

Lesson 7: The Judges



Fig 1. The Promised Land

The Promised Land was now conquered, 600 years after God had promised Abraham that his seed would become a nation. God had promised blessings, stating that if the people followed Him faithfully, they would be “*the head, not the tail*” in the world, and be “*at the top*” and “*never at the bottom*” ([Deut. 28:1-14](#); [30:1-10](#)). All that the Israelites needed to do was obey God. However, they did not obey God. The blessings they could have had were forfeit.

The recurring pattern in the book of Judges is often referred to as the “*Four S’s*.” (1, pg. 227)

1. **Sin:** The people fall into sin, as they worship false gods or intermarry with the Canaanites.
2. **Servitude:** The people’s sin brings on a period of servitude in which Israel becomes subject to people they once controlled.
3. **Supplication:** After a time in servitude, Israel cries out to God in supplication.
4. **Salvation:** After supplication God raises up a leader to bring the people salvation.

JUDGES

The Book of Judges is the main source of information for this period (1367-1050 BC) in Palestine. Its history can be accepted as completely accurate. A key verse, written twice ([Judg. 17:6](#); [21:25](#)), states its tragic theme: “*Everyone did as he saw fit.*” This pattern of failure runs throughout the book.

Most of the Book of Judges is spent on six foreign oppressions:

1. MESOPOTAMIAN
2. MOABITE
3. CANAANITE
4. MIDIANITE
5. AMMONITE
6. PHILISTINE

None of these came from large, national powers of the day. The large powers of the time were not engaged in an active domination of the area.

- Egypt’s Eighteenth Dynasty rulers, after Amenhotep III, were all weak and not interested in Canaanite control.

- Both Seti I and his son, Rameses II, of the Nineteenth Dynasty, did campaign north against the Hittites, but only passed through the coastal areas of Palestine. Bethshan was occupied by both of these rulers. The valley region was under Canaanite control, with Israel being little affected.
- Merneptah and Rameses III of the Twentieth Dynasty did make temporary invasions of the Palestine regions to keep control of the coastal highway.
- The Hittites never invaded Palestine, probably because Egypt kept them in check.
- The country of Mitanni of northern Mesopotamia was in turn kept in check by the Hittites under Shuppiluliuma (1375-1340) who was mainly responsible for the rise of the Hittite Empire.

Israel's enemies were people of the local area, small like herself. Of all the local enemies, the most serious were the Philistines, the one Israel faced last during this time period into the early Unified Kingdom.

- As part of the vast movement of the Sea Peoples, the Philistines had been repelled by Pharaoh Merneptah (1238-1228), but they came in larger numbers against Egypt in the rule of Rameses III (1195-1164), between his fifth and eleventh years.
- They were kept from infiltrating Egypt but not from occupying land that Egypt claimed along the southern Canaanite shoreline.
 - o Here, in an area previously assigned to Judah and Dan, the Philistines established a pentapolis, in which the five main cities were Ashkelon, Gaza, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath, each of which had its own ruler.

In 1993, archaeologists Seymour Gitin of the W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research and Trude Dothan of Hebrew University of Jerusalem were excavating at Tel Mique in Israel.

- They suspected that Tel Mique was the site of one of the main cities of the Philistine pentapolis, specifically the biblical city of Ekron ([Josh 13:3](#)).
- This was confirmed when an inscription, in the temple being excavated, the city name "Ekron" was found (Fig. 2). It was a royal inscription carved into a slab of limestone.
- The Philistine city of Ekron was identified with Tel Mique.



Fig 2. Ekron Inscription

The Book of Judges

The Book of Judges is named from the people God selected to provide leadership for His people. [Judges 2:16](#) says that God "*raised up judges who saved them.*" Twelve names are normally included in the group (fig. 3). To this list sometimes are added Abimelech, Eli, and Samuel.

- Abimelech, son of Gideon, was more a renegade king than a judge.
- Eli and Samuel, though spoken of as "*judging*" Israel ([1 Sam. 4:18](#); [7:15-17](#)), were more high priest and prophet.

Chronology Problems

The number of years indicated in the book of Judges, for the periods of oppression and peace, including the time of Samson, adds up to 410 years. With the Exodus placed at 1446 BC and Solomon's temple at 966 BC, insufficient time exists to allow 410 years for the events outside of the Judges time period.

