

Week 11 - Majoring on the “Minors” - Judges 3:31; 10:1-5; 12:8-15

Scripture Reading: Luke 19:28-40

Introduction

This morning we are going to be looking at the six judges commonly referred to as the “minor” judges

We need to understand that they are minor only in the sense that the Bible records little information about them than it does the so-called “major” judges

And, in the case of the minor judges, we also note that their accounts don’t follow the cyclical pattern of rebellion, punishment, crying in pain, and deliverance that we’ve come to expect

In fact, God appears to be uninvolved with the judgeships of these six men as we notice that the author doesn’t even say that God raised any of them up or empowered them

He simply states that Shamgar “was,” that Tola and Jair “arose,” and that Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon “judged Israel.”

Of course, I don’t believe that God was uninvolved for even a second, but it’s worth noting that the author is silent concerning God’s involvement with these six men

The first of the minor judges appears in **Judges 3:31** right after the account of Ehud and before the lengthy account of Deborah and Barak

After him [Ehud] was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.

I. The man with the ox goad

Shamgar is arguably the most interesting of the minor judges, and yet, God’s Word tells his story in one sentence of just 22 words

We do also see his name mentioned in the song Deborah and Barak sang in **Judges 5:6**, suggesting that he was a contemporary of Deborah, Barak, and Jael and that his exploits were known and deemed to be worthy of praise

But today, Shamgar is widely treated as a footnote to Ehud - when he is regarded at all

He almost certainly has been deemed unworthy of a sermon all his own

That’s partially because the account of Shamgar leaves us with several questions that we simply can’t answer definitively

And those questions start with his name

Shamgar is not a Hebrew name, and scholars are most widely convinced that Shamgar was a Hurrian operating in Palestine

And the fact that he is referred to as “the son of Anath” leaves us with another question without a satisfactory answer

We would naturally expect that phrase to mean that Anath was Shamgar’s father - and that simplest of solutions may well be the answer

But things get complicated when we learn that Anath was also a part of Canaanite mythology and was, at the same time, the Canaanite goddess of war and a consort of Baal

So the designation “the son of Anath” could also mean that Shamgar was a worshipper of Anath

Further, historians have discovered that there was a band of mercenaries named after Anath who operated in the region at this time, so the designation could mean that Shamgar was one of these mercenaries

In that case, he would have simply been doing what he was doing and only incidentally benefited Israel by killing the 600 Philistines

And speaking of the Philistines, who were known for their military prowess and brutality, the fact that Shamgar was able to dispatch 600 of them with a makeshift weapon is nothing short of amazing

I would have to say that even though the author is silent regarding God's involvement with Shamgar, divine intervention had to be present

An ox goad was a tool used to prod and control oxen when working with them in the field

It was a long, hardwood pole, up to 8 feet in length and around 2-inches in diameter at the butt end, that typically had a sharp iron tip on one end and, at times, a small iron scraper on the butt end that was used to clean the plow

A goad would make a formidable weapon, to be sure, and I wouldn't want to come up against someone who was wielding one and seeking to harm me

We aren't told how Shamgar took on the 600 Philistines - whether he was in a battle or whether he operated more like an assassin who picked them off one or a few at a time

I suspect most of us picture him in the same way we see Samson killing Philistines with his jawbone - but we aren't told, so it has to remain something of a mystery

If Shamgar was a foreigner, it's possible that our author didn't have a whole lot of information to share about him

Or, it could be that the author was a little bit embarrassed by the fact that God had used a foreigner to rescue Israel

Regardless, we see God remain sensitive to the difficulties of his people and his grace and power in delivering them from the oppressive evil brought about by their own foolishness

And we are once again reminded that God is resourceful in his methods and means

Throughout the book of Judges, we see God employ unconventional people and unconventional weapons to accomplish his ends

After all, he has already used a left-handed man with a homemade dagger, a foreign woman with a mallet and tent peg, and a woman with a millstone to take out Israel's oppressors

So we come to understand that God is not limited and will use outside agents to both punish and deliver his people

From Shamgar, we jump ahead to Judges 10, where we left off last week, and we are introduced to two men in the first five verses of the chapter

I've designated these two the "relatively obscure" because we are given even less information about them than we were about Shamgar

II. The relatively obscure

Let's begin by looking at the first two verses where we meet the second minor judge, Tola [**Judges 10:1-2**]

After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, and he lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. And he judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he died and was buried at Shamir.

The name, Tola, means "worm" and the fact that he is said to have arisen in Abimelech's wake invites us to interpret this lowly person against Abimelech's self-importance and ambition

We are told that Tola was the son of a man named Puah and the grandson of a man named Dodo - but we don't know anything about either of them

And we are told that he was from the tribe of Issachar and that he ruled from Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim - but the precise location of Shamir is also currently unknown to us

Again, we are told that Tola "arose" and not that God raised him up

And we are told that he arose "to save Israel," but we aren't told of a specific oppressor of Israel

Perhaps there was no foreign oppressor, and he only saved Israel from unraveling in the aftermath of Abimelech's treachery and complete lack of restraint against his own people by providing stable governance

The fact that he judged, or governed, Israel for 23 years and the somewhat blasé sharing of the details - he lived, he governed, he died, and he was buried - may well be intended to convey that his was a stable, uneventful reign of healing. There isn't a whole lot more to say about Tola except that he was undoubtedly a welcome breath of fresh air after Abimelech and a tribute to God's grace who never allows treachery and violence to be the last word for his people.

