

Lesson 2

Success & Failure

Judges 1.1-2.5

Introduction

Judges 1.1-2.5 serves as the first of a two-part introduction to the book, summarizing the success and failure of Israel as they endeavored to finish the conquest of Canaan after the death of Joshua. While the people began by seeking insight from God (1.1-2), the account ends with them *weeping loudly*, 2.4. The chapter describes first the activities in the south with Judah and Simeon (1.3-17) and then moves to cover the actions of the northern tribes (Ephraim and Manasseh (1.22-35). While successes and positives were certainly gained, the overall picture is disappointment and failure.

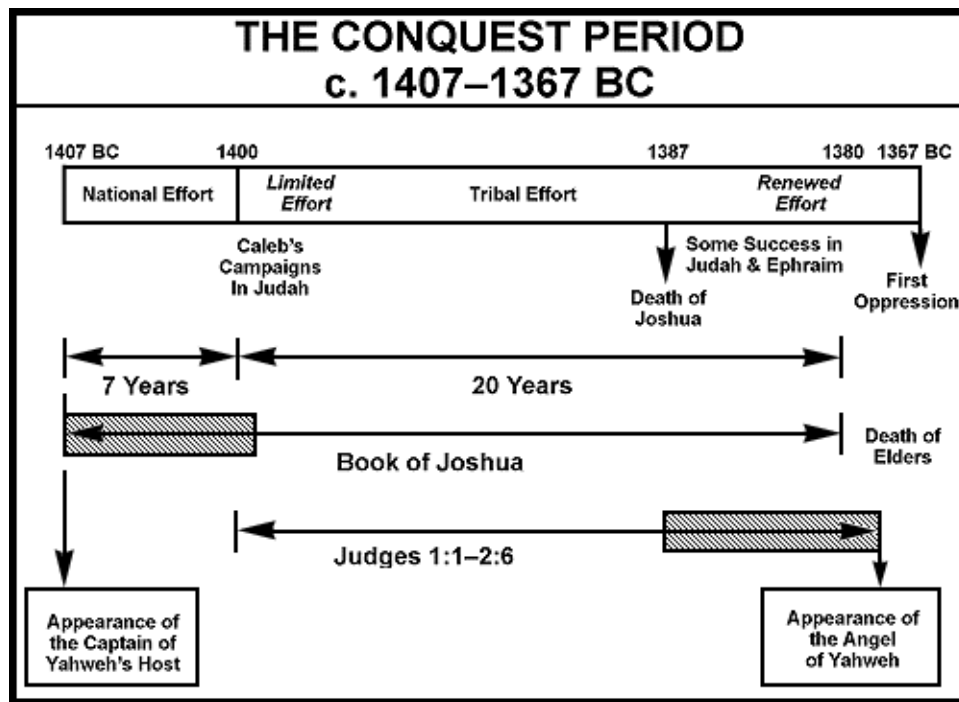


Figure 1 - The Conquest Period - Smith, James E. *The Books of History. Old Testament Survey Series.* Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995.

1.1-2: Israel After Joshua

The death of Joshua was seen as a significant point in Israelite history, dividing it into “before” and “after.” The time of his death marked the end of an era. After Moses died, Joshua immediately stepped into the leadership role. Now, upon his death, there was no leader. What the people do now provides us with the testimony of the kind of leadership Joshua had provided. He had trained them to seek the Lord,

and the first thing they do is inquire of him on how to move forward. *How* they asked of the Lord is not revealed and probably unimportant. The Lord responds to their inquiry, identifying Judah to lead the way against the Canaanites. God assures them, *I have handed the land over to (you)*. So, from the beginning, the book of Judges opens with optimism. Unfortunately, the promise will not be fully realized until a few centuries have passed.

1.3-21: The Southern Tribes Engage the Enemy

1.3-10: The Battle for Jerusalem

Judah, the largest tribe, made a pact with Simeon to fight together. In this, we have a great picture of unity and brotherhood, taught by Moses and Joshua (Deuteronomy 32.1-27; Joshua 22.1-9); their alliance is testimony that their teaching had been heard.



Judah attacked the Perizzites, who are first mentioned in Genesis 13.7 as residents of the hill country north of Jerusalem, around Bethel and Ai. It is believed that Bezek was somewhere in this area, although its exact location is unknown. Adoni-bezek was the leader of the Perizzites. When the Israelites caught him, they cut off his thumbs and big toes. Adoni-bezek acknowledged the fairness of his fate. Over the years, he had debilitated seventy kings by severing their thumbs and toes, further degrading them by forcing them to scavenge for scraps beneath his table like a group of dogs. This harsh and arrogant monarch ultimately experienced retribution. He was brought to Jerusalem, where he later passed away, 1.7.