- The chronology problem comes from [1 Kings 6:1](#), which states that 480 years elapsed between the Exodus and Solomon's fourth year, when he began to build the temple.
- This leaves only 70 years in which to locate the 40-year wilderness period, Joshua's time of leadership (16 years), the period between Samson's demise and Saul's inauguration (no fewer than 5 years), Saul's 40-year reign ([Acts 13:21](#)), David's 40-year reign, and Solomon's first 4 years...a total of 145 years altogether.
- Thus, the 410 years for the events in judges is at least 75 years too long.

The Book of Judges itself suggests the solution; it implies that certain periods overlapped in time.

- For instance, [Judges 3:30-4:1](#) implies that Shamgar judged during the 80 years of peace following Ehud's deliverance from the Moabites.
- [Judges 10:7](#) implies that Jephthah, occupied with the Ammonites east of the Jordan, and Samson, concerned with the Philistines on the west, were contemporary in activity.
- Certain of the lesser judges, because they were active in separated areas of the land, could have also worked at the same time. For example, Tola, who judged in Issachar ([Judg. 10:1-2](#)), and Jair, who judged across the Jordan in Gilead ([Judg. 10:3-5](#)).

Sufficient years may be accounted for to solve the chronology problem.

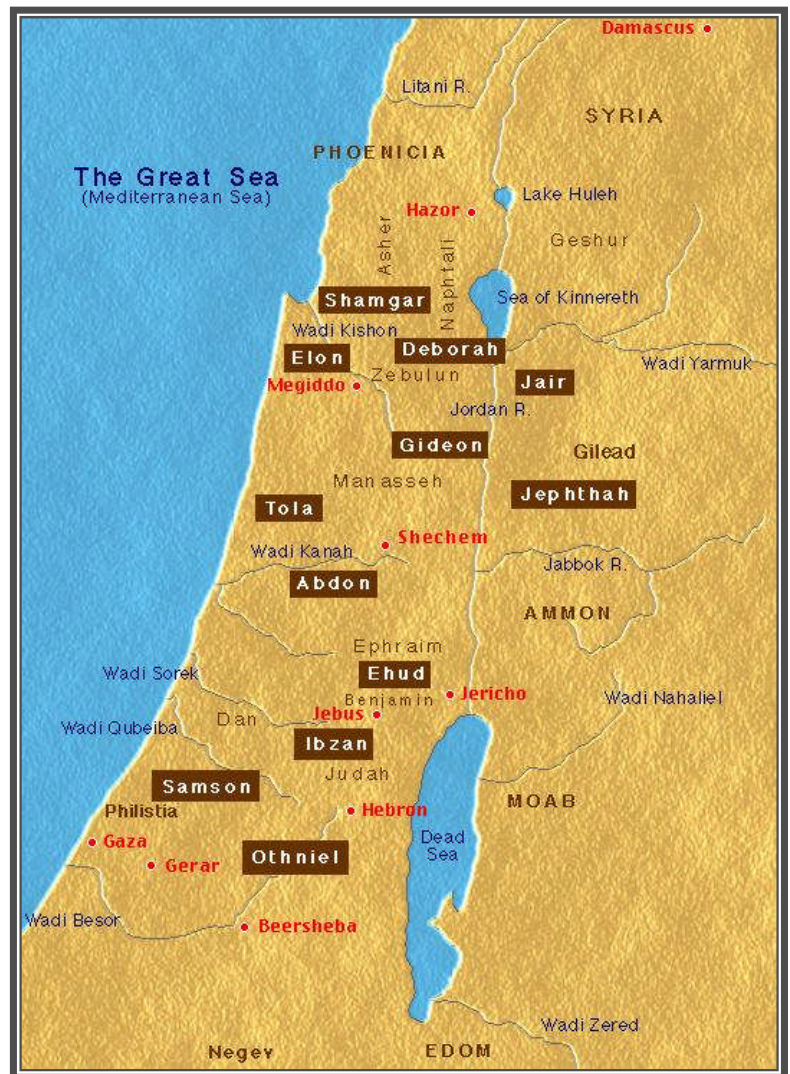


Fig 3. The 12 Judges and Locations

MESOPOTAMIAN OPPRESSION

The Oppression and Deliverance (Judges 3:8-11)

The leader of the Mesopotamian oppression was Cushan Rishathaim. His country is called Aram-Naharaim (fig. 4), meaning “*Aram of the two rivers*,” a designation for Mesopotamia.