Continuing, in verses 3-5, we meet Jair [**Judges 10:3-5**], and his account is quite a bit different.

After him arose Jair the Gileadite, who judged Israel twenty-two years. And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities, called Havvoth-jair to this day, which are in the land of Gilead. And Jair died and was buried in Kamon.

The first thing we see is that, whereas Tola was from the tribe of Issachar, we see that Jair is from the tribe of Gilead.

Then we note that there is no lineage included for Jair.

Jair instead is noted for his progeny as his claim to fame seems to be the influence he has through his 30 sons.

We need to recognize that Scripture isn't critical of Jair - just as it wasn't critical of Gideon - but for Jair to have sired 30 sons and who knows how many daughters implies that Jair had multiple wives.

Then we are told something that seems a little strange - those thirty sons rode on thirty donkeys.

That's somewhat similar to saying that a person drives a luxury car or has a private jet today.

What this signifies, along with the presence of multiple wives, is that Jair was a wealthy, powerful man of influence.

A fact that is further supported when we read that each of his sons was in charge of a city, and the region in which those cities were found was named after Jair - Havvoth-jair means "the towns of Jair."

We first see Jair's name crop up in **Numbers 32:41**, which tells us:

Jair the son of Manasseh went and captured their villages, and called them Havvoth-jair.

And **Deuteronomy 3:14** is even more explicit, saying that Jair captured the entire region and named it after himself.

The accumulation of wives and concubines, multiple heirs, living in luxury, governing cities, and naming a region after oneself are all symbols of royalty.

Therefore, it appears that whereas Tola's reign shows us a hint of God's goodness and grace, Jair's looks to be a picture of the tendency of man to secure our position, extend our influence, and ensure our legacy.

Note also that Jair is not said to have saved Israel from an oppressor.

It seems that the best that can be said about him is that he oversaw a time of relative peace and prosperity in Israel that lasted for 22 years.

But we can't help but notice that, as God's influence wains, we see the rise of human aspiration.

Our inborn tendency to usurp the throne of the true King always seems to be waiting in the shadows.

It's been that way since Adam and Eve were seduced to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to make themselves like God.

And Christ's servants are seldom satisfied with being servants for very long.

The temptation to rule is always present, as we saw with Jesus' disciples in **Mark 10:37** when James and John asked for positions of power at Jesus' side in heaven.

The Jair account seems designed to introduce the account of Jephthah, the next "major" judge in the series, which we will get to after we break for Easter next Sunday.

But for today, we will jump over Jephthah and take a look at the three remaining minor judges in Judges 12: Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon

III. The others

This trio is given eight verses, and the word “after” that begins each account means that we should interpret the list sequentially

Verses 8-10 summarize the reign of Ibzan, whose name means “swift” **[Judges 12:8-10]**

After him [Jephthah] Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. He had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he gave in marriage outside his clan, and thirty daughters he brought in from outside for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years. Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem.

We are told that he was from Bethlehem, but the fact that the Old Testament speaks of two different Bethlehems means that we can't be sure which one was Ibzan's home

Most Bible scholars favor the view that Bethlehem in Zebulun is the one indicated, whereas the opposing side argues for Bethlehem in Judah, which we know as the birthplace of King David because, they say, the omission of a tribal reference favors the better-known city - we will just have to accept it as another unknown

We see that Ibzan, like Jair, had thirty sons for whom he procured thirty wives from outside his clan

And we see that he was further blessed with thirty daughters whom he also sent away in marriage to men from outside his clan

What Ibzan did is reflective of the patriarchal nature of the times, as parents typically arranged marriages in that culture

But it's not a trivial matter to be rushed past as it shows us something of Ibzan's character and his intentions

Like Jair, Ibzan isn't said to have saved Israel from an oppressor, and his actions show us that he was more concerned with cementing clan alliances and extending and shoring up his power base

Ibzan was a man concerned mainly with increasing his political influence and building an endowment for himself and his sons - so we see the self-interest motif continue

We read that he judged Israel seven years; then he died and was buried at Bethlehem

Next, we come to Elon in verses 11-12 **[Judges 12:11-12]**

After him [Ibzan] Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel, and he judged Israel ten years. Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.

