, 16). Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of King David. Thus Ruth the Moabitess, a Gentile, has a place among the ancestors of Our Divine Lord (St. Matthew 1, 5).

But it is impossible to re-tell this "most beautiful of all harvest stories." It must be read in the Bible where it is so simply and so impressively written.

SAMUEL

The latter years of Heli are recorded only as being bound up with the history of the last of the Judges, Samuel. Samuel was at once priest, prophet and Judge. He was the son of Elcana of the tribe of Levi. Anna, the wife of Elcana, had long been childless. She went every year from Ramah to Silo with her husband when it was his duty to minister as priest at the Tabernacle. In the sanctuary she prayed long and earnestly for a son, and she made a vow that if her prayer were granted she would dedicate the child to God as a Nazarite. Samuel was born in answer to her prayer, and when he was yet a child Anna, true to her vow, brought him to Silo; consecrated him to the service of God and gave him to Heli to be educated. There too before the Ark of the Covenant the pious mother gave thanks to God in the Cantic of Anna (1 Kings 2, 1-10)—the Magnificat of the Old Testament. Anna's piety was rewarded, for she was blessed with five other children subsequently.

Heli had two sons, Ophni and Phinees, who were priests in Silo. They were bad priests; they are described as "children of Belial, not knowing the Lord, nor the office of priests to the people" (2, 12-13). Heli knew that they were flagrantly breaking the ceremonial and moral laws and bringing contempt on their ministry. He remonstrated with them, but only weakly, and the evil continued and grew. One day a prophet came to Heli and told him that God's vengeance was near; that the high-priesthood would be taken from Heli's family, and his two sons killed on the same day.

Revelations were rare in those days because of the decline of religion. Then one night as the boy Samuel was sleeping in Silo he heard his name called. He thought that it must be Heli's voice, and twice he came to the high-priest to ask him why he had called. The second time Heli knew that it was a revelation from God; so he told Samuel to return and when next the voice called to reply: "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth" (3, 10). Samuel did so, and God revealed to him anew the threatened vengeance on Heli and his sons. In the morning Heli questioned Samuel as to the content of the divine message, and reluctantly Samuel told him all. The old man accepted the terrible decree with pious resignation: "It is the Lord: let him do what is good in his sight" (3, 18). This was the first of many revelations given to Samuel, and soon "from Dan to Bersabee" he was recognised as a prophet.

THE PHILISTINE WAR

The Philistines now declared war on the Hebrew nation, and at Aphec a battle was fought in which the Hebrews were defeated with a loss of four thousand men. They decided to send to Silo and bring the Ark of the Covenant to the scene of war. Heartened then by the presence of the divine throne they went against the Philistines again. But this time their defeat was still greater—their forces were utterly routed; Ophni and Phinees, who were guarding the Ark, were slain; and the Ark itself was captured by the Philistines. A warrior of the tribe of Benjamin who escaped the slaughter came to Silo with tidings of the calamity. Heli was there, old and blind, full of anxiety for the safety of the precious Ark. When he heard of the national disaster, the death of his sons, and the loss of the Ark, he fell and died.

There is something intensely poignant in the sad ending of Heli, whose only faults were weakness in an office which demanded strength, and a misguided affection for his unworthy sons. Samuel succeeded him as Judge.

THE LAST OF THE JUDGES

The Philistines brought the Ark of the Covenant to Azotus and there placed it in the temple of their idol, Dagon. Next morning they found the idol prone on the ground. They replaced it in position, but again on the following day it had fallen from its place and was broken in pieces. God then sent two plagues which forced the Philistines to restore the Ark to Israel after they had kept it for seven months. They placed it on a waggon drawn by two cows, and without any human interference the cows took the road to Bethsames, where the Ark was received with great rejoicing. From Bethsames it was taken to Cariathiarim where it remained until the time of David. Eleazar, son of Aminadab, was appointed high-priest.

