

In those days, Israel didn't have a king; every man did that which was right in his own eyes. The last line in the book of *Judges* is the summation of summation of the Old Testament. Seems to be the goal of modern society, for everyone to do what they want to do. But in the book of *Judges*, it was an indictment of chaos, disorder, and evil.

I should know, I was the high priest and ruled over Israel as the last judge.

I was the last pure judge of Israel. Not pure in the sense of clean or without blame. I was the last judge who wasn't also a prophet.

I am going to tell you about the end of the book of *Judges*, but I will give you the end of my story first. My family and I will be such a disaster that the people of Israel will demand that God give them a new type of leadership. After my death, the leaders of Israel will be prophets and kings, not judges.

Samuel will be the first prophet of this new era beyond the judges, and Saul will be the first king. Here's a quick recap of how the Israelites got to my time. More than 300 years before me, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, Moses led them to the shores of the land promised to Abraham.

Under the leadership of Joshua, the Israelites entered the Promised Land and conquered most of it. The twelve tribes of Israel took possession of the lands allotted to each one of them. Upon Joshua's death, God appointed people as judges to lead the Israelites .

The Israelites never completely conquered the peoples of the Promised Land, so these unconquered people and surrounding countries proved to be constant trouble to the Israelites from a security standpoint. And the Israelites continually succumbed to following the gods of these other nations.

The book of *Judges* is an account of the cycles of the Israelites following God under a judge, turning to false gods, being punished by God, and returning to follow God under the next judge. The book of *Judges* concludes by illustrating the chaos throughout the country of Israel.

In one of the last stories in *Judges*, a man named Micah took a huge amount of silver from his mother and made some priestly garments and household gods from it. He hired a Levite, a man who was supposed to be a priest of God, to be his personal priest for his false gods. In his ignorance and rebellion, he commented that the Lord would surely be good to him since he had a Levite as his own personal priest.

Syncretism. That is a word that modern people don't use much, but perhaps they should. Syncretism. It means an amalgamation or combination of different religions or cultures. That is what Micah was trying to do. He wanted the best of both worlds...worship God and worship false gods.

Syncretism. The Greeks and Romans were perfectly fine with it. In fact, most religions through time have been fine with it. After all, not many of them want to stake claim to having sole truth.

Here's the problem. The God of the Jews hates syncretism. He demands that his followers worship him and him only! He hates all other gods, and demands that his followers hate them, too. Sound harsh? It is, but it is the crux of the Bible. Love God, love people, hate false gods.

Since the Israelites weren't yet led by kings, each of the twelve tribes were guided by their tribal elders. The tribe of Dan was in a unique position. They had not conquered the peoples in the lands allotted to them by Joshua, so they were somewhat homeless. The elders chose five of them to search the land and find somewhere they could claim as home.

The five spies came to the home of Micah, and spent the night. They recognized Micah's priest and asked for his inquiry of God as to whether they would be successful in finding land. He said they would be successful. Sure enough, they

found land in Laish that seemed to be good land and easy to conquer.

The spies returned home and gathered up six hundred armed men. They went to Laish by way of Micah's home. With their superior force, they stole Micah's silver idols, priestly ephod garment, household gods...and priest. Micah and his people protested, but to no avail. In the end, the people of Dan took his stuff and defeated Laish. They finally had a home. They continued to worship the homemade gods of Micah. Stupid. Who was going to stop them? Israel had no king.

The book of *Judges* ends with a long, almost incomprehensible story of the Israelites coming together to fight against one of their tribes, Benjamin. In the end, the tribes make sure that Benjamin is punished severely, but survives.

I lived in Shiloh along with my sons, Hophni and Phinehas.<sup>1</sup> The Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant were housed in Shiloh. People throughout Israel came to worship at Shiloh.

My sons were wicked. There is no other way to put it. They had no love or regard for God. They stole food from the sacrifices made by the people, even if they had to take it by force. They would sleep with the women who served at the entrance to the tabernacle.

I confronted my sons. I warned them that there is no one who can protect them from their sins against God. But I was old, and they did not listen to me. The Lord would have to take care of it.

A man of God came to me to tell me that my efforts were not enough. Since my family and I had dishonored God, he was going to cut off my family line from being priests. He told me that my two sons would die on the same day, as a sign. I lamented that my family had fallen so far. The first Phinehas, in the time of Moses, was zealous for the Lord's honor. Three centuries later, my son, Phinehas, so dishonored the Lord that he destroyed our family.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 3

The final accounting for the Israelites started because of the Philistines. The accursed Philistines. Because we Israelites had refused to dominate the entire land, the Philistines became established in the coastal plains.

We had no choice but to fight the Philistines to retain our nearby homes. We camped at Ebenezer and the Philistines at Aphek. In the first battle, we lost four thousand men.

When the soldiers returned, the elders of Israel claimed the defeat was due to the Lord not protecting us. They demanded that we give them the Ark of the Covenant to lead them in battle. Without my consent, my two sons...my two evil sons... took the Ark of the Covenant and went to the battle.

When the Ark entered the camp, the Israelite soldiers cheered so much the ground shook. The Philistines learned the reason of the noise and went berserk. They knew of God's history of defeating the Egyptians and were terrified they were next. That was the good news.

The bad news... those terror-stricken Philistines fought even harder! The Israelites were defenseless. Even though they had the Ark of the Covenant, their evil actions had caused God's presence to depart from the Ark. The Philistines crushed the Israelites. Thirty thousand men died that day. Including both of my sons. They died on the same day, just as the man of God had prophesied.

Toward the end of the battle, a messenger ran from the front lines to Shiloh. There I was by the side of the road sitting in my chair, watching and praying. I feared for the Ark of the Covenant. The messenger ran right past me and into town. He delivered the bad news. A cry of mourning and fear erupted from the town.

I was ninety-eight years old, overweight, and nearly blind. The messenger saw me and he took pity. I was trembling with fear, and must have been pitiable. "What happened," I asked. After a long hesitation, he finally answered, "Israel fled from the Philistines after suffering great losses. Your two sons are dead, the Philistines have captured the Ark of God."

At the mention of the Ark, I fell backward over my chair and broke my neck. I died. The era of the judges of Israel died with me. The transition of Israel to a kingdom began that day.

The era of the judges lasted about three centuries. God gave us chance after chance to dominate the land and follow his commandments. We Israelites were willing to follow God for short periods of time, but never fully committed our hearts and lives to him.

“Because God loved your ancestors, he chose them and their descendants. He brought them out of Egypt by his mighty power in order to give them the lands of great and mighty nations. Know this day, and keep it in your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and upon the earth below...and there is none other. You shall keep his statutes and commandments that it may go well with you and your children after you, and that you may live long upon the earth.”

We never did follow those words of Moses. We were never willing to keep God’s statutes and commandments. We kept God from giving us the Promised Land that he so desperately wanted to give us.

Now that I’m dead, the time the judges has ended. The era of prophets and kings will follow me. They must do that which is right in their own eyes. They must do better about being God’s people. They must.