- Since this is the only oppressor who came from a distant land, and since the Mesopotamian region did not otherwise have military contact as far south as Israel at this time in history, considerable discussion has ensued as to the man’s identity.
- Some have suggested that Cushan Rishathaim may have been the Hittite king who is known to have conquered Mitanni and later southward as far as Palestine, leaving traces at Bethshan and elsewhere.

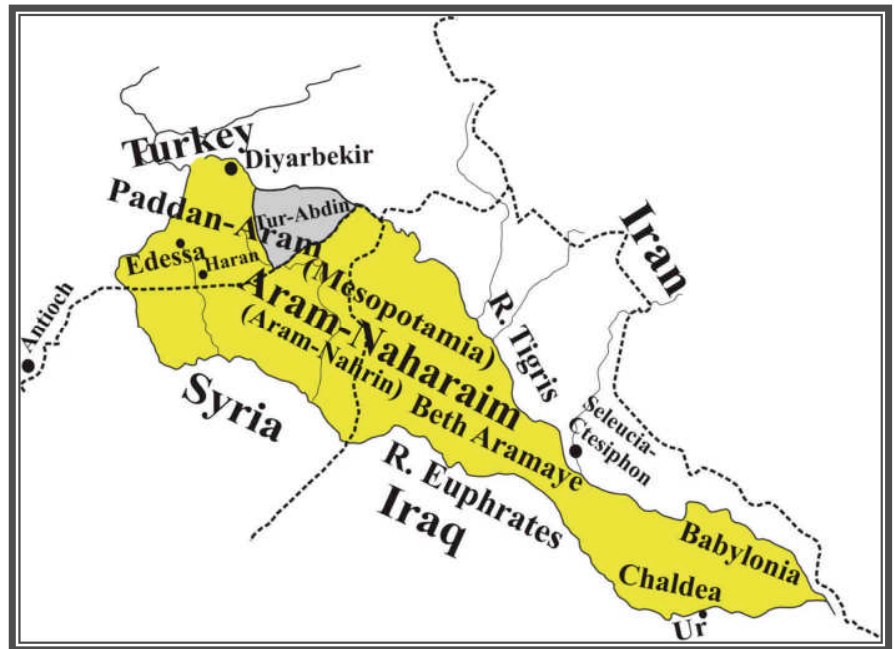


Fig 4. Aram-Naharaim

The Bible does not tell how this conquest by Cushan-Rishathaim was affected, nor how many tribes were involved. None of the other oppressions affected all of the tribes, and so likely this one did not either.

- The duration of occupation is given as eight years. Toward the close of this time the people cried to God for relief, and He gave it through Othniel, younger brother of Caleb.
- No record is given of how he won the victory. It is stated that “*the Spirit of the LORD came upon him*” in achieving it. After the victory, Israel had peace 40 years.

This first oppression can be dated to the early second quarter of the fourteenth century.

- It could not have followed Joshua’s death immediately, because Judges 2:7 states that the people continued faithful to serve God during his time and that of the elders who out lived him.
- Since the oppression was permitted because of unfaithfulness, there had to be time for the elders to die and Israel’s apostasy to occur.
- Joshua could hardly have died before 1390 BC, which means this oppression cannot be placed much before 1375 BC, 15 years later.

MOABITE OPPRESSION

Oppression and Deliverance (Judges 3:12-30)

The second oppressing nation was Moab. Moab lay immediately across the Dead Sea from Judah, south of the Transjordan tribes.

- Moab, assisted in some part by Ammonites and Amalekites, crossed the Jordan and occupied Jericho.
- Eglon was their king. Using Jericho as a center, he kept the Israelites in servitude for 18 years.

Israel cried once more to God for relief, and God rose up a second deliverer, Ehud of the tribe Benjamin.

- If the date for Ehud is set not long after the civil war of Benjamin and the other tribes, he may have been one of the 600 Benjamites who escaped to the rock of Rimmon.
- The deliverance Ehud effected was not through warfare, but through an act of deception in which he killed King Eglon.
 - o Ehud extended a gift from the subjugated Israelites to King Eglon. Alone with the king, Ehud killed him with a sword.
 - o Ehud then assembled Israelites at the Jordan where the Moabites, who could now be expected to retreat, would cross. The Moabites did retreat, and Ehud's men killed 10,000 Moabites. This brought 80 years of peace to the land.



