

PHASE ONE
JUDGES 3:7 – 10:5

Othniel

⁷The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of YHWH, forgetting YHWH their God, and worshipping the Baals and the Asherahs.

⁸Therefore the anger of YHWH was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim; and the Israelites served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.

⁹But when the Israelites cried out to YHWH, YHWH raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who delivered them, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.

¹⁰The spirit of YHWH came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and YHWH gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

¹¹So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel son of Kenaz died.

1. Othniel of Judah (3:7-11)

Israel's failure to live by the covenant is expressed here in terms that were picked up in the Introduction:

Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of YHWH and worshipped the Baals; and they abandoned YHWH, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked YHWH to anger. They abandoned YHWH, and worshipped Baal and the Astartes.

– Judges 2:11-13

'Baal' ('lord') is the warrior god of the Canaanites. Each city had its own local manifestation (hence 'Baals'). His consort is called both 'Astarte' and 'Asherah'.

'Caleb' (3:9) the Kenizzite is described as 'of the tribe of Judah' (Numbers 13:6). This is a good reminder that Israel is a covenant community, not an ethnic one. Having accepted YHWH and being in alliance with Judah, Caleb is considered a member of Israel and of the 'tribe' of Judah. It is presumably the same with his 'brother' Othniel (see 1:12-15). It is probably the connection with Judah that accounts for his being mentioned first among the 'judges', and is presented as an exemplar of the role and function of a 'judge'.

Typically the stories of the 'judges' begins with the failure of the people to live by the covenant (3:7). This leads to divine anger and punishment (3:8). In this case it takes the form of subjection to a foreign king. Since the Hebrew 'r' (ר) and 'd' (ד) are almost identical in shape, it is suggested that the reference here is to Edom, not Aram. The collapse of Egyptian influence in Canaan at the close of the thirteenth century made way for such foreign intrusion. Since it was assumed that God controls everything (see Introduction pages 28-30) the experience of subjection is described here as YHWH 'sold them' (a word that picks up the idea of 'slavery'). God who redeemed them from slavery is selling them back into it.

In response to their cry, YHWH raises up a judge – called such because he alerts the people to their infidelity, rallies them to the covenant, and leads them to throw off the yoke of slavery. He is able to do this because 'the spirit (rū^h) of YHWH came upon him' (3:10). His success led to a generation ('forty years') of peace.

2. Ehud of Benjamin (3:12-30)

The Jordan formed a natural boundary to the territory allotted to the Benjamin tribe. We are surprised to hear that the Moabites controlled the territory on the east side of the river. Numbers 21:21-35 and Deuteronomy 2:24 - 3:7 recount the capture of this territory by the Israelites before they crossed into Canaan. It is evident from Judges that there were Israelites in Transjordan very early, but their dominance there came from the expansion of Israel into Transjordan during the reign of Omri, king of Israel (892-871). The story needs no commentary.

¹²The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of YHWH; and YHWH strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of YHWH. ¹³In alliance with the Ammonites and the Amalekites, he went and defeated Israel; and they took possession of the city of palms. ¹⁴So the Israelites served King Eglon of Moab eighteen years.

¹⁵But when the Israelites cried out to YHWH, YHWH raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The Israelites sent tribute by him to King Eglon of Moab. ¹⁶Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length; and he fastened it on his right thigh under his clothes. ¹⁷Then he presented the tribute to King Eglon of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. ¹⁸When Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent the people who carried the tribute on their way. ¹⁹But he himself turned back at the sculptured stones near Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." So the king said, "Silence!" and all his attendants went out from his presence. ²⁰Ehud came to him, while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber, and said, "I have a message from God for you." So he rose from his seat. ²¹Then Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon's belly; ²²the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out. ²³Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof chamber on him, and locked them.

²⁴After he had gone, the servants came. When they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, "He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber." ²⁵So they waited until they were embarrassed. When he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them. There was their lord lying dead on the floor.

²⁶Ehud escaped while they delayed, and passed beyond the sculptured stones, and escaped to Seirah. ²⁷When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites went down with him from the hill country, having him at their head. ²⁸He said to them, "Follow after me; for YHWH has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand." So they went down after him, and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites, and allowed no one to cross over.

²⁹At that time they killed about ten *contingents* of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men; no one escaped. ³⁰So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest eighty years.

3. Shamgar (3:31)

³¹After him came Shamgar son of Anath, who killed six hundred of the Philistines with an oxgoad. He too delivered Israel.

Shamgar is mentioned here to prepare us for his being mentioned in the Song of Deborah (5:6). The Philistines are said to have come from Caphtor (Crete, see Genesis 10:14; Amos 9:7; Jeremiah 47:4). They were one of the ‘Sea Peoples’ that attacked Egypt and the coast of Canaan towards the end of the thirteenth century. Joshua 13:2 includes their territory as one of the areas that had not yet been conquered by the Israelites. ‘Six hundred’ is a military unit. He took on the whole unit single-handedly!

