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*The
Bible
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NOT TO BE SOLD

The Bible Story

by BASIL WOLVERTON

Volume V

PUBLISHED BY AMBASSADOR COLLEGE PRESS
POST OFFICE BOX 111, PASADENA, CALIFORNIA 91109

The Bible Story

of the Bible

Printed in U. S. A.

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INTRODUCTION

by Herbert W. Armstrong

It is our very great pleasure to present Volume V of *The Bible Story*. We are thrilled, and overjoyed, because of the enthusiastic acceptance of Volumes I, II, III and IV.

Those who have read the first four volumes know that there has never been a Bible story book like this. There have, of course, been many Bible story books—too many, of a kind. But candidly they seemed, to me, to have no mission, except to entertain children. They seemed to try to compete with the exciting fiction of violence of which youngsters see entirely too much on television—or read in cheap novels or comic books.

These children's Bible story books were a series of disconnected blood-and-thunder stories drawn from certain Biblical incidents. There was no connection between one and another, or with the Gospel. They were shorn of their real meaning. They seemed to me to degrade the Bible in children's minds. The real connection of these Biblically recorded incidents with the *meaning* and *purpose* of life—of God's message to mankind—was ignored. Yet all these incidents are recorded in the Bible *because* they have real and deep MEANING. They teach vital lessons that ought to be made plain to children—and to adults as well!

Children *need*, as they need life itself, an awareness of the basic TRUTHS of the Bible, while these children are growing up. Years ago this realization plagued me. God had called me to an important ministry which He was blessing with rapid and constant growth. But the children were being neglected in this ministry. How could I supply this lack? For years it was a frustrating dilemma.

HOW could I get to growing children a real knowledge of God—of the Creator and His vast creation—of His power, authority, and rulership over all He created—of the very PURPOSE in having put humans on this earth—of the vital *connection* between these Biblical incidents and the meaning of life?

In due time God supplied the man for this important undertaking. Basil Wolverton is a nationally known artist in the United States. His work has appeared in more than fifty nationally circulated magazines. He is both an artist and a trained writer. He was converted through *The WORLD TOMORROW* broadcast many years ago. He is a student and teacher of the Bible.

In November, 1958, *The Bible Story* started, serially, in *The PLAIN TRUTH*. But it is *not* written *only* for children! We like to say it is written for children

from 5 to 105! Mr. Wolverton has written in simple, understandable language, easily read by children at the nine- to twelve-year-old level yet *interesting* to adults as well!

Very few seem to realize that a *continuous story-thread* runs through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. That is the story-flow that Mr. Wolverton is writing. With professional expertness, Mr. Wolverton makes this story gripping and thrilling in plain and simple words. Parents can read this book to four- and five-year-olds, and, with a little explaining, make it understandable and also absorbing and interesting.

Mr. Wolverton has stuck tenaciously to the literal Biblical account. He has taken author's license to portray certain incidents in conversational style. Yet he has been zealously careful to avoid adding to, or detracting from, the meaning of Scripture.

An initial printing of fifty thousand copies of Volume I was immediately exhausted. A second and a third printing, each of fifty thousand, were ordered. Volume II was exhausted in the first printing of one hundred thousand and a second printing of over seventy thousand was required. The first printings of Volume III and IV were one hundred and seventy-five thousand each.

The first volume contained thirteen chapters, as follows:

"In the Beginning; Thou Shalt Surely Die; Noah Builds the Ark; And the Flood Came; The Tower of Babel; Abram Journeys to Canaan; Abram Gives Up His Son; Esau Sells Jacob His Birthright; Jacob Falls in Love; Joseph's Adventures in Egypt; Joseph Becomes Ruler of Egypt; 'I am Joseph'; Seven Years of Famine."

The second volume contained chapters fourteen through thirty:

"Moses Flees Egypt; God Calls Moses; Moses and Aaron Meet Pharaoh; The Plagues of Egypt; The Plagues Continue; The Worst Weather Ever!; Two More Plagues on Egypt; The Exodus Begins; At the Red Sea; Crossing the Red Sea; Safe at Last!; War with Amalek!; On to Sinai; The Ten Commandments; The Golden Calf; Moses Breaks Ten Commandments; Moses Returns."

The third volume carried the story of the Bible through the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Volume IV continued it through the period of Joshua and the Judges to the time of Gideon.

The present volume picks up the story from there. It is presented to you as a ministry of love, without money and without price; and it is our fervent hope that it will bring to you and your children enlightenment, interesting reading, understanding, and abundant blessings from its original and TRUE AUTHOR, Jesus Christ.



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The Bible Story

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

THE FIRE THAT FAILED!

AFTER GIDEON was dead and Israel had again started slipping into idolatry, one of Gideon's many sons schemed to become king of Israel. He was Abimelech, an overly ambitious young man who went to violent extremes to push himself into power.

One of his first moves was to pay a band of vicious characters to capture his seventy-one brothers and line them up at a chopping block. One of the brothers escaped, but all the others were beheaded. (Judges 9:1-5.)

As soon as the dreadful act was finished, the murderers fled, careful to leave no evidence as to who had committed the ghastly crime.

Gideon's youngest son, Jotham, was the one who had escaped being murdered. He had hidden himself when the assassins had first appeared, but when he heard later what had happened, he almost wished he hadn't. He left Ophrah right after that, realizing that Abimelech's men would be looking for him for a long time.

While the search for Jotham was going on, Abimelech wasn't too worried about him. He felt that the youngest son would fear to make any move against him. He went ahead with his plans to become ruler of Israel by obtaining the backing of influential men, families and priests of Baal in Shechem, which resulted in a few days in a celebration and a ceremony in which Abimelech was declared king of Israel. (Verse 6.)

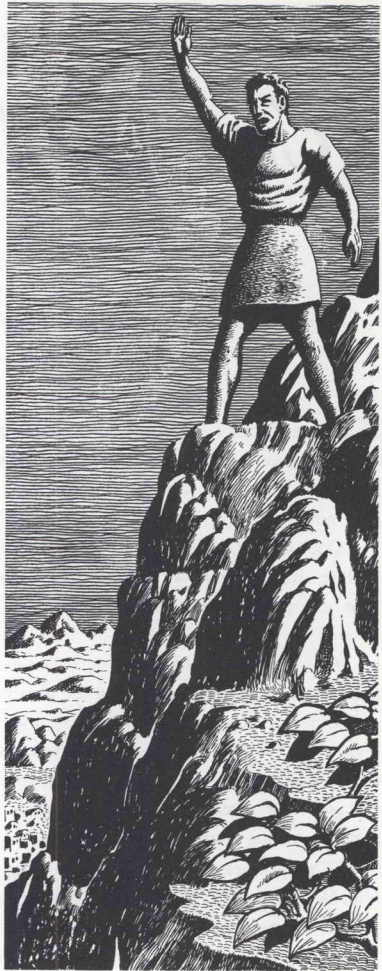
When Jotham learned of this he was quite angry. Even though a son of Gideon,

who had been Israel's leader, he didn't yearn to become Israel's king. But he wanted to expose his half-brother for the murderous, power-seeking politician he was, and to help promote in Israel the conduct his father had enforced and practiced against pagan worship.

By night Jotham went up Mt. Gerizim, which towered close above Shechem. Next morning, when the people were up and about, he appeared on the top to call down to them. This wasn't such a tremendous feat as one might imagine, inasmuch as Joshua had successfully addressed hundreds of thousands of people in that same area. Mt. Ebal was close by to the north, and between the two peaks a strong voice could clearly be heard over an unusually large expanse. (Joshua 8:30-35.)

Jotham couldn't have chosen a better place to talk to so many people at the same time and say what he had to say before Abimelech's hired murderers could get to him. It isn't known how many people lived in and around Shechem at the time, but there must have been at least a few thousand residents, including people from the neighboring villages and countryside who were gathered at Shechem for a festival.

"Listen to me, men of She-



Despite assassins who sought him, Jotham boldly appeared atop Mt. Gerizim to call down to the people of Shechem during the festival.

chem!" Jotham shouted down to them. "You are headed for misery and trouble. But if you will hear what I have to say, and move to correct matters, God will help you!" (Judges 9:7.)

Although Jotham was too far away to be recognized by sight, there were some among the startled people of Shechem who knew him by voice. Abimelech was told at once. He came out to look up and listen, and when he was convinced that the man on the mountain was his missing half-brother, he gave orders to his men to quickly climb the mountain and silence Jotham.

"But as soon as he sees us come up one side of the mountain, he'll go down the other," one of the men pointed out. "Wouldn't it be better to grab him when he comes back down?"

Abimelech glared at the man.

"I'm paying you to dispose of all my brothers as soon as possible!" he growled impatiently. "You let this one slip through your hands once. I don't want him to escape again. Spread out around the mountain base and climb it from all sides at once. Then you'll have him surrounded when you reach the top. And don't bother to bring him down. Bury him up there and conceal the grave!"

While Abimelech's men were on their way up Mt. Gerizim to do away with him, Gideon's son, Jotham, stood atop the mountain. From there he spoke loudly to the thousands of people below in and around the Baal-infested city of Shechem.

Jotham's Amazing Prophecy

"Let me tell you a story!" he called down. (Judges 9:6-7.)

The people listened with tense excitement.

"There was a time when all the trees decided that they should have some kind of tree rule over them. They agreed that the olive tree was best fitted as a leader, so they asked the olive tree to be king. The olive tree refused, saying 'I honor God and man by the oil I produce. Why should I forsake my outstanding service even to be king?'

"Then the trees said to the fig tree 'Be our king.' But the fig tree answered, 'Why should I give up producing my special sweetness and flavor just to be promoted over all other trees?'

"The trees next asked the grape vine to rule over them. The grape vine replied, 'I cannot be your king. It would mean that I would have to stop yielding the juice from which comes the wine to cheer God and man.'

"The trees finally turned to the bramble to ask it to be their king. The thorny bush answered quite differently. 'If you really want me to be your king,' it said, 'then leave

all matters entirely up to me. If you fail to put your trust in me or disagree with what I want to do, I shall spew out fire to burn up everything, even the cedars on the snow-clad peaks of mount Lebanon!" (Judges 9:8-15.)

People below who listened to Jotham realized that when he spoke of the bramble he was referring to Abimelech, and that when he mentioned the cedars of Lebanon he was referring to the elders and chiefs of Israel.

"If you people think you have done the best thing for Israel in making Abimelech your leader," Jotham continued, "and if you really believe that your murder of my seventy brothers was a fitting tribute to Gideon my father, who risked his life for you, then be happy with Abimelech and let Abimelech be happy with you!

"On the other hand, if you have allowed a scoundrel and a murderer to become your king, Abimelech will soon have his differences with you people who have helped him into power. You will eventually destroy him. But he will also destroy you!" (Verses 16-20.)

Momentary Sorrow is *NOT* Repentance

Many of the people who listened below were greatly impressed by what Jotham had to say. Some of them were ashamed that they had not united to protest Abimelech's being made their leader, but most of them did not repent of their part in Abimelech's treachery. They waited to hear what more Jotham had to say, but no more words came down to them. God's warning to them was finished. They had no more excuse for remaining on Abimelech's side.

As Jotham finished speaking, he sighted men creeping toward him around the shoulders of the mountain. He realized that they had been sent to take his life, so that no son of Gideon could possibly be left to be set up as leader of Israel in opposition to Abimelech. Before the assassins had time to reach him, Jotham fled.

Jotham's pursuers were weary and winded from their hurried ascent of Mt. Gerizim, and when Gideon's son suddenly bolted down the side of the mountain opposite the one facing Shechem, they were unable to catch their intended victim.

