

Acts 13:20 (Walter Biggar Scott) 169574

Bible Subjects, Judges of Israel (13:20)

Paul in his summary of Israelitish history (Acts 13) says — “And after that He gave unto them judges about the space of four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet” (Acts 13:20). In the following list we have not included Eli, who exercised the priestly functions as well as judging in a civil capacity; nor Samuel, who, while ruling Israel, also filled the prophetic office. We have noted only those recorded in the book of Judges — from Othniel to Samson.

These judges were extraordinary deliverers raised up by God from time to time, in answer to His people’s cries and tears. Their condition was most deplorable. The wonders of God in Egypt and at the Red Sea; and the still more recent marvel of the Jordan affording a dry passage into Canaan, with all the forty years’ story of grace in the wilderness were fading from their memories, and certainly losing their freshness and power in their souls. Departure from the Lord is ever the effect of resting upon the demonstrations of Jehovah’s love and care, instead of knowing and resting upon that love itself. In order to recover the wandering heart of Israel, and wean the people from the idolatry and sin of the surrounding heathen, they were delivered into the hands of the nations whom they had failed to drive out; there to learn through bitter experience the folly of departing from the living God. Upon their repentance, God raised up a class of saviours, who, in themselves, and by their mode and way of deliverance, were fitted to humble Israel, and, besides, vindicate the sovereignty and grace of Jehovah.

1. Othniel, Lion of God. (Judg. 3:5-11)

It was out of Mesopotamia that Israel’s great progenitor was called (Acts 7:2-3); and into the hands of that power Israel was first delivered. This period of servitude lasted eight years. The deliverer from Mesopotamian bondage was Othniel, whose courage and valour was put to the test in the capture of the strong city Kirjath-sepher; and, as reward, received Caleb’s daughter, Achsah, to wife (Josh. 15:15-17). Forty years’ rest was the result of the mighty deliverance wrought by “Caleb’s younger brother.” The sovereignty of God in the choice of a younger brother is not to be overlooked.

2. Ehud, Unity. (Judg. 3:12-30)

The second captivity lasted eighteen years, and that under a people peculiarly obnoxious to Israel, whose origin was disgraceful (Gen. 19), and who were forever debarred from entering into the congregation of the Lord (Deut. 23:3-6). As in the previous deliverance, a forty years’ rest and quiet was secured, so by this second intervention of Jehovah in the judgment of Moab and deliverance of His people, they enjoyed a rest of 80 years. The deceit practiced upon the fat King of Moab, and the extermination of all the men of war — ten thousand in all — may be safely left as written. The Word of God records facts, states things as they occurred, neither explaining nor defending the actions of men. God makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and so turned to the blessing of His people the death of Eglon, King of Moab, and his men of war. The sovereignty of God in the choice of Ehud, a “left-handed” man, is once more observable.

3. Shamgar. (Judg. 3:31)

The Philistines next come upon the scene as the oppressors of the southern tribes of Israel. How long this third captivity lasted, or how long Shamgar judged Israel, we are not informed. The whole history of this time is briefly summed up in one verse. The bold and daring exploit of Shamgar killing 600 Philistines with an ox-goad reminds us of the doings of Samson amongst that same people; and one cannot fail to remark upon the sovereignty of the mode of deliverance. Who ever heard of victories obtained over a brave and warlike people by the use of such an instrument as an ox-goad, and that, too, wielded by a single arm? One man successfully opposing and overcoming 600!

4. Deborah and Barak, bee, lightning. (Judg. 4, 5)

The tribes located in northern Canaan now come under the cruel and iron yoke of Jabin, king of Canaan, who for twenty years “mightily oppressed Israel.” This king seems to have had a large army, well supplied with war chariots, and commanded by an able and experienced captain. The Israelites, on the contrary, could oppose no cavalry to the 900 iron chariots of Sisera, nor could a weapon of war be found amongst 40,000 of the people (Judg. 5:8). But what of the mighty host of Sisera or his iron chariots, were they ever so strong and countless? Dare the puny arm of man be bared in presence of Jehovah’s power? The cry of the oppressed people again enters the ear of God, and He raises up an instrument which certainly reflected no honour upon Israel. Deborah, a woman, not only judged the people, but also prophesied in the Lord’s name, so that the moral condition of the people could scarcely be lower. Barak, the son of Abinoam, refused to take the leadership of the Lord’s host, save as directed by, and in the presence of, a woman (Judg. 4:8-9). The truly humbling death of the Canaanitish captain, and the utter destruction, even to a man, of his mighty army, covered with renown the name of the Lord of Hosts (Judg. 5). A forty years’ quiet was the result of this mighty victory.

