

JUDGES

Central Focus Small Group Studies 2007/8

Study Notes by Lee Gatiss

Judges 1:1 – 2:5

1. Where are we on the Bible timeline? What has just happened?
(You may want to consult Joshua 21:43-45 and Joshua 24:19-24 to get a quick picture of what has gone before).
2. What are the people doing in Judges 1:1-7?
3. Look up Leviticus 18:6-30 (especially verses 24-25), and Deuteronomy 9:4-5 and 18:9-14. Why is God helping the Israelites to conquer Canaan?
4. Describe the military situation in the land by the end of chapter 1. Who is in control? What is Israel's relationship to the people of the land?
5. What is God's view of Israel's success rate in Judges 2:1-5?
6. In view of Deuteronomy 7:17-26 why is God angry?

Judges 1:1 – 2:5 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to expose the people's disobedient lack of faith in only partially conquering the Promised Land, and explain why God allowed pagan nations to retain control of parts of it.

How it works out...

1:1-7 The Conquest Continues. We begin with death of Joshua, leader of the people since the death of Moses. Thus a new era opens. The people begin well by consulting the Lord. Judah begins well by allying with his brother Simeon (later, more than once the tribes fight or get at each other, i.e. 5:15-17; 20:1-48). They defeat the Canaanites and Perizzites and even Adoni-Bezek recognises God's hand of justice in their actions when they repay him for cutting off the thumbs and toes of kings he himself had subjugated. This is part of Israel's task: to rid the land of its sinful inhabitants, as God's emissaries. Not because they are so righteous themselves (Deuteronomy 9:4-5), but because these Amorites and Canaanite tribes are so wicked (Genesis 15:16, Leviticus 18:6-30 (esp. v. 24-25), Deut 18:9-14). So they are not just taking the land as a gift to them from God, but executing justice on his behalf too.

1:8-10 Judah marches on Jerusalem. The mention of Jerusalem is important because it later becomes the capital city under David (2 Samuel 5:6-10) and, much later, a picture of what the new creation will be like (Revelation 21). Yet although the city is captured (v.8) the Jebusites who lived there were not driven out (v.21) by the tribe of Benjamin who had evidently allied themselves to Judah too. The mighty descendents of Anak who caused such fear in the previous generation of Israelites (Numbers 13, esp. vv.22, 28) are defeated.

1:11-15 The Next Generation take control. This story has another allusion to later events in that it involves Othniel, who will become the first of the Judges (Judges 3:7-11). Here he is linked to the great man of faith, Caleb (Numbers 13:30, 14:30 and Joshua 14-15) whose daughter is the first of several shrewd and important women in this book (e.g. Deborah, Jael, and Delilah).

1:16-21 Judah and Friends have mixed success. Moses' brother in law, Hobab, went with the people when they set off into the wilderness (Number 10:29-32). Now his father in law's tribe (the Kenites, though he is also sometimes called a Midianite) join with Judah and settle with them. They will play a part in the story in chapter 4 (4:11) which is probably why they are mentioned here alongside these other short allusions to previous and later events. Later they are shown mercy, despite living with the Amalekites, enemies of Israel (1 Samuel 15). Judah continues its victorious march, conquering the Philistines in the 'Gaza strip' (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ekron) which will be significant enemy cities in later stories (6:4, 16:1, 21; 14:19). In verse 19 the first signs of failure creep in with the iron chariots proving too scary for them and the Jebusites proving too much for Benjamin.

1:22-26 Compromises help pagans. The tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim (Joseph's sons) make a deal with a man from Luz which enables them to capture the city and rename it Bethel, but they also allow him to go on to found a new pagan city elsewhere called Luz. One small act of disobedience which has large ramifications (Joshua 7:10-26)!

1:27-36 Partition and uneasy peace, not conquest. We are then told more briefly how the Northern tribes also failed to completely drive out the Canaanite inhabitants of the land. Worse than that, they came to accommodations with them, either subduing them into forced labour (verses 28, 30, 33, 35) despite being "strong" (v. 28), living among them side by side (verses 29, 31-32), or being pushed back by them (verse 34). At the end of the chapter, Israel are clearly the dominant power in the land of Canaan, occupying the majority of it and in control of much. But it is also, in a sense, partitioned between Israel and various surviving Canaanite nations.

2:1-5 God's anger at their lack of faith. The Angel of the Lord now tells us God's perspective on the events of chapter 1. Rather than being simply military failures, the defeats and accommodations of chapter 1 are a result of not obeying God's voice. He had told them (in Deuteronomy 7:17-26, for instance) to make a complete end of these nations. Even if they struggled at first without success, they were to continue bit by bit (Deut 7:22) and God would give them victory. This is part of the covenant God had made with them, which they had broken by making covenants (deals and accommodations) with the surviving nations, particularly by not destroying their pagan altars. God therefore invokes a covenant curse – if they have broken the deal, he no longer has to keep his side and so he will leave these nations in Canaan as a thorn in Israel's side. This upsets the people: they cry and sacrifice to God. Tellingly, there is no explicit mention of them repenting though by, say, taking up the fight against the Canaanites again or tearing down their altars to false gods.

Application

1. God is a covenant keeping God, faithful to his words of promise and of judgement. Rejoice, and fear!

2. God called not just for Israel to judge the Canaanite nations but also to drive them out in order to be separate from and independent of them. We are not called to exterminate unbelievers (our situation in redemption history is somewhat different!) but we are still called to be different from them (e.g. Ephesians 4:17-24; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1). How and why do we fail to do that today? What is the warning here if we continue along that path?
3. God's people, even at their keenest like Judah, do not always completely trust in God's promises and can too easily fail to obey him to the uttermost when faced with difficulties (like iron chariots). Do we settle for less than full obedience because it would be too much effort? Or because we're content to look better than others? Heb 3:12-15.
4. God's people, like the House of Joseph or the Northern tribes, can often be too ready to compromise (with their sin or with other people's expectations), for the sake of an easy life. Keeping a sin under a certain amount of control is not the same as wiping it out altogether; yet simply accepting it or allowing its ongoing influence and power to continue unchecked is equally disobedient, when God has promised to enable us to defeat it if we obey.
5. In what ways do our un-repented of sins become thorns in our sides (2:3)? Perhaps compare this idea with Paul's teaching in Romans 1:18-32.

Judges 2:6 – 3:6

1. This section starts again from the death of Joshua (as in 1:1). What does this section add to the picture we've already been given in 1:1-2:5?
2. What is so ominous about 2:10? How did it happen?
3. What is described in 2:11-13?
4. Should God's reaction in 2:14-15 be a surprise? (see Deuteronomy 28 especially verse 25 and Leviticus 26 verses 17 and 37)
5. Why are the people not just scattered, exiled, or completely destroyed by God (read 2:16-19)
6. Why did God leave the Canaanite nations as a thorn in Israel's side?
7. What is the progression of sin in Judges 3:5-6? How might such a progression be seen in our lives as Christians in the Church?

Judges 2:6 – 3:6 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to give an overview of the whole Judges period from a spiritual perspective. It emphasises how God acts in justice to enforce the covenant curses on the people's repeated disobedience, and how he acts in grace to save them from their oppressors, giving them an opportunity to repent and obey him again.

How it works out...

2:6-10 Dropping the baton. The narrator returns to the death of Joshua (see 1:1), to re-tell the story, not from a military-political angle but from a spiritual perspective. Verses 7-9 are a repeat of Joshua 24:29-31 but they also neatly fit into the pattern established in this chapter (cf. verses 18-19). Deuteronomy was Moses' attempt to address the generation entering the land who had not known the events of the exodus; verse 10 here shows that for some reason that sermon fell on deaf ears because, ominously, the succeeding generation did not know the Lord or what he had done. No reason is given – was it the parents fault for not instructing the next generation perhaps, disobeying Deut 6:4-9? Or was it the fault of the children, who enjoyed the Promised Land but closed their ears and forgot the Lord who gave it (Deut 6:10-12)?

2:11-15 Apostasy and Judgment. Israel turned away from God and served other gods. The incident in Numbers 25 should have taught them the dangers of this. Twice we are told of their abandoning the Lord and of the Lord's anger. Not only does God leave the nations as a thorn in Israel's side (as in 2:3) but now he is said to give Israel over into their hands. Indeed, it should have come as no surprise that the Lord was against them in their sin, as this fulfils the terms of the covenant (e.g. Deut 28, esp. verse 25; Lev 26, esp. verses 17 and 37).

2:16-19 God's pity and patience and their ingratitude. The people deserved God's anger and the covenant curse of defeat. They did not deserve the grace of the Lord, who was moved to pity by their distress and acted to save them from the consequences of his own righteous covenant justice. In justice he gave them into the hands of the plunderers; in mercy he saved them from the plunderers by sending judges (saviours, rulers – not legal 'judges' in our sense). But when the judge died the people (literally) "repented" and turned back to following other gods (the only time repentance is mentioned in this passage!), becoming progressively more idolatrous than the previous generations.