By the time he reached the base of the mountain, Jotham was out of sight of his pursuers. He sprinted toward the south, carefully keeping out of sight in the gullies and defiles until he was well out of the region of Shechem. After traveling about twenty miles, he succeeded in reaching safety in the town of Beer, about eight miles north of Jerusalem. (Verse 21.)

How God's Law Operates

Perhaps Jotham's efforts to remind the local Israelites that they were headed



Jotham kept on speaking to the people of Shechem until he noticed that men were creeping up the mountain toward him.

for trouble weren't entirely wasted. Abimelech was leader of the northern Israelites around Shechem and Arumah for three years, but at the end of that time a feeling of dislike and suspicion developed between him and many Israelites, especially those in the Shechem area. Former partners in murder now became enemies. This was the natural result of building a government on murderous plots, evil schemes and unholy religious propositions. Even so, God stepped in to cause differences to develop more quickly in order that Abimelech and his hired murderers and fellow conspirators might come to faster justice. Abimelech probably was aware of God's laws, but he wasn't convinced that the dreadful penalty for breaking them was certain to fall on him. (Romans 15:4; II Timothy 3:16.)

Some of the same men who had helped Abimelech become a ruler hired men to watch for him and his friends as they traveled about in the more wild, mountainous regions around Arumah and Shechem in upper Canaan. They hoped to assassinate him in some out-of-the-way spot, but their attempts were unsuccessful because he had been told of the plan. All that was accomplished was the injuring and robbing of many other people who were moving through lonely areas. (Judges 9:22-25.)

Meanwhile, a Canaanite named Gaal, who wished to see the Israelites driven out, organized a band of soldiers and went to Shechem to suggest to Abimelech's enemies that they band together against their leader. Gaal volunteered to head the movement.

Abimelech wasn't in Shechem at the time, so many of the men of Shechem felt free to join Gaal. There was a great celebration in the temple of Baal. There, inflamed by much drinking of wine, Gaal loudly announced that the Israelites should turn to the Canaanite leaders if they wished to be free of Abimelech, an Israelite, and that he, Gaal, would remove Abimelech from power if only the people would back him up with fighting men.

Political Confusion Worsens

Many men in Shechem rallied to join Gaal. He was so encouraged that he became certain he could lead a revolution without any danger of failure. He went so far as to send messengers to challenge Abimelech to return to Shechem and fight for the right to be ruler. (Judges 9:26-29.)

This development troubled Zebul, governor of Shechem and one of Abimelech's right-hand men. He knew where Abimelech was, and sent a swift messenger to him to warn that Gaal had taken over the city and was fortifying it. He suggested that Abimelech quietly bring in an army by night, hide in nearby fields and then wait to see what Gaal would do.

That night Abimelech quietly moved his army into the vicinity of Shechem, concealing it in four companies in gullies and behind hills and rocks.

Next morning Gaal strode out through the city's main gate with some of his men. Zebul accompanied them.

"The mighty Abimelech must have heard of my challenge long before this, but I don't see any sign of him," Gaal loudly remarked in a sneering tone. "Perhaps he decided to lead the Israelites back into Egypt!"

Gaal's men laughed at this comment. Zebul smiled, too, but not because of the remark. He was aware that Abimelech's troops were all around. Suddenly Gaal squinted his eyes as though trying to make out something in the distance.

"Look!" he barked, pointing. "Do I see people moving down from the tops of those hills?"

"People?" Zebul echoed. "Aren't you looking at just shadows and rocks?"

Gaal hardly heard what Zebul said, so engrossed was he in staring in other directions. (Judges 9:30-36.)

"Those *are* people," he exclaimed. They're coming toward us through the valley and across the plain! We're surrounded!"

"How true!" Zebul remarked with a grim smile. "Now let's see how you'll go about destroying Abimelech as you boasted you would do! And you'll have to hurry, or the opportunity—if any—will soon be gone!"

"You seem pleased!" Gaal barked angrily at Zebul. "Probably you've had something to do with this!"

One of his men saw him move threateningly toward the governor, and quickly stepped up to ask what the trouble was. "Look around you!" Gaal snapped. "We're about to be attacked, and for some reason Zebul seems to be happy about it!"

The man looked about, but he saw no attackers because the approaching soldiers had moved behind a hill in one direction and had marched out of sight into a depression in the plain in the other direction.

"I see no attackers," he said to Gaal.

Gaal stared quickly about, perplexed that no one was in sight. He glanced uneasily at Zebul, then went back to scanning the horizon. "I guess you were right about shadows and rocks," he told Zebul.

"The heat makes them look as though they're moving. But why did you say what you did about my boasting that I would destroy Abimelech?"

"If you have the courage to stand up to Abimelech," Zebul answered, "then you're entitled to boast."

Gaal didn't know whether he was being complimented or insulted, but that wasn't his concern at the moment. He continued blinking at the horizon and hoped that somehow Abimelech would never show up to give him any trouble. His fleeting belief that he had been surrounded had worn the sharp edge off his desire to fight with the man he had challenged to battle. Besides, he had lost a little confidence in himself because of what he thought he had seen.

"If Abimelech comes," Gaal remarked, "I'll meet him in a fair fight in the open, but there is no point standing here all day in the hot sun waiting for something that perhaps won't happen. I'm going back inside the gates."

"If Abimelech should suddenly show up and catch you in the city, we could be besieged for weeks," Zebul observed.

"If he accepts my challenge, we'll see him long before he gets here," Gaal answered.

"Then you'd better start looking!" Zebul pointedly commented.

Gaal glanced around. To his sudden surprise and dismay, he saw men pouring out from behind a nearby hill and more swarming up from a depression in the plain. There was no doubt that they were Abimelech's men, and they were closing in fast. Gaal realized then that he had actually seen them when they were at a greater distance, and that Zebul had also seen them and was silently waiting for them to get much closer.

"It appears that you'll soon have to decide to fight or run," Zebul grinned.

Gaal wasted no time with counter remarks. He yelled to the men who were with him to sound a call to arms. The closest of Abimelech's men were only a few hundred yards from the city by the time Gaal and his men rather hesitantly stomped out to meet them.

Canaanite Ambition Thwarted

Minutes later the two armies closed in battle, but not for long. Abimelech's men cut down the foremost of Gaal's soldiers, and the sight of the slaughter unnerved the rest of Gaal's men. They turned, including their leader, and fled back toward Shechem's main gate. Abimelech's men rushed in behind them, killing and wounding many before they could reach the city. Gaal was among those who managed to race through the entrance to Shechem before the gate was slammed shut. (Judges 9:37-40.)

Satisfied that he had put down the revolution, Abimelech led his army to the town of Arumah, about eight miles southeast of Shechem. There the men rested and took on provisions.

Meanwhile Zebul, the governor of Shechem, who hated Gaal, managed to round up a sizable band of Shechemites who shared his feeling. These men pounced on Gaal and the remaining remnant of his army, and thrust them out of the city.

Because there had been so many people in Shechem in recent days, there was a serious shortage of food. Regardless of the threat of attack by Abimelech, who now regarded Shechem as an enemy stronghold, hundreds of people went out next morning to the surrounding fields, orchards and vineyards to obtain vegetables and fruit. Spies reported this to Abimelech, who immediately led his army back to Shechem. About one third of the soldiers dashed to the main gate of the city.

The Shechemites' Penalty for Murder

The remainder of the army was divided into two companies, and closed in on the Shechemites in the fields and orchards. The victims tried to race for safety in the city, but were either cut down as they ran or were killed by Abimelech's men when they reached the gate.

All of Abimelech's soldiers then converged on the city. They battered down the gates and poured inside, but it wasn't a matter of a quick victory. The Shechemites were prepared to fight, and they put up stiff resistance by showering spears, stones and arrows down from the walls and the buildings. By late afternoon, however, it was evident that the defenders were running out of arms and missiles. From then on the victory swiftly went to Abimelech, whose men slaughtered or chased out all the peo-

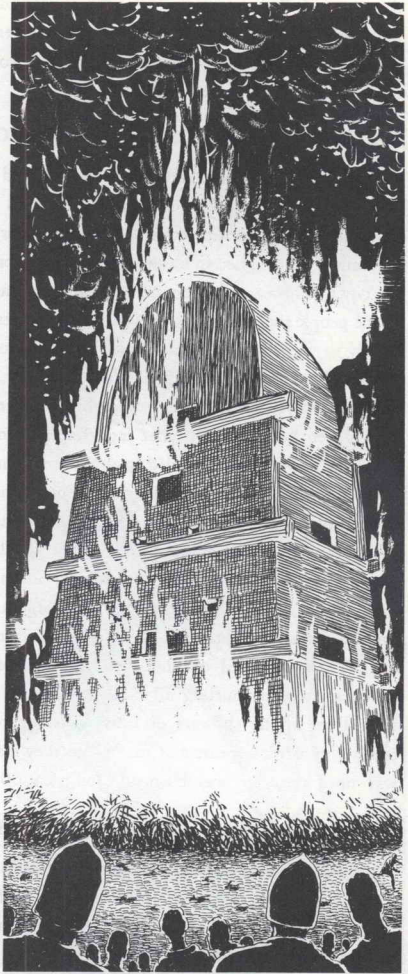
ple. There is no record of what happened to Zebul, governor of the city.

It was a custom at that time that a home, city or village should be strewn with salt if for any reason it was considered a disgraceful or abominable place. To show his contempt for Shechem, Abimelech ordered his men to fling salt all about the city. (Judges 9:41-45.)

While this was going on, fugitives of the Shechem area were fearfully gathering not far away at a tower-like structure built on a mountainside. It was the place of worship of one of the Canaanite gods, and was considered a strong refuge. More than a thousand people swarmed into it. They hoped that Abimelech, who had shown a strong leaning toward pagan gods, would spare the place in the event he found them hiding there.

Their period of concealment was short. Again Abimelech's spies informed him what was going on. Abimelech took his men into a nearby region where there was a heavy growth of trees and brush. There each man cut down as large a branch as he could comfortably carry, and took his load to where the people were hiding.

The branches were piled around the base of the structure,



More than a thousand people sought refuge in the high building of Shechem built for idol-worship, but all lost their lives when Abimelech's men burned it.

then ignited. The tremendous fire that followed speedily destroyed the tower. The hundreds of people inside, unable to escape, were burned to a charred mass for having helped Abimelech murder Jerubbaal's sons, just as Jotham had prophesied. (Judges 9:19-20; Judges 9:46-49.)

From Revenge to Conquest!

Night had arrived, and as the flames died down in the darkness, Abimelech considered it a successful day. He gave orders for his men to camp for the night where they were. Abimelech's God-given victory made him so conceited and greedy he wanted to conquer innocent cities. Next morning he started them on a march to the city of Thebez about ten miles to the northeast. He had received reports that most of the people there were not in favor of his leadership. His vengeful, bloody desire was simply to wipe them out, just as he had done to others who had stood in the path of his political aims. Abimelech didn't realize that God had allowed him to wipe out Shechem only because of its part in his treacherous murders.

When he reached Thebez late that morning, the people there were so frightened that they fled to a high, walled stronghold within the city. This pleased Abimelech.

"We have them bottled up without so much as having to throw a spear!" he exultantly told his officers. "Spread our men out to camp around Thebez so that no one will escape during the night. Tomorrow we shall take their stronghold and everyone inside it!" Abimelech's army closed in on the city, converging on the high fortress within. The stone structure was large and strong, but the gate was made of timbers. Brush and branches were piled against it so that it could be burned open.

People gathered on the open top floor of the fortress fought hard to keep the attackers away by hurling all kinds of objects down on them. Many invaders lost their lives in the showers of heavy missiles from the tower. Abimelech's men countered with arrows, spears and stones, but they realized that they could make little headway until the gate was burned. (Judges 9:50-52.)

The Fire That Failed!