Fig 5. Ehud Kills King Eglon

Evidence

Following the destruction of Jericho by Joshua the site lay abandoned for decades. Then, an isolated palace was constructed. It was found and excavated by British archaeologist John Garstang in the 1930s. The archaeological finds in the stratum of the palace match the period of the palace at Jericho where Eglon, king of Moab, was assassinated by Ehud (Judges 3:15-30).

- The building dates to the second half of the 14th century BC, the time of Eglon's oppression.
- The plan of the building is similar to other palaces of the period and fits the description given in the Bible.
- The building was an isolated structure, as the Bible implies. There is no evidence for a town at Jericho at this time.
- The resident was wealthy, seen by a large quantity of imported articles and other decorated pottery.
- The resident was involved in administrative activities, as evidenced by a cuneiform tablet found.
- The building was occupied for only a short period of time and then abandoned.

Eighty Years of Peace (Judges 3:30)

One reason for the 80-years of peace could be the renewed activity of Egypt during this time. The Bible places these 80-years in the latter half of the thirteenth century.

- The Egyptian period would have been the Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt, when power was exerted by Egypt in Palestine and southern Syria, particularly by Seti I (1316-1304) and Rameses II.
- Both rulers campaigned against the Hittites, along the coast of Palestine. These displays of power would have been well observed by small nations of the region, who would have refrained from undue overt activity that might call attention to them. Consequently, local wars would not have been waged so long as Egypt was in the area, thus making for the period of peace.

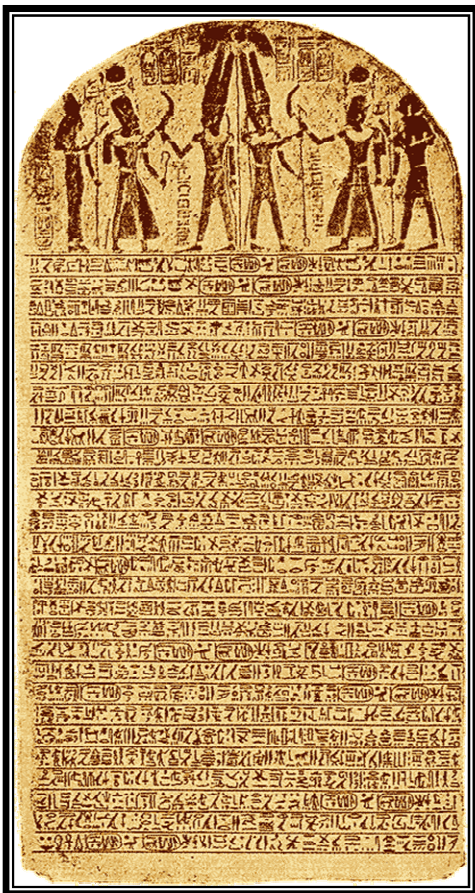


Fig 6. The Merneptah Stele

Egypt's goal was to control the coastal highway leading to Syria to the north. Cities along this highway such as Gaza, Ashdod, and Aphek functioned as Egyptian strongholds. The Merneptah Stele provides clues as to how far inland Egypt extended.

Merneptah Stela

The most important mention of Israel outside of the Bible is found in the Merneptah Stela (fig. 6). Discovered in 1896 in Merneptah's mortuary temple in Thebes by Flinders Petrie, the stela is a eulogy to pharaoh Merneptah, who ruled Egypt after Rameses the Great, c. 1236-1223 BC.

- Of significance to Biblical studies is a short section at the end of the poem describing a campaign to Canaan by Merneptah in the first few years of his reign. One line mentions Israel: *"Israel is laid waste, its seed is not."* Here we have the earliest mention of Israel outside the Bible and the only mention of Israel in Egyptian records.
- Also mentioned is *"Carried off is Ashkelon; seized upon is Gezer; Yanoam is made as that which does not exist."*
- This puts Israel as a nation right after the conquest of Canaan by Joshua (1406 BC).
- The alignment of these three cities implies that the confrontation with Israel took place in northern Palestine. Gezer was a key access point into the Hill country of Palestine where the tribes of Israel were located. It could be here that Israel clashed with Merneptah.

Karnak Temple in Thebes

Another confirmation of Merneptah's campaign into Israel is found on battle reliefs on a wall of the Karnak Temple in Thebes.