2:20-23 Will they follow me? This repeats the divine reaction of 2:1-4 but adds that the other nations were left not just as a snare but as a test. God wanted to see if Israel would follow him and turn back to him when they were oppressed. The afflictions of the judges period are therefore both a curse (because of their disobedience) and a test of their obedience, a reminder and an opportunity to turn back to God.

3:1-4 Will they go to war with my enemies? We have here further explanation of the test the people faced from the nations. God left them as a thorn in Israel's side so that they would have to experience the crisis of war. This is not an additional reason for leaving the nations, but is part of the "test": God wanted the people to know the difficulties of war so that they had the opportunity to cry out to him for help and see him at work to graciously save them from the Philistines, Canaanites, and others.

3:5-6 Cohabitation, Compromise, and Conversion. These verses sum up Israel. They "lived among" the peoples of the land. Then they intermarried with them. Then they served their gods. This illustrates the principle of progressive compromise: one act of disobedience (not kicking out the Canaanites, e.g. 1:27-36) led to another (intermarriage with followers of other gods - explicitly forbidden in Exodus 34:11-16 and Joshua 23:11-13) and eventually to apostasy and abandonment of God altogether in favour of other gods.

Application

1. God is just, and carries through the warnings of the covenant which the people agreed to. God is still just, and disciplines his people under the new covenant too, so that there may well be consequences for our disobedience and sin. See Hebrews 12:3-11 for a New Testament example of such teaching.
2. Compromise with the world's values remains a slippery slope for believers as it was for these people. How is this seen in the temptations we face at work and at home as individuals, or as a church? From one generation to the next?
3. The experience of oppression and suffering at the hands of their enemies in the Judges period is designed by God to test the people, and give them an opportunity to turn back to God in repentance and faith. When we undergo discipline from God because of our sins, or some form of suffering (which may or may not be linked to our sin) this also gives us an opportunity to remember God and turn to him in repentance, and for help. The experience of difficulties in this life is meant to teach Christians holy war – war, that is, against their sin, and the struggle to be holy and separate from the sinful world around us. Romans 7:21-25 might be a good place to turn for this.
4. God is gracious, and saves his people from the consequences of their own disobedience. Ultimately this is fulfilled in Jesus, who came to save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). In the cross, however, we see not just the grace of God but his justice as well, because he did not leave our sins unpunished even as he saved us from them. God is also seen here to be patient and compassionate with his people, not wanting any of us to perish (2 Peter 3:9) and face forever the consequences of our sins. In Jesus, we are saved from enduring the eternal consequences of our sins forever, not from suffering in this life necessarily.
5. God saved the people through the judges, but they quickly turned back to other gods when the judge died. This suggests that we need an everlasting ruler and saviour who will always be around to encourage our obedience to God and prevent us sliding backwards into idolatry. Praise God for Jesus who "is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

Judges 3:7-31

1. Outline the scenes in the story of Othniel (3:7-11).
2. What is new here that was not included in the general outline in 2:13-19?
3. How does the Ehud story fit into the pattern described in chapter 2?
4. Write down all the details the narrator has put into the story in 3:12-30 which would be unnecessary to get the general thrust. What part of the story does the narrator concentrate on most, and why?
5. What is the Shamgar story there for?
6. What lessons are we as God's people meant to learn from these three strange and dramatic stories?

Judges 3:7 – 31 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to show how Israel actually degenerated and was cursed with oppression, but was graciously delivered by God-appointed saviours, in surprising and dramatic ways.

How it works out...

7-11 Othniel the model judge. Within the first generation, the people do evil and rebel against the Lord. The first hint that we are now hearing about a specific historical incident comes in verse 8 when we are told the actual name of an oppressor into whose hands God sold the Israelites (pronounced Coosh-an - rish-ah-thigh-im, which means something like Cushan – Doubly Wicked). So the first enemy is not just a Canaanite or Philistine chieftain - he is King of Mesopotamia, to the east of Israel, and although we have not been able to identify him with any known ruler he must have been powerful to have extended his empire so far west. In return for them doing evil in his sight, God sold the people into his hands for eight years (another historical detail), in fulfilment of the covenant curses for disobedience (e.g. Deut 28:25 or Lev 26:17, 37). As we've already been led to expect in 2:16-18, God then raised up a deliverer/judge to save them. The first such judge was Othniel, mentioned already in 1:11-15, who was related to Caleb [i.e. of famous, noble stock but also, interestingly, not originally from an Israelite family – he is a son of Kenaz (1:13) which means (Gen 36) he is descended from Esau not Jacob]. The Spirit of the Lord comes on him, to anoint and empower him for this task, and he goes to war against Cushan-rishathaim, successfully defeating him and bringing peace ("rest") for 40 years. If God can deliver them from a double-wicked, mighty emperor, surely smaller enemies should be no problem for him.

12-14 More evil and oppression. Mention of Othniel's death alerts us to expect (along the lines established in 2:19) that the people will again do evil in God's sight. This time God enables Eglon king of Moab to the South-East of Israel to defeat them, with help from Ammonites and Amalekites left over from the incomplete conquest of the land. They took control of the city of palms (Jericho, see Deut 34:3) and forced Israel into subjection to Moab (an old enemy, see Numbers 22-24) for 18 years (a decade longer than in verse 8).

15-25 The name's ben Gera, Ehud ben Gera. Again the people cry out and God hears (cf. 2:18b). The second Judge is Ehud, a left-hander from Benjamin (Benjamin means "son of my right hand"!). He is raised up by the Lord, and has the task of taking the tribute (a payment made by people in subjection to their overlords) to Eglon. He uses this as cover for an assassination. Note how the narrator enjoys retelling the story, focusing our eyes on the two-edged sword, the fat stomach of the oppressor, his curiosity for a secret (curiosity killed the fat man?!), and the slow-motion action as the sword is skilfully unsheathed by the left-hander and then swallowed up by fat (first the hilt, then the blade – we're meant to enjoy each centimetre as it disappears into Eglon!). Ehud slips away like 007, leaving a dead king in a pile of poo locked in his own room. In verses 24-25, the toilet humour continues as the king's bodyguard twiddle their thumbs thinking he is on the loo (the smell perhaps leading them to this conclusion). We are meant to laugh at their predicament, as the assassin slips away unseen...

26-30 Kicking out the Moabites. Not content with decapitating the Moabite Army by removing its commander, Ehud calls up the Israelites and leads them into battle, seizing strategic points along the Jordan river and slaughtering Moab's best fighting units. Ehud specifically attributes the victory to the Lord who "has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand" (v. 28). The positions are reversed as Moab is subdued under the hand of Israel. The land has rest for 80 years (twice as long as the peace of verse 11 after Othniel's victory). Mention of the idols (the border?) in v.26 parallels that in v.19. Interestingly it is only after he passes beyond the idols that we hear Ehud mention the Lord. The very existence of idols at the place where Israel first crossed into Canaan (see Joshua 4-5) shows how bad things have got.

31 Superman Shamgar. A strange historical note which takes us round to the coastlands, as another deliverer called Shamgar kills 600 Philistines with a most unusual weapon (a cattle prod!) – perhaps a sign of divine strengthening? He is probably included not just for historical accuracy but because the author has an eye on making the total number of judges in his account equal 12 and the number of deliverers equal 7 (in detailed fulfilment of Deut 28:25 and Lev 26:18, 21, 24, 28). He is also worth mentioning here because later in 5:6 he finds his way into a song. He saves Israel, but his name is probably not Hebrew, and "son of Anath" could well mean he served Anath, the Canaanite goddess of war! Perhaps he was not intending to benefit Israel directly, and yet God uses him to relieve their suffering.

Application

1. God is the hero of all three stories, because he raises up saviours for Israel as we were told he would in 2:16. This is amazingly gracious of him considering their sinful disregard of him. Praise and thank him for that!

2. Othniel's story is typical of the pattern we heard of in chapter 2, except that we learn he is endowed with power by the Spirit of the Lord. True victory always comes, "not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord of Hosts" (Zech. 4:6). No colourful details in these stories should obscure God's initiative and our reliance on him.
3. In the Ehud story, the narrator has particularly drawn our attention to the details of the assassination of Eglon. Although he was raised up by the Lord, there is no ethical comment on Ehud's methods. Are they, in fact, a sign of the Canaanization of the people – the downward spiral of moral standards of Israel so they are no longer any different from the surrounding nations? It also shows that oppressors of God's people get what's coming to them in the end.
4. We can laugh at the fat, stupid, fatally-curious Eglon, but he had dominated Israel for 18 years. On reflection, what does that say about Israel itself? A Canaanized, evil-doing people of God can be enslaved even by luxury-worshipping fools when they are not following and relying on God. Do we see that today?
5. It is difficult to draw conclusions from the enigmatic Shamgar episode. But perhaps we can say that sometimes the church is preserved and protected, despite itself, by unorthodox means and by unlikely people, even those outside the people of God. Can you think of any examples?

Judges 4-5

1. How is the oppression of 4:1-3 worse than previous afflictions?
2. What do we expect as we turn the page from verse 3 to verse 4? Why is verse 4 onwards surprising, considering the pattern of Judges so far?
3. Why is verse 11 there?
4. Who initiated the attack on Sisera, and who wins the victory?
5. What is God praised for in 5:2 and 5:9?
6. What picture of Israel do we get from 5:14-18?
7. What can we learn here as Christians:
about our God?

about ourselves as the people of God?

about how God deals with his people?