In his eagerness to accomplish a break-through, Abimelech moved closer to the wall. It was a foolish thing to do because he became the intended object of a number of missiles. A heavy chunk from a broken millstone struck him on the head. He thudded to the ground, blood oozing from his scalp. His young armorbearer rushed to him, noting that he was still conscious.

"It was a woman who threw it, sir!" the young man exclaimed. "We'll get her as soon as we get inside!"

"I know," Abimelech muttered, "but don't let it be said that a woman sent me to my death! Thrust your sword through me! Now!"

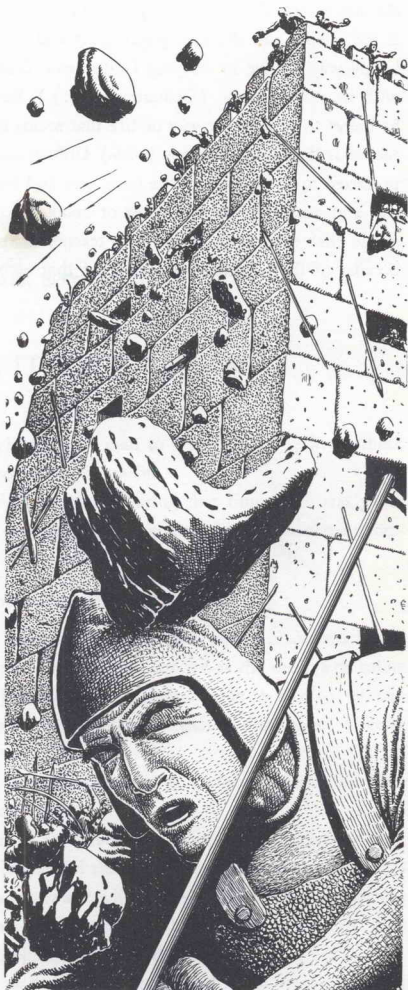
The armorbearer was hesitant. One of Abimelech's officers nearby, realizing that his leader was dying, shouted at the armorbearer, at the same time motioning for him to do what his superior commanded.

God Restores Peace

The young man obeyed. Abimelech died by the sword, but he would have died only a little later from the head wound. Thus died Abimelech, who had refused to profit from the sad experiences of others who had rebelled against God's laws. Only those who want to obey God can learn from such tragic events. (Romans 15:4; II Timothy 3:16.)

When his men realized that he had been killed, they ceased fighting and withdrew from Thebez. Within minutes the army became disorganized. The men started back to their homes, many of them ashamed that they had taken part in the slaughter of their own people. Their neglected fire, like their war, died. (Judges 9:53-55.)

Jotham's prediction of grief in Israel wasn't an empty one. God had brought destruction upon



Abimelech was felled by a heavy object hurled from the top of the fortress at Thebez.

the destroyers. (Verses 56-57.) All the trouble and misery could have been avoided if the people had shunned pagan gods and had been willing to learn the right and happy way to live by obeying God's laws. God has promised that all will go well with those who obey. (Deuteronomy 6:3.) But Satan has suggested that it would be better to choose any way of life that seems easiest and most pleasant and wait to see what develops. (Genesis 3:4-6.) Unfortunately, almost every generation of Israel preferred to go along with the latter way and learn life's principles in the most difficult and miserable manner. Most of mankind continues to believe that delusive old adage that experience is the best teacher. Experience is really the worst teacher because of the wretchedness and grief that accompany it.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

COURAGE WITHOUT WISDOM

AFTER the death of Abimelech, the next man to become a judge in northern Canaan was Tola. He was from the tribe of Issachar.

Tola led northern Israel twenty-three years. During that time there was peace in that part of the land because the worship of pagan gods and idols was almost completely stopped. (Judges 10:1-2.)

From Obedience to Idolatry

After Tola died, a man by the name of Jair came into power in eastern Israel. He had thirty grown sons who helped him maintain control as the mayors or rulers of thirty towns in northern Canaan. Jair and his sons chose to rule by God's laws, and for twenty-two more years matters went well for the Israelites in that region. (Verses 3-5.)

Meanwhile, other judges ruled over the Israelites in southern Canaan, but that is another facet of the history of Israel.

Jair's death triggered the return of the Israelites of northern Canaan to idolatry. The pagan nations all about them considered them curious or odd because they observed laws that didn't allow religious orgies and wild festivals. Rather than be thought of as religious oddballs, the Israelites—who wanted to be well thought of by their neighbors—gradually fell into worshipping foreign gods.

Their desire to conform to the ways of the people about them wasn't the only reason Israel went over to idolatry. The belief grew that pagan religions offered more freedom because there were less laws to observe. Israel forgot the many wonderful

blessings that obeying God brings—peace, health and prosperity.

This was foolish reasoning, but Israel today reasons the same way. Those who are of a religious bent generally join the largest, most popular churches with a careful eye to conformity. Some of these people are being called out of such worldly churches to become part of God's Church. Those find that God's ways are much different from what they thought, and that the churches from which they came are based on many pagan beliefs.

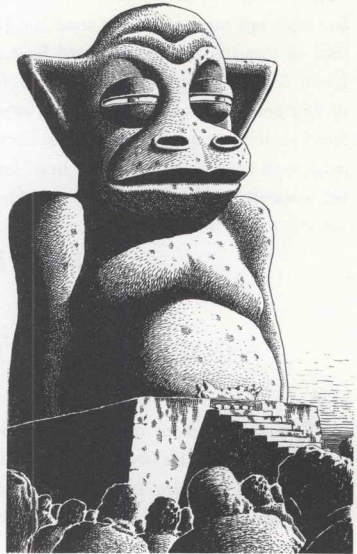
Because of the disobedience of the Israelites, God became increasingly angry. He allowed two nearby warlike nations to send soldiers into the land. They were the Ammonites, whose country was to the east, and the Philistines, whose nation was on a portion of the southeast shore of the Great Sea west of Canaan—the Mediterranean.

At first the Ammonite movements in the east consisted only of forays by small bands of soldiers who would attack Israelites' homes and villages in Gilead, east of the Jordan River, then hastily retreat with any booty they could seize. Gradually the attacking bands grew larger and bolder until they were setting up armed camps well inside Canaan. It wasn't long before the camps were growing into large garrisons from which enemy soldiers crossed the Jordan River into southwestern Canaan to kill and plunder. (Judges 10:6-9.)

Death, disease and poverty moved over Israel in a black cloud of misery. It appeared that if the wretched conditions continued, Israel would be entirely wiped out or fall into permanent slavery.

It was then that the people began to cry out to God. They admitted their sin of bowing down to other gods, and begged for forgiveness and help.

God's reaction was far from hopeful. His reply was probably given through the high priest or someone chosen as a prophet.



After the death of Jair, who was a judge of the northeastern Israelites, the people of that region again started to worship the idols of the pagan nations around them.

"Did I not save you previously from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Zidonians, the Amalekites and the Midianites?" God asked them. "You pleaded for help when you were in danger, and I delivered you from all these enemies. Then you turned around and forsook me! Why should I save you again? Cry to your pagan gods to save you!" (Verses 10-14.)

The Israelites knew better than to waste their prayers on heathen gods in a time of trouble. They were aware that only the God of Israel could help them, and they continued their pleas for deliverance.

And Finally—Repentance!

"Do whatever you will to us!" they pleaded. "But for now, we beg you to spare us from our enemies!"

If God felt that the Israelites failed to show their sincerity, He didn't have to wait long for evidence of it. All over Canaan the people swiftly turned from the heathen gods, destroyed their idols and temples and eagerly sought to learn God's ways. To many the knowledge of their Creator's laws was quite obscure, because it had been almost a generation since the nation had last fallen into idol worship. When God witnessed the smashing of their little "good luck" objects, tearing down images of the national gods of foreign nations and earnestly seeking to find the right way, He felt sorry for Israel.

Again, after eighteen years of oppression, the ever-merciful Creator moved to deliver His chosen people. (Judges 10:8.) He made it known to them that as many as possible should gather to meet the enemy in the land east of the Jordan, and that He would help them.

The Israelites were disorganized, but this wonderful news spurred them to action. During the next weeks thousands secretly came at night—especially from eastern Canaan—to gather at Mizpeh, a city in the southern portion of the land allotted to the tribe of Gad. Assembling wasn't easy. Many who wanted to go found it impossible to leave home without being seen by enemy soldiers. Some fought their way free. Others died trying. Most of them had to leave home at the risk of being discovered and having their families taken by the enemy. It was all part of the price they were still paying for breaking the first, second and fourth Commandments, which generally lead to breaking the other seven.

It wasn't long before the news of this great gathering reached the Ammonites, who were already bringing up heavy forces along the east side of the Jordan to their main garrison in Gilead. They were about ready for a last mass attack on the half tribe of Manasseh and the tribes of Reuben and Gad in eastern Canaan. Israel's move stepped

up the action of the Ammonites, who hadn't expected any mass resistance. If they had also learned another startling fact, they would have acted with even more haste.

God Chooses Whom Man Rejects!

That fact was that the quickly-organized army of Israel as yet had no leader or captain! (Verses 17-18.)

Meanwhile, near the eastern border of the territory of Manasseh in Gilead, there was a rugged man by the name of Jephthah, who was the head of a desert band made up of trained fighters who made a living by somewhat questionable means. They probably raided and looted poorly protected Ammonite settlements and hired themselves out as guards and protectors. Jephthah's father was one of the tribe of Manasseh, but because his mother was not his father's legal wife, his half brothers (whose mother *was* the legal wife of their father) wouldn't allow him to share in their inheritance. Spurned by his own family, Jephthah had left home when a very young man to seek a living elsewhere. (Judges 11:1-2.)

He had journeyed off to the desert country to the northeast, where he established himself well in the ways of life in the wilderness. (Verse 3.) He became well trained in riding, hunting and fighting. Eventually he built himself up as a tribal leader, the builder of a small private army that was the fear of fierce nomadic tribes and the protector of the weak and the poor. Jephthah was actually a kind of captain of men little better than cunning desert pirates, but he became respected and famous in his part of the country. He had a reputation for seizing booty only from bands of vicious robbers and killers, especially Ammonites.

In Mizpeh there was growing concern as to who should be chosen to head the army of Israel. Outside of a few men who had been officers of minor rank years previously, there was little choice. It was soon recognized that none of these men were able enough to lead the army. The elders of Israel realized that the leader must be one whom the soldiers would respect in knowledge, resourcefulness, patriotism, courage and experience.

When the name Jephthah was brought up, there were yells of derision, although it was well known that he was a mighty leader and had kept his private band free from Ammonite oppression. (Judges 11:1.) The more the elders discussed him the more seriously he was considered. They now realized the man they had self-righteously cast out was their only hope. The discussions ended with several men riding swiftly out of Mizpeh in the direction of Jephthah's home far east of the Jordan. They were now ready to ask Jephthah to lay down his life for those who formerly would not have given him a piece of bread if he were hungry.

Jephthah was surprised to be visited by chieftains of Israel. He was more surprised to recognize some elders of eastern Manasseh—and some of his brothers!



From the high desert city of Mizpeh (the one just south of the Yarmuk river east of the Jordan—not the city of that name close to Jerusalem) the Israelite leaders set out to the mountain home of Jephthah.

"This is quite a gathering," he remarked coldly. "What business could you have with me? And why are my brothers here? To them I am a non-deserving outcast!"

"We realize that this must seem very strange to you," an elder explained, "but all of us are here to ask your help against the Ammonites. We have a large army, but no general. Would you consider leading our newly formed army against them?" (Judges 11:4-6.)

Jephthah could hardly believe his ears. There were almost countless able men in Israel, he realized, yet here were representatives come to ask an outsider to lead their army! He stared at his brothers, who eyed him uneasily.