- The reliefs are found to carry the royal cartouche of Merneptah.
- Three of the battle scenes depict attacks on fortified cities, and one of the cities is identified as Ashkelon. The other two cities must be Gezer and Yanoam. A fourth battle scene depicts the defeat of an enemy in open terrain.
- These scenes are the earliest depictions of Israelites and are a perfect match with the Merneptah Stele.

Shamgar (Judges 3:31)

It was probably during this same 80-year span that Shamgar lived as third judge.

- The brief record of his life follows directly after the record of Ehud's life.
- Deborah, the next judge, mentions Shamgar in her victory song (Judg. 5:6) as having preceded her.
- He is called "*son of Anath*," which suggests that his hometown was Bethanath, a southern city of Judah (Josh. 15:59).
- His victory is described as a personal one, in which he demonstrated enormous strength and courage, killing no less than 600 Philistines with nothing but an ox-goad (a stout stick, often bronze tipped, used to guide oxen at work).

CANAANITE OPPRESSION

Oppression and Deliverance (Judges 4-5)

The third oppression came from Canaanites, whom the Israelite tribes should have driven from the land years before. Jabin, king of Hazor, was the leader, and Sisera was his general.

- The city of Hazor, defeated by Joshua 170 years before, had again become strong.
- Sisera employed 900 chariots of iron and made Harosheth, about eleven miles northwest of Megiddo on the Kishon River, his center of activity. He was able to maintain control over Israelite tribes of the area for twenty years.
 - o Harosheth is identified with Tell el-Harbaj, a six-acre site on the south bank of the Kishon River, at the foot of Mount Carmel.



Fig 7. Hazor Tablets

In 1992 a cuneiform tablet fragment was found at Hazor, addressed to a king named Jabin. The royal document dates from the 18th century, indicating the name of Jabin was dynastic and in long use (fig. 7).

Israel's principal deliverer this time was a woman, Deborah.

- She is called a prophetess.
- She received people under a palm tree located between Ramah and Bethel, 60 miles south of where the battle with Sisera takes place.
- She called on Barak, a man of Kedesh, far to the north in Naphtali, identified with Tell Qades, northwest of the drained Lake Huleh, to assemble an army. He consented, provided she would participate with him. When she agreed he gathered an army of 10,000 men from Zebulun and Naphtali, apparently the two tribes most affected by the oppression.

Barak brought his army south to Mount Tabor and joined battle with Sisera west of Megiddo (Judg. 5:19) on the banks of the Kishon. There was victory for Israel and 40 years of peace followed.

MIDIANITE OPPRESSION

Oppression and Deliverance (Judges 6-8)

The fourth oppression was brought by Midianites aided by Amalekites and “*other eastern peoples*.” This combined enemy came from the east to plunder the grain-growing areas of Israel, primarily the Esdraelon Valley and the Mediterranean coastlands as far south as Gaza (Judg. 6:4).

- For six years the invaders stripped these areas of livestock and grain. The Israelites’ hide in caves.
- When the people cried for relief this time, God provided a deliverer, Gideon.

Gideon lived in Ophrah, a village of Manasseh located in the Esdraelon Valley.

- The people of Ophrah had accepted Baal worship so completely that they had built their own Baal altar and Asherah symbol.
- God’s first order to Gideon was to destroy these objects, which he did at great personal risk, showing courage and faith (Judg. 6:25-32).

Gideon called for an Army, 32,000 responded from the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali.

- As Gideon saw the enemy appear, numbering 120,000 (Judg. 8:10), he believed his 32,000 were too few to do battle. Gideon’s request for divine reassurance, using the sign of the fleece (Judg. 6:33-40).
- God granted the request but then said that the 32,000 were too many, rather than too few. Gideon should reduce the number in order that God might receive credit from the people for the victory when it had been won.
- Gideon obeyed, first by permitting all who were fearful of heart to return home, and then testing to see which men would drink from a brook in a manner showing readiness for battle. This left him only 300 men, an unbelievably small number to face 135,000.

The eve of the battle found the enemy encamped in the Esdraelon Valley between Mount Gilboa on the south and Mount Moreh on the north. Gideon’s men were gathered near the well of Harod at the foot of Gilboa, armed with trumpets and pitchers containing torches.