4. Deborah and Barak (4:1 – 5:31)

We have already been informed by the authors of Judges that during the period prior to the monarchy Israel did not manage to control either the coastal plain where the Philistines ‘had chariots of iron’ (1:19), or the plain of Esdraelon (1:27) that cut the tribes of the central hill country from those of the hill country of Galilee (see map page 266). Here, however, we have a narrative account of an epic victory in the plain of Esdraelon, followed in chapter five by an anonymous (contemporary, twelfth century BC?) poem/song that celebrates the victory. In both the prose narrative and the song the victor is YHWH. The tribes are rallied by Deborah, of the northern tribe of Issachar (5:15), who is called a ‘prophetess’ (4:4). She is the medium through whom YHWH declares his ‘judgment’ (4:4). She is the wife of ‘Lappidoth’ (‘blazing torch’, 4:4), and is connected to Barak (4:6, *bārāq* means ‘lightning’) of the neighbouring tribe of Naphtali (see map page 272). The Canaanite cities of the plain of Esdraelon are determined to wipe out the Israelites. Their leader is ‘Sisera’ who is linked to the famous ‘Jabin of Hazor’ (4:4), the king who was defeated by Joshua (see Joshua 11:1-15). The idea seems to be that Jabin is alive again in Sisera. Finally, there is Jael, who is lauded as being faithful to YHWH even though her people, part of the Kenite tribe from around Hebron in the south, had moved north (4:11) and were in alliance with the Canaanites (4:17).

¹The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of YHWH, after Ehud died. ²So YHWH sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. ³Then the Israelites cried out to YHWH for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.

The pattern of infidelity, followed by being ‘sold’ into subjection, and crying out to YHWH for help, repeats the formula found in Judges 3:7-11, and in the introduction to the story of Ehud (4:1; see 3:12-15). Like the Philistines (see 1:19), Sisera had the advantage of iron (4:3), which strengthened the wheels of the war chariots and gave them an advantage on the plain.

⁴At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. ⁵She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. ⁶She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "YHWH, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten *contingents* from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. ⁷I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'"

Mount Tabor is on the northern edge of the plain of Esdraelon, some eighteen kilometres east of the beginning of the Wadi Kishon, which flows west and enters the Mediterranean just north of the Carmel promontory. YHWH will send a flash flood which will bog the chariot wheels, and give the advantage to the Israel footsoldiers.

⁸Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." ⁹And she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for YHWH will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten *contingents* of warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.

Asher is the only tribe of Galilee not represented at the battle (see 5:17).

¹¹Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, that is, the descendants of Hobab the *son-in-law* of Moses, and had encamped as far away as Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh.

For the translation 'son-in-law' see Judges 1:16. The Greek Version seems to represent a better Hebrew text.

¹²When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goim to the Wadi Kishon. ¹⁴Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day on which YHWH has given Sisera into your hand. YHWH is indeed going out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten *contingents* of warriors following him. ¹⁵And YHWH threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, ¹⁶while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left.

'No one was left' echoes the words of Exodus 14:28.

The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; no one was left..

At the Red Sea, too, 'YHWH threw the Egyptian army into panic'(Exodus 14:24). The story is told in such a way as to allude to the Red Sea 'miracle'.

¹⁷Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. ¹⁸Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. ¹⁹Then he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. ²⁰He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say, 'No.'" ²¹But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died.

²²Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." So he went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

²³So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites.

²⁴Then the hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan.

^{5:1}Then Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying:

The Celebratory Song (5:2-31)

²*When leaders are put at the head of Israel,
when the people offer themselves willingly—
bless YHWH!*

'Bless YHWH' means 'cause YHWH to be praised'.

³*Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes;
to YHWH I will sing,
I will make melody to YHWH, the God of Israel.*

⁴*YHWH, when you went out from Seir,
when you marched from the region of Edom,
the earth trembled,
and the heavens poured,
the clouds indeed poured water.*

⁵*The mountains quaked before YHWH, the One of Sinai,
before YHWH, the God of Israel.*

See Exodus 19:18-19 and 20:18-21. Also the scene in which YHWH reveals himself to Elijah (1Kings 19:11-12).

⁶*In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,
in the days of Jael, caravans ceased
and travellers kept to the byways.*

On Shamgar see Judges 3:31. The prose story of Jael killing Sisera is in Judges 4:17-22. In the days of Shamgar Israel was not able to conquer the kings of the plain, but they did disrupt their trade.

⁷The peasantry prospered in Israel,
 they grew fat on plunder,
 because you arose, Deborah,
 arose as a mother in Israel.

⁸When new gods were chosen,
 then war was in the gates.
 Was shield or spear to be seen
 among forty *contingents* in Israel?

⁹My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel
 who offered themselves willingly among the people.
 Bless YHWH.

¹⁰“Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys,
 you who sit on *the judgment seat*
 and you who walk by the way.

¹¹To the sound of musicians at the watering places,
 there they repeat the triumphs of YHWH,
 the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel.