Judges 4:1 – 5:31 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to praise the Lord who saves his people through a variety of secondary means - despite their sin, division, and weakness - for his own glory.

How it works out...

4:1-3 Iron clad oppression. The usual apostasy began after the death of Ehud. This time the Lord sold his people (see 3:8 for the commercial metaphor) to the king of Canaan with his headquarters near the Sea of Galilee. Sisera, his army commander, was significant enough to be named in the story and had a large force of 900 iron chariots (recalling the chariots in 1:19 which halted the advance of Judah). The people cried out for help to the Lord because these chariots had kept them oppressed for 20 years (even longer than in 3:8 and 3:14).

4:4-11 The Prophetess and the General. Turning the page we expect a mighty strongman, but are surprised to hear instead of a prophetess (like Miriam in Exodus 15:20 who also sings). She was judging Israel (in the administrative sense) and was considered an authority by the people of Israel. She reminds Barak of his neglected duty ("Has not the Lord...") to call the army, ordering him to assemble a force from Naphtali and Zebulun (Northern tribes) to which God would give victory. Barak is too timid, perhaps, to go without Deborah, or afraid of defeat without her help, so she agrees to go with him. Her prophecy that the victory will not give Barak glory and that Sisera will be sold by God into the hand of a woman is a rebuke to Barak, and sounds at this point as if Deborah herself will be the one to gain glory from the event. Verse 11 seems oddly out of place, giving seemingly random details about someone with a past link to Israel. Our expert storyteller will reveal its importance only in verses 17-22, but putting it here reminds those who have read the story before of what's coming.

4:12-16 The Lord defeats the chariots. Sisera calls out his army to fight Barak. Deborah tells Barak that the Lord will give him victory and go with him, probably to reassure the poor frightened fellow. Sure enough, the text reports that it was the Lord himself who routed Sisera – the divine hand behind the victory so far has been explicitly acknowledged at every stage. Barak's army finishes off Sisera's army as completely as Ehud had destroyed the Moabites (3:29). Yet Sisera escaped...

4:17-22 Sisera's Headache. The story turns to the final defeat of Sisera and we remember that detail from verse 11 about Heber the Kenite when his wife is introduced. Could she be the woman who destroys the great commander? At first we think probably not, since she appears to be on his side (and is indeed the wife of an ally) and he trusts her enough to fall asleep in her tent while she stands guard. He asks for water and she gives him milk (even better, she must be a friend). Lulled into a false sense of security, Sisera nods off. Jael walks softly over to him and pins him to the ground with a tent peg in his temple! This is another unorthodox weapon (see 3:16 and 3:31) wielded by a surprising and brave heroine, but for unknown reasons (is she on Israel's side, or just holding a personal grudge?). Barak soon calls by and is shown the dead man, in fulfilment of Deborah's prophecy in verse 9. Thus did God (not Barak, Deborah, or Jael) subdue the Canaanites.

5:1-5 The Song: Verse 1 - God marches out. Deborah and Barak sing together (as did Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15) about the Lord's victory. They bless the Lord (i.e. praise him) for the willingness of Israel's leaders. He was behind their voluntary service (cf v.9), and and "nature". Clouds dropped water – a hint that the battle was influenced by rain (cf. v.21)? The Lord controls the weather, not the Baals!

5:6-8 The Song: Verse 2 – Things looked bad... in the days of Shamgar (3:31) until Deborah arose as "mother in Israel". New gods meant war, but the people had no arsenal of weapons to go out to fight.

5:9-13 The Song: Verse 3 – Hurray for Israel, Barak, and Deborah! Yet the people still offered themselves willingly – for which God is to be blessed (praised). This blessing is parallel to the opening of the song in verse 2 and in a similar follow up, Deborah calls on kings and nobles (as in verse 3) to tell of it and make God's victory over the mighty army, through the little villagers of Israel, known to all.

5:14-18 The Song: Verse 4 – But not all Israel. Several tribes of Israel are mentioned as taking part in the battles, not just Naphtali and Zebulun. These are the volunteers praised in verses 2 and 9. Verses 15 and 16 also mention Gilead (part of the territory of Gad), Reuben, Dan, and Asher who did not take part but sat still while their brothers fought. A hint that not all was well between the tribes!

5:19-23 The Song: Verse 5 – Sisera defeated, but traitors cursed. Sisera is defeated by the forces of nature (under God's control, verses 4-5) like the stars and the river Kishon. Like some of the tribes, the inhabitants of Meroz also did

not help the Lord (and the other tribes) during the battle, for which they are cursed. They stand as an example to the whole nation of those who take sides with the Canaanites.

5:24-31 The Song: Verse 6 – Sisera's killer and Sisera's mum. Jael, on the other hand, represents non-Israelites who take the side of Israel. Her part in the story is gone over in slow motion and revelled in. In contrast to Deborah the 'mother of Israel' (v.7) Sisera's mother is pictured waiting longingly for his homecoming which will never be. In the final verse 31, this is the sort of complete and utter defeat Deborah and Barak wish on all God's enemies. And just to rub it in to those who stood idly by and remained out of the fight, they pray for God's friends to be like the rising sun. The episode finally ends with 40 years of peace.

Application

1. The credit for this victory is seemingly shared between Barak, Deborah, and Jael. And yet behind all the human actors stands the Lord who is truly credited with the entire thing, from speaking through Deborah, to motivating the volunteer soldiers, to subduing the Canaanite army. God works through means, secondary causes, but ultimately gains glory for himself. He saves his people, and incorporates not just the weather but the free activities of human beings (who often act for their own reasons) into his plan. Praise him for his astonishing wisdom, skill, and power!
2. The story is quite embarrassing for Israel. Again they do evil, their male leadership seems weak, they are internally divided, and again they require the services of foreigners to save them (cf. Othniel descended from Esau, Shamgar probably a pagan, and Jael a Kenite allied to Canaanites). God the hero saves weak, feeble, sinful people.
3. The song leaves an Israelite wanting to be part of the victorious coalition of tribes, rather than one of those (5:16-17) who worried too much about the sheep or ship (or stock?) market to get involved in what God was doing...

Judges 6

1. Who is God's agent to discipline Israel this time, and what do they do?
2. Why does God not send a deliverer straight away?
3. Summarise the conversation between God and Gideon in 6:11-18.
4. What is the significance of the two offerings in 6:19-24 and 25-27?
5. What does the reaction in 6:28-32 tell us about the situation in Israel?
6. Why do we only get around to the Midianite threat in verse 33?
7. Is the fleece incident something for Christians to emulate? Does the narrative itself show us how we should view this request?

Judges 6 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate how God can turn weakness and timidity into strength and victory when we trust his word and follow the deliverer.

Details

6:1-6 Here we go again! Israel sins against God, doing what he considers evil, so he gives them over to the power of Midian. They, allied with others, attack Israel's crops and livelihood, forcing the fearful and overpowered Israelites into hiding. They cry out to him for help.

6:7-10 Don't fear the Amorite gods. Rather than sending a deliverer straight away, God sends a prophet (as in 4:4). This prophet diagnoses their plight: it is because they have disobeyed the voice of God (who rescued them previously, from Egypt) that they are oppressed now. Verse 10 strongly suggests that they had fallen into some kind of pagan worship, turning to the gods of the Amorites rather than fearing God.

6:11-18 The call of the timid warrior. The prophet does not announce salvation is on its way, but shows only that God's punishment of them is just. However, when the angel of the Lord appears our hopes are raised that he will graciously deliver them. He appears to a man from the tribe of Manasseh (Abiezrites were one of the clans from that tribe, see verse 15 and Joshua 17:2). So far we have had deliverers from the tribes of Judah (Othniel), Benjamin (Ehud), and Naphtali (Barak). Now it is Manasseh's turn to provide God's solution (other tribes will get their turns in due course). His father's name is Joash, which means 'Yahweh is strong', but when called a 'mighty man of valour' himself, he focuses on his own weakness in verse 15. Just as he had reassured Moses, God says to timid Gideon, "I will be with you" (see Exodus 3:12). Gideon still cannot bring himself to believe it and so he asks for a sign, to back up the promise of deliverance.

6:19-24 Oh no! It really was God! The angel panders to Gideon's lack of faith in the raw word of God, and consumes Gideon's offering with fire before vanishing from sight. Then Gideon realises who he has seen and recalling that "man shall not see me and live" (Exodus 33:20) he is afraid. But the Lord quietens him down, reassuring him that he was not about to kill Gideon after just promising to save Israel through him! Gideon's relief is given permanent shape in an altar to God called "The Lord is Peace."

6:25-27 Stealthy start to the campaign. God then commands another offering to be made, this time using materials scavenged from pagan altars belonging to Gideon's own father. Yet realising the public and incendiary nature of what he was being asked to do, he did it in secret at night because he was afraid of his family and the people who lived nearby.