After his death, Jerusalem didn't hold out long and was taken by the sons of Judah, who captured the city, killed its inhabitants, and burned it.

Next, Judah conquered Hebron, about 19 miles SW of Jerusalem, once called *Kiriath-Arba*⁵. The Book of Joshua highlights Caleb's significant involvement in this campaign, 15.13. Here, the Judges' account describes the battle from the perspective of tribal achievement. While it's clear Caleb didn't single-handedly conquer the Anakim in Hebron, Judges 1.20 acknowledges his crucial contribution to the victory there.

1.11-18 – At Debir & Other Campaigns

Debir had been known as *Kiriath-Sepher*, which means “book city” or “book town,” hinting that this must have been a center of learning or government administration. It was located 7-8 miles SW of Hebron. Here, Othniel emerges as the victor of the campaign. He was motivated by a romantic challenge set by Caleb, who offered his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who could conquer the city. Caleb's younger brother, Othniel, succeeded in this endeavor, presumably with the approval of Achsah, the

woman in question. Their marriage was not contrary to Mosaic law, setting the groundwork for Othniel's future role as Israel's first judge. Achsah is portrayed as a strong and insightful woman, securing additional resources for her new family by persuasively asking for a field with vital water sources, showcasing her assertiveness and foresight.

Verses 17-18 cover the broader military campaigns of the Judah and Simeon tribes, including their successful conquests in the Negev, leading the Kenites to join them. They destroyed Zephath, renamed it Hormah, and captured significant Philistine cities along the Mediterranean coast, although these territories were only held briefly.

1.19-21: Summary of the Southern Campaign

Judah and Simeon's success in the Canaanite hill country was attributed to Yahweh's support. However, their efforts faltered against the lowland inhabitants who possessed "iron chariots." The failure was partly due to Judah needing to capitalize on early advantages in these areas and settle the conquered lands effectively. The tribe of Benjamin fared even worse, not building upon Judah's initial victory over Jerusalem. As a result, the Jebusites returned and coexisted with the Benjaminites in Jerusalem, a situation that persisted when the Book of Judges was written.

1.22-36: The Northern Tribes Failure in Dispossessing the Canaanites

1.22-26: Initial Success



Following Judah's lead, the house of Joseph, encompassing the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, initiated their campaign to expel Canaanites from their territory, targeting Bethel first, a city previously conquered by Joshua. With divine support, they utilized espionage to gain strategic advantage. Spies persuaded a local man to reveal the complex layout of the city's entrance, which was crucial for avoiding heavy casualties during the assault. He was spared during Bethel's capture and destruction in exchange for cooperation. Unlike Rahab, who allied with the Israelites, this informant chose exile over integration, relocating to Hittite territory where he established a new city, naming it Luz, the original name for Bethel.

1.27-29: Failure Comes

Manasseh was given certain cities within the territories of Issachar and Asher, including four in the Esdraelon Valley and one coastal town, but failed to take control of these cities.

While initial inaction might have stemmed from fear, it wasn't due to a lack of tribal strength, as Israel

eventually became powerful. Nonetheless, the Canaanites were not expelled but subjected to forced labor, leaving the reasons for Manasseh's failure to conjecture. Similarly, Ephraim did not expel the inhabitants of Gezer, a strategically important city, not due to inability but rather a decision to leave it under Canaanite control.

1.30-36: Israel Chooses to Live Side by Side with the Canaanites

Zebulun managed to impose forced labor on the Canaanites in two cities without entirely expelling them. Asher and Naphtali lived among the Canaanites, indicating a possible shift in power dynamics to the Canaanites' favor at some point. The tribe of Dan was pushed back into the hills of Ephraim by the Amorites, never gaining dominance. This series of events highlights a recurring theme of failure, marked by the repeated phrase "did not drive out," reflecting disobedience to God's command to remove the Canaanites from the land. The text emphasizes the spiritual risk this posed, as tolerating the Canaanites could lead to their gods being seen as equivalent to Yahweh, leading to apostasy.

The author of Judges critiques the northern tribes for their failure, pointing out that while Israel might have achieved military and economic dominance over the Canaanites, evidenced by forced labor, they failed spiritually by disobeying God's command to expel the Canaanites. It wasn't that they could not remove the enemy, but they made a deliberate choice. While the physical occupation of Canaan could be seen as a success, spiritually, it was a significant failure.