"I suppose you know my brothers forced me out of my inheritance in disgrace years ago," Jephthah addressed the elders. "They hated me and pushed me out of my home because my mother was a harlot. They caused others to hate me. The elders did nothing to protect me. Why should I now be the one to help you in your time of trouble?"

This time it was the brothers who answered. They stepped forward beseechingly.

"We did wrong, and we are sorry!" they exclaimed. "Forgive us! We beg you to go with us now to Mizpeh to help get our army moving. If you do, we'll see that you shall become leader of all the people of your home region, the land of Gilead!" (Verses 7-8.)

The brothers were so convincing in their sincerity that even Jephthah, a hardened soldier, couldn't help but believe them. He regarded them intently for a few moments, then turned to ask more questions of the elders. He didn't wish to make up his mind without trying to find some underlying motive in this astonishing overture. After the plan had been laid out to him in more detail, and after he had sat before them for a time in thought, he asked them this last question:

"If I take your army against the Ammonites, and God makes me victorious, will the heads of the tribes east of the Jordan actually give me full direction and power to help change the lives of all the people?"

There was an affirmative chorus of solemn promises. (Verses 9-10.)

Jephthah turned to his brothers with a nod and a slight smile. The Israelite elders tried to restrain their cheerful shouts. Jephthah's brothers rushed forward to bow before him, but he pulled them up to embrace them.

Days later at Mizpeh, after Jephthah had been made leader of the northeastern tribes, he sent messengers to the king of Ammon, who was camping with a large army south of the Jabbok river in the territory of Gad. Although warfare was the thing Jephthah knew best, he loved peace and had long since learned that avoiding war was more often the wiser course. He was determined to at least try to resolve matters by diplomatic means. He courteously inquired of the king why he had come to fight against the tribes of northeastern Israel.

The messengers returned promptly with the Ammonite king's curt reply:

"The Israelites took away my land when they came up from Egypt. I am here with my army to demand that you return it to me. It is all the territory east of the



Jephthah was at first suspicious of the men who came to ask him to be their military leader.

Jordan between the Arnon and the Jabbok rivers.” (Judges 11:11-13.)

Jephthah sent messengers back to the king, this time with a clarified piece of information he hoped would give the Ammonite ruler food for thought and perhaps a change of mind:

“You claim that the Israelites took your land when they came up from Egypt. We know, as well as you do, that this is not true. Neither did Israel take away the Moabites’ land.

“When Israel came up from Egypt by way of the desert, the Red Sea and Kadesh, messengers were sent to the king of Edom asking permission to pass through his land. He refused. Permission was asked of the king of Moab to pass peacefully through Moab, and he also refused. After the Israelites had camped at Kadesh for a time, they set out to the northeast, careful not to trespass into the lands of Edom and Moab, or disturb those people as they passed by.

“Israel sent messengers to Sihon in Heshbon, king of the Amorites, asking permission to pass through his land. His land is this land now in question. The Amorites had formerly taken it from the Ammonites, and Ammon was never able to recover it. Instead of granting the request to let Israel pass through his land, king Sihon tried to wipe out Israel by the sword. But he was defeated. The God of Israel then turned possession of the land of the Amorites over to Israel. It included the territory from the Arnon river to the Jabbok river, and from the Jordan river eastward into the desert. These are the boundaries of the land you claim as yours, but why do you claim it? (Judges 11:14-23.)

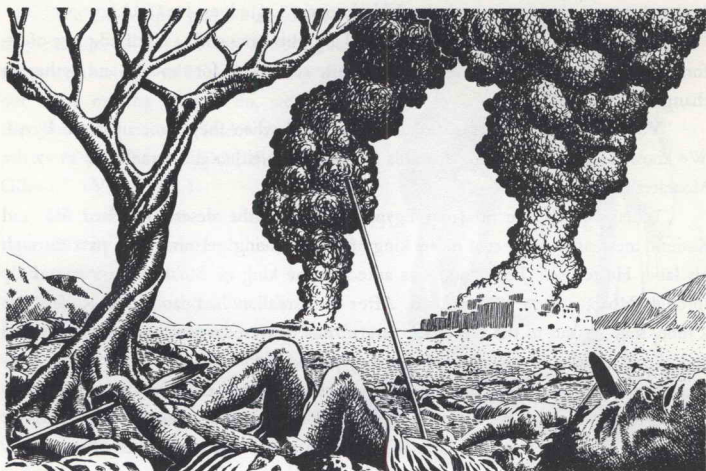
“Our God took that land from the Amorites and gave it to us. If your god Chemosh were to give you something, wouldn’t you feel that you should be the rightful owner? Whether it is the land you speak of or any other land, if our God drives out the inhabitants before us, we shall possess that country!

Ammonites Reject God’s Decision

“Do you feel that you are better than Balak, king of Moab, who knew better than to fight with Israel over the towns and territory he knew Israel rightfully owned? Did he ever claim we should give him the land Moab had lost to the Amorites? If you have felt that these places you lost to the Amorites should be recovered from Israel, why didn’t you do something about it long before this?

“Considering all these things, you honestly must admit that Israel has done nothing to cause you to threaten the nation or to wage war. On the other hand, you are doing the wrong thing to threaten war against Israel!

“Let the God of Israel, who is the Supreme God, judge this matter between Israel



The Israelites vanquished the Ammonites over an area of thirty miles and including twenty towns.

and Ammon!"

Again the king of the Ammonites was quite prompt with an answer. It consisted of very few words, and left little doubt in Jephthah's mind as to what would be the next turn of events.

"I say the land I designated belongs to me," the return message read. "Why leave it to your God to prove anything? Prove it yourself!" (Judges 11:24-28.)

Jephthah was through sending messages. He and his officers immediately passed through all of eastern Israel recruiting more soldiers and even sent messengers across the Jordan to ask the tribe of Ephraim for help. He told his officers to get the Israelite army ready to move. While preparations were being made, Jephthah foolishly uttered a very unusual and improper vow, thinking that his chance for victory would be greater if he could promise something to God in return. (Judges 12:1-2; Judges 11:29-21.)

"If you will give us success in battle and if I am allowed to return in peace, then I will dedicate to you whatever first comes out of my door to meet me," he said to God, "and, I will prepare it as a burnt offering!"

God did not approve of this foolishly spoken vow and would have helped Jephthah just as surely if he had not made it. But regardless of what God thought

of the vow, He helped Israel charge into the Ammonites with crushing strength. The battle raged over a thirty-mile area that involved twenty towns. When it was over, the Ammonites were completely defeated. (Verses 32-33.)

But the pleasant flavor of victory was soon to turn bitter for Jephthah. His courage and integrity had brought victory but his lack of good judgment was bound to bring grief. As he approached his home on his return from the battlefield east of the Jordan, his young daughter—his only child—came dancing out of the house.

He stood speechless, remembering that he had vowed to dedicate to God whatever came to meet him! (Judges 11:34.)

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

THOSE INFAMOUS PHILISTINES

WHEN Jephthah returned to Mizpeh after his victory over the Ammonites, he approached his home to see his only child come out of his house to meet him! (Judges 11:34.)

Doing What Seems Right

He remembered then the vow he had made to God before the battle. Jephthah was so upset that he tore his coat to shreds. As his daughter rushed to meet him, he seized her in a fond embrace. Then he told her of the vow he had made. It was a shock to her, but she didn't complain.

"If you have made a vow to God," she told her father, "then you must keep it. God has given you a victory over the Ammonites, as you asked, so do with me according to your promise in this matter."

A vow to God is something that should be made very seldom—if ever. Jephthah began to realize that he had been very foolish in making such a rash vow. But, thinking any vow was binding, he was determined to carry it out, even though God certainly disapproved of such an act. The lesson God wants us to learn from the book



Jephthah sadly told his daughter, while he held her, of the terrible vow he had made.

of Judges is recorded in the last chapter: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." (Judges 21:25.) God had forbidden them to do what was right in their own eyes. (Deuteronomy 12:8.)

"Before I go," Jephthah's daughter told him, "I should like to take two months to visit my friends who live in various places in the nearby mountains, as I shall probably never see them again!"

Jephthah readily agreed. (Judges 11:35-38.) At the end of two months she dutifully returned home. The Bible doesn't explain the details of what happened. It merely concludes: ". . . she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed . . ." (Judges 11:39.) Though some commentators have thought Jephthah kept his daughter a perpetual virgin, the Jews and most commentators have understood this tragic story as it is explained in the King James translation of the Bible.

Jephthah learned a mighty lesson. He discovered, through this tragedy, the real lesson of faith—that one does not have to vow to God in order to have Him perform what He has promised. What God expects is that we learn to trust Him in everything. When Jephthah finally learned that lesson, he became an outstanding example of faith. Paul even referred to him in Hebrews 11:32 as one of the outstanding examples of faith in the Old Testament.

It later became a custom in Israel for the young women to spend four days of every year in expressing sorrow for Jephthah's daughter. (Judges 11:40.)

When the other tribes of Israel heard that their brothers east of the Jordan had freed themselves from the Ammonites, they reacted in various ways. It should have been a cause for happy celebration, but the people of Ephraim didn't see it that way. They were offended because they hadn't been given part of the glory Jephthah's army earned in fighting the Ammonites. In fact, they were so irked that they formed an army and marched northward to a spot where they could cross the Jordan river and then headed eastward to confront Jephthah.

"Why didn't you let us in on your battle with the Ammonites?" they angrily asked. "Were you trying to take all the glory of winning for yourself? You have acted in an unbrotherly and selfish manner, and for that we should set fire to your home and burn it down on you!"

This was an unfair charge and a ridiculous threat, but Jephthah didn't lose his temper.

"There was no time to lose in preparation against the Ammonites," he explained. "If you had wanted to help, you could have volunteered whatever number of men you might have quickly gotten together when I asked you for help. But you sent no

one. So now you have no good reason to complain. Thousands of men, including myself, risked their lives against the enemy, but God delivered us and the matter is over. What, therefore, is your reason for bringing an army to fight me?" (Judges 12:1-3.)

Jephthah's words only served to stir the Ephraimites to greater anger. They began shouting childish insults at the eastern Israelites.

Where Brotherly Envy Leads

"You men of the Gilead area have no national pride!" they yelled. "You are trying to establish a country all of your own, but you won't succeed because you are only the outcasts and the scum of Israel!"

These groundless affronts stung the Gileadites, and though Jephthah tried to keep them under control, the continued yells of contempt soon developed into the action of attack. It wasn't long before a battle was raging.

The Ephraimites had come as the angry ones, but Jephthah's men, after all those insulting remarks, had greater anger, and they fell against their brothers with such power that they quickly defeated the men of Ephraim, who broke ranks and fled in fear and confusion in all directions. Jephthah knew that eventually they would all move to cross the Jordan westward to get back to their home territory to the south, so he ordered his men to rush to the places at the river where it was possible to ford it. He felt that people who had such a miserable attitude should be punished, and God allowed him to do just that.

At first the Gileadites had difficulty in identifying people because there were so many crossing the Jordan. To get safely across, the Ephraimites tried to pose as people from east of the Jordan so that they wouldn't be attacked. Then someone thought of a good way to determine which were Ephraimites. Each man, as he approached the river, was asked to pronounce the word "shibboleth." Persons who were east of the Jordan could pronounce it correctly, but Ephraimites, because of their particular manner of speaking, couldn't bring themselves to say "shibboleth" but insisted it was "sibboleth." All those who mispronounced the word were slain. By the time the matter was finished, forty-



Strangers who tried to cross westward over the Jordan were stopped by the Gileadites, who slew them if they were unable to pronounce the word *Shibboleth*.

two thousand Ephraimites were dead! (Judges 12:4-6.)