6:28-32 Israel starts to follow the leader. The public act obviously had no obvious signature to it, since the townsfolk have to do some investigative work to discover who had torn down the pagan altar and sacrificed a bull. They call for Gideon's head, but he is defended by his father (who, remember, owned the altar of Baal in the first place, verse 25). Joash says that the one who should be put to death is the idolator who worships Baal, not Gideon who has humiliated him – a sign of awakening faith in the true God and a contempt for idols. Perhaps once his son had taken the lead he realised the error of his ways and was in some way turning away from idols, as Israel tended to do (albeit temporarily) when their judge-deliverers started to act. Gideon's nickname 'Jerubbaal' means "Come and have a go, Baal!"

6:33-35 Let's go get 'em! Finally we come back to the threat with which the story began. Clearly God had other things he wanted dealt with first before he simply empowered Gideon to defeat Midian. Now the Spirit of the Lord clothes Gideon (see 3:10 where he comes upon Othniel) and he calls out an army from his clan, his tribe, and then from three neighbouring tribes as well. The battle is approaching...

6:36-40 Don't be angry, but... Yet again Gideon shows timidity by not trusting completely in what God has promised him. He said he would save Israel and defeat Midian through Gideon (6:14-16); yet Gideon says in verse 36, "If you will save Israel by my hand..." as if God might not have meant it. Once more God panders to Gideon's lack of faith (and perhaps fear of having misunderstood?) and reassures him with the precise miracle he requests. Then in verse 39 Gideon again pushes his luck (as it were), acknowledging that it might make God angry to question his word again. But God graciously performs the inverse miracle to set Gideon's mind at ease.

Application

1. Idolatry before enemies. Note how God deals with the idolatry within his people first before he gets to the external threat and the difficulties of their circumstances. His priority is to secure our wholehearted commitment to

him, not first and foremost to preserve our comfort or earthly safety. He starts with the heart whereas we are often more concerned with the immediacy of our everyday inconveniences. Something to repent of...?

2. Fear and idolatry. Fear is obviously a key theme of this chapter, and it is intimately related to idolatry. If we do not fear the Lord then we will be timid in the face of other 'gods' and their followers. Yet if we fear God, then nothing else should terrify us whether it is feisty neighbours, a besetting sin, or our ultimate enemies - death and the devil. What are we afraid of...?

3. Putting out a fleece. The fleece incident is not something for Christians to emulate. It is plain in the story itself that Gideon was too fearful and even 'pushing his luck' with such requests. The outcome shows more about God's grace and patience than it does about how we should pray and seek guidance! We are also given abundant evidence in Scripture that God's mere word alone can be trusted, without the need for miraculous signs. This may not help when we are seeking guidance about a job move or a relationship perhaps. But bear in mind application 1 above!

Jesus taught that some would not believe even if they were shown miracles (see, e.g., Luke 16:31). Nevertheless, he did institute two outward signs to accompany his word: baptism and the Lord's supper, which are intended to confirm and strengthen our faith in his promises. Besides, Gideon was reassured (patiently and graciously) specifically that he would deliver Israel; we do not require assurance that we will deliver God's people, since Jesus himself is our mighty saviour!

Judges 7-8

1. Why does God reduce Gideon's army given the huge threat?
2. Why does Gideon go into the enemy camp with his servant?
3. What is significant about 7:24-25 (cf. 6:34-35)?
4. What are Gideon's relations with other Israelites like (8:1-17)?
5. What is right and wrong about 8:22-28?
6. Why is 8:29-35 worrisome?
7. What can we learn here as Christians:
about our God?

about leadership of God's people?

about how God deals with his people?

Judges 7-8 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to show how God gains glory for himself by using Gideon's small army to defeat Israel's enemies, while Gideon follows his own agenda for personal glory.

Details

7:1-8 God's glorious 300. Gideon's army assembles against the Midianite threat. But God is concerned to gain glory for himself from the forthcoming victory rather than allowing Israel to claim they saved themselves by their own strength and skill. So he whittles down the size of the army. Note that the first to leave are to be those who are 'fearful and trembling', as Gideon himself was in chapter 6. What a great proportion of them leave at this stage (almost 70%)! Next, God gets the number down to only 300 through a bizarre selection procedure. (Those who know history may be aware of the battle of Thermopylae in 480bc, where 300 Spartans are said to have held off many thousands [some say millions] of Persians, as immortalized in the recent film "300" which broke box office records in March 2007. Just so you know!).

7:9-18 God reassures Gideon. God commands Gideon to now go and defeat the enemy. But to corroborate his promise of victory, he offers the timid leader a reassurance like those Gideon asked for himself in chapter 6. Taking God up on this offer to dispel his doubts, Gideon secretly goes into the enemy camp. Their numbers are stressed in verse 12 so we realise how anxious the leader of the 300 Israelites might be! He overhears a dream a man had, and the interpretation it is given by his comrade, which persuades him that God is indeed on his side (though why he wouldn't just believe it when God himself said so is another matter!). He prepares his troops for battle and tells them to cry out "For the Lord and for Gideon" (cf. verse 20) – which is not quite where the glory should go according to 7:2, of course.

7:19-25 The strong defeated by the weak. Gideon's plan to scare the Midianite-Amalekite hoards with trumpets, torches, and pottery smashing works like the dream. Verse 21 is the key verse: Gideon's men stood still while the locust-like enemy troops scatter and flee, their strength and confidence having evaporated. In verse 22 God himself confounds them and they turn on each other as the Israelites stand by. Then the armies of Naphtali, Asher, and Gideon's tribe Manasseh are called up and pursue the Midianites. Gideon also invites the Ephraimites (another, bigger, Israelite tribe) to join in as Israel completes what the brave 300 began.

8:1-3 First signs of trouble. Ephraim is annoyed that they weren't invited to join the battle earlier. God, of course, was ultimately behind that decision, as he had very clearly decided who would have the honour of fighting for him. Gideon pacifies his brother Israelites by flattering them about their greatness compared to him. But does he really believe his own propaganda...?

8:4-9 Gideon turns on his own people. Gideon continues mopping up operations against the Midianites, and arrives in Succoth (a town allotted to the tribe of Gad). The people there refuse to help him by providing food for the 300, so he in return promises to punish them when he has caught the kings of Midian. Another town also on the eastern side of the Jordan responds similarly, which contrasts with the willingness of the northern tribes to help Gideon. It starts to look as if he is on a personal crusade with his private army.

8:10-21 The timid one becomes the tyrant. We hear for the first time the size of the Midianite alliance's army (135,000 men) defeated by Gideon. Here he is in pursuit of the last 15,000 of them and especially their "kings" Zebah and Zalmunna – what glory to defeat kings! In verses 13-17, after capturing these kings he goes back to fulfil his promise to Succoth and Peniel. Personal blood vengeance replaces national deliverance as a motive for Gideon's action. He is more concerned with his own family's glory and honour than he is with God's. Gideon, the fearful young man, has become a brutal aggressor and tyrant contending not against Baal now (remember his nickname, Jerubbaal) but against his own people. In verses 18-21 the kings themselves come to a gruesome end, after flattering Gideon that he also was like the son of a king. He in return takes their symbols of royalty (the crescent ornaments).

8:22-28 The trappings of kingship. Gideon himself is now offered kingship by the men of Israel, an invitation to start a dynasty. Seeing Gideon with the trappings of royalty in his possession, they now want a king like the Midianites had and offer him the job on the basis of his victories. They should have been praising God, not his human agent, as was clear at the start of this unit in 7:2. Yet Gideon refuses the honour, and although he pointedly fails to remind them that the victory was God's, not his (7:2) he does rightly say that God is their king. Such seeming humility does not last very long. He amasses huge amounts of gold and kingly possessions from the people, as tokens of their submission to him, and builds a glorious monument to his victories in his home town. He wants to be king de facto, if not de jure, effectively king even if not officially. Israel whored after this image, as they did with other pagan gods (see 2:3, 17), and it became a snare to Gideon and his family. But the land had rest for 40 years.

8:29-35 Epilogue. A short epilogue concludes the Gideon story and prepares the ground for the story of his son. He had seventy sons, a great dynasty indeed. One of these, born to a concubine, he called Abimelech which translates as "My father is king". Calling one's son "Prince" in this way, does not say much for the humility expressed in 8:23! We will hear more of this man in the next study. The final paragraph implies that despite Gideon's ephod being a snare, in some way he actually halted the spiritual decline of the nation while he was alive. Once the man who contended with Baal was dead, however, they gave themselves over to the Baals again, forgetting God and Gideon.

Application Suggestions

- 1. God's power is made perfect in weakness** (2 Cor 12:9-10). That is the application made in Hebrews 11:32-34 and it fits very well with the victory in chapter 7. Ultimately God's power is made perfect in the weakness of the cross, which humanity considers foolish (1 Cor 1:18-2:5) but which defeats God's enemies (Col 2:15).
- 2. God's glory must be our supreme concern.** God is most concerned about this in 7:2 but Gideon forgets it and seeks his own glory in chapter 8. In 8:32, he even manages to profess theological correctness while doing so! In what ways can a church or an individual Christian do the same? How can they repent of such an attitude?
- 3. Spiritual highs and lows can come together.** After a mighty victory over their enemies, Israel are riding high but quickly sink again into apostasy. We need to be on guard that a victory over sin in our lives or church does not go to our heads, is not accompanied by a similar pride and degradation, and that our agenda remains God's agenda.