“Then down to the gates marched the people of YHWH.

¹²“Awake, awake, Deborah!
 Awake, awake, utter a song!
 Arise, Barak, lead away your captives,
 O son of Abinoam.

¹³Then down marched the remnant of the noble;
 the people of YHWH marched down for him against the mighty.

¹⁴From Ephraim they set out into the valley,
 following you, Benjamin, with your kin;
 from Machir marched down the commanders,
 and from Zebulun those who bear the marshal’s staff;

¹⁵the chiefs of Issachar came with Deborah,
 and Issachar faithful to Barak;
 into the valley they rushed out at his heels.

Machir is the ‘son’ of Manasseh and the ‘father’ of Gilead (Numbers 26:29).

Among the clans of Reuben
 there were great searchings of heart.

¹⁶Why did you tarry among the sheepfolds,
 to hear the piping for the flocks?

Among the clans of Reuben
 there were great searchings of heart.

Reuben did not rally to the fight. Where was the tribe at the time this song was composed? Gad is not even mentioned in the song, nor is Judah or Simeon. It is worth noting that the word ‘tribe’ is used loosely. The basic unit was the kinship clan. Geographical factors meant some kind of wider connection. What the various ‘tribes’ shared was a common religious idea. Other connections were probably quite loose.

Celebrating the Victory

**¹⁷Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan;
and Dan, why did he abide with the ships?
Asher sat still at the coast of the sea,
settling down by his landings.**

Dan seems to be located in its earlier territory, bordering the Mediterranean to the west of Benjamin.

**¹⁸Zebulun is a people that scorned death;
Naphtali too, on the heights of the field.**

**¹⁹"The kings came, they fought;
then fought the kings of Canaan,
at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo;
they got no spoils of silver.**

**²⁰The stars fought from heaven,
from their courses they fought against Sisera.**

The stars were imagined as openings in the firmament through which one can see the light of heaven, and through which the rain fell to the earth. As noted earlier, a flash flood bogged the wheels of the chariots, and in this way heaven enabled an Israel victory.

**²¹The torrent Kishon swept them away,
the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon.
March on, my soul, with might!**

**²²"Then loud beat the horses' hoofs
with the galloping, galloping of his steeds.**

**²³"Curse Meroz, says the angel of YHWH,
curse bitterly its inhabitants,
because they did not come to the help of YHWH,
to the help of YHWH against the mighty.**

**²⁴"Most blessed of women be Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
of tent-dwelling women most blessed.
where he sank, there he fell dead.**

**²⁵He asked water and she gave him milk,
she brought him curds in a lordly bowl.**

**²⁶She put her hand to the tent peg
and her right hand to the workmen's mallet;
she struck Sisera a blow,
she crushed his head,
she shattered and pierced his temple.**

**²⁷He sank, he fell,
he lay still at her feet;
at her feet he sank, he fell;**

²⁸“Out of the window she peered,
the mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice:
‘Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?’
²⁹Her wisest ladies make answer,
indeed, she answers the question herself:
³⁰‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?—
A girl or two for every man;
spoil of dyed stuffs for Sisera,
spoil of dyed stuffs embroidered,
two pieces of dyed work embroidered for my neck as spoil?’
³¹“So perish all your enemies, YHWH!
But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might.”

And the land had rest forty years.

5. Gideon (6:1 – 8:32)

Midian seems to refer to northwest Arabia and to include various Bedouin tribes from that region. The traditional genealogy has the tribes of Midian descended from Abraham through his wife, Keturah (see Genesis 25:2,4). Joseph was sold by his brothers to a caravan of Ishmaelite traders bringing merchandise from Midian to Egypt (see Genesis 27:28, 36). When Moses fled from Egypt he settled in Midian where he married Zipporah, a daughter of a Jethro, a priest (Exodus 2:15-22). It was while caring for Jethro’s sheep that Moses ‘came to Horeb, the mountain of God’ (Exodus 3:1), where YHWH revealed himself to him in the burning bush and sent him on a mission to redeem his people from Egypt. In the Book of Numbers Midianites are blamed for the apostasy at Peor (Numbers 25:18), and Moses is ordered to fight them (Numbers 31:1-2; see Joshua 13:21).

The account here in Judges records a period when hordes of Bedouin from Midian came in from the desert up through the Negeb and across the Jordan riding their camels and devastating the countryside, forcing the Israelite farmers to seek refuge in caves in the mountains. Once again this is seen as a punishment from YHWH for their infidelity, and once again they ‘cried out to YHWH for help’ (6:6).

¹The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of YHWH, and YHWH gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. ²The hand of Midian prevailed over Israel; and because of Midian the Israelites provided for themselves hiding places in the mountains, caves and strongholds. ³For whenever the Israelites put in seed, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. ⁴They would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the land, as far as the neighbourhood of Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey. ⁵For they and their livestock would come up, and they would even bring their tents, as thick as locusts; neither they nor their camels could be counted; so they wasted the land as they came in. ⁶Thus Israel was greatly impoverished because of Midian; and the Israelites cried out to YHWH for help.

