

Judges Chapter 11 Part 1

Before we explore the narrative of Jephthah, let's look at some of the fabric of Scripture. Some of the threads of this fabric go from one end of the book of Judges to the other. And some of them even go outside of the book of Judges all the way to the New Testament to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Look at the prominence of the various tribes in the book of Judges. The most prominent or perhaps the most successful tribe of Israel was Judah. In chapter 1 Judah is chosen to be the first to fight to take its designated land. It also helped the tribe of Simeon to acquire its land. The valiant warriors Caleb and Othniel are from that tribe.

The first judge in the book of Judges is Othniel. He was of the tribe of Judah. There is nothing bad said of him. He was appointed to deliver and to judge. He went to battle and won. No problems. Just success. There were other judges of other tribes but none of them was as successful as quickly as Othniel. The last judge was Samson who was from the tribe of Dan. This tribe was the least successful of all the tribes. When they entered the land they did not succeed in defeating anyone. Instead, the indigenous population defeated them and expelled them from their own territory. The last of the judges, Samson, was perhaps the worst of the judges. The book of Judges anticipates the time of the kings. As such it was looking forward to Saul and perhaps to his successor David of the tribe of Judah, the ancestor of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament follows the narrative of salvation from the fall of Adam to the promise to Abraham to the exodus of the sons of Israel from Egypt to Judah to David and eventually to Jesus Christ who was from the tribe of Judah.

The reason for the existence of the deliverers was to deliver the tribes of Israel from oppression from outside Israel. When we get to Samson, we are dealing with a persistent enemy, the Philistines. Although Samson

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began to deliver Israel from the Philistines, he did not complete that task. That was left for king David to accomplish. The Jews during Jesus' incarnation were looking for a deliverer to deliver them from the Romans.

Remember, Jesus Christ has two advents: the first as the suffering servant who delivered from sin (He was judged for the sins of the world) and the second as deliverer of Israel and the world from the forces of sin and evil. At the end of the Tribulation/Jacob's Troubles, Jesus Christ will lead the battle against the forces of sin and evil. He will win the battle without much ado similar to Othniel. When we get to Samson, we are dealing not with winning battles but with human events such as a miraculous birth, the indwelling or endowment of the Holy Spirit and teaching by parables. This is more like the first advent of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit is very important and active in the book of judges. Of those judges that received the impartation of the Holy Spirit, they are said to only receive it once except for Sampson who got it four times. It is almost as if the writer of Judges is saying that the Holy Spirit is needed for any deliverer of Israel. The Holy Spirit is important in the life Jesus Christ. He did the majority of his miracles in the power of the Holy Spirit. He lived his life every single day in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we get to the narrative of Gideon we encounter a turning point in the book of Judges. One of the things that is prominent, starting with a son of Gideon, is the birth of individuals. There is no problem with Gideon's birth it is normal. But, Abimelech is the son of a concubine, possibly a non-Israelite concubine. This alienates Abimelech from his brothers. Then we encounter that Jephthah is the son of a prostitute. This is cause for his brothers to kick him out of the family house. When we get to Sampson we encounter a miraculous birth. Joseph is willing to divorce Mary since she was pregnant by someone other than himself. He had to be clued in that the Holy Spirit had made her pregnant. The mother of Sampson was said to be barren. But the angel of the Lord

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announces the future birth of Samson. When Sampson is born he is to be dedicated to the Lord. This is similar to the birth of Jesus. Mary was a virgin and had no children up to that point. Then an angel of God announced that she would have a child. That child was to be dedicated to God in fact he was God incarnate.

Starting with the narrative of Gideon/Abimelech, we are introduced to parables as a means of teaching or understanding the future. When we get to Samson it becomes an important part of the narrative. In the Jephthah narrative there is a mention of Balak. At first this seems like an unneeded detail until you realize that he hired Balaam to curse Israel. So Jotham in the Abimelech narrative gives a curse parable then in the Jephthah narrative there is an oblique reference to an oracle blessing by Balam. Then in the Samson narrative he challenges his detractors with riddles. The New Testament is filled with teachings of Jesus in which he teaches and challenges by means of parables.

As I develop those threads, I hope to be able to put them into some kind of table for easy reading.

This week, I start with the last verse of chapter 10 because it leads into chapter 11. This is a pivotal verse. It illustrates their human viewpoint, their focus on Ammon not the Philistines, and the offer to be “chief” over the Gileadites.