2.1-5: A Divine Rebuke

The term "angel of the Lord" does not describe human messengers or prophets in the historical texts but represents a visible manifestation of God. This divine figure appeared after Joshua's faithful elders died around 1380 BC and before the rise of the first foreign oppressor around 1367 BC. This divine figure moved from Gilgal to Bochim, a significant but unspecified location in the hills, marking a shift from the heights of spiritual renewal at Gilgal to the depths of despair at Bochim due to Israel's disobedience.

The angel reminded Israel of Yahweh's mighty deeds and promises, the unbreakable covenant, and the Israelites' obligations not to ally with Canaanites or adopt their worship practices. The decisive message sharply accused Israel of disobedience and warned of consequences: God would not expel the Canaanites, who would become perpetual thorns and snares to Israel, leading them into idolatry.

The Israelites' reaction was one of immediate emotional distress; they wept, named the place Bochim ("Weepers"), and offered sacrifices to Yahweh. However, this response did not translate into action to remove the Canaanites, indicating a remorse that fell short of genuine repentance.

Conclusion

Judges 1.1-2.5 offers several lessons for today's Christians, emphasizing the necessity of seeking God's guidance. The transition after Joshua's leadership is a huge reminder to continually look to God for direction, which remains relevant for Christians as they face changes or challenges.

Judah and Simeon's alliance is a powerful testament to the strength found in unity and brotherhood. It calls Christians to embrace cooperation and mutual support, mirroring the love and unity Christ teaches. This spirit of togetherness is essential for the church's mission and its members' spiritual pursuits.

Here, we also see the pitfalls of partial obedience. The Israelites' incomplete adherence to God's commands led to spiritual compromises, a scenario that Christians are urged to avoid. Total commitment to God's will is crucial, as anything less can weaken faith and moral ambiguity. The spiritual dangers of Israel's compromise, living in close quarters with the Canaanites, act as a warning against conforming to secular practices and beliefs. We must stand firm in our faith, maintaining our distinctiveness in a world that often opposes godly values.

Reflecting on Adoni-bezek's fate, we must understand that past misdeeds can carry lasting implications. Christians need to lead lives marked by righteousness, being mindful of the long-term effects of their actions. Additionally, the recognition of Achsah's proactive role in securing resources for her family highlights the significant contributions of women and the importance of their recognition and inclusion in all aspects of church life.

Finally, the reaction to the angel's message at Bochim teaches that true repentance is more than just emotion; it demands a behavior change. Genuine repentance involves feeling remorse and making concrete changes to align one's life with God's expectations.

The opening sections of Judges highlight that true success in the eyes of God is not quantified by earthly achievements but by steadfastness and obedience to His word. We must wholeheartedly follow God, recognizing that disobedience can have extensive spiritual repercussions.

For Thought and Reflection

1. How does the Israelites' approach to seeking God's guidance at the start of Judges contrast with their actions later in the book, and what does this tell us about the nature of spiritual leadership?
2. In what ways can the unity between Judah and Simeon be seen as a model for working together in the church today?
3. What does the story of Adoni-bezek's retribution teach us about God's justice, and how should this affect our understanding of retribution and forgiveness in our own lives?
4. Considering the Israelites' failure to obey God's command to drive out the Canaanites fully, how can Christians today identify and guard against the risks of partial obedience in their spiritual lives?
5. How can Achsah's example of assertiveness and foresight inspire both men and women in the church to value and pursue the contributions of all members?

6. What lessons can we draw from the Israelites' experience of military success yet spiritual failure, and how can we apply these lessons to our definitions of success?
7. In what ways does the account of the Israelites living among the Canaanites challenge modern Christians to examine their cultural engagement and the influence of secular values on their faith?
8. The reaction of the Israelites at Bochim was one of weeping without action. How does this illustrate the difference between remorse and repentance, and what does true repentance look like in a believer's life?

⁵ Webb writes: The name *Kiriath-arba* means "city of Arba." This and the three names at the end of this verse connect the victory reported here with a specific Hebron tradition that the reader is assumed to be familiar with, according to which *Sheshai*, *Ahiman*, and *Talmi* were the sons of Anak, whose father was Arba, "the great man among the Anakim" (Joshua 14.15; cf. Joshua 15.14; 21.11; Numbers 13.22).