⁷When the Israelites cried to YHWH on account of the Midianites, ⁸YHWH sent a prophet to the Israelites; and he said to them, "Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt, and brought you out of the house of slavery; ⁹and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians, and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you, and gave you their land; ¹⁰and I said to you, 'I am YHWH your God; you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not given heed to my voice."

The call of Gideon (6:11-24)

**¹¹Now the angel of YHWH came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. ¹²The angel of YHWH appeared to him and said to him, "YHWH is with you, you mighty warrior."
¹³Gideon answered him, "But sir, if YHWH is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, 'Did not YHWH bring us up from Egypt?' But now YHWH has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian."**

Before introducing the 'hero' sent by YHWH, the Deuteronomists set the scene for their contemporaries by highlighting the nature of the 'evil' for which Israel was being punished. It is the same evil that brought about the destruction of Israel in 721BC and of Judah over a century later. YHWH (6:10), who redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan has been faithful to them, but they have not 'given heed to his voice'(6:10). They have found it easier to follow the predictable superstitions of Canaan and settle for the meanings and values associated with Baal and Asherah, content to please 'the gods of the Amorites' and in return to have good harvests and peace in the land. As we have already seen, this didn't work. Having failed to live the covenant in the west ('Amorites') they have become prey to the marauding hordes from the east (Midian).

Here we are introduced to Gideon (the one who 'cuts down', gāda'). He is introduced as a 'mighty warrior'. Because of the revelation of YHWH here the 'oak at Ophrah'(6:11) became a sanctuary, sacred to the Manasseh tribe (see 6:24). Presumably, this story was recalled and preserved there. YHWH is revealing himself to Gideon through a 'messenger'('angel'; see 2:1; 5:23). The angel's greeting is picked up by Luke as the greeting of the angel to Mary (see Luke 1:28).

Gideon's response is a reasonable one. It is hard to see how YHWH could be with them when he 'has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian'(6:13). This is the first lesson in the many-layered story of Gideon. The problem was not that YHWH was not with his people. It was that they were not with YHWH. (This was Saint Augustine's conversion experience expressed beautifully in his prayer: 'You were with me, but I was not with you'.)

'Unit' here translates the Hebrew 'elep (which later came to mean 'thousand'). In the battle scenes 'unit'(or 'contingent') is a better translation. The victory over Midian was one of the great victories of the pre-monarchic period of Israel. Faced with the oppression under the Assyrians three centuries later, Isaiah writes:

The yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken
as on the day of Midian.

– Isaiah 9:4

YHWH of hosts will wield a whip
against them, as when he struck
Midian at the rock of Oreb.

– Isaiah 10:26

The Psalmist prays that YHWH will do to Israel's enemies

as you did to Midian ... Make their
nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, all their
princes like Zebah and Zalmunna.

– Psalm 83:9-11

Like Moses, Gideon is diffident. YHWH assures him that the victory will be YHWH's, not his. His weakness is irrelevant. In fact he is chosen because of it. We recall the words spoken to Paul of Tarsus:

My grace is sufficient for you, for
power is made perfect in weak-
ness.

– 2Corinthians 12:9

Gideon offers hospitality to YHWH's messenger and is given a sign when the messenger uses his walking staff to touch the food placed on the rock. It is consumed in fire – an offering accepted by YHWH. In Manasseh Gideon 'the mighty warrior' is likened to Moses whom 'YHWH knew face to face'(Deuteronomy 34:10).

14Then YHWH turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you." **15**He responded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My *unit* is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

16YHWH said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them."

17Then he said to him, "If now I have found favour with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me.

18Do not depart from here until I come to you, and bring out my present, and set it before you." And he said, "I will stay until you return."

19So Gideon went into his house and prepared a kid, and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour; the meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the oak and presented them.

20The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so. **21**Then the angel of YHWH reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes; and the angel of YHWH vanished from his sight. **22**Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of YHWH; and Gideon said, "Help me, Lord YHWH! For I have seen the angel of YHWH face to face." **23**But YHWH said to him, "Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die." **24**Then Gideon built an altar there to YHWH, and called it, YHWH is peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites.

Gideon's first task: destroy the altar to Baal (6:25-32)

²⁵That night YHWH said to him, "Take your father's bull, the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that belongs to your father, and cut down the sacred pole that is beside it; ²⁶and build an altar to YHWH your God on the top of the stronghold here, in proper order; then take the second bull, and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the sacred pole that you shall cut down."

The altar to Baal and the 'sacred pole' ('Asherah') symbolise the infidelity of Israel. Before ridding the land of Midian, Gideon must wage war against the apostasy that brought on the disaster.