Judges 10:18 The people, the leaders of Gilead, said to one another, “Who is the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He shall become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.”

The people. The Hebrew is not straight forward as the relationship of the people and leaders. The LXX translates as the leaders of the people. And so is the NIV.

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Leaders. This is one of the words used for leaders.

Here is another thread going through the history of the sons of Israel. Let us start with the Gideon narrative and see how the deliverer deals with “leaders” under different titles. I find this interesting since the deliverers have to deal with different “leaders” as did Jesus in His first advent.

1. Gideon. The leaders of Succoth. Judges chapter 8.

Judges 8:6 The leaders of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army?”

Judges 8:14 And he captured a youth from Succoth and questioned him. Then the youth wrote down for him the princes of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men.

The word (*sar*) leaders can mean leader, chieftan, chief, official, vassal king. It can refer to the administrative staff of a king.

Parallel to the word for leaders is the word for elders (*zaken*). It is also used in Judges 8:16 for the men that Gideon disciplines. In those days, in that culture, “old” men or elders were highly regarded as being wise. Today in the popular culture, age is something that is looked down on. After some age, people are said “to be over the hill.”

The point is that Gideon had to deal with elders and officials who had demonstrated a lack of support for the sons of Israel when in need. Didn’t Jesus have to deal with religious leaders who also had some political power? These leaders did not understand the spiritual needs of the people. Jesus called them out.

2. Abimelech

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Abimelech asked that the male members of his wife's family talk to the "men" of Shechem. This word is "ba'al." This word has many similar meanings depending upon context. It ranges from "lord," to "citizen," to "husband," to "leaders." It has a definite Canaanite flavor since the chief god of the Canaanites was "Ba'al."

The citizens of Shechem made Abimelech, "king." That is what the word means, "king."

Judges 9:6 All the men of Shechem and all Beth-millo assembled together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar which was in Shechem.

Judges 9:22 Now Abimelech ruled over Israel three years.

The word for "ruled" in Judges 9:22 is the word *sar*, rule. Interesting in this context that the king ruled. The word for reigning derived from the word for king is not used here.

3. Jephthah

Here in relation to Jephthah is another word. It is "chief."

Who is the man that will begin to fight? Here we have two verbs working together. The first verb means to pierce or to bore in the simple *qal* stem. Here it is in the causative stem and can mean "to begin." Who will get the ball rolling and lead the troops into battle? To fight, is an infinitive expressing purpose.

Note: this word "begin" which means to pierce or bore is also used of Samson.

Judges 13:5 For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines.”

It is easy to miss this point.

1. There were two enemies of the sons of Israel mentioned in the Jephthah narrative:

Judges 10:7 The anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the sons of Ammon.

2. But, the Jephthah narrative only deals with the sons of Ammon, not the Philistines. Jephthah begins the fight against the sons of Ammon.
3. God worked in miraculous ways to provide the deliverer from the Philistines. But Samson only began that fight per the Lord in Judges 13:5, quoted above.
4. In both narratives, this word, “begin,” is inserted. Perhaps the reader is to take note of these two words and see the link.

But the choice of words in Judges 10:18 should have reminded someone who they should depend on to fight for them. Perhaps the author is again playing with words.

Exodus 14:14 The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent.”

People who know their doctrine go back to this concept. Remember David?

1 Samuel 17:46 This day the Lord will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. And I will give the dead bodies of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel,

1 Samuel 17:47 and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the Lord's and He will give you into our hands.”

Here is a man who was living in fellowship, trusting the Lord. He knows Exodus 14:14. His words explode with confidence. Where does this confidence come from? Daily exercising faith in God's promises, His Word.

This is not always easy. It takes time to trust God for more difficult situations. Say you are living pay check to pay check with a house mortgage and a car payment. Your boss calls you into his office. Based upon recent events, you think he may fire you. Do you put your trust in the Lord? “The battle is the Lord's.” Or do you start perspiring in fear, abandoning faith in His promises?

The choice. The people decide to find the deliverer on their own rather than wait for God. In other books like Chronicles, Kings, Isaiah, people inquire of the Lord. Not here.

The people recognize that an army needs a leader. Someone doesn't just say charge and they go into battle. There needs to be tactics, planning and direction.