5. Gideon, Breaker. (Judg. 6-8)

The next oppression was from the east. The Midianites, a powerful people, were joined by the Amalekites and the nomadic tribes of the desert, who, with their camels and cattle entered the land in countless numbers, and pitched their tents in the very heart of the country. Plunder was evidently the object of this motley host; “they entered the land to destroy it.” In a short time they turned a large portion of the fairest part of the country almost into a desert, sweeping away the growing crops and removing all the beasts of burden and domestic animals. The heavily burdened and cruelly oppressed people had to flee from their dwellings and betake themselves for safety to the mountains. This awful time of distress lasted seven years, when the people again turning to Jehovah were faithfully addressed by a prophet

whose name is not recorded. Then Gideon was raised up, but first he must clear his father's house of idolatry ere he could become a suited vessel in Jehovah's hands for the deliverance of the people. The moral training to which Gideon was subjected, is well worthy of being carefully pondered by those serving in the church of God, while the numbers, manner, and instruments employed in the glorious and complete discomfiture of the mighty and numerous hosts opposed to Israel, conspicuously displayed the weakness of man and the power of Jehovah. What a lesson we learn in that 300 tried and tested men approached the host of Midian with neither sword nor spear in hand! The broken pitchers were the fitting expression of human weakness; and the trumpets giving forth their blast were a call to Jehovah as in ancient days, when it was said — "Rise up, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee" (Num. 10:35). As the result of the mighty victory gained over Midian and his confederates, another forty years' peace was secured. The total inability of man to hold himself in the place of blessing is sorrowfully demonstrated in the closing years of Gideon's administration. His sun, which rose so fair, went down in a dark back-ground of worldliness and idolatry (Judg. 8:24-27).

6. Abimelech, Father of the King. (Judg. 9)

The signal deliverance obtained over the allied forces of Midian kindled quite a loyal feeling among the men of Israel. They entreated Gideon to assume the royal prerogative, and to transmit the same to his sons, of whom he had a goodly number, "three score and ten." Most nobly was the proffered crown rejected, and Jehovah's rule over the people maintained: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you" (Judg. 8:22-23). It would have been well for the people of Shechem, and well, too, for Abimelech if he had caught the spirit of his father. But ambition and love of power obtained the mastery in the mind of Abimelech, who of all the sons of Gideon had least right to assume royal or other power in Israel, being the son of a concubine. By craft he secured the good-will of the inhabitants of Shechem, and then cruelly murdered, "upon one stone," his sixty-eight brothers, Jotham, the youngest, escaping. Abimelech was the first person in Israel who usurped royal power. It was on the occasion of Abimelech's accession to the throne, when the elders and men of Shechem were gathered in the valley beneath, that Jotham, standing on a commanding position on the cliffs above, addressed to the assembled congregation the most ancient parable recorded. It was a keen, pointed home-thrust to the conscience of both king and people.

Craft and cruelty inaugurated Abimelech's accession to the throne; but a throne established on iniquity and blood cannot prosper, as the men of Shechem found to their cost, as also the king, who died a shameful and humbling death, especially so regarded by an eastern monarch, and that after a short-lived, troublesome reign of but three years (Judg. 9:3-57).

7. Tola, Worm. (Judg. 10:1-2)

The next defender of Israel was Tola, of whose actions, and of the state of the people during the twenty-three years of his administration we know nothing. His parentage is given, and where he dwelt and died, but nothing more.