²⁷So Gideon took ten of his servants, and did as YHWH had told him; but because he was too afraid of his family and the townspeople to do it by day, he did it by night. ²⁸When the townspeople rose early in the morning, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the sacred pole beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built. ²⁹So they said to one another, "Who has done this?" After searching and inquiring, they were told, "Gideon son of Joash did it." ³⁰Then the townspeople said to Joash, "Bring out your son, so that he may die, for he has pulled down the altar of Baal and cut down the sacred pole beside it." ³¹But Joash said to all who were arrayed against him, "Will you contend for Baal? Or will you defend his cause? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been pulled down." ³²Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, "Let Baal contend against him," because he pulled down his altar.

Gideon's father defends him. His son Gideon ('the one who cuts down') has pulled down the altar to Baal. If Baal is a god let Baal 'contend against' (rīb) him. Hence Gideon's name 'Jerubbaal' (from 'rīb' and 'Baal').

Gideon summons the northern tribes against Midian (6:33-35)

³³Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East came together, and crossing the Jordan they encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. ³⁴But the spirit of YHWH took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. ³⁵He sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them.

We are back with the situation that has caused the people to cry out to YHWH (6:3-7), and, once again, we are in the region of the victory of Deborah and Barak (Judges 4-5): the plain of Esdraelon (Jezreel), separating Gideon's tribal area, Manasseh, from the tribal areas of Galilee. Riding their camels, the bedouin invaders have the advantage on the plain, but 'the spirit of YHWH took possession of Gideon' who takes over the leadership of his own clan and summons the neighbouring tribes to battle.

An embellishment from folklore: Gideon is on a divine mission (6:36-40)

³⁶Then Gideon said to God, "In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, ³⁷I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said." ³⁸And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. ³⁹Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew." ⁴⁰And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

Fleece gathers dew at night in the desert. This 'miracle' demonstrates that YHWH is really with Gideon. We can expect a magnificent victory.

This is to be YHWH's victory (7:1-7)

Only those who trust YHWH are allowed to stay. This leads to over two thirds of the fighting force returning to their homes. Then Gideon is instructed to choose those who show by their manner of drinking that they are less alert.

¹Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the troops that were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod; and the camp of Midian was north of them, below the hill of Moreh, in the valley.

'hārad' means to tremble, and 'môr'â' means fear. Both words occur again in verse three: 'fearful and trembling'.

²YHWH said to Gideon, "The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.' ³Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.'" Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two *contingents* returned, and ten *contingents* remained.

⁴Then YHWH said to Gideon, "The troops are still too many; take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you there. When I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go with you; and when I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go." ⁵So he brought the troops down to the water; and YHWH said to Gideon, "All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths, you shall put to the other side." ⁶The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water. ⁷Then YHWH said to Gideon, "With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go to their homes."

Building up the suspense (7:8-18)

⁸So he took the jars of the troops from their hands, and their trumpets; and he sent all the rest of Israel back to their own tents, but retained the three hundred. The camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

⁹That same night YHWH said to him, "Get up, attack the camp; for I have given it into your hand. ¹⁰But if you fear to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah; ¹¹and you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to attack the camp." Then he went down with his servant Purah to the outposts of the armed men that were in the camp.

¹²The Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley as thick as locusts; and their camels were without number, countless as the sand on the seashore. ¹³When Gideon arrived, there was a man telling a dream to his comrade; and he said, "I had a dream, and in it a cake of *mouldy* barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent, and struck it so that it fell; it turned upside down, and the tent collapsed." ¹⁴And his comrade answered, "This is no other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, a man of Israel; into his hand God has given Midian and all the army."

The tent (Bedouin) is destroyed by the bread (the settlers).

¹⁵When Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshipped; and he returned to the camp of Israel, and said, "Get up; for YHWH has given the army of Midian into your hand." ¹⁶After he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and put trumpets into the hands of all of them, and empty jars, with torches inside the jars, ¹⁷he said to them, "Look at me, and do the same; when I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. ¹⁸When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets around the whole camp, and shout, 'For YHWH and for Gideon!'"

Surprise and panic (7:19-22)

¹⁹So Gideon and the hundred who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. ²⁰So the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars, holding in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow; and they cried, "A sword for YHWH and for Gideon!" ²¹Every man stood in his place all around the camp, and all the men in camp ran; they cried out and fled. ²²When they blew the three hundred trumpets, YHWH set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army.

This is not a victory for the sword, wielded by a courageous army. Gideon was, indeed, 'afraid to attack'(7:10). YHWH alone is the victor.

A joke at Ephraim's expense (7:22 - 8:3)

In their panic the Medianites flee in every direction. Then 'all the men of Israel' from the local tribes get involved. Then, belatedly, Ephraim, Manasseh's southern neighbour and the other half of the Joseph tribe, is summoned to guard the river crossings to cut off escape. They do so, and turn up unexpectedly with the heads of two leaders of the Bedouin: Oreb ('raven') and Zeev ('wolf'). Both these names are recalled in Psalm 83:9-10, and Isaiah 10:26 speaks of the 'rock of Oreb'(see page 307). They are put out that they were not in on the initial battle. The Manasseh troops cleverly talk their way out of a confrontation with their proud neighbour. The proverb is intentionally ambiguous. Gideon's clan enjoyed the harvest. Ephraim got only the left-overs. But they turn the proverb to make Ephraim look good, and Ephraim falls for it. They then disappear out of the story.