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But then they say he shall be head over us. Here is another word for leader, “head.” This Hebrew word can mean “head” as part of the human body. It can also mean beginning, top, company, leader. By using this word, they avoid saying “king.” In modern day Arabic, the cognate word is used for “president.”

Judges 10:18 The people, the leaders of Gilead, said to one another, “Who is the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He shall become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.”

The discussion starts out with trying to find a “man.” There is no discussion of let’s ask God to provide. No faith of Abraham here.

This verse has red flags which beg a comparison to Gideon/Abimelech.

1. Acts of God versus the acts of man. The people decide to find someone to lead the farmer army into combat. In the Gideon narrative, God first sent a prophet, then the Angel of the Lord approached Gideon. The Lord answered Gideon’s questions through demonstrations. Then the Holy Spirit came upon him. God acted. Not so here. As God said, He will not continue to deliver (overtly) as He did in the past. Now He is working through people and their actions to bring about His desired result.

2. Man is allowed to come up with a solution. In the Gideon narrative, God took the initiative.

3. This solution involves rewarding the military leader with a political position as the leader of the people. In present day terms, president.

4. We have seen this with other judges. They delivered Israel and then they “judged” Israel for some number of years. Gideon was offered a position as a leader. Abimelech became king without fighting a foreign enemy. Instead he ended up killing the very people he was king over.

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Note there are two functions suggested here. Who will fight. They are looking for a commander of the forces to fight against the Ammonites. But they also suggest that this man will be “head” over the people.

Eventually, we do find that Jephthah was a judge. It is almost an afterthought.

**Judges 12:7 Jephthah judged Israel six years.
Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was
buried in one of the cities of Gilead.**

Let us read Judges chapter 11:1-27. The goal of this reading exercise is to note how much history Jephthah knows.

**Judges 11:1 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a
valiant warrior, but he was the son of a harlot.
And Gilead was the father of Jephthah.**

Jephthah. Translated as “he will open.” [Unger].

Valiant Warrior. Where did we see this before? Gideon was told he was (going to be) a valiant warrior by the Angel of the Lord (Judges 6:12). Here, the inerrant Word of God narrative states that Jephthah was indeed a valiant warrior. So immediately we have visions of him being like Caleb or Othniel. But we must go back to the Gideon narrative. Here is a parallel with a difference. God didn’t say he was a valiant warrior like Gideon. Gideon had not proved himself at that point. But here, people recognize Jephthah as a valiant warrior because of his exploits. They were likely in the criminal realm.

Son of a harlot. But our visions are immediately dashed as we learn that he was the son of a prostitute. This should remind us of Abimelech, the son of Gideon who was the son of a concubine. So we have gone from previous judges being legitimate sons, to the son of a concubine to the son of a prostitute. And he is going to deliver Israel? So, this forces us to

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consider the Gideon/Abimelech narrative. A faith hero can come from the most unexpected places. Like the “little cook” in the movie Ratatouille.

Gilead. This can be a little confusing. We saw on the map that there was an area on the east side of the Jordan called Gilead. There is a town on the east side of the Jordan called Gilead. Now we have a man, the father of Jephthah whose name is Gilead. We have run into this type of confusion before. There is a town called Shechem we saw in the Abimelech narrative. But in Genesis 34, Shechem is the man who seduced or perhaps raped Dinah. Gileadites, “a branch of the tribe of Manasseh, descended from Gilead.”(Unger). Remember, Manasseh was the first born of Joseph. I will come back to this later.

Judges 11:2 Gilead’s wife bore him sons; and when his wife’s sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, “You shall not have an inheritance in our father’s house, for you are the son of another woman.”

Wife. This would indicate that Gilead has one wife, unlike some of the previous characters in the book of judges.

Drove him out. This is an intensive verb. There is a similar use in Genesis chapter 21:

Genesis 21:10 Therefore she said to Abraham, “Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.”

It is also the word used in Genesis chapter 3:

Genesis 3:24 So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed

the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.

Jephthah had half-brothers. They were “legitimate,” while he was “illegitimate.” The half-brothers did not want Jephthah to even attempt to inherit. They may also have been aware that some brothers killed their siblings, like Abimelech. It is implicit in the context that Jephthah lived in his father’s house until the sons grew up. It does not say at what age they drove him out. Was Jephthah older than the other brothers and perhaps the “first born?” Maybe that was the issue. No matter, the brother’s chased him out. Interesting that the father did not chase him out.