There isn't a whole lot to say about Elon, as God only gives us the barest of information about him

We can say that his name means “oak” and that he was from the tribe of Zebulun

But his name could also be a Hebrew play on words - a sort of pun indicating that he was a little despot

And we are told that he governed Israel for ten years only to be buried at a place called Aijalon in Zebulun

We are told a bit more about Abdon in the final three verses **[Judges 12:13-15]**

After him Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys, and he judged Israel eight years. Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

Abdon means “service,” and we are told he was the son of a man named Hillel - which is a unique name in the Old Testament used nowhere else

But we know nothing of this Hillel either, and while Abdon judged from Pirathon in Ephraim, we don't have a precise location for Pirathon

Like Jair, Abdon had sons who rode on donkeys, but he had 40 to Jair's 30, and he further had 30 grandsons who also rode on donkeys

The fact that each of these men rode on his own donkey is a sign of both Abdon's prosperity and the peace of the time, but it also points to his personal importance, just as with Jair and Ibzan

Following the accounts of Gideon and the fraudulent rule of Abimelech, it seems that judgeship in Israel is always on the verge of morphing into kingship, and these minor judges seem most interested in amassing power for themselves

However, Abdon only governed for eight years before he passed on and was buried in his hometown

And the final note that his burial place lies within the hill country of the Amalekites is somewhat ironic and ominous as it seems to indicate the further absorption of the Israelites into the people of Canaan

So what should we make of Jair, Ibzan, and Abdon and their obvious self-interest?

First, kingdom-building can be either good or bad depending on who is ruling the kingdom

And, from what we are told, it appears that those three men were at the top of their little empires - so to speak

And it seems that they may well have been competing with God's authority

For instance, we aren't told that Ibzan married his children to Canaanites, and we don't want to go too far and say that he did - but it seems possible that he did

And if he did, it would have been in direct defiance of God, and alliances with the world are always a bad idea

One of the most challenging things Christian leaders face is the temptation to usurp God's throne

We see this repeatedly as one influential Christian leader after another seems to forget that Christ is the head of his church as they build mini-kingdoms to honor themselves - only to come to ruin in the end

Any alliance that takes us away from God - whether it is an external alliance, such as friendship with the world, or an inner partnership with ourselves, such as satisfying our own ego - is a bad bargain

And since we live in a time that promotes self-interest and self-actualization, materialism, and power, this should serve as a warning to us

Such activity doesn't further the kingdom

Conclusion

The details surrounding these six men are sparse, to be sure - frustratingly sparse

Actually, except for Shamgar, the minor judges aren't even all that interesting

At least Shamgar did something amazing, perhaps even miraculous, that hints at God's assistance

But with the other five, no rousing deeds are recorded, and there aren't any exciting tales or miracles

We just have the blasé recording of some basic information - and not enough of that to definitively tell us much

So we might well wonder why God chose to use space in his Holy Word to record these accounts at all if he wasn't going to give us more details

But our frustration reveals something about the purpose of God's Word and its selectivity

There were undoubtedly stories that could have been shared, but God chose not to have them recorded and preserved

Perhaps that's because the Bible is God-centered so it isn't focused on the lives of men but on what God is doing as he works through people to accomplish his plans

That doesn't mean that the people aren't important or that we don't count, but people aren't the central focus

God uses all manner of people in his work, from the upright and capable like Othniel, the resourceful like Ehud, the timid yet ultimately faithful like Gideon, the strong and confident like Deborah, and those who are weak like Barak, and even the opportunistic like Jael

God even used an abominable man like Abimelech

And now we have seen he used these six individuals and then left most of the details about them out of the record - forcing us to focus on him and his activity

Another thing I want us to recognize as a warning to us is that human activity seems to have taken the place of God's gifts during this period

Whereas we have seen the phrase "the land had rest," now it has been replaced with "he judged x-number of years"

The land is no longer said to enjoy the graciousness of God's rest, and life goes on, but the quality of that life is degraded

That should serve as a warning to us that church life may appear to go on as it always had for a time after the people turn from serving God to serving themselves

God doesn't want his churches to be perpetual performers of programs; he wants them to be active and vital in the world

He wants us to be in tune with his will and ready to shift and move at a moment's notice in concert with him

We cannot exist to build our own dynasty but must occupy ourselves with the growth of God's kingdom

Lastly, I want to talk about the brevity of life and the short time we have to do our work on this earth

Looking at six judges in one day and the repeated phrase "and he died" has led to this thought

Most of us will labor in obscurity, and the details of our lives will not be remembered for very long

Living, as I do, next to a cemetery where I often take walks, I often consider how I don't know most of the people whose names adorn their tombstones, and I know virtually nothing of the lives that are represented by a simple dash between their date of birth and their date of death

Great or small, good or bad, all of the leaders that God has given to his people have or will die - all that is, except one

God raised up a Leader in Israel who continues forever as we read in Hebrews 7:23-25

His death on the cross on our behalf didn't end his reign or take away the benefits he brings his people

Indeed, after three days, he bodily rose again and defeated death for all who will put their complete trust in him

Today is Palm Sunday, and with it, we kick off Holy Week in the church, which culminates with Resurrection Sunday next week

And this morning, we are going to partake of the Lord's Table commemorating the life and death of our Savior

So let me encourage you to take some time this morning as the worship team comes to lead us in our closing song to remember what Christ has done for you and to prepare your heart to partake of the elements

I would invite those who are serving the elements to come forward as we sing

Let's pray