For twenty years the Philistine domination continued. During all this time, however, Samuel worked patiently and zealously and prudently for the welfare of his people. He travelled every year from Ramah to Bethel, Galgal and Masphath—where he held assemblies to administer justice, to promote peace and unity, and to restore religion. His work and his example bore fruit at length. In time the whole nation rallied to him. He promised them that God would free them from the foreigner if only they would worship Him and renounce the sinful cults of Baalim and Astarte. They put away the idols. Then Samuel called a great assembly at Masphath. The people did penance and fasted, and Samuel offered sacrifice for them. While the sacrifice was being offered the Philistines joined battle with the Hebrews, but a miraculous thunderstorm drove them back in confusion. The Hebrews pursued them as they fled in terror, and defeated them with great slaughter. From that day

until Samuel resigned his office of Judge the Philistines remained within their own territory and Israel enjoyed peace and freedom.

When Samuel grew old he appointed his two sons, Joel and Abia, to assist him in the government. They acted as Judges at Bersabee. They proved sad failures, and the people came to Samuel demanding a king to rule them. This brings us to the period of the monarchy; the stirring epoch of the Judges is closed now: "Samuel, the prophet of the Lord, the beloved of the Lord his God, established a new government, and anointed princes over his people" (Ecclesiasticus 46, 16).

CONCLUSION

1. A constant subject of enquiry is the moral character of certain exploits recounted in the Book of Judges. The principal ones are: Aod's deceit, and his treacherous killings of Eglon, king of Moab (3, 19-23); Jahel's deceit, and her treacherous killings of Sisera (4, 21-23); Samson's destruction of the Philistine temple and killing of all who were in it, including Samson himself (16, 29-30).

The solution of this question is not found in the Scriptures. It is going beyond the text of the Book of Judges to argue that these deeds were inspired by God, and therefore justified. Besides, this is begging the question, and multiplying miracles. Again, the Judges are praised in Ecclesiasticus 46, 13-15; but this praise is in general terms and does not extend to all their actions.

The solution is to be found in history. Parallels for the actions of Aod [*LA BIBLE ET DÉCOUVERTES MODERNES. Vol. 3, pages 105-106.*] and Jahel [*BIBLICA. Vol. 9 (1928), page 47.*] have been found in modern oriental literature dealing with a stage of culture similar to that of the Judges. Those concerned regarded such cunning and treachery as being justified and even praiseworthy when used against political enemies. The Judges must be considered against the background of the civilisation in which they lived, and in the light of the conventions and manners of their time, and of the people with whom they were at war. Thus Adonibezec, whose fingers and toes were cut off when he was taken prisoner by the Hebrews, did not protest against this cruelty to a prisoner of war. He admitted that he himself had done the same to seventy kings formerly, and he took it as a requital and nothing more (Judges 1, 7). International law (such as it was) sanctioned such deeds against national enemies in war, and the Judges acted according to the only conventions they knew.

The case of Samson is somewhat different. For him it is sometimes pleaded that the demolition of the temple was an indifferent act morally, from which two results followed independently one of the other—the overthrow of the enemies of God and Samson's death. Samson willed the former good result and permitted the latter evil result. This is a good distinction. But from the general history of Samson and particularly from his final prayer: "... restore to me now my former strength, O my God, that I may revenge myself on my enemies, and for the loss of my two eyes that I may take one revenge" (Judges 16, 28)—this distinction appears to be altogether too subtle for a mind like his. Samson's exploit also is best explained on the above lines.

2. The Judges, therefore, received the grace of faith; but this did not bring with it a special enlightenment of conscience. They were instruments of God in the carrying out of the Messianic plan; but the divine economy of miracles is kept. The period gives concrete evidence of the truth of the divine message revealed to Saint Paul: "power is made perfect in infirmity" (2 Corinthians 12,

9)—that is, the power of God is shown forth all the more effectively by reason of the weak instruments which He uses to bring about His designs.

3. The Judges of Israel are types of Our Lord Jesus Christ—imperfect types of the perfect liberator and defender and ruler of His people. The imperfection of the types contrasted with the perfection of Christ, the antitype, teaches us the superiority of the New Law over the Old, and shows our privileged position as Christians: "the law having a shadow of the good things to come, not the very image of the things ..." (Hebrews 10, 1).