Judges 11:3 So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows gathered themselves about Jephthah, and they went out with him.

Fled. The only other time this word is used in the book of Judges, it is used of Jotham fleeing from his half-brother Abimelech. This word, like the word “drove out” from above was used in relation to Hagar.

Genesis 16:8 He said, “Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from and where are you going?” And she said, “I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.”

Land of Tob. Tob means good. Here is a note from the NIV study Bible, “the land of Tob. The Hebrew name sounds exactly like “the good land,” a common way of referring to the promised land in Deuteronomy. The narrator appears to call attention to the irony of this outcast from Israel finding refuge in “a land of good (things).” I mentioned last week the

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true story of a friend who was struggling to make ends meet as the owner of a sign company. He had an employee he caught stealing from the cash register, so he fired him. A week later this unemployed ex-employee won the Texas Lottery. So here you have a worthless fellow who was driven out of his father's house and apparently out of the area of Gilead. He went to a "good land" and prospered as leader of a bunch of worthless fellows and fellow outcasts. He apparently gained a reputation as a "valiant warrior." Who he fought against is not stated. But he gained a reputation throughout the area.

Worthless fellows. Another parallel to Abimelech who had "worthless and reckless fellows." The word "worthless" is the same word used here. Interesting to note that the word is used to describe the "empty" pitchers Gideon used by the 300 men.

They went out. NIV has "followed him." The verb means to go or come out.

Interesting parallel. Jesus had disciples who gathered around him and followed him. They were not worthless fellows. Except for one, Judas Ischariot.

Judges 11:4 It came about after a while that the sons of Ammon fought against Israel.

Fought. Same word used in Judges 10:18. So this links to that. The leaders need someone to be in charge to fight the Ammonites. Note that this word is used to tie these verses together. Each one uses this word: verses 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11.

Judges 11:5 When the sons of Ammon fought against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob;

Fought. Again the word for fight.

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Elders. We mentioned this word along with other words for leader in Hebrew.

Went to get. Again, two Hebrew verbs working together to express purpose. Went is the word for walk. It can also mean the mode of living. Here the Gileadites have changed their minds about Jephthah. It is obvious that they have not been training for war. So once again, the sons of Israel are depending upon a “deliverer.” Except this deliverer is one they chose. God was not involved in their choice. They are walking by sight, not by faith. And yet, God is working in the background to deliver them.

To get can mean “to take.” They are going to make him a deal he can’t refuse.

Judges 11:6 and they said to Jephthah, “Come and be our chief that we may fight against the sons of Ammon.”

This is an echo of Judges 10:18. Except this is stated backwards. In 10:18 they want someone to start the fight who will become the chief. Here they are going to make him chief so he will fight.

Judges 11:7 Then Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “Did you not hate me and drive me from my father’s house? So why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?”

Judges 11:8 The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “For this reason we have now returned to you, that you may go with us and

fight with the sons of Ammon and become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.”

Judges 11:9 So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “If you take me back to fight against the sons of Ammon and the Lord gives them up to me, will I become your head?”

The Lord gives. Here is the standard word “natan.” It is God that gives the victory. Interesting that Jephthah says this.

So the logic of this sentence is 1) You take me back (literally, you return) 2) I fight against the sons of Ammon 3) The Lord gives them to me (grace?) and 4) You make me chief over you (or in Texan, chief over ya'all).

Now, let me circle back to the book of Genesis. Is there someone who was taken out of his father's house but eventually made good? Joseph! Why would Jephthah, who is prospering in the land of Tob (good) want to go and fight for the people who hate him? By the way, Joseph's brothers hated him:

Genesis 37:4 His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

Perhaps Jephthah thought it “destiny” to relive Joseph's story. Joseph's brother took him by force out of the family and sold him into slavery. Eventually Joseph was given authority over all of Pharaoh's household. Essentially, he was made “chief” under Pharaoh.

Judges 11:10 The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “The Lord is witness between us; surely we will do as you have said.”

Irony. Irony. They do not ask God to provide a deliverer. No, they go and get one that looks fierce and has a reputation as a “valiant warrior.” Then they swear “As God is our witness...”

Witness. Literally, hearing. God is listening. He is omnipresent and he heard what they were saying.

Judges 11:11 Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah.

Again, Jephthah shows some familiarity with the concept of grace.