

Exegetical Notes – Judges 10:1-11:40
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Background: When Joshua died, the conquest of The Promised Land was only partially completed. In large part, Israel had followed the instructions of YHWH regarding the taking of the land and the destruction of the indigenous population who lived there, but Israel had not followed God completely. Large sections of the indigenous population remained and were not under Israeli control.

From the time of the occupation (around 1380 BC) until the beginning of the Monarchs (1050 BC) Israel was a THEOCRACY, a nation whose king was God. Israel was supposed to listen to and follow the word of the Lord, but as we have already seen, Israel was not good at following the instructions of YHWH. Her failure to do so left her in trouble time and again. Partial obedience to the word of the Lord is disobedience to the word of the Lord and always leads to disaster. “Judges provides many examples of the principle that OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW BRINGS PEACE, WHEREAS DISOBEDIENCE MEANS OPPRESSION AND DEATH” (Charles Ryrie). This is the constantly repeated lesson of the Book of Judges. Judges is the story of the time in Israel’s early history when “Every man did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6 and 21:25). This always results in chaos and disaster.

In the Book of Judges a recurrent theme emerges: Step one - The people are following the will of YHWH; Step two - The people stop obeying the word of the Lord; Step three - An enemy arises that oppresses the people of God; Step four - The people cry out to God for help; Step five - God answers Israel’s prayer by sending them a deliverer (a judge to lead her, a Messiah); Step six - The people repent and return to the Lord. Then, the process begins again. Judges simply repeats this pattern over and over again. God’s people are “stiff necked and disobedient.” God is forever faithful. If God’s people would follow God’s word, they could save themselves hardship, worry, pain, etc. But they choose to do what seems right in their own eyes.

Judges 10:1-11:40

Verses 10:1-2

After the time of Abimelech, a man of Issachar named Tola son of Puah, the son of Dodo, rose to save Israel. He lived in Shamir, in the hill country of Ephraim. ² He led Israel twenty-three years; then he died, and was buried in Shamir.

The sixth Judge of Israel was Tola. Little is known about him. He led Israel for 23 years.

Verses 3-4

³ He was followed by Jair of Gilead, who led Israel twenty-two years. ⁴ He had thirty sons, who rode thirty donkeys. They controlled thirty towns in Gilead, which to this day are called Havvoth Jair. ⁵ When Jair died, he was buried in Kamon.

- The seventh judge of Israel was Jair. Little is known about him. He led Israel for 22 years.

Verses 6-10

⁶ Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him, ⁷ he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, ⁸ who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. ⁹ The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim; Israel was in great distress. ¹⁰ Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, "We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."

- After the death of Jair, Israel, again, lapsed into forbidden religious practices. They served the gods of the nations around them and no longer served YHWH.
- Resultantly, God became angry with the people of Israel. He lifted his hand of protection from them and allowed their enemies to rule over them. For 18 years, Israel was "oppressed" by her enemies.
- Out of her great distress, Israel, at last, cried out to God for help.

Verses 11-14

¹¹ The LORD replied, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, ¹² the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? ¹³ But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. ¹⁴ Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”

- This time, God responded to the prayer of Israel differently. He confronted Israel with her sin. He told the people of Israel that they had rejected him as their god once again. They had, of their own free will, chosen to follow other gods. God reminded them that when they had done this before, he had been faithful to help them. But this time, He told them to call on the gods of their own choice to save them.

Verses 15-16

¹⁵ But the Israelites said to the LORD, “We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.” ¹⁶ Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.

- Hearing YHWH’s strong words of rejection, Israel repented of her sin and begged YHWH to help her. The truth of her repentance was found in her actions. The Israelites cast out the idols they had been worshiping and began to follow YHWH again.
- God, who is forever faithful, saw Israel’s repentance. (God was not caught off guard by this. He knew beforehand that Israel would repent. He let it unfold as he did to teach Israel about Himself and about herself. He was faithful and she needed to follow Him.) YHWH then restored his hand of protection over Israel.

