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1

TROUBLED TIMES

I. THE DAYS OF THE JUDGES (1:1—3:6)

A. VICTORIES AND DEFEATS (1:1—2:5)

THE STORY of the Judges begins where the book of Joshua ends, with the death of Joshua, the great leader and man of God. A full record of Joshua's death and burial is repeated in 2:6-9, suggesting that the information in chapter 1 is really a summary of the state of affairs just before his death.

1. *Judah and Simeon merge forces (1:1-21)*

The tribes of Judah and Simeon merged their forces to carry out a series of attacks on the Canaanites in the hill country south of Jerusalem and as far as the Negev. They captured the town of Bezek and punished the king, Adoni-bezek (in Hebrew, "Lord of Bezek"), by cutting off his thumbs and big toes. This was a common way of eliminating a warrior from further military service; also, a mutilated king would probably never return to his throne. The town of Bezek is usually placed in Ephraim, about seventeen miles north of Shechem. However, a Judean location would fit the situation better. Furthermore, the name Adoni-bezek may be an alternate for Adoni-zedek, the king of Jerusalem men-

tioned in Joshua 10:1. This would also explain why he was brought to Jerusalem and died there.

The city of the Jebusites was taken by the men of Judah and Simeon but evidently not held for long. Nor were the inhabitants driven out by the Benjamites, for they continued to live as their neighbors (Judg. 1:21). The Jebusites were a mixed people who descended from early colonies of Hittites and Amorites in Canaan. The city dates back to the third millennium and may be the *Salem* ruled by Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18. On the other hand, the latest discoveries at Ebla in Syria list a *Jerusalem* as early as 2300 B.C.! *Salem* may turn out to be another city, perhaps in the Transjordanian area. Jerusalem in its Hebrew form means "foundation of peace."¹ It was occupied by the Jebusites until the daring conquest by David and his men about 1000 B.C., when he made it the capital of the twelve tribes.

The Kenites were related to the Midianites, and many of them joined the tribe of Judah during the wilderness wanderings because of the family tie with Moses' father-in-law, Jethro. Caleb, the most famous of the Kenites, was rewarded for his service to Israel by the gift of two important cities: Hebron and Debir (1:10-20). The former was clearly marked as the shrine of the ancient fathers of the Hebrews, but the location of Debir was a matter of controversy until the excavation of Tell Beit Mirsim, eleven miles southwest of Hebron. Additional evidence came with the identification of the upper and lower springs just to the west of the Tell; these two cold freshwater springs still serve the local farmers and

1. Suggestions for the etymology of the name *Jerusalem* differ widely. Some scholars tie it to an ancient Canaanite deity named Salem; others prefer "City of Peace," or "Foundation of Peace." Cf. discussion by Charles Pfeiffer, *Baker's Bible Atlas* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961), p. 149.

Bedouins. The word in the text is *gulloth*, meaning a “bubbling fountain,” a spring of “living” water so highly praised by the peoples of the land.

2. *The exploits of Ephraim and Manasseh (1:22-29)*

Next, the account turns to the central area and the exploits of the twin tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. From many conquests, only one is singled out, the capture of Bethel, perhaps because of its memorable connection with the flight of Jacob and with his dream (Gen. 28:19). The local name of Bethel, “House of God,” was *Luz*, which may have been derived from the term for “almond trees.”

Manasseh’s assigned area certainly contained some of the most imposing and powerful of the Canaanite city-states: Beth-shean, Taanach, Megiddo, Dor, and others. The task of occupation was just too great, but Manasseh did manage to conscript some of the Canaanites to serve as forced laborers (Josh. 16:10). Administrative texts from Ras Shamra reveal similar use of forced labor gangs from subject peoples.

Ephraim had the same problem with the heavily fortified city of Gezer on the edge of the plain overlooking Joppa. Gezer was never captured, not even by David. It was eventually taken by Egypt and presented as a wedding gift to Solomon when he married an Egyptian princess (1 Kings 9:16).

3. *Failures in obedience (1:30-36)*

Asher’s possessions along the coast should have included the cities of Acco, Sidon, and the others mentioned in verse 31, but they were never conquered. Zebulun failed to take two important cities of Galilee. The tribe of Naphtali never eliminated from its territory the pagan inhabitants of north-

ern Beth-shemesh or Beth-anath. So reads the list of the tribes' repeated failures to confiscate all the land and to fully obey the command of the Lord through Moses and Joshua.

The tribe of Dan was especially afflicted by its immediate neighbors, the Amorites and Philistines, on the plains west of Aijalon. (Read Josh. 19:40-48 for the full account of their defeat and expulsion from the land originally assigned to them.) For a time the Danites tried to live along the foothills, but finally they resolved to migrate to the northland, above the Hulah Valley, where they captured the city of Laish and re-named it Dan (Judg. 18:27-29).

4. *The angel of the Lord (2:1-5)*

Gilgal by the Jordan had been headquarters for many of the tribes from the beginning of the conquest of Canaan. There for a few years the sanctuary rested and the sacrifices by the Aaronic priests continued. We read that "the angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal" to a place meaning "the weepers," *Bochim* in Hebrew (2:1). A priest or prophet may be indicated by the phrase "angel of the LORD," since *angel* may also be translated as "messenger." The importance of this event and message, however, suggests a heavenly being such as that one called the "captain of the LORD's host" and before whom Joshua bowed down and worshiped (Josh. 5:13-15), or, the angel of the Lord who wrestled with Jacob at the brook Jabbok (Gen. 32:24-30). This messenger, or angel, from God severely rebuked the Israelites for their disobedience in failing to drive out all their enemies. Perhaps of equal or greater importance, the tribes had failed to "tear down their altars" (Judg. 2:2). In other words, the Israelites already had accommodated their faith to the pagan

religion of the Canaanites and were guilty of trespassing the very first commandment (Exod. 20:3). Tears of regret followed the stern words of the angel, but the people's apostasy had already begun to set in, and the damage seemed irreparable. True repentance must go beyond tears of sorrow and achieve a right-about-face, a turning of one's entire life from sin to a walk that pleases the Lord.