²²The army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. ²³And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after the Midianites. ²⁴Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters against them, as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan." So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they seized the waters as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan. ²⁵They captured the two captains of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the wine press of Zeeb, as they pursued the Midianites. They brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon beyond the Jordan.

^{8:1}Then the Ephraimites said to him, "What have you done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against the Midianites?" And they upbraided him violently. ²So he said to them, "What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? ³God has given into your hands the captains of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; what have I been able to do in comparison with you?" When he said this, their anger against him subsided.

A personal vendetta, not commanded by YHWH (8:4-22)

Here we have another story from the folklore surrounding the 'mighty warrior', Gideon. Two of the Midian chiefs were responsible for killing members of Gideon's family. They thought that they would be secure in Transjordan. Gideon, however, again with what appears to be a small band, crosses the Jordan determined to avenge his brothers.

⁴Then Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the three hundred who were with him, exhausted and famished. ⁵So he said to the people of Succoth, "Please give some loaves of bread to my followers, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian."

'Succoth'(8:5) is in the Jordan valley to the east of the Jordan just north of the Jabbok. Zebah ('victim') and Zalmunna ('protection refused') are also mentioned in Psalm 83.

6But the officials of Succoth said, "Do you already have in your possession the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna, that we should give bread to your army?"

A man has to show some proof of his military prowess. The people of Succoth don't know who Gideon is and are not ready to give him the benefit of the doubt. At the same time they refuse him and his soldiers hospitality, and, from Gideon's point of view, they are not fighting on YHWH's side. There is no reason to think Gideon is either. The earlier victory seems to have gone to his head, and he is off now under his own steam.

7Gideon replied, "Well then, when YHWH has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will trample your flesh on the thorns of the wilderness and on briers." 8From there he went up to Penuel, and made the same request of them; and the people of Penuel answered him as the people of Succoth had answered. 9So he said to the people of Penuel, "When I come back victorious, I will break down this tower."

Penuel is near Succoth. This is where Jacob struggled with the night stranger (see Genesis 32:24-32).

10Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about fifteen contingents of men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East; for one hundred twenty contingents of men bearing arms had fallen.

'Contingents' translates 'elep (see 6:15). Karkor is on the edge of the Arabian desert to the east of the Dead Sea. The two chiefs are in their home territory.

11So Gideon went up by the caravan route east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and attacked the army; for the army was off its guard. 12Zebah and Zalmunna fled; and he pursued them and took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and threw all the army into a panic.

13When Gideon son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres, 14he caught a young man, one of the people of Succoth, and questioned him; and he listed for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven people. 15Then he came to the people of Succoth, and said, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, 'Do you already have in your possession the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna, that we should give bread to your troops who are exhausted?'" 16So he took the elders of the city and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them he trampled the people of Succoth. 17He also broke down the tower of Penuel, and killed the men of the city.

18Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "What about the men whom you killed at Tabor?" They answered, "As you are, so were they, every one of them; they resembled the sons of a king." 19And he replied, "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother; as YHWH lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you." 20So he said to Jether his firstborn, "Go kill them!" But the boy did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a boy.

²¹Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, “You come and kill us; for as the man is, so is his strength.” So Gideon proceeded to kill Zebah and Zalmunna; and he took the crescents that were on the necks of their camels.

Gideon declines the offer of kingship (8:22-32)

²²Then the Israelites said to Gideon, “Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian.”

²³Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; YHWH will rule over you.” ²⁴Then Gideon said to them, “Let me make a request of you; each of you give me an earring he has taken as booty.” (For the enemy had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)

As in the story of Joseph, these Bedouin from Midian are Ishmaelites (8:24; see Genesis 27:28, 36).

²⁵“We will willingly give them,” they answered. So they spread a garment, and each threw into it an earring he had taken as booty. ²⁶The weight of the golden earrings that he requested was one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold (apart from the crescents and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and the collars that were on the necks of their camels). ²⁷Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his town, in Ophrah; and all Israel prostituted themselves to it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.

Another twist in the Gideon story. He has fought a battle that was not authorised by YHWH. He has rightly denied the offer of kingship (an indication of the insecurity of Israel and its desire to be like its neighbours rather than rely on YHWH), but he uses the booty to make a richly adorned vest for purposes of divination (see the ephod of the highpriest, Exodus 28:15-30). He sets it up in the sanctuary at Ophrah and the people look upon it as an idol. We are reminded of the golden calf (see Exodus 32). The Bible does not idealise its great men. They are presented as the stories present them: real, faulty human beings, but raised up by YHWH in response to his people’s cry.

²⁸So Midian was subdued before the Israelites, and they lifted up their heads no more. So the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.