As the elders of Gilead had promised, Jephthah was made judge of northern Israel. He died after being in power for six years. During the next twenty-five years three other judges ruled that part of Israel. None of them did anything particularly eventful, but in those years there was a degree of peace and prosperity in that region. (Judges 12:7-15.)

While all this was taking place, the state of affairs in other parts of Israel varied from fair to miserable. When the Ammonites, years previously, had moved in from the east, the Philistines had come into Canaan from the southwest. All during the time the northern Israelites were troubled by the Ammonites, and during the time of peace that followed Jephthah's victory, most of the rest of Israel was suffering from the inroads by the Philistines. By the time Gideon had died, the people of northern Israel had begun again to fall toward idolatry. Soon northern Israel had fallen away from God's ways to a great extent, and curses were beginning to fall on them. With southern Israel almost completely in the hands of the Philistines, all of the Israelites were once again embroiled in calamity of their own making.

In those days there was a Danite named Manoah who lived in the town of Zorah, which was in the tribe of Dan near the border between the territories of Dan and Judah. It was about twenty miles west of Jerusalem, and in the land occupied by the Philistines.

Christ Was No Nazarite

Manoah had been married for several years, and though he hoped to rear a large family, his wife had no children. As time went on, the couple had to face the discouraging possibility that Manoah's wife was incapable of bearing children.

One day when Manoah's wife was alone, a strange man came to speak to her. She was startled at the sight of the stranger because of his outstanding appearance. He had unusually expressive and piercing eyes, and gave the impression that he was a man of exceptional and even terrible power.

"I know that you haven't been able to have children," he said to Manoah's wife, "but now I want you to know that soon you shall give birth to a son. Listen to my instructions. This son of yours shall be under the vow of a nazarite from the time he is born till his death. Therefore you should not drink wine or strong drink while your son is on the way. And don't eat any food that is unclean. This son of yours shall grow up to be a special person who shall start to deliver Israel out of the power of the Philistines! (Judges 13:1-5.)

What Manoah's wife did then will be related a few paragraphs later. The vow

of a nazirite should first be explained. When the Israelites camped at Mt. Sinai and received from God complete instructions on how to conduct themselves rightly, those directions included what should be done if one decided to give himself or herself over to special service to God for any chosen period of time, whether it was for a month, a year, or several years. This promise to go into such special service was known as the vow of a nazirite.

Anyone who made such a vow was to do three things: Drink no alcoholic drink nor consume grapes or any product of grapes such as vinegar or raisins; touch no dead body; refrain from cutting the hair. (Numbers 6.) Manoah's son was to observe these rules all his life, and Manoah's wife was to observe them until her son was weaned.

Because Christ was reared in the town of Nazareth in the land of Galilee, the word "nazirite" is sometimes erroneously connected with the place where Jesus lived. For this reason Christ is sometimes referred to as a nazirite. Inasmuch as the Son of God led a perfect life while in human form, there was hardly any necessity for his making a vow to be of special service. And not having made such a vow, there was no reason for Him to observe the three rules that a nazirite was obliged to follow.

Nevertheless, some insist that Christ lived the role of a nazirite. The truth is that Christ didn't have long hair as he is so often pictured. He wasn't averse to drinking wine or grape juice. The New Testament several times mentions the fact that Christ drank wine. (Matthew 11:18-19; Luke 5:29-30.) He also had no aversion to touching a dead body. He was a Nazarene, reared in Nazareth, but never a nazirite. Christ did not live by the rules of the nazirite vow, for these things Jesus did would have broken the nazirite vow. That would have been sin. If Christ had sinned, He could not have become our Savior. (II Corinthians 5:20-21.)

The stranger who had appeared to Manoah's wife left as suddenly and mysteriously as he had arrived. When Manoah returned, his wife immediately went to him and excitedly told him what had taken place.

An Amazing Visitor

"I asked him his name but he neither answered my question nor told me where he came from!" she exclaimed. "He was such an unusual man that I felt as though I were in the presence of someone holy!" (Judges 13:2-7.)

Manoah was at first inclined to believe that his wife's imagination was a bit over-active, but the more he thought about what she had told him the more he came to believe that some person sent by God had spoken to his wife. The matter began to weigh so heavily on his mind that he prayed that God would again send the mysteri-

ous man to give them further instructions as to how they should rear the son who would come to them.

A few days later, when Manoah was working in his fields at a distance from his home, his wife was at the same time working in an area close to their home. She stopped to rest, and it was then that the mysterious stranger suddenly appeared again to her. She was greatly startled, and ran to her husband to tell him that the person who had predicted she would have a son was again present. Manoah hurried back with his wife to find a man who exactly fitted the description she had given him days before.

"Are you the one who spoke to my wife a few days ago?" Manoah asked a bit hesitantly.

"I am the same," the stranger answered.

"You predicted we would have a son," Manoah went on. "We would like to learn in more detail how we should rear him."

"I have already given your wife instructions," the stranger replied. "If you hold to them, you will do well." He then repeated those instructions to refresh their memories. (Judges 13:8-14.)

Manoah believed that this man was some kind of a prophet in whom he could rely, and he was so pleased to know that his wife would have a son that he asked the man to stay until a young goat could be broiled for a special feast. The stranger told Manoah that he wouldn't stay to eat, but that if he wished to cook meat, it should be offered as a sacrifice to God.

The more Manoah talked with the stranger, the more curious he became about his identity.

"What is your name?" he finally inquired boldly. "We would like to know so that we may rightly honor you when your predictions come true and our son is born."

"By now you should realize that my name should be kept secret," the stranger replied. "Therefore you shouldn't ask about it."

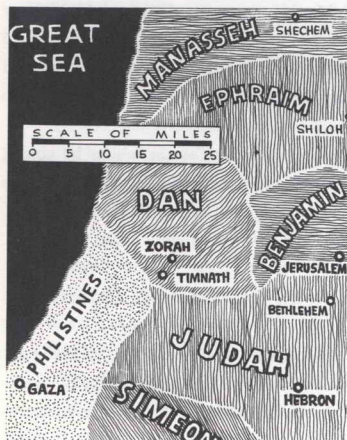


Manoah was startled to meet the unusual man who had previously visited his wife.



When Manoah and his wife looked up again, the stranger had disappeared out of sight in the sky!

Area in southwestern Canaan where Samson spent his unusual life.



Manoah still didn't understand who the man was, but he did as suggested and placed a dressed young goat on a nearby large flat-topped rock. As he stepped back to pick up some sticks to make a fire, the stranger pointed at the rock. Flames shot up out of it! Then, as Manoah and his wife stared, he stepped onto the rock and miraculously shot upward with the flames and smoke!

Manoah and his wife were so startled at the sight and by the sudden realization that this man was a visitor from God that they fell fearfully to the ground. When finally they looked around, they saw no sign of the stranger. (Judges 13:15-20.)

"We must have seen God!" Manoah muttered. "No one can look on God and live! We'll surely be struck dead because of this!"

His wife wasn't so alarmed about the matter. She comforted him by pointing out that if God intended to strike them dead, He wouldn't have accepted their sacrifice and He wouldn't have told them that they would soon have a son. (Judges 13:21-23.)

The couple had not actually seen God. The stranger was either an angel or Jesus Christ in human form. If it had been Christ manifesting Himself in His natural spirit state, Manoah and his wife would not have been able to look and live.

Eventually a son was born to Manoah's wife. He was named Samson.

He grew up to be an exceptionally strong young man who felt very forcefully that something should be done to free his people from the control and influence of the pagan Philistines. (Judges 13:24-25.)

One day when he was in the town of Timnath, a few miles south of his birthplace, he met a Philistine woman and, after becoming better acquainted, they fell in love and decided to marry. He immediately returned home to tell his father and mother that he wanted them to visit the Philistine woman's parents and arrange for his marriage to their daughter.

Manoah and his wife were shocked and disappointed that their only son should choose to marry a foreign woman instead of a daughter of his own people. They did not realize God was using this situation to begin delivering Israel from the Philistines.

Samson was so insistent that they finally went to Timnath.

Samson went with them. At one point he went on ahead for some distance to see if the trail were safe. Suddenly a large lion came roaring out from behind a boulder! Unarmed, Samson quickly turned to face the fierce beast with his bare hands as it lunged upon him! (Judges 14:1-5.)



Samson was unaware that a hungry lion was waiting for him to come up the trail!

CHAPTER SEVENTY

SAMSON AND THE PHILISTINES

SAMSON, the young Danite who insisted on marrying a Philistine woman, was on his way with his parents to where the woman lived. Suddenly he was attacked by a full-grown lion.

Samson Slays a Lion

When he saw the beast coming for him from among the rocks that lined the trail (Judges 14:1-5), Samson deftly moved off his mount. Instead of trying to escape, he deliberately lunged toward the lion. Just as it leaped for him, he dodged. The mighty cat landed on the ground instead of on Samson, who swiftly leaped on the lion the moment it was confused by its failure. Samson straddled the animal's back, locked his arms around the shaggy neck and squeezed hard against the lion's throat. The beast emitted a short roar of rage that trailed off to a gasp as its wind was cut off. It struggled over on its back, frantically pawing the air with claw-extended feet, pinning Samson to the ground.

The thumping weight of the lion might have fatally crushed an ordinary man, but Samson was far from ordinary physically. He hung on, constantly tightening his grip. His head was buried in the beast's thick mane, and breathing was difficult. Summoning all his strength, Samson jerked the massive head backward. He heard the bones snap, and felt the great body go limp. The lion rolled off him, and he lay for a few moments renewing his breath. He staggered to his feet to stare at the dead beast. Samson was a little surprised that he was able to overcome such a powerful animal. He didn't fully understand that he had been given special

protection and a great amount of extra strength by a loving God. (Judges 14:6.)

Not wishing to startle or concern his parents with what had happened, Samson dragged the dead lion back from the trail before they rode into sight. He regained his mount and continued with them to the town of Timnath, where arrangements were made for his marriage to the Philistine woman whom God had put in Samson's life so that he would have a necessary closer association with the Philistine oppressors. (Verse 7.)

In those days it was a custom for a period of time to pass after a couple decided to marry till the time of the wedding. It was many months later, therefore, that Samson and his parents set out for the marriage ceremony at Timnath.

When they arrived at the place where Samson had slain the lion, the young Danite went aside by himself to the spot where he had left the carcass. Animals and insects had long since consumed the flesh of the animal. Only the bleached skeleton remained. Samson discovered that bees had built their comb inside the rib cage, and that there was honey inside. Although bees were swarming about, he surprisingly managed to get some of the honey to eat without being stung. Neither did the bees attack him while he filled a leather bag with honey. He brought some of the honey also to his father and mother, but he told them nothing about the lion. (Judges 14:8-9.)



Samson waited until the fierce lion was nearly on him—then dodged with unusual swiftness!

Samson's wedding turned out to be quite a social event in Timnath. It included a seven-day feast to which thirty young men were invited as friends of the bridegroom.

Young women were also invited as companions of the bride. Besides these, there were friends and relatives. Most of the people were Philistines, a fact that caused Samson's parents to be rather uneasy, what with some of the Philistine overlords acting unfriendly and suspicious.

At that time riddles were a popular form of conversational entertainment. In the course of the festivities, Samson posed a riddle to his thirty companions, basing it on his experience with the lion and the honey.

A Riddle Spells Trouble

"If you men can give me the answer to a certain riddle before this feast is over," Samson told them, "I'll give each of you a fancy shirt and costly robe. Here's the riddle: 'Out of the eater came something to eat; out of the strong came something sweet.' Now if you fail to give me the right answer before the feast is over, then you shall give me thirty expensive shirts and thirty fine robes. Agreed?"