8. Jair, whom God enlightens. (Judg. 10:3-5)

The successor of Tola occupied the territory east of the Jordan, in the country of Gilead. He seems to have been a man fond of pomp and display, and withal very ambitious, as in the brief record we are told that his thirty sons rode on "thirty ass colts," and they had "thirty cities" termed "Havoth-Jair," meaning the cities or villages of Jair. Three verses have been deemed sufficient by the recording Spirit to chronicle the twenty-two years of Jair's administration.

9. Jephthah, the Opener. (Judg. 10:6-12:7)

Israel again lapsed into idolatry. The debasing, cruel, and generally obscene rites which formed an integral part of heathen worship amongst the nations in and surrounding the land of Canaan were quickly learned and practiced by the people, to whom it was said by God Himself, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:3). The anger of Jehovah burned hot against His people, and He delivered them into the hands of the Philistines and Ammonites; the former people oppressed the tribes lying south and west, while the latter not only crushed those on the eastern boundary of the Jordan, but crossed over the river, and made the tribes of Ephraim, Judah, and Benjamin also suffer. This double and sore oppression lasted eighteen years. Once again, the deliverer arises from the land of Gilead, and from a quarter which least of all reflected honour upon Israel. Jephthah, the son of a harlot — a degree worse even than the parentage of Abimelech, son of a concubine — and expelled from home by his indignant brethren, had gathered around him a troop of bold, bad men, who lived by making raids or incursions into the surrounding parts of the country. This was the man who, in the wisdom and sovereignty of God, was destined to deliver Israel from a captivity of eighteen years. Jephthah, with all his shortcomings, was yet a man who turned to God; personally "a mighty man of valour," yet he did not rely on the strength or bravery of his arm to accomplish deliverance for Israel, but "vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If Thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands." Jephthah judged Israel six years.

10. Ibzan, illustrious. (Judg. 12:8-10)

The only incident recorded about this judge is that he had an equal number of sons and daughters, and, failing to get them married at home, he procured elsewhere thirty daughters for his thirty sons, and sent away his daughters where they could more readily obtain husbands. Ibzan was buried at Bethlehem, after a judgeship of seven years.

11. Elon, Oak. (Judg. 12:11-12)

The next judge was Elon, who directed the affairs of his country for ten years. Nothing is known of this ruler, save that he was a Zebulonite.

12. Abdon, Servile. (Judg. 12:13-15)

Again the record is brief, and the materials exceedingly scanty, but enough is told us to warrant the conclusion that Abdon was a man fond of display, and bent upon the aggrandizement of his family, for not only were his sons privileged to ride on ass colts, but so were his nephews. This honourable distinction was conferred upon seventy members of his family. Abdon judged Israel eight years.

13. Sampson, Sun. (Judg. 13-16)

The circumstances narrated previous to the birth of Samson are interesting and instructive. Probably, with the exception of Isaac, he is the only one whose birth was announced before-hand, at least the only one recorded in the Old Testament. Samson was a Nazarite from his birth, and although many of his actions and ways were erratic, still so long as he preserved his Nazariteship intact, he was invincible. Practical separation from an evil world is the Christian's only power for God, and the moment he sinks down to the level of things around, he can only become the sport of an unbelieving world, and, robbed of his strength, become weak as water. With Israel, so with the Christian. We can never be on a level with the world. Israel never did stand on equal terms with the surrounding nations; either she formed a footstool for their feet, or they were in as perfect and thorough subjection to her. As Israel walked with and confided in Jehovah, her place amongst the nations was one of headship and supremacy; but when she sank into idolatry and wickedness, she forfeited her exalted, national standing, and became a downtrodden and tributary people. What a lesson to us in all this! Israel was under the rigorous rule of their old and bitter enemies — the Philistines, then in the zenith of their power, for forty years — the longest captivity recorded. During the twenty years of Samson's administration, he seems to have been but feebly, if at all, supported by the nation. The acts of individual prowess are truly wonderful, and have never been equalled, much less surpassed, but Samson falls before the seductions of nature, and although classed amongst the judges who are held in everlasting remembrance (Heb. 11:32), yet, the close of his eventful life is full of solemn warning and instruction. Beware of nature's enticements; beware of tampering with the world from which ye have been delivered (Gal. 1:4).

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