Judges 9:1-10:5

1. What is wrong with Abimelech's rise to power?
2. Who do you think the bramble in Jotham's story is meant to refer to?
3. What is Jotham's curse? Where else is it mentioned or alluded to in this chapter?
4. Summarise in a sentence what happens in the war between Abimelech and Shechem in these passages:
 - 9:22-25
 - 9:26-29
 - 9:30-33
 - 9:34-41
 - 9:42-46
 - 9:47-49
5. What is ironic about Abimelech's end in 9:50-56?
6. What is noteworthy about Tola and Jair?
6. What is the big message God wants us to take from the Abimelech story?

Judges 9-10:5 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to warn that God will bring retribution on those who violently usurp his sovereign rule over his people.

Details

9:1-6 The Shechemites make Abimelech king. Gideon's son Abimelech (meaning "My Father is King", i.e. "Prince") enlists the support of his concubine mother's family in Shechem. They support his bid to be king with money from the temple of Baal-berith (which ironically means 'Lord of the Covenant'). Abimelech then murders seventy of his brothers on a stone (presumably with help from the Shechemites) as part of his coup to seize power. He is then proclaimed king, something his father said in 8:23 would not happen.

9:7-15 Jotham's Talking Plants. One of Gideon's sons escapes Abimelech's murderous plot (v. 5) and now he goes to the top of Mount Gerizim (where the covenant blessings were pronounced, see Deuteronomy 11:29) to pronounce a curse against his brother the king. It is an allegory involving talking plants, who represent different rulers over the trees (Israelites). The olive, fig, and vine all refuse the honour but the bramble accepts. This ruler provides some shade, but also spews out fire to destroy some trees.

9:16-21 Jotham's Curse. The bramble in Jotham's story represents Abimelech, as he now makes clear. He warns that since Abimelech has become king through violence done against his father and his father's sons (killed on a stone, we are reminded, verse 18), the Shechemites should beware. The curse he pronounces threatens that Shechem will turn against Abimelech and Abimelech against Shechem if it is found that Gideon's sons were not treated well.

9:22-29 Shechem turns to Gaal instead. Abimelech is said to rule over not just Shechem (see v. 18) but over Israel, though not for very long. God puts enmity between Abimelech and the Shechemites just as Jotham said because of the violence done to Jerubbaal-Gideon's sons. See "an evil spirit from God" in 1 Samuel 16:14-16 too, which is sent to punish another man who had turned from God. The reason for all that follows is given in verse 24 – God instigates the vengeance because of Abimelech's violent coup. A chap named Gaal moves into Shechem and stirs up the people there against Abimelech, goading Abimelech into a fight.

9:30-41 Abimelech defeats Gaal. Zebul is Abimelech's man in the city, and he is angry at Gaal's impudence. He hatches a plan to drive Gaal out and restore Abimelech's popularity and rule there. The short version is that Abimelech and Zebul succeed in ousting Gaal.

9:42-49 Abimelech massacres Shechemites. When the Shechemites come to see what has happened to Gaal and his men, Abimelech organises his troops to massacre the people. Then he goes on to ruin the city itself completely. 1000 inhabitants manage to escape to a fortified Tower, but Abimelech pursues them and kills them too.

9:50-57 God avenges Gideon's sons. Abimelech is on the rampage. When he tries to set another city on fire some time later he meets his own dismal fate. As we have seen before in Judges, a key part in this episode is played by a woman (see 1:13-15, 4:4, 4:17-22) who uses a millstone to fatally injure Abimelech – the ironic judgment of God on him for slaying his 70 brothers on a single stone. He can't bear to be killed by a 'mere woman' and so he asks to be killed by his armour bearer to escape such ignominy. Yet we all know about it even today, so he hardly escapes being known as the king killed by a woman! Verses 56-57 remind us that it was all God's doing, in response to Jotham.

10:1-5 Tola and Jair. This epilogue to the Abimelech story (and transition to the Jephthah story) tells us that Israel reverted to having judge-saviours rather than kings after the failed experiment with monarchy under Abimelech. The name Tola means "worm" or "maggot", so we are invited to interpret this 'lowly person' against the backdrop of the overly ambitious Gideon and Abimelech. He is from Issachar in the North, but lived centrally in Ephraim in what appears to be a more uneventful, orderly time after the previous chaos. Jair is from the East side of the Jordan in Gilead (as is Jephthah in chapter 11) and appears to be prosperous and influential. God is not mentioned in these verses.

Application

1. God brings vengeance on Abimelech. Jotham's curse in 9:20 is fulfilled, which we are alerted to in 9:24 and 9:56-57. The violence Abimelech inflicted on others comes down on his own head (literally!). Thus a key part of the story is that God curses those who violently usurp his rightful rule over his people (cf. 8:23). Jesus our rightful ruler said that "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52).

2. Who is visibly on the throne in our lives? God is equally displeased with us as individuals when we usurp his rightful rule. Discuss the many ways in which we exercise rebellious self-rule over ourselves, day to day.

3. Israel needs a less violent leader. In contrast to the violent rule of Abimelech, Israel needs a king who will unite the people rather than killing them for his own benefit. In contrast, Jesus came to rule through humility, service, and suffering because "the meek shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

4. Israel needs a God-given leader. There was a certain amount of good that resulted from Gideon's leadership, but he was far from perfect and eventually died, leaving Israel to sink again. He was right to point to God as their true king, and they still need to rely on him to provide Spirit-empowered leadership when necessary. Abimelech tries to provide a more permanent solution with a continuous dynastic leadership, but is self-appointed and self-interested. Abimelech attempts to violently establish instead a dynasty, but what is needed is a perfect king who lives forever (Hebrews 7:25). His leadership was given by God, not seized (Phil 2:6-11). Do we look for spiritual leadership in the places it came from before ("dynastically"), or from places of apparent 'power', rather than looking to Jesus who is our real king, and who may bring us human help and leadership from many different places?

Judges 10:6-12:15

1. What is distinctive about the story in 10:6-16?
2. What bodes well in 11:4-11?
3. Why does Jephthah launch into a history lesson in 11:12-28?
4. What are Jephthah's ethical options in verse 34 onwards? What does his decision-making tell us about him?
5. What bodes ill in 12:1-7?
6. How do these 'minor' judges in 12:8-15 contrast with Jephthah?
7. Other than 'don't make silly vows' what can we learn as Christians from this study?

Judges 10-12 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to show how paganized Israel which sought to bargain with God got a similarly provocative negotiator, and tragic deliverer. The Jephthah story revolves around key dialogues and confrontations.

Details

10:6-16 God versus Israel. Israel has been totally Canaanized, serving 7 different kinds of deity except the Lord. Naturally God is angry with them, and as we expect he gives them into enemy hands, for 18 years. They cry out to God as they have before. Yet God is fed up (v. 13) and says he will not save them anymore. Then they seemingly repent, in action as well as word this time, putting away their foreign gods, but it could well be merely a conversion of convenience, an attempt to bargain with God to save them "this day". God, it seems, decides that he does not want to listen to this much longer and is impatient over their misery. This means he will now act.

10:17-11:11 Jephthah versus Gilead. The nation encamps at Mizpah and wonders who will lead them. Jephthah's rise is narrated as a purely human story, with God only being credited later on (11:29). Jephthah is originally an outsider, having been banished as the son of a prostitute (cf. Abimelech, 8:31) because his brothers wanted all the inheritance. But in their hour of need, the elders of Gilead realise how useful he might be and ask him back (just as they realised how useful God might be when they asked him to help them?). The negotiations between Jephthah and Gilead mention the Lord, but it is tense between them. God is called in only a silent witness to a human contract.

11:12-28 Jephthah versus Ammon. The newly installed commander gets down to business, but not by fighting. He begins, as he did with the Gileadites, with negotiating. The Ammonites claim Israel stole their land when they came up from Egypt, and he wants it back. Jephthah replies that they didn't: God defeated the Amorites in battle (not Ammonites v. 19-22) and Israel took the land that way. It never was Ammonite land, and no-one had disputed that before. Jephthah calls the Lord to decide between the opposing claims to the land.

11:29-40 Jephthah versus his daughter. God gives his verdict when his Spirit comes on Jephthah (as in 3:10 and 6:34) and he defeats the Ammonites. But rather strangely and completely unnecessarily, Jephthah makes a vow to God, to offer God whatever comes out of his house when he returns. Is he now trying to negotiate with God as well, offering him something in return for a victory? Is this the intended paganism of child sacrifice (as in Leviticus 20:1-5 or Jeremiah 32:35), or simply an idiotic negotiating tactic? On the analogy of the vow in Numbers 21:2 he should have vowed to destroy Ammonite towns, not his only daughter whose death would end his dynasty. Like Isaac with Abraham, she submits willingly, but here the human vow is not backed with divine provision. The vow which sought to manipulate the present, ruins his future (and hers!). Indeed, he will be remembered in Israel because of her fate, not his victories (11:39-40).