²⁹Jerubbaal son of Joash went to live in his own house. ³⁰Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. ³¹His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech.

³²Then Gideon son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

Though Gideon declines the offer of kingship, he certainly lives like a king. With such a mixed bag of stories about him he is still remembered as the man through who YHWH broke the power of Midian.

Gideon's son, Abimelech (8:33 – 9:57)

³³As soon as Gideon died, the Israelites relapsed and prostituted themselves with the Baals, making Baal-berith their god. ³⁴The Israelites did not remember YHWH their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies on every side; ³⁵and they did not exhibit loyalty to the house of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel. ^{9:1}Now Abimelech son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's kinsfolk and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, ²"Say in the hearing of all the lords of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh." ³So his mother's kinsfolk spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the lords of Shechem; and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." ⁴They gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the temple of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him. ⁵He went to his father's house at Ophrah, and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone; but Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived, for he hid himself. ⁶Then all the lords of Shechem and all Beth-millo came together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.

We have come to expect the kind of introduction given in 8:33-35, though the title 'Baal-berith' (covenant with Baal) for the god they worshipped is worse than anything we have met to this stage. The people have broken their covenant with YHWH and settled for cult of the local gods. The result of their apostasy on this occasion is not subjection to a foreign power, but rather the heinous crimes of Gideon's son, Abimelech, who has himself set up as king in Shechem, the seat of the former sanctuary of the tribal confederation, now turned over to Baal-berith. It emerges later that 'Abimelech ruled over Israel three years' (9:22), which accounts for his being included here. The fact that he destroyed Shechem may also be relevant. This may be part of the Deuteronomistic polemic against sanctuaries other than Jerusalem. The Deuteronomists began Judges with a thinly veiled polemic against the shrine at Bethel (see 2:1-5). They end with a polemic against the sanctuary at Dan (see chapter eighteen), and here, in the centre of the Book is a polemic against the sanctuary at Shechem. It seems that placing Jerubbaal and Abimelech in the centre is intentional, for Jerubbaal is listed before Barak in 1 Samuel 12:11 (see also Hebrews 11:32).

While there is no evidence of any destruction of Shechem in the final years of the thirteenth century when Israel was emerging in the hill country, there is evidence of the city being destroyed in the middle of the twelfth century, which fits with the Abimelech account found here (see Judges 9:45).

The Canaanite city fathers set Abimelech up as their king and he is supported from the treasury of the Canaanite sanctuary.

Jotham's fable and prophetic denunciation (9:7-21)

⁷When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on a *promontory* of Mount Gerizim, and cried aloud and said to them, "Listen to me, you lords of Shechem, so that God may listen to you.

⁸The trees once went out
to anoint a king over themselves.
So they said to the olive tree,
'Reign over us.'

⁹The olive tree answered them,
'Shall I stop producing my rich oil
by which gods and mortals are honored,
and go to sway over the trees?'

¹⁰Then the trees said to the fig tree,
'You come and reign over us.'

¹¹But the fig tree answered them,
'Shall I stop producing my sweetness
and my delicious fruit,
and go to sway over the trees?'

¹²Then the trees said to the vine,
'You come and reign over us.'

¹³But the vine said to them,
'Shall I stop producing my wine
that cheers gods and mortals,
and go to sway over the trees?'

¹⁴So all the trees said to the bramble,
'You come and reign over us.'

¹⁵And the bramble said to the trees,
'If in good faith you are anointing me king over you,
then come and take refuge in my shade;
but if not, let fire come out of the bramble
and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'

¹⁶"Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and honour when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have done to him as his actions deserved — ¹⁷for my father fought for you, and risked his life, and rescued you from the hand of Midian; ¹⁸but you have risen up against my father's house this day, and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his slave woman, king over the lords of Shechem, because he is your kinsman — ¹⁹if, I say, you have acted in good faith and honour with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you; ²⁰but if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the lords of Shechem, and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the lords of Shechem, and from Beth-millo, and devour Abimelech." ²¹Then Jotham ran away and fled, going to Beer, where he remained for fear of his brother Abimelech.

The city fathers of Shechem turn against Abimelech (9:22-25)

²²Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. ²³But God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem; and the lords of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech. ²⁴This happened so that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might be avenged and their blood be laid on their brother Abimelech, who killed them, and on the lords of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers. ²⁵So, out of hostility to him, the lords of Shechem set ambushes on the mountain tops. They robbed all who passed by them along that way; and it was reported to Abimelech.

Another opportunist (9:26-41)

²⁶When Gaal son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his kinsfolk, the lords of Shechem put confidence in him. ²⁷They went out into the field and gathered the grapes from their vineyards, trod them, and celebrated. Then they went into the temple of their god, ate and drank, and ridiculed Abimelech. ²⁸Gaal son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelech, and who are we of Shechem, that we should serve him? Did not the son of Jerubbaal and Zebul his officer serve the men of Hamor father of Shechem? Why then should we serve him? ²⁹If only this people were under my command! Then I would remove Abimelech; I would say to him, 'Increase your army, and come out.'"