The thirty men nodded in agreement. They welcomed any opportunity for something that might develop into an argument or trouble for Samson. They acted friendly toward him, but inwardly felt just the opposite. Some of them resented Samson's marriage to a woman with whom they had been more than friendly from time to time, and who had no intention of changing her ways. (Judges 14:10-14.)

The thirty men had no intention of providing shirts and robes for Samson. They therefore went to his wife to force from her the answer to the riddle.

"I would tell you if I knew," she told them. "Samson didn't give me the answer."

"Then find out before this feast is over!" they said to her. "Otherwise, we'll burn you together with your parents' home!"

Fearful of what would happen, Samson's wife tried to get the answer to the riddle from her new husband. At first he refused to tell her. She wept bitterly, complaining that it wasn't fair of him to start out their married life by keeping secrets from her. Samson finally was so moved by her tears, pleas and feminine wiles that he told her all about the lion and the honey. Although she didn't believe the story, Samson's wife disclosed to the men who had threatened her, at the first opportunity, all that had been told to her.

"Your husband's story is ridiculous," they told her. "No man could kill a full-grown lion with his bare hands. Possibly he told you this tale to avoid giving you

the right answer. And if you're not providing the right answer, we'll carry out that threat we made!"

That afternoon, only two or three hours before the feast ended, the men approached Samson to inform him that they at last had an answer to his riddle. Samson noted that some of them looked very confident. Inasmuch as only he and his wife supposedly knew the answer to the riddle, he could think of only one reason why the men should display such an expression.

"Give me your answer," Samson said to them. "If you have it, I'll stick to my offer to reward you."

"We gave your riddle much thought," one of the men told Samson, "and we were really stumped for days. After some time in conference, we believe that we have the answer. Here it is: 'What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?'"

Samson wasn't too surprised by such an accurate answer. He realized that it was as he had lately suspected—that his wife was overly familiar with these men, and that she didn't care for him much more than she cared for them.

"Your answer is right, and I congratulate you on your cleverness," Samson informed them. "You mentioned how hard you worked to find the answer. That was a lie! You found the answer only because you forced it from my wife, whom you have known too well!" (Judges 14:15-18.)

These accusations, though true, would ordinarily have brought men swarming over the accuser. Not one man, however, moved against Samson. None was inclined to tangle with this broad-shouldered, powerful man in his time of anger. There was an awkward silence as Samson surveyed the crowd.

"I'll go now to get those thirty shirts and thirty robes I promised you!" he muttered as he stalked out.

"All those clothes would cost him too much," one man remarked with a grin as Samson disappeared. "That's the last we'll see of him!"

But Samson did return. It was a few days later. He was carrying a large, bulging bag. He called the thirty men together and emptied the contents of the bag—thirty shirts and thirty robes!

"Where did you get these?" the men inquired as they picked them up and admiringly examined the fine material.

"What does it matter to you?" Samson replied tartly. "I took them from thirty well-dressed Philistine men I met on the various streets of Ashkelon. But they don't need the clothes any more because they're all dead now!"

Jaws dropped in consternation at the same moment the men dropped the pieces

of clothing as though they were sizzling hot potatoes. Samson walked away, leaving the Philistines wondering if he were a muscular monster or merely a purveyor of tall tales—or both.

Later they learned that the bodies of thirty Philistines had been found one morning in various parts of their city of Ashkelon, about twenty-four miles southwest of Timnath. All thirty of the bodies were found to be without shirts and robes.

On hearing this report, the so-called companions of the bridegroom were convinced that a monster had indeed been in their midst. They had no way of knowing that Samson's violent actions had been inspired by the God of Israel, who was directing the young Danite in a move for freedom for the southern tribes of Israel against their Philistine oppressors. After delivering the shirts and robes, Samson returned in anger to his home at Zorah without making any effort to visit his bride. (Judges 14:19.)

As the weeks went by, his anger and disgust diminished, and he decided to return to his wife. Taking a young goat as a gift, he went to the home of his wife's father, who was surprised and uneasy when he opened the door and saw Samson.

"I've come to see my wife," Samson said firmly to his father-in-law. "I trust she is here."

Samson's Wife Stolen

"She—she is," the father answered hesitantly. "But weeks ago you gave me the definite impression that you would have no more to do with her, and consequently I gave her in marriage to the man who was your chief companion at your wedding!"

Samson was stunned by this news, though he might have known that anything could have happened among Philistines during his long absence.

"I should have expected something like that," he murmured bitterly. "She seemed to like him more than me or any of the other twenty-nine."

"Forget her!" the father exclaimed in an attempt to pacify Samson. "As you know, I have a younger and prettier daughter. If you would take her for your bride, I would be greatly pleased—and so would she!"

"But I wouldn't!" Samson retorted. (Judges 15:1-2.)

Burning with anger, he returned at once to Zorah. On the way he devised a plan to chastise at least some of the Philistine overlords because of their unjust treatment to him and to most other Israelites.

Within the next few days, with the help of several friends, he trapped three

hundred foxes. These animals were especially abundant in Canaan, and were a specially great nuisance in raiding the vineyard areas.

Samson and his helpers took the caged animals, by night, down into Philistine farming territory where various grains were raised. It was the dry harvest season. Some of the corn, oats, wheat and barley was still standing. Some of it had been cut and stacked or stored.

Samson and his men took short cords and tied the foxes together in couples, with one end of a cord tied to each animal's tail. Then they fastened a firebrand to each cord midway between the tails, and freed them in various areas. The result was that each pair of foxes rolled, raced and struggled all over the fields, dragging their torches and setting fire to the tinder-like grain shocks and uncut fields for miles around. Dry breezes spread the many fires over wide territory, insomuch that there was a tremendous loss of crops to the Philistines during the next several hours. (Judges 15:3-5.)

After the fires were finally put out, the leaders in that area investigated to find out how the fires had started. When they discovered that Samson was responsible, and that he had done it because his father-in-law had given Samson's wife to another man, the Philistines became even more alarmed. Samson had become an object of their fear and respect in recent weeks because of his unusual strength and daring. No one, even in groups, wished to oppose him. The natural thing to do, therefore, was blame Samson's wife and her father for the loss.

It wasn't long before an angry mob converged on the home of Samson's father-in-law, loudly demanding the appearance of the man and his daughter. The two feared the crowd too much to come out. After a while the house was set on fire. The occupants still refused to come out, and perished when the house burned to the ground. (Verse 6.)

When Samson heard what had happened, he boldly appeared before the Philistine leaders. He told them that he was well aware that their actions were in vengeance against him. Then he shouted to them that he wouldn't cease his violent actions toward them until he considered the score settled. This statement greatly disturbed the Philistine oppressors. They decided that they should speak out against Samson so that they wouldn't lose face in the estimation of the oppressed Israelites.

"You've had your way around here too long!" someone shouted.

This was the signal for the Philistines to choose what should be done. Some, though they disliked Samson, feared him too much to oppose him. These tried to quiet others who wanted to make a stand against him. They quickly found themselves outnumbered as feeling against the Danite welled up within minutes.

One man, certain that he would have plenty of backing, and wishing to become a hero by opposing Samson, walked up to him and shook his fist in his face.

"We've had enough of you!" he screamed indignantly. "After all, you're only an Israelite who should realize that we are your masters!"

The unfortunate fellow couldn't have made a poorer choice of words. Samson stared at him while all looked on in expectant silence. Like a cat leaping for a bird Samson pounced on the speaker, then snatched him up as though he were a light bundle of rags. Before anyone could move to interfere, he hurled the fellow into the knot of men grouped before him. There were grunts and howls of pain as the Philistines were floored under the impact of the hurtling body.

Most of those who were able to get up left the vicinity as quickly as they could. A few joined forces to try to stand up to Samson, coming at him from all sides. This was a foolish move. The Danite beat them off with a fury that spelled death for several.

The sound of the fight quickly attracted other men. Samson planned to get away before the Philistines could attack him in greater numbers, but it appeared that the opportunity had slipped by. From all directions he saw men moving menacingly toward him, men who were determined that his trouble-making for them was about to cease. Some of



Samson angrily snatched up the insolent Philistine as though he were a light bundle of rags!

them carried knives and swords. Others carried clubs. There seemed to be no way of breaking out of the tightening circle of aggressors. The panting, sweating Danite realized that this could be the end.

As the crowd closed in tightly, one over-anxious Philistine leaped at Samson. He proved to be the needed weapon for the man at bay. Samson caught him, flipped him upside down to seize him by his ankles and swing him around and around with such force and speed that those closing in on him were mowed down in a senseless heap.

The violence of Samson's action, which left dead and dying all around, was a quick convincer to the Philistines that they were dealing with a man of super-human strength, and that further opposition would result only in more death and injury. They melted away in retreat, giving Samson the opportunity, at last, to get out of that region.

More Trouble for Samson

Instead of going to the home of his parents, where the Philistines would be certain to look for him, Samson went eastward into the land of the tribe of Judah. The Philistines were in power there, too, but he found refuge near Jerusalem in a cave-like fortress named Etam, where some Israelites had gathered to defend themselves against their oppressors. (Judges 15:7-8.)

The Philistines immediately



Even before a messenger arrived to announce the coming of an army, Samson viewed the men of Judah from atop the rock fortress where he had taken refuge.

formed an army which marched eastward into the territory of Judah, where the soldiers camped in a rugged area of limestone cliffs in Lehi, near where Samson was hiding. When the leaders of Judah inquired why an army had come against them, they were told that it had come to insure that the men of Judah would find Samson and deliver him, as a bound captive, to the Philistine army.

The men of Judah had no choice in the matter. They knew that the Philistines would attack them if they refused. They bowed to the wishes of their tyrants by promising that they would bring Samson back as a helpless prisoner.

Later, at the fortress of Etam where Samson was staying, a messenger excitedly rushed in with the news that an army was approaching from the north.

"There must be at least three thousand!" he panted. "They've come down to try to capture Samson, the long-haired nazarite!" (Judges 15:9-11.)

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

SAMSON VEXES THE PHILISTINES

EVEN before a messenger arrived to warn Samson at the fortress of Etam that thousands of soldiers were coming to take him, the young and powerful Danite spotted the army of three thousand from atop the fortress. He could tell by the dress and insignia of the soldiers that they were of the tribe of Judah. He could think of no valid reason why fellow Israelites would be a threat to him or the men with him.

Samson Is Arrested

When the leaders of the army of Judah met with Samson and the other men at the fortress, the reason for the presence of so many men was soon made known.

"We admire your great strength and we have marveled at the ways you have used it and your sense of humor in making the foxes set fire to the Philistines' crops," the captain of the army of Judah told Samson. "However, you seem to have forgotten that the Philistines are ruling over us, and that no one man can change that unhappy situation. Your violent actions against them and your insulting ways and remarks have only made them more hostile toward us. Why have you caused so much trouble?"

"They are our enemies," Samson replied. "They treated me badly, and I did the same to them. And I might as well enjoy my revenge by having a good laugh at their expense." (Judges 15:1-11.)

"What you did has resulted in more grief than you realize," the captain continued. "Now we have had to promise the Philistines that we will deliver you to

them bound and alive! Otherwise, their soldiers will overrun the land with a terrible slaughter!"

Samson silently surveyed the three thousand soldiers below. He was beginning to understand the seriousness of the situation.

"Who figured that so many men would be required to capture me?" he laughed. "I am only one man."

The captain's face turned a little red, but he had a reasonable answer.

"We didn't know how many men would be in and around this fortress."

Samson knew that he would have to submit then and there to the men of Judah or fight against his own people in an attempt to escape. He loved all Israelites and didn't want to hurt any of them.

"I'll willingly go with you if you'll promise to keep me alive," Samson finally said.

"We'll have to bind you," the captain told him, "but I promise you that otherwise you will receive only the best treatment from us."