12:1-7 Jephthah versus Ephraim. Not all accept Jephthah's leadership. The stropky Ephraimites come out to meet Jephthah as they did Gideon (8:1-3), and threaten not his dynasty but his literal house. The sibling rivalry between the tribes erupts again, this time issuing in a vicious and bloody civil war which kills a large number of Ephraimites. This is the story from which we get the word Shibboleth, which in English means a test word or opinion which reveals one's party or sect. In Hebrew, Shibboleth means 'flowing stream' (which we can imagine some people might only be able to pronounce as "fwowing stweem") and would be used to reveal some as Ephraimites with non-Gileadite accents. Killed for a dodgy dialect!

12:8-15 'Minor' contrasts. This account of three 'minor' judges frames the account of Jephthah. None of these men judge Israel for long (7, 10, and 8 years). Ibzan has 30 sons and 30 daughters, and Abdon has 40 sons and a lot of donkeys too, just as Jair in 10:3-5 has 30 sons with 30 donkeys and 30 cities. This prompts a contrast with Jephthah who only had one child (and a daughter at that) who he ends up killing! In other words, the 'minor' judges are powerful and influential figures even if their tenure is brief. We've now had 12 men in the book so far, from all over Israel (not quite every single tribe, but close). God has graciously raised up judges to save Israel in her time of need, and spoken to her through prophets (e.g. Deborah, and the unnamed prophet in 6:8).

Application

1. No peace for the wicked. This cycle in Judges is marked by the absence of the line "and the land had peace for x years" (see 3:11, 3:30, 5:31, 8:28). Added to the brief nature of each judge's tenure (Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon altogether only judge for about 30 years), this gives a picture of Israel's instability. God's patience is running out with his wicked people, who have even turned to civil war. They get the leaders they deserve (the son of a prostitute, for harlot Israel; a manipulator of words for an insincerely repentant people!). God's silence is deafening as Israel becomes its own worst enemy. He gives them some respite from their enemies, but appears content to let them destroy themselves in other ways.

2. Making vows. Vows should be kept (Numbers 30:1-2; Deut 23:21-23). It is better not to vow than to make silly vows (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5). Jephthah would have been under a curse for vow-breaking if he had not fulfilled his vow – which would seem to be the most chivalrous option to take, and would have saved his daughter and secured his lineage at least. He could also have used the provision in Leviticus 27:1-8 and simply paid twenty shekels to a priest as compensation for his daughter's life vowed but spared. The fact that he chose to actually fulfil his completely unnecessary and utterly abhorrent vow and kill his daughter as a burnt offering brings him under the curse for murderers anyway, and shows what a paganized deliverer he really was. Should this make us ponder times in our own lives when we might be tempted to negotiate with God?

3. Minor Judges. The lists of minor judges in 10:1-5 and 12:8-15 remind us that the 'heroic' and colourful deliverer stories are not an exhaustive account of political realities at the time. They have been selectively chosen and expanded to develop a particular theme, which is the grace of God in the face of the Canaanization of Israel. God, therefore, remains the hero of the story, not Israel and not the judges who are deeply flawed human beings.

Judges 13-15

1. How does the narrator build up our expectations in 13:1-14?
2. Read Numbers 6:1-8. What are the main elements of the Nazirite vow?
3. What is the main point of 13:15-25? Who is pulling the strings?
4. Describe Samson's character. What things does he appear to be motivated by in chapter 14?
5. What is God doing behind the scenes (14:4) and how does that fit with your answer to question 4?
6. What is the place of chapter 15 in the story so far?
7. Can we as Christians learn from Samson in 15:18-20?

Judges 13-15 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to show how God graciously provided a deliverer, and used his sinful desires to provoke and win a war with the Philistines.

Details

13:1-14 Miraculous conception of the consecrated deliverer. The Israelites continue to do evil in God's eyes and are given over to the Philistines of the Gaza strip for a long time – but don't cry out. God graciously responds by opening the womb of a barren woman and telling her through an angel to consecrate the child, as a Nazrite (see Numbers 6:1-21), to be set apart as a saviour (5). This is stressed twice in verses 5-7. The woman tells her husband, who prays for clarification and further instructions. The angel returns to reiterate that the child is to be consecrated to God. He does not answer Manoah's question about the child's future mission (12), but our expectations are raised.

13:15-25 The Lord is behind it! This section focuses on the fact that God is behind the birth of Samson. Manoah presses to learn more about the angel of the Lord, who gives little away. He requests an offering to the Lord, not himself, and when he disappears in its smoke to heaven they realise he was from God. In verse 22 they call him God, but whether this is an appearance of God himself in angelic (or human? V. 8, 10, 11) form or simply a glorious sight (v. 6) is hard to say. When an angel of the Lord appears in the Bible, it speaks the very words of God (e.g. in Exodus 3 the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the bush and then God speaks, evidently through the angel [see also Genesis 16:11-13]. So we don't need to assume that the appearance of an angel of the Lord is necessarily the appearance of the Lord himself. Some think "angel of the Lord" must be the pre-incarnate Christ, but this goes against the evidence of Luke 2 at least, where even though "the glory of the Lord" shines around the angel, Christ himself is physically somewhere else! Manoah's wife reasons correctly that God will not kill them (see Exodus 33:20) but intends to bless. They name their child Samson ("little Sun"). God blesses him and his Spirit stirs him.

14:1-7 Samson follows his eyes. The baby grows up and rather than following the Lord, he follows the desire of his eyes, commanding his father to obtain a Philistine girl he fancies as his wife. He saw her (2), and she was right in his eyes (3, 7), though it was not right in God's eyes to marry outside the covenant (e.g. Exodus 34:12-16). The narrator tips us off that God is going to work not just "despite" Samson's sinful desires, but through them, for his own purposes - verse 4 gives us the clue to the whole Samson episode.

14:8-20 A riddle at the reception. On the way to the wedding, Samson had killed a lion (14:6). Now he goes past it again and sees in its dead body a swarm of bees and some honey. He should not, as an Israelite but especially as a Nazirite, touch anything in a dead body. But he does, and also desecrates his parents (9) at the same time. At his wedding reception, Samson greedily attempts to make a profit out of this episode by setting it as a riddle which, if unsolved, will bring him material gain. Yet despite his great strength, Samson proves weak when confronted by women, and he gives away the secret of the riddle, which only he could have known, to his wife. The strong one melts like honey in her hands! He is far from complimentary about her in his response (18b), and he petulantly reasserts his strength by seizing the clothes he now owes his 30 guards from others. Ominously, his wife is then given to his best man! More trouble will come (see 14:4).

15:1-8 Making the most of the opportunity. Samson returns to reclaim his bride, but is rebuffed by her father. Now he sees a chance to do harm to the Philistines in a seemingly righteous cause. Samson uses guerrilla tactics to achieve his personal goals in squabbles provoked by his own misbehaviour, but God is using him in fulfilment of his design in 14:4. The Philistines treat Samson's wife as a scapegoat and punish her and her father for causing Samson's attack.

15:9-17 The Saviour betrayed by his own people. More Philistine raids on Israelite territory follow, to capture Samson: his personal feuds have become an international crisis, which is just what God wanted. The formerly crusading tribe of Judah is cowed into submission by their overlords, and they agree to bind Samson and hand him over as a way of dealing with the Philistine attacks. They prefer to betray their own for the sake of a quiet life rather than fighting: they prefer the rule of the Philistines to the rule of God. God's Spirit, however, empowers Samson to overcome the Philistines, in a victory reminiscent of Shamgar's in 3:31 but which violates his Nazirite oath again (in the use of a freshly killed donkey's jawbone). With typical self-glorifying flair he coins a poem to celebrate it, and calls the place Jawbone Hill.

15:18-20 Samson calls for divine help. It was thirsty work killing a thousand men with a donkey bone. In a seemingly pious prayer, Samson calls out to God for the first time, and expresses his dependence on God (for water). He reasons (like his mother in 13:23) that God will not desert him now after such a great salvation. But his tone sounds impudent and self-centred, and his request is purely personal. Yet graciously, God miraculously provides even for one like Samson. He governed Israel for 20 years in this way!

Application

- 1. Chapter 13** shows us that God is gracious in providing a saviour for Israel, even when they don't cry out for one. He is determined to preserve his people despite their almost suicidal determination to rebel against him. He is committed, also, to us as his covenant people, not because we deserve his commitment, but despite the fact we don't.
- 2. Chapter 14** shows us the danger of following the desire of our eyes. Yet it should also cause us to praise God who has a wider agenda and power which is bigger than our failings, and can use even our sinful moments to achieve his purposes. This is not an excuse for sin - as we see later, Samson following his eyes leads to the loss of his eyes! Yet it reminds us not to despair when we see our own sin, but to trust in God who works all things for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28). Even if his instruments are blunt and crude, he will achieve his purposes.
- 3.** It is tempting to see in Samson's betrayal in chapter 15 a foretaste of what will happen to Jesus, who was also miraculously born and consecrated to God, and yet betrayed by his own people only to be anointed with God's Spirit to gain victory over God's enemies. Yet the contrasts are also immense: Samson, for example, follows only his own agenda, whereas Jesus made himself nothing and took the form of servant to die on a cross. Samson's reasoning in 15:18 might find an echo in Romans 8:32 where Paul reasons that since God has given us such a great salvation in Christ, surely he will also provide us with everything we need on the way to the purchased glory.