- Gideon divided his men into three sections, deployed it around the edge of the enemy camp, and attacked by night.
- The simultaneous sounding of the three hundred trumpets and flaring up of the three hundred torches, taken by the Midianites as the signal for a coordinated attack from all sides, ignited panic among the enemy forces. They bolted and ran.
- Gideon quickly sent word to the Ephraimites to cut off the enemy’s escape at the Jordan. They responded, catching the Midianites and killing two of their leaders, Oreb and Zeeb (Judg. 7:23).



Fig 8. Gideon Defeats the Midianites

- At this time some of the troops, who had gone home when given the chance, returned to help in the chase ([Judg. 7:23](#)). Gideon pursued the enemy to their home country where he completed the rout by killing two main leaders, Zebah and Zalmunna.

The country had peace for forty years while Gideon lived.

Abimelech ([Judges 9](#))

At Gideon's death peace was broken by three years of treachery and bloodshed at the hand of Abimelech, the renegade Israelite who had himself proclaimed king.

- He was a son of Gideon by a concubine in Shechem ([Judg. 8:31](#)), who actively sought the kingship.
- Supported by his mother's family in Shechem, he murdered all but one of his 70 brothers, whom he considered potential rivals. Only Jotham, the youngest, escaped.
- Abimelech was crowned by the Shechemites, who were glad to have a king from their own number. He reigned for three years.
- After three years, the Shechemites had experienced enough of his arbitrary ways and revolted, seeking leadership from one Gaal, head of a roving band. In the resulting war, Abimelech was able to crush Gaal's force at Shechem, even burning many of the people alive when they took refuge in the temple of Baal-berith ([Judg. 9:23-49](#)).
- Moving on to Thebez to crush further resistance, he was killed when a woman dropped a millstone on his head ([Judg. 9:50-57](#)).

Evidence

The east gate of Shechem where Gaal and Zebul watched the forces of Abimelech approach the city ([Judges 9:34-38](#)) has been discovered by archaeologists in Shechem.

- Part of the city's fortifications throughout the second millennium, the gate is typical for the Middle Bronze period with three piers and two chambers.
- This gate would have been the main gate of the city in the days of Abimelech.

The Temple of Baal/El-Berith in Shechem, where funds were obtained to finance Abimelech's kingship and where the citizens of Shechem took refuge when Abimelech attacked the city ([Judges 9:4, 46-49](#)) has also been found.

- Shechem is identified with Tel/Tell Balatah. This fortified temple dates to the period of the judges and has walls 17 feet thick.
- Archaeologists have identified this building with the Temple of Baal Berith (fig. 9) mentioned in [Judges 9](#).



Fig 9. The Temple of Baal/El-Berith

Judgeships of Tola and Jair (Judges 10:1-5)

Two minor judgeships, probably contemporaneous, followed Gideon. The two judges served in widely separated parts of the country and so could have been active without interference.

- Tola, of the tribe of Issachar, judged in Shamir, Ephraim, for 23 years.
- Jair judged in an unidentified city of Gilead across the Jordan for 22 years.

Little is known of either person.

- Tola is said to have defended Israel, though without explanation.
- Jair is said to have had thirty sons, riding on thirty ass colts, living in thirty cities, which suggests that he was an individual of unusual position and wealth.

AMMONITE OPPRESSION

Oppression and Deliverance (Judges 10:6-11:33)

The Ammonite oppression was mainly east of the Jordan.

- God's deliverer was Jephthah, the son of a Gileadite named Gilead, and a harlot (Judg. 11:1-3).
- Jephthah first tried to reach a settlement with the Ammonite king by negotiation but did not succeed. The foreign ruler would not accept Jephthah's argument that the land now rightfully belonged to Israel since she had held it for 300 years.
- Jephthah prepared for conflict by raising troops from Manasseh and Gilead. Establishing his headquarters at Mizpah in Gilead, he moved against the Ammonite army and won a decisive victory, seizing no less than twenty cities located between Minnith and Aroer in an area allotted to Reuben.
- Jephthah continued as judge for six years.

Judgeships of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (Judges 12:8-15)

Following Jephthah's judgeship there were three minor judges, possibly contemporaries.

- Ibzan judged in Bethlehem for seven years and had thirty sons and thirty daughters.
- Elon judged in Ajalon of Zebulun to the north for ten years.
- Abdon judged in Ephraim, half-way between, for eight years. Abdon's wealth and position are indicated by the fact that he had forty sons and thirty grandsons.