Samson was free to do as he wished until the soldiers of Judah had eaten and rested and were ready to start back northward. Then the husky Danite's mighty arms were securely bound behind his back with two lengths of strong, new rope. Knots were made especially secure and the rope was bound very tightly over his cloth-wrapped wrists so that there would be no opportunity for leverage or slack by which the binding might gradually be worked loose. (Judges 15:12-13.)

When the army of Judah started out, Samson was carried on a litter between burros. The captain wished to make certain that nothing happened to the Danite before he could be delivered to the Philistines, who were still waiting to the north in the rugged region of Judah where their army had moved in.

It was not many miles from the fortress of Etam to where the Philistines were encamped. Just before the men of Judah reached the place, the captain gave orders to his three thousand men to disband and return to their homes. He was fearful that the army of the Philistines might have formed a trap ahead for his men. A handful of men were ordered on to guide the burros carrying Samson, and these men were advised to escape, if they could, as soon as Samson was in the hands of the Philistines.

A Surprise for the Philistines

When the Philistines learned from look-outs that Samson was being brought into their camp, they became very excited. They grabbed up their arms and rushed southward to seize the man who had troubled them so much. When they saw him

being carried toward them, they began shouting in triumph. It was quite satisfying to them to view him being borne to his apparent doom in their midst. Instead of seizing him immediately, they stood back and shouted taunts and insults. At this point the men who were guiding the burros felt that they had accomplished their mission, and they turned to flee.

Samson made no effort to do anything. Officers sent men to approach him to examine his bonds to make certain that they were real and sufficient. They reported that the ropes were new, strong and well-knotted, and that Samson was truly helpless. Assured, the Philistine officers boldly gathered around Samson.

"So this is the mighty Israelite called Samson!" a Philistine officer haughtily addressed the prone Danite. "You have caused us some trouble in the past, but now you should know that your future is going to be full of a lot more trouble, even though it will be a very short future!"

A great cheer rose from the Philistines. This was too much for Samson, who had been trying to wait for some kind of opportunity. Anger can result in increased strength, and so it was with the muscular Danite. At the same time God imbued him with a special power because he had kept the requirements of a nazirite.

The laughter and hoots of the Philistines increased as Samson jerked himself up and strained at his ropes. In his bound state Samson's bulging muscles, rising veins and expression of anger and agony were a combination to cause great mirth to his enemies. All this was changed within seconds when the bonds snapped and the Danite leaped to his feet. Laughter abruptly faded. Grinning expressions turned to those of surprise and disbelief. Those who stood close to Samson swiftly moved away from him. (Judges 15:14.)

This was a crucial moment for Samson. He knew that he needed more than his fists to protect himself. There was no club, sword, spear or knife within his immediate reach. There were stones, but they could only be thrown, and were awkward to use.

Only the Jawbone of a Donkey

His darting eyes at last focused on the nearby skeleton of a donkey that had died recently and had been freshly picked clean by scavengers. Samson leaped to the bones, jerked the head from the rest of the skeleton and yanked the lower jawbone from the head.

By this time the bolder of the Philistines were beginning to close in on him. Grasping the jawbone by its smaller end, Samson started slamming away all about him, cracking the arms, heads, chests and backs of those who were courageous

enough, however unwise, to come close to him. Some of the officers who had taunted Samson were pushed up to him by their surging soldiers, insomuch that they were included among Samson's victims.

When Philistine soldiers at a distance at last realized what was happening, they tried to rush in and overcome Samson by their very numbers. Men were rammed up to the Danite by the hundreds, but Samson swung the jawbone so swiftly and fiercely that no man was able to seize him or even touch him without being severely wounded or slain. Even so, the Philistines continued to pour in to their deaths.

What with Samson being surrounded with Philistines, soldiers more at a distance hesitated to use spears and arrows, lest they kill their own men. The sight of the slaughter of their fellow soldiers by a man crushing their skulls was too unnerving for the Philistines. The rest of them disappeared into the hills, bringing the strange battle to a quick end.

There was silence to take the place of the shouts of fighting men. And on the arid ground lay a thousand Philistine corpses brought to that state because of Samson's swift, strong use of a donkey's jawbone—and God's help. (Judges 15:15.)

It was a ragged, sweating, weary Danite who looked warily about for more Philistines to rush in. He was breathing hard after his long, fatiguing struggle. He listened for the approach of more attackers, but the only sounds were the groans



Samson realized that God had helped him overcome the hundreds of soldiers heaped about him.

of the wounded and dying. As Samson uncertainly stood there amid the hundreds of corpses, it was difficult for him to realize what had happened.

"I can scarcely believe it," he muttered to himself. "God must have helped and protected me, or I wouldn't have been able to overcome all these men with the jawbone of a donkey!"

Finally he realized that the fingers of his right hand were still wrapped tightly around the jawbone. Then he tossed it away. He named the place *Ramath-Lehi*, which means "Hill of The Jawbone." (Judges 15:16-17.)

Until that moment he hadn't realized how tired and thirsty he had become. He looked around for some source of water, but there appeared to be no brook or spring in the vicinity. None of the dead Philistines had canteens, having excitedly rushed out of their camp with only their weapons.

Samson realized he would be risking death if his enemies should attack him in his tired condition. He fell weakly to his knees in the dry soil, then forward on his face.

God Sends Water

"You have helped me through many great dangers, God!" he muttered wearily. "Surely you didn't spare me to this moment just so I would die of thirst and my body at last fall into the hands of my pagan enemies! Please give me water!"

He lay motionless on the hot ground. His throat began to burn as though he had swallowed hot coals. He was too miserable and worn out to go any farther.

Above his labored breathing he heard a faint sound like the soft gurgle of bubbling liquid.

Samson then raised his head up to see clear water flowing up out of the ground only a few feet away! He stared at it unbelievably. It took moments for him to realize that God had granted his request and had by a miracle made a spring in a low spot, or hollow place, there at Lehi, called "the jaw" in the King James version. Spurred to action by the sight and sound of the water, he crawled slowly up to it and dropped his head into the cool spring to gulp in the life-giving water!

Soon Samson's strength returned. He was so thankful for the miracle God performed to save his life that he named the place *En-bakkore*, which means "Well of the Implorer." (Judges 15:18-19.)

He had no difficulty in returning to his home town. The Philistines feared him more than ever. Some believed that he was possessed with a demon, while others thought that the Israelite God he worshipped had something to do with



Samson slowly and laboriously crawled to the pool of water that had sprung miraculously from the dry ground.

his unusual strength. They decided to leave him alone until some circumstance favorable to them would result in his death.

It was a long, long time, however, before that circumstance developed. After his victorious encounter with the Philistine army, God made Samson judge over southwest Israel. He continued in that office for the next twenty years. During that time, however, the Israelites were still under subjection to their oppressors. (Judges 15:20.)

One day near the end of that twenty-year period, Samson rashly went to the Philistine capital city of Gaza near the Mediterranean, or the Great Sea. This city had been captured by Judah many years previously, but had fallen back into Philistine hands at one of the times Israel had forsaken the Creator.

Samson's reason for going to Gaza isn't mentioned in the Bible, but it was unwise for him to move about in the land of his enemies. To make matters worse, he went into one of Gaza's leading inns. It was impossible that such a powerfully built man—with the uncut hair and beard of one under a nazirite vow—should go unrecognized. Since Samson's peculiar features were well known, word spread swiftly that the mighty Danite was in town. Military officials were quite excited when they heard the news. They immediately ordered men to close the gates of the

city so that Samson could not leave. Excitement mounted when it was later reported that Samson had been so attracted by the proprietress of the inn that he had decided to stay there till the next day.

Are Gates and Bars Enough?

"This is even more to our advantage!" a Philistine officer exclaimed. "He'll surely stay all night, and we'll better be able to cope with him in the daylight. Then, when he tries to get out, we will have the last laugh. At that time I want every man to come out of hiding and set upon him with every kind of weapon. This time that Israelite, Samson, will come to his death by our hands!" (Judges 16:1-2.)

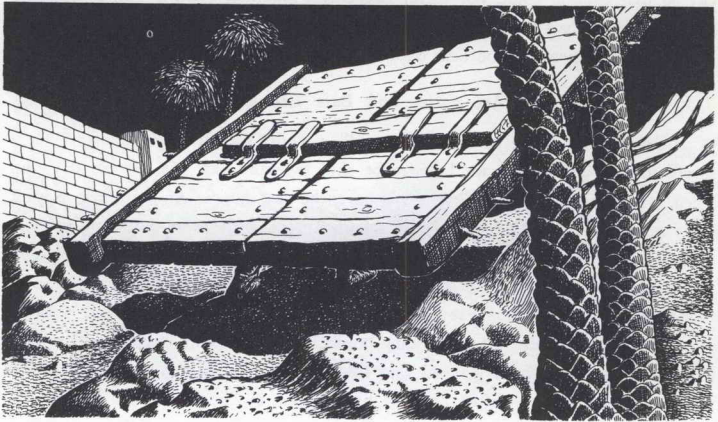
Some Philistines who were aware of the plot against Samson quickly went to the inn to inform him. Of course they hoped that the Israelite judge would reward them handsomely. Samson realized that this could be a plan to get him out of the place right away and into the arms of his enemies, but he took a chance and left the inn about midnight.

Carefully keeping in the deep shadows, he silently went to the double gates of the city. He thought it strange that no guards were in sight. He hurried to remove the bar that held the gates locked and rigid after dark. To his surprise, after he removed the bar, the gates were still rigid. He pushed and pulled on them, but they wouldn't open. He realized then that another bar had also been fixed to the outside of the gates—undoubtedly to keep him from escaping to safety among his own people.

There was no way out except over the wall. It was too high for him to scale. And in those places where structures were built high against it, it might have been possible for him to get up on the wall, but it would have been too much of a drop on the outside.

Samson was as angry at himself for having blundered into this predicament as he was at the Philistines for trapping him. His first impulse was to step back and hurl himself at the double door in an attempt to crack the outside bar. Then a vengeful notion came to him. He seized the post to which the left gate was fixed and yanked it loose from the wall. He did the same with the right post. The gates and posts, held together by the bar that had been bolted across them from the outside fell to the ground as a solid mass. Samson was free again! Just for a joke—to have a laugh on the Philistine oppressors—Samson decided to make them look ridiculous again.

Lifting one edge up, Samson squeezed under the gates and hoisted them onto



The husky Danite fooled his enemies by carrying away the barred gates of their city of Gaza!

his shoulders. After balancing them to the best position, he walked away with the gates of Gaza—posts, bar and all!

But Samson wasn't content just to remove the gates. They were found a few days later on top of a high hill several miles to the east. (Judges 16:3.)

With all his strength and his virtues—his faithfulness to his nazirite vow, his patriotic love for God and the Israelites—Samson seemed to have a weakness for pretty Philistine women. To him their pagan culture seemed very charming. Not long after the episode at Gaza, he was attracted to a Philistine woman by the name of Delilah.

There were five main Philistine rulers, and when they heard that Samson had chosen a mate, they found out who she was and sent agents to talk to her.

"We have been instructed by our superiors to ask you to do a great favor for them," the agents secretly told Delilah. "It is something that should be easy for you, but we are willing to reward you well."

"Of course this has to do with Samson," the wily Delilah remarked casually.

"Why—yes. It does," the spokesman for the agents replied.

"And you would like me to find out what makes him so strong so that the rulers of Philistia will know how to deal with him," Delilah went on.



The five rulers of Philistia sent five men to pay her for the secret of Samson's strength.

The agents were a bit taken aback by this statement, but at the same time they were relieved that they wouldn't have so much to explain.

"I expected something like this." Delilah told them. "What makes you think, gentlemen, that even a great reward would cause me to betray Samson?" (Judges 16:4-5.)

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

THE POWER OF A WOMAN!