Judges 16

1. What more do we learn about Samson in 16:1-22?
2. Give an outline of the story of Samson and Delilah in 16:4-22.
3. If Samson is a picture of Israel, what does that say about the nation?
4. Compare and contrast Jesus with Samson in 16:23-31.
5. What do we learn from the Samson stories in terms of:
 - Patterns of God's action with his people
 - Paths for us to follow or avoid as God's people
 - Promises for us to look forward to?

Judges 16 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to reveal how God gains victory over his enemies through the defeat of his servant.

Details

16:1-3 The Girls and Gates of Gaza. Samson is a man driven by his senses, and so when he sees a prostitute he goes in to her because she, no doubt, seemed right in his eyes (14:3, 7). That he does this in Gaza of all places (well away from his tribal home in Dan) shows that he can't stay away from Philistines, which is all part of God's plan (14:4). The Philistines in Gaza realise he is there and try to trap him, but fail to do so. How exactly the escape works is not clear, but evidently it involved an amazing feat of strength.

16:4-14 The Silver and Seductress of Sorek. He can uproot gates and carry them 40 miles uphill, but Samson is weak in the face of the wiles of a woman. After he falls in love with Delilah, the Philistine lords spot their chance to humble him, and offer Delilah a huge amount of money (which makes her just as much a prostitute as the unnamed woman of 1-3). In a well-told tale which increases the suspense, three times she tries to discover his secret and three times Samson lies to her and escapes from her bindings. But he foolishly continues to play her game and put himself at risk, getting perilously close to the source of his strength when he mentions his hair in verse 13.

16:15-22 Love is blind. Emotional blackmail succeeds where brute force had failed, and Samson (all brawn and no brain) who learned nothing from his experience at his wedding in 14:15-17 finally gives away that he is a Nazirite. Not a very good one from what we have seen (see his touching of corpses in contravention of Numbers 6:6 in 14:8-9 and 15:15) but he had not cut his hair (see Numbers 6:5). There is nothing in the story so far to suggest that he would necessarily lose his strength if he cut his hair, but if he ascribed his strength to divine aid and linked that to his obedience to his vow then this would seem a logical conclusion (although it would not explain why it was the hair-cutting that would lose him his strength rather than, say, touching dead bodies or drinking alcohol). Certainly Delilah seems confident that this is the real secret in verses 18-19; verse 20 tells us that the Lord left him once his hair was gone; and verse 22 seems to imply that the hair was related to his strength, as it ominously sets up the final scene. Ironically, as soon as the Philistines discover the secret of his strength, he loses it despite continued confidence. Bald Samson has his eyes put out and is bound and made to work in a prison. Following the desire of his eyes has led to the removal of his eyes and his capture.

16:23-27 Praise Dagon? The Philistines ascribe their capture of Samson to their god Dagon, and celebrate accordingly. They call Samson out to entertain them while they made merry at his downfall. Samson cunningly asks to feel the pillars on which the house rested (a very large house with 3000 people on the roof). This cues up the final act in the Samson epic, in which the Lord, not Dagon will be victorious.

16:28-31 The Sun Sets. Samson prays once more (as in 15:18), and again does so with his own personal agenda in mind (vengeance on those who put out his eyes – still his driving force!). He prays "O Lord GOD" (which is how the ESV alerts us to the Hebrew phrase adonai YHWH - adonai is usually translated Lord and YHWH is usually translated Lord, but "Lord GOD" is better than "Lord Lord"!). He acknowledges God's role in his life and his dependence on him for strength. He prays for renewed strength one last time, and to die with the Philistines he is about to kill. Now we will see the truth of 13:7 where his mother was told he was to be consecrated to God from the womb until his death. With his arms outstretched, he pushes the house down, killing more of God's enemies in his death than in his whole brutal career. He was buried in Israel, and we are reminded he judged for 20 years (see 15:20). God found his opportunity against the Philistines (14:4), even in his anointed deliverer's death.

Application

1. Victory in death. Again we see a certain resemblance between Samson and the great deliverer, Jesus. They both gain their biggest victory through death in captivity, having been betrayed by those closest to them, put on public display, laughed at, arms outstretched, praying to God while their enemies celebrate their own apparent victory. Yet we also see a contrast: Samson's personal agenda, moral blindness, and constant use of brute force against Jesus' moral perfection and his agenda to glorify his Father and save his people through suffering and voluntary weakness.

2. Sweeter and Stronger. Love is the answer to the Philistine riddle in 14:18. It is sweeter than honey and stronger than a lion, and leads to the ultimate downfall even of the strongman Samson. As we often see in the Bible and in our own experience, "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions - is not from the Father but is from the world" (1 John 2:16). The devil and our fallen nature are both capable of using subtle techniques and influences to draw us away from God – brute force is unnecessary. Money worked on Samson's wife and lover, just as feminine charms worked on Samson. What dangerous games do we play? Where are our weak spots? Power, money, sex, reputation, intellect? How can we guard ourselves against the sweet, strong, and seductive powers of the world, the flesh, and the devil?

3. Samson is a picture of the nation. What happens to him is a model for what Israel can expect if it fritters away its high calling, lives by what is right in its own eyes, follows its own agenda, and provokes God to abandon her. She will be humiliated and forced to serve others in exile away from her own land – no freedom, no sight, no dignity, no hope. The only prospect for a nation or an individual like this is the undeserved grace of a committed, covenant God.

4. The effects of Canaanization. It is worth noting the effect on male-female relations which Israel's paganization has had. With the onset of pagan values and priorities, male-female relations appear to have been massively corrupted. Men exploit women for their own ends, and vice-versa. Lies, lust, leverage, and lucre all play their part in perverting gender relations. This is not how it should be, and is due to the depraved condition of the people.

Judges 17-18

1. In what ways are these chapters different from 3:7-16:31?
2. Itemize the spiritually and morally dubious things that happen in ch. 17.
3. How is the Danite conquest of Laish different from the conquests of chapter 1? (Note 1:34).
4. What is the significance of the repeated refrain in 17:6?
5. How does the pick and mix style of religion in these chapters show itself in churches today? (Not in the world, but in the Church).
6. How might we in St. Helen's be in danger of repeating some of the mistakes of the Danites?

Judges 17-18 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to expose what religious mockery occurs when God is not acknowledged as king.

Details

17:1-6 A Messy World. A man called Micah secretly steals a huge amount of money from his mother who curses the thief. Then he returns it and she blesses him in the name of the LORD, and dedicates all the money to the LORD, but actually gives it to her son for the making of an idol (but only ends up giving 200 out of 1100 shekels to the silversmith). As well as making idols, Micah also installs his own priest in his shrine. This is a world where nothing God has said about idolatry, worshipping in God's place not making personal shrines (Deut. 12), the priesthood, honouring parents, honesty, stealing, and blessing has been listened to. This is presented as a typical episode in Israel: Israel had no king, everyone did what they wanted— not even God ruled their actions, though they know his name and pretend to honour him. Their 'sincere' religious expression leads to thoroughly pagan actions. Human monarchy is not the answer: the king they lack is God (see 8:23).

17:7-13 A Proper Priest. In this episode, Micah adds a Levitical priest to his entourage. He is a younger man, and yet Micah wants him to be his "father and priest" in verse 10. He becomes like one of his sons in verse 11. He is possibly too young to work as a priest (Numbers 4:3, 30), and is certainly presented as being "in Micah's pocket", a tame religious pet! Micah adds a "proper priest" to his religious toys and charms. He is from Bethlehem in Judah, and joins the Ephraimite in his apostasy. Neither great tribe has anything to be proud of.

18:1-10 Under God's Eye. We are reminded again (see 17:6) that there is no king in Israel (even God). Our attention shifts to the Danites (from which tribe Samson, the last Judge we looked at in chapter 16, came). They failed in 1:34 to take their allotted territory when Israel entered the land, so they went looking elsewhere. While on such a mission for Dan, some warriors bump into Micah's Levite, who (rather ambiguously) tells them God is watching their journey – but does he watch with approval...? They find a quiet and unsuspecting people in Laish and recommend its conquest to the tribe of Dan, claiming God has given it to them. This seems to be a deliberate parody of spy stories in Numbers 13 and Joshua 2, with Micah's Levite the equivalent of Rahab the prostitute.

18:11-26 The Priest joins the Raiders. 600 armed Danites set out, via Samson's hometown in Mahaneh Dan, and arrive at Micah's house for a stopover. They steal his religious artefacts and entice the priest to abandon him and join them instead, which he is delighted to do. Micah calls together his friends and neighbours and runs to catch up with the Danites, but they will not give him his priest or idols and he's too weak to fight them when they threaten. The object he made with stolen silver is stolen from him by his own paganized countrymen!