PHILISTINE OPPRESSION

Oppression (Judges 10:7; 13:1)

The sixth and last oppression recorded in Judges was by the Philistines. According to Judges 10:7, the time was roughly contemporary with the oppression of the Ammonites. The Philistines were able to impose their will on Israel for 40 years and continued to periodically do so through the reign of Israel's first king, Saul.

Samson (Judges 13:2-16:31)

God's man to counter the Philistines was Samson.

- Samson's father was Manoah, a Danite who had not migrated north with other of his tribe.

- Importance was lent to Samson's birth by a prior announcement through the Angel of God ([Judg. 13:3-23](#)). The son to be born would be a Nazirite, which means, among other things, that his hair was not to be cut ([Num. 6:1-13](#)).
- Samson's place of birth was Zorah, located at the boundary line between Israelite and Philistine land.

Samson did not lead an army to battle, but he did go alone among the Philistines, working havoc by feats of enormous strength. This strength was of special enablement by the Spirit of God, his dedication to God being symbolized particularly in Samson's uncut hair. Through this strength he was able to kill many of the enemy.

Samson's Feats of Strength ([Judges 14-15](#))

1. Samson's first demonstration of strength came in connection with his marriage to a Philistine girl of Timnah. On the way to visit her Samson encountered a lion and killed it with his bare hands.

2. The second demonstration occurred within a year. Samson returned to claim his bride, but he was told that she had been given to another. In retaliation, he caught 300 foxes, tied firebrands to pairs of them joined by their tails, and released them to burn Philistine crops. The Philistines reacted by burning Samson's one-time bride and her father to death. Samson avenged their death by slaughtering many of the enemy. Then he moved back to Israelite territory, where 3,000 of his own people, afraid of Philistine retaliation, came to capture him. His countrymen promised not to hurt him themselves, so Samson permitted himself to be bound and delivered to the Philistines in Lehi. Once among the Philistines he burst his ropes and killed 1,000 of the enemy with the use of a "fresh jawbone of a donkey."



Fig 10. Samson Kills Philistines with a Donkey Jawbone

3. After these experiences Samson served as judge in Israel for twenty years ([Judg. 15:20](#)). These years may have been spent in Hebron ([Judg. 16:3](#)), and would be contemporary with Samuel's judgeship prior to the battle of Mizpah ([1 Sam. 7:3-11](#)).
4. Samson again visited Philistine territory, stopping at Gaza, where he fell victim to lust and sinned with a harlot ([Judg. 16:1-3](#)). Rising at midnight, and finding the city surrounded by waiting Philistines, he inflicted marked humiliation on Gaza by breaking away defensive gates and carrying them to a nearby hill on his return to Hebron. Not long after, Samson once more submitted to lust, becoming infatuated with a woman of the Philistines named Delilah, who lived in the Sorek Valley not far from his place of birth, Zorah. Given promise of massive reward by the Philistine leaders, Delilah sought to entice Samson

to reveal the secret of his strength. He gave her false answers three times but finally told her the truth regarding his uncut hair. She cut it off while he slept, and the Philistines were able to put out his eyes and make him labor sightless in their prison in Gaza. When his hair had grown again, Samson had his last revenge. Taken to entertain assembled Philistines in the temple of Dagon, he called upon God for a return of his strength, and he was enabled to dislodge two central supporting columns of the temple from their bases, destroying the building and killing more of the enemy at the time of his own death than in all his prior years.

Evidence

In one fell swoop, Samson eliminated the entire Philistine leadership. This was a major setback in their conflict with Israel. It was a turning point. From this time on, the Israelites started to gain the upper hand. But did it really happen? Could one man pull down an entire temple? Archaeology has discovered some interesting facts.

- Archaeologists have uncovered two Philistine temples. One at Tel Qasile, in northern Tel Aviv, and one in Tel Migne, ancient Ekron, 21 miles south of Tel Aviv.
- Both temples share a unique design; two central pillars supported the roof. The pillars were made of wood and rested on stone support bases. With the pillars being about six feet apart, a strong man could dislodge them from their stone bases and bring the entire structure down.



Fig 11. Two Stone Pillar Bases in the Philistine Temple at Tel Qasile

The archaeological findings match the Biblical story perfectly and attest to the plausibility of the account.

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