Verses 17-18

¹⁷ When the Ammonites were called to arms and camped in Gilead, the Israelites assembled and camped at Mizpah. ¹⁸ The leaders of the people of Gilead said to each other, “Whoever will take the lead in attacking the Ammonites will be head over all who live in Gilead.”

- When the armies had drawn up for battle at Gilead. Israel was perplexed. The troops were amassed but there was no leadership. The army had no general.
- So the people made an offer. Whoever would assume the role of general would become head over them.

Verses 11:1-3

11 Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. ² Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman." ³ So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him.

- There was a man from the city of Gilead who was recognized by the people as a mighty warrior. His name was Jephthah. He was the son of a prostitute. His father, Gilead, had a wife (Hebrew is singular) who had born him legitimate heirs. These sons had chased their step-brother, Jephthah, away so that they would not have to share their inheritance with their father's illegitimate son.
- Jephthah had fled from his brothers and settle in the land of Tob. He had collected a band of outcasts and was a bandit chief in the area. Perhaps he was a kind of Robin Hood.

Verses 4-10

⁴ Some time later, when the Ammonites were fighting against Israel, ⁵ the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶ "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites."

⁷ Jephthah said to them, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?"

⁸ The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead."

⁹ Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me—will I really be your head?"

¹⁰ The elders of Gilead replied, "The LORD is our witness; we will certainly do as you say." ¹¹ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the LORD in Mizpah.

- As no one stepped up to assume the command of Israel's forces, the elders went to Jephthah and asked him to assume command. They promised to make him their ruler if he would take control of their army.

- At first Jephthah was reluctant to assume control because the elders of Israel had not stood up to his brothers and because he did not trust the elders to keep their promises. But the elders insisted that they would keep their promises and obey him. Jephthah was persuaded.
- He made the elders promise to keep their word publicly at Mizpah. He then assumed control of the army of Israel.

Verses 12-28

¹² Then Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: "What do you have against me that you have attacked my country?"

¹³ The king of the Ammonites answered Jephthah's messengers, "When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. Now give it back peaceably."

¹⁴ Jephthah sent back messengers to the Ammonite king, ¹⁵ saying:

"This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites. ¹⁶ But when they came up out of Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and on to Kadesh. ¹⁷ Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Give us permission to go through your country,' but the king of Edom would not listen. They sent also to the king of Moab, and he refused. So Israel stayed at Kadesh.

¹⁸ "Next they traveled through the wilderness, skirted the lands of Edom and Moab, passed along the eastern side of the country of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was its border.

¹⁹ "Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon, and said to him, 'Let us pass through your country to our own place.' ²⁰ Sihon, however, did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. He mustered all his troops and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel.

²¹ "Then the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and his whole army into Israel's hands, and they defeated them. Israel took over all the land of the Amorites who lived in that country, ²² capturing all of it from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the desert to the Jordan.

²³ "Now since the LORD, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it over? ²⁴ Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever the LORD our God has given us, we will possess. ²⁵ Are you any better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever quarrel with Israel or fight with them? ²⁶ For three hundred years Israel

occupied Heshbon, Aroer, the surrounding settlements and all the towns along the Arnon. Why didn't you retake them during that time? ²⁷ I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by waging war against me. Let the LORD, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites."
²⁸ The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him.

- Acting as Israel's leader, Jephthah sent word to the Ammonite king asking the Ammonite king why he was bothering Israel. To which the king replied that he was only taking back from Israel what Israel had taken from him as they were leaving Israel. He demanded that Israel give him back what belonged to him without a battle.
- Jephthah then sent a lengthy message back to the Ammonite king which set the history in its correct setting as given in the writings of Moses (see Exodus and Numbers). The bottom line of Jephthah's reasoning was that YHWH gave Israel the land, therefore the land belonged to Israel. Jephthah argued that the Ammonites should be happy with what their god, Chemosh, gave them. He said that the matter should be resolved in battle. If the Ammonites won, Chemosh was stronger than YHWH. But if Israel won, The Ammonites should accept the outcome.
- The Ammonites made no response to Jephthah's correspondence.