18:27-31 The Dodgy origins of Dan. The Danites continue on their mission and lay waste to Laish's unsuspecting population who live far away from their own people with no-one to help them. They call the city Dan. Our sympathies as readers have probably been transferred at this point to the pagan inhabitants of Laish, who in one sense ought to have been a symbol for all that is abominable and wicked. But by their actions here in the Bekaa Valley, Dan's descendants show themselves worse than such pagans, even though technically they are applying the "extermination" law of Deut. 7:1-2. But now we also discover the identity of their Levite with his idols. He is none other than a grandson of Moses himself! The problems of religious syncretism and compromise are so deeply rooted that they have infected the most sacred institutions and the most revered household in the nation. And this descendent of Moses presides over a shrine which rivals the Tabernacle of God itself, which was at that time pitched in Shiloh. It would always remain a centre for idolatrous religion, at this most northern edge of the Promised Land (see 1 Kings 12:25-33; 2 Kings 10:29).

Regarding the date of chapters 17-18, it is instructive to note that naming the Levite as Jonathan, son of Gershom, son of Moses shockingly dates the apostasy in this section to the earliest days of Israel's occupation of the land, just as 2:10 indicated. Though even if "son of" could also mean "descendent of" (as it sometimes does, see Matthew 1:1 for instance) it is still a scandalous identification. The reference in 18:30 to the "captivity of the land" most probably refers to the exile of the northern kingdom of Israel (which included the city of Dan) by Assyria in 734BC (see 2 Kings 15:29). Alluding to this final catastrophe for the people of Dan is certainly evocative, and should warn those who read the book not to repeat the mistakes of the past and so risk the same fate! The reference to the house of God being at Shiloh (18:31) indicates that Judges was written after the ark and Tabernacle moved from Shiloh (where it was in Joshua 18:1) to Jerusalem under King David c. 1000BC (2 Samuel 6). So the book dates from sometime after 734BC, but probably from before the exile of the Southern kingdom of Judah in 586BC.

Application

1. Pick-n-mix Religion. Here we see that it was not just individual judges and leaders in Israel who had been Canaanized. Here we also see a family, a famous Levite, and a whole tribe that has rejected God as their king. No-one is devoted to God or behaves with integrity. They did what was right in their own eyes, because they had

rejected God as king, though that didn't mean they had gone off some of the trappings of religious devotion. The religion presented in these chapters is "pick and mix" religion – a bit of Yahweh, a bit of idolatry, a show of concern for God (17:2-3) and prayerfulness (18:5) but a rejection of his standards (e.g. 17:1-5; 18:24-25). People chose to do things their way, picking what they liked from various ethical and religious codes rather than being devoted to God's ways alone. How does that describe our world? What about our own lives...?

2. Success is not always a sign of God's favour. Micah got away with stealing. The Danites succeeded in their vicious attacks. Success is not necessarily a sign of righteousness or an indication that we are doing something right in God's eyes. God does not stifle every corrupt thought and scheme of the human heart, but his eye is on them all (18:6) and he will bring judgment in due time. Rather than doing what God had told them to do and conquer the space allotted for them (1:34) the Danites did what was easy in their own eyes and conquered a peaceful, unsuspecting people. Ambitious pragmatism can sometimes lead us into doing what is easier and leads to apparent success rather than doing what is godly but difficult. How would that apply to us as individuals, and as a church?

Judges 19-21

1. What is the link between the opening scenes in 19:1-9 and the outrage in Gibeah (19:10 onwards)?
2. Compare Judges 19:22-30 to Genesis 19:1-29. What is the narrator trying to say about the state of Israel in the time of the judges here?
3. Describe what happens in 19:30-20:11, and why it is unique in the book.
4. What is ironic about 20:12-48 compared with chapter 1 of the book?
5. Are these good ways to find a wife (21:1-25)? Write down all the bad things which happen to women in chapters 19-21. Why are things so bad?
6. Does the churches today have any of the same kind of problems as we see the church in Judges 19-21 had?
7. What have you learned from the book of Judges as a whole?

Judges 19-21 - Study Notes

Main Point and Purpose

The purpose of this section is to shock us with the moral bankruptcy of a thoroughly paganized Israel, judged and amazingly preserved by God despite themselves.

Details

19:1-9 Great Hospitality. We are reminded again (17:6, 18:1) that there is no king – even God. A Levite from Ephraim has a concubine from Bethlehem – the same two places from which the main characters of chapter 17 came (the Levite from Bethlehem and Micah from Ephraim). Their relationship turns sour and she leaves. He pursues her and ends up staying at her father's house for much longer than he intended, because of the insistent hospitality on offer.

19:10-29 Gibeah's Outrage. Such hospitality is not on offer in Gibeah. Ironically, the Levite refuses to spend the night in Jerusalem because at this time (see 1:21) there were foreigners there, the Jebusites, and presumably they did not expect good hospitality from strangers. Yet hospitality is definitely not on offer in the Israelite town of Gibeah either (v. 15) even though they were on their way to the house of God (v. 18, see 18:31) and had most things needed to look after themselves. An old man does finally offer them a place to stay but the "worthless fellows" of the city threaten the Levite with violent homosexual rape – a clear echo of Genesis 19:4-5 which shows that an Israelite town has become as degraded as Sodom itself. With no angelic rescuers such as Lot had in Sodom, the evil Gibeahites abuse the concubine (offered by the cowardly Levite along with the old man's daughters to satisfy the crowd's appetites). We don't hear if she actually died as a result of this or not, but we do hear that when he wakes from his peaceful night's sleep her husband discovers her listless body and chops her up, sending a piece of her to each tribe of Israel as a provocative spur to action from them. Makes sense of her leaving him in verse 2, perhaps! Has anyone here done what is right in God's eyes? Or have they all become like the inhabitants of Sodom in their moral bankruptcy?

19:30-20:11 Get Together for War. The Levite manages to provoke all Israel into a response and they gather to discuss action. This unnamed Levite has united the nation more than any of the Lord's anointed Judges in the book! He carefully conceals his own callous part in the tragedy and impresses the assembly, who decide to punish the Benjaminites in Gibeah. How easily manipulated they are with no king!

20:12-48 God's War. The Benjaminites will not give up the worthless man who started this trouble, but instead muster themselves to fight their fellow Israelites (even their elite left-handed men, v.16 – remember 3:15). Benjamin is greatly outnumbered. Israel consults God, who approves their war by telling them which tribe shall lead the attack on Benjamin. But note the irony by comparing this with 1:1 where things were very different. Israel is sent into battle but God promises no victory whenever they speak to him (18, 23, 28) and indeed sends them out to be defeated and beaten. Finally, God defeats Benjamin through Israel (35) catastrophically (48), but both sides have been judged by God.

21:1-25 Two ways to find a wife. The issue here is how to repopulate the almost extinct tribe of Benjamin which is bereft of women to marry the remaining men, since the rest of the nation took a ridiculously unnecessary oath (like Jephthah in 11:30-31) not to allow anyone from their tribes to marry Benjaminites. Again we see they are their own worst enemies. So a plan is hatched to punish one clan which did not turn up to the assembly by killing them and giving their virgin women to the Benjaminite men. Perverse and ruthlessly pragmatic, but still not enough. So a further plan is cooked up which will apparently prevent Israel breaking their vow (intended to stop Benjamin's perversity in chapter 19 from infecting others...) and being cursed. The same men who had been so outraged by the rape of chapter 19 now ask the men of Shiloh to accept the kidnap and rape of their own daughters as a way of tidying things up! Interestingly, Israel's first human king comes from this reconstructed tribe of Benjamin (Saul, 1 Samuel 9:21), as does the apostle to the Gentiles (Paul, Romans 11:1), so it is a good thing to keep Benjamin going. The book ends by reminding us again that this had all happened because everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes, rather than acknowledging God as their king in everything.

Application

1. Israel worse than Sodom. Unrestrained lust and human depravity play a lead role in these horrific true stories. Women are not treated well here whether they are concubines, Benjaminites, Jabesh-Gileadites or dancers from Shiloh: rape, abuse, murder, kidnap, and callous disregard all feature in the narrative. Israelite society seems to know nothing of responsible male headship with men expressing sacrificial, protective love for women. Canaanite standards have invaded the people of Israel, even to the extent that a homosexual expression of this instinct for self-gratification is seen within the people of God, whereas previously that had only been seen in the worst pagan nations. Do the churches today tear themselves apart when they do what is right in their own eyes in sexual morality...?

2. Israel's worst enemy. Corporately, Israel are their own worst enemy, abusing each other, making foolish vows, tearing themselves apart. This episode also demonstrates that it is not necessarily the enemy outside which threatens the soul, but 'the Canaanite within', which applies at the individual level too. Praise God for Jesus our saviour-king, who on the cross rescues us not just from God's anger but also from ourselves and our foolish sin.

3. The nation preserved. The nation has survived much in the course of this book, but no thanks or credit are really due to their leaders or the people (Othniel and Deborah alone seem to remain unsullied). They have been preserved by a righteous but patient and gracious God. Evil within the people has multiplied and been chastised by God, but they have not been wiped out (though they deserved to be). He sovereignly uses our terrible choices to bring good in the end. Human heroes are few and far between, just as they are in the history of the church in the last 2000 years or so. We continue to rely on God lavishing his grace on undeserving sinners, not dealing with us as our sins deserve, but preserving his people despite ourselves.