³⁰When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal son of Ebed, his anger was kindled. ³¹He sent messengers to Abimelech at Arumah, saying, "Look, Gaal son of Ebed and his kinsfolk have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you. ³²Now therefore, go by night, you and the troops that are with you, and lie in wait in the fields. ³³Then early in the morning, as soon as the sun rises, get up and rush on the city; and when he and the troops that are with him come out against you, you may deal with them as best you can."

³⁴So Abimelech and all the troops with him got up by night and lay in wait against Shechem in four companies. ³⁵When Gaal son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance of the gate of the city, Abimelech and the troops with him rose from the ambush. ³⁶And when Gaal saw them, he said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming down from the mountain tops!" And Zebul said to him, "The shadows on the mountains look like people to you."

³⁷Gaal spoke again and said, "Look, people are coming down from Tabburerez, and one company is coming from the direction of Elon-meonenim."

³⁸Then Zebul said to him, "Where is your boast now, you who said, 'Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?' Are not these the troops you made light of? Go out now and fight with them." ³⁹So Gaal went out at the head of the lords of Shechem, and fought with Abimelech. ⁴⁰Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him. Many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate.

⁴¹So Abimelech resided at Arumah; and Zebul drove out Gaal and his kinsfolk, so that they could not live on at Shechem.

Abimelech destroys Shechem (9:42-49)

⁴²On the following day the people went out into the fields. When Abimelech was told, ⁴³he took his troops and divided them into three companies, and lay in wait in the fields. When he looked and saw the people coming out of the city, he rose against them and killed them. ⁴⁴Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city, while the two companies rushed on all who were in the fields and killed them. ⁴⁵Abimelech fought against the city all that day; he took the city, and killed the people that were in it; and he razed the city and sowed it with salt.

⁴⁶When all the lords of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the temple of El-berith. ⁴⁷Abimelech was told that all the lords of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. ⁴⁸So Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the troops that were with him. Abimelech took an ax in his hand, cut down a bundle of brushwood, and took it up and laid it on his shoulder. Then he said to the troops with him, "What you have seen me do, do quickly, as I have done." ⁴⁹So every one of the troops cut down a bundle and following Abimelech put it against the stronghold, and they set the stronghold on fire over them, so that all the people of the Tower of Shechem also died, about a thousand men and women.

'Mount Zalmon' (9:48, 'Black Mountain') in this instance refers to the high ground on which stood the Shechem temple and its tower.

Abimelech is killed (9:50-57)

⁵⁰Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and encamped against Thebez, and took it. ⁵¹But there was a strong tower within the city, and all the men and women and all the lords of the city fled to it and shut themselves in; and they went to the roof of the tower. ⁵²Abimelech came to the tower, and fought against it, and came near to the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire. ⁵³But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, and crushed his skull. ⁵⁴Immediately he called to the young man who carried his armour and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, so people will not say about me, 'A woman killed him.'" So the young man thrust him through, and he died. ⁵⁵When the Israelites saw that Abimelech was dead, they all went home.

⁵⁶Thus God repaid Abimelech for the crime he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers; ⁵⁷and God also made all the wickedness of the people of Shechem fall back on their heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham son of Jerubbaal.

Abimelech is remembered as the one who destroyed Shechem, a Canaanite stronghold in the central hill country. However, he was not called by God and his claimed 'kingship' was shortlived. He received the punishment he deserved. Only those can lead who are raised up by YHWH.

6. Tolah (10:1-2)

¹After Abimelech, Tola son of Puah son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, who lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim, rose to deliver Israel. ²He judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he died, and was buried at Shamir.

The fact that so little is told of Tola may indicate that he was raised up by YHWH to ‘judge Israel’ at a time of peace. ‘Deliver’ (10:1, *yāša‘*) does not necessarily imply military action. YHWH raised him up to preserve the covenant. The names Tola and Puah are associated with Issachar also in Genesis 46:13 and Numbers 26:23.

7. Jair (10:3-5)

³After him came Jair the Gileadite, who judged Israel twenty-two years. ⁴He had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys; and they had thirty towns, which are in the land of Gilead, and are called Havvoth-jair to this day. ⁵Jair died, and was buried in Kamon.

The name ‘Jair’ means ‘he enlightens’. ‘Sons’ in this context is an indication of political alliance: a confederate sub-group that is his power base. There is a play on words between ‘towns’ (*‘ārîm*) and the unusual word for ‘donkeys’ (*‘yārîm*). Jair is mentioned elsewhere, as a member of the Manasseh tribe. There seems to be some uncertainty as to the borders of Gilead and Bashan (see map page 51):

Jair the Manassite acquired the whole region of Argob as far as the border of the Geshurites and the Maacathites, and he named them—that is, Bashan—after himself, Havvoth-jair, as it is to this day.)

– Deuteronomy 3:14 (see also Joshua 13:30 and Numbers 32:41)