Verses 30-33

²⁹ Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites. ³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, ³¹ whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

³² Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into his hands. ³³ He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon.

- With YHWH's blessing, Jephthah moved against the Ammonites. But, before he went into battle he made a pledge to God. He pledged that if God gave him success in battle, he would sacrifice whatever came out of the door of his house first upon his return home to YHWH.
- Jephthah defeated the Ammonites.

Verses 34-40

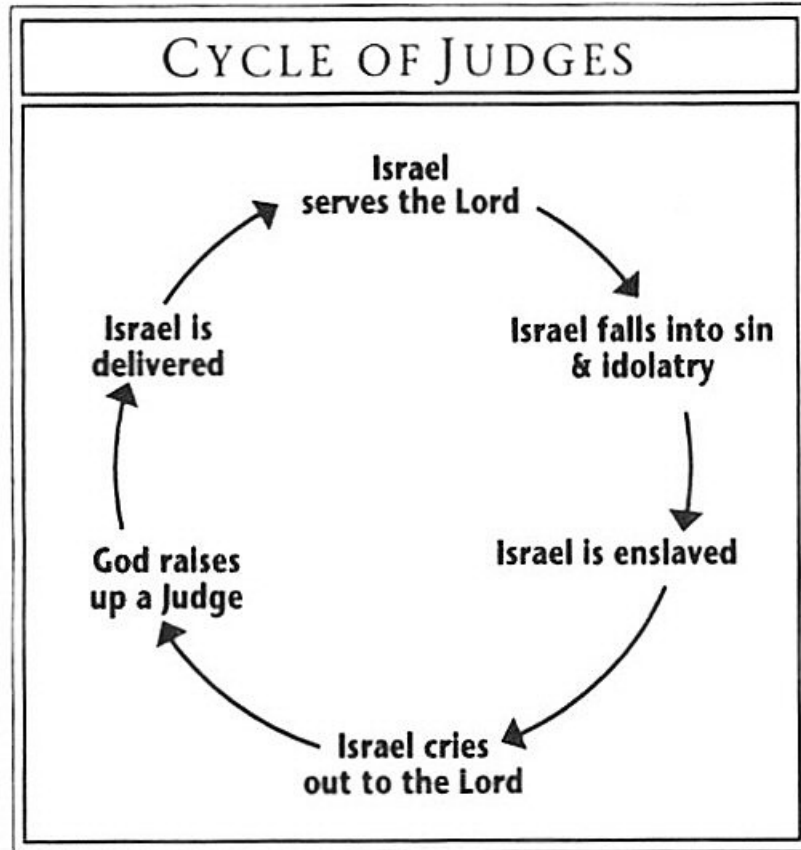
³⁴ When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break."

³⁶ "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. ³⁷ But grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry."

³⁸ "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. ³⁹ After the two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin.

From this comes the Israelite tradition ⁴⁰ that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

- After the victory, Jephthah returned home. As he arrived at his house, the first thing out of the door was his only child, his daughter not yet of marriageable age. She came out dancing to greet her victorious father.
- When Jephthah saw his daughter coming out of the door, he was undone because of the vow he had taken. He was bound by his word. God had not required Jephthah to make this vow. It was done of his own free will. But he was bound by his promise to God.
- His daughter understood that her father's vow was unbreakable and submitted to her fate urging him to honor his word to God. (Some scholars argue that by regrouping the Hebrew letters in verse 31, it can be made to read, "Whatever comes out of my house to meet me will be YHWH's and I will sacrifice a burnt offering." This would mean that Jephthah was not required to sacrifice his daughter to God as a burnt offering but was dedicated to God for the rest of her life. This would mean that Jephthah's daughter became a sort of nun who was forbidden to marry and to serve YHWH for the rest of her life. However, this is not the traditional reading of the text.) The point is, Jephthah was bound by his word to God to do what he said he would do.



(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Tola, Jair & Jephthah*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship*, Coatesville, Pennsylvania, & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. They are used here by permission.)