SAMSON fell in love with a beautiful Philistine woman named Delilah. (Judges 16:4.) The five representatives of the five rulers of Philistia had come to offer a reward to Delilah if she would discover for them the secret of Samson's strength. When Delilah asked them why they presumed that she could be paid to betray Samson, they felt that she was about to refuse.

Delilah Makes a Deal

"You should do this for the good of our great nation and all your Philistine friends," they anxiously told her. "You would be aiding in keeping down trouble and bloodshed!"

Delilah eyed them quizzically for a few moments.

"I suppose you are right," she finally said, casually running one hand over her hair to push it into place. "If I find out what you want to know, how much are you willing to give me?"

"We'll give you a total of 5,500 pieces of silver, and no more," the relieved spokesman for the agents replied. "This money will be delivered to you just as soon as Samson is in our hands!" (Judges 16:5.)

"Be prepared to pay me very soon," Delilah quipped as she smiled at the five men. Although Samson didn't realize it, the woman he loved was proving to be a greedy opportunist who would do anything for enough money.

That same night she began to question Samson about the source of his strength.

"One reason why I admire and respect you so much," she fondly whispered to

him in a time of intimacy, "is that your enemies have never been able to overcome you because of your great physical power. I know that you must have some secret source of such unusual power. It would please me if you would tell me that secret."

"I can think of no worthwhile reason why you should know such a thing," Samson replied. "You are a bit too curious to be pleased."

"I suppose so," Delilah tactfully sighed. "I merely hoped that you would share with me the knowledge of what great thing it would take to overcome such a strong man as you."

Samson fondly surveyed Delilah. He had such an ardent affection for her that he didn't wish to refuse her some kind of answer. Yet, he did not completely trust her with the secret of his great strength. And Samson did not want to risk unnecessary danger. So he decided to use his sharp wit again so that, if Delilah talked too much to the wrong people, he might have another good laugh on the Philistines.

"If my enemies were to carefully bind me with seven strong, green strips of bark twisted together," Samson said, "then my special strength would fail me, and I would be no stronger than any other man of my physical development." (Judges 16:7.)

"Samson, why do you tell me such a tale?" Delilah gently scolded him, thereby trying to cause him to think that she didn't believe him.

"Why don't you try binding me with such a cord and see what happens?" Samson asked.

"I think I shall do just that, my darling," Delilah replied.

Hours later, Delilah contacted the representatives of the rulers of Philistia to tell them what Samson had told her.

"It could be that Samson made up a story to test your loyalty," one of the men observed.

"I realize that," Delilah answered, "but you'll agree that we'll have to take a chance. Furnish me with the seven strong, green strips of bark braided together, and I'll manage somehow to tie Samson up with them. I'll have men hiding in another part of my home to leap on him if he cannot break the cord!"

"Excellent!" exclaimed the spokesman for the five agents. "We'll send you the cord right away! The rest is up to you!"

Another Laugh for Samson

Later, when everything was in readiness, Delilah produced the cord and playfully wound it about Samson.

"I took you at your word," she told him smilingly, carefully knotting the cord

at his wrists behind his back. "Now, if you are as helpless as you said you would be, what if I should call for your enemies to come and take you?"

"This little game of ours wouldn't be very interesting if you already knew what would happen," Samson teased. "If you have some way to get in touch with my enemies this very minute, I'll face them!"

Samson was quite unaware that a number of picked Philistine soldiers were hiding only a few yards away, ready to pounce on him at the expected moment of his helplessness. He was quite surprised when Delilah began shouting.

"Samson is bound!" she called out excitedly. "Come after him, you men!"

The hidden men, peeking through small slits in a curtain, failed to move or make any noise. They first wanted to see what the Danite would do. They had been told



Several Philistine warriors hid in another part of Delilah's tent, to be ready to leap on Samson if he should lose his superhuman strength.

that he probably would struggle quite fiercely with his bonds if they proved to be too much for him, and the soldiers were taking no chances.

Suddenly Samson broke the cord as though it were made of cobwebs, causing the Philistines to fall back and quietly flee through a rear entrance. Delilah was relieved that the soldiers hadn't rushed into the room. She quickly regained her composure

and concealed her disappointment by smiling and applauding. (Judges 16:8-9.)

A few nights later, when she felt that enough time had passed so that Samson wouldn't guess how anxious she was to betray him, she again brought up the subject of his strength.

"Why did you jest with me about the wonderful source of your great power?" she asked in a hurt tone. "I don't think it was fair of you to tell me something that wasn't true."

"I didn't think you had a good reason to be serious," Samson explained, "so I put you off with a light answer."

"But I was serious!" Delilah insisted. "Why shouldn't you tell me what a wondrous thing it would take to overcome such a man as you?"

Again, because of his deep feeling for Delilah, Samson felt that he should give an answer, but he was too wary to tell her all she wanted to know.

Samson Still Cautious

"All right, Delilah," he sighed. "Here's what could prove my undoing. If I were bound tightly with strong, new ropes that have never before been used for any other purpose, then would I be only as strong as any other man of my size and development."

Delilah realized that this wasn't necessarily so, but there was nothing to do but obtain the new rope and again hide the Philistines in her house while she once more went through the rather childish procedure of playfully binding Samson.

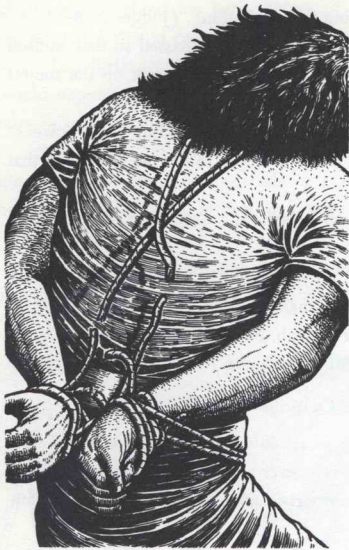
"I can't imagine why tying me up seems so fascinating to you," Samson commented, "but if it makes you happy, I don't mind."

By this time Delilah had bound Samson very thoroughly with the heavy, strong, new rope. She believed now that he would have great difficulty in getting free, what with the manner in which she had wound the rope around and around his arms, wrists, waist and neck. After tying a last knot, she abruptly backed away.

"Samson is bound!" she shouted. "Come out and seize him before he can loose himself!"

Again the peeking Philistines held back until they could be doubly sure that it was safe to expose themselves. When they saw Samson flex his muscles and break the ropes as though they were fine threads, they once more fled for their lives. (Judges 16:10-12.)

Delilah could well be thankful for the second time that the Philistines left instead of exposing themselves. She repeated her performance of the time before, to try to cause Samson to believe that it was all a little game, however silly, to show him



The tough, new ropes with which Delilah had carefully bound him were only as weak threads to Samson!

Delilah purposely took so much time that Samson fell asleep. When she had his hair woven with the web and securely fastened to the pin of her loom, she cried out to the hiding men to leap out and seize Samson. Awakened, he sat up suddenly, jerking the pin and the web loose from the loom by the strength of his hair and muscles. As before, when the Philistines saw that he was free, they fled. (Judges 16:13-14.)

"How can you say that you love me after mocking me three times about your great strength?" Delilah asked in a slightly displeased tone.

"I can love you without having to answer all your questions," Samson replied with some irritation. "If you really care for me, you won't bother me any more with this subject!"

The Temptress Finally Wins

Nevertheless, from then on, Delilah kept badgering him with questions. Every day and every night she would ply him with questions about the source of his strength.

how much she admired his unusual physical power.

For the third time, several nights later, Delilah launched into another attempt to uncover Samson's secret.

"You have mocked me twice in this matter," she told Samson in a wounded voice. "Don't you love me enough to share your greatest secret with me?"

"Of course I do," Samson answered. "Now listen to this. As you know, I often divide my hair into seven different tresses. I'll lie here on the floor in front of your loom. If you can weave my seven locks with the web of your loom, the main source of my strength will depart from me."

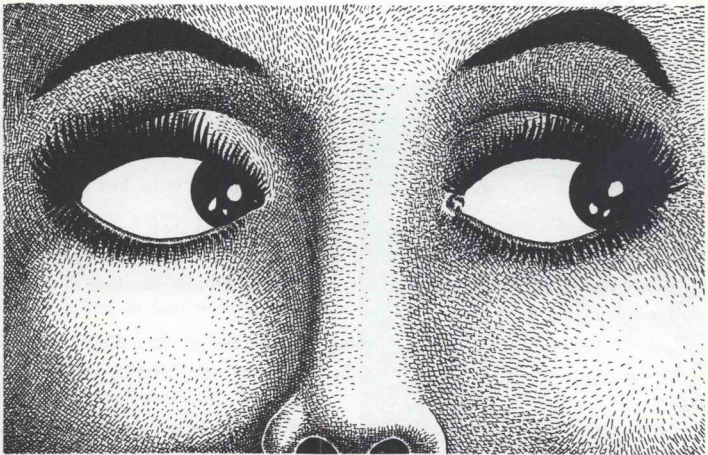
For the third time Delilah half-heartedly arranged for Philistines to be hidden in the next room while Samson submitted to having his seven plaits of hair being put through Delilah's loom.

He began to feel that the risk he would run by exposing his secret wasn't worth what he suffered by her nagging. In fact, he felt that he would rather risk death than continue to put up with such nagging.

"All right! *All right!*" Samson finally exclaimed in desperation, clamping his fists against the sides of his head. "I'll tell you anything you want to know! After that I never want to hear any more from you about why I am as I am!"

Assuming an expression of compassion, though she was really quite elated, Delilah rushed to Samson and threw her arms about him. It appeared that this unprincipled temptress whom Samson unwisely loved was about to succeed where a whole army had failed.

"I'm sorry, my darling!" she murmured. "I guess I didn't realize that I was being



Delilah subtly begged Samson to tell her the secret of his strength.

so troublesome. If it will help you to get anything off your mind, sit down and tell me all about it!"

"You Philistines probably don't know much about such things," Samson began, "but at the moment I was born I became a nazirite, which meant that I was dedicated to service for the God of Israel for my entire life. [Judges 13:1-25.] There are several special things that a nazirite must do. One of those things is to let his hair

and beard grow without any cutting or trimming. [Numbers 6:1-21.] If my hair and beard were to be cut off, my nazarite vow would be broken and God probably would not give me the special protection He has given me all my life. Neither would He give me the special strength I have at times when I am to perform unusual feats!" (Judges 16:15-17.) -

Delilah was certain that at last Samson had told her the truth. Later, she contacted the agents of the rulers of Philistia to tell them that Samson was about to become their prisoner. She arranged for the usual men to go into hiding in her house that night.

When Samson returned from business elsewhere, Delilah met him with unusual warmth. Because it was quite late, she sat on the floor and suggested that Samson lie with his head in her lap. She sang to him softly, gently running her fingers through his great mass of hair. Soon he was asleep, but she didn't try to rush matters.

She waited until his heavy breathing indicated that he wouldn't be easily awakened.

It was then that she silently signaled to one of the men in concealment, who hesitantly appeared and fearfully moved toward the sleeping Danite. This man was a barber whom Delilah had hired to join the Philistine soldiers.

Samson's Nazarite Vow Broken

It took time for this timorous fellow to get up courage to apply his razor to Samson's flowing locks, but once he got off to a start, it didn't take him long to deftly crop the sleeping man's hair and beard off short. When his task was done, he lost no time in leaving.

During this most unusual haircut, Samson had at times moved restlessly. Delilah continued singing to him softly, hoping that he wouldn't spoil everything by awakening.

But as soon as he was shorn, Delilah didn't care how soon he awoke. She signaled to the Philistines to come out of hiding, but they didn't dare until they could believe that he was too weak to overcome them.

"Wake up to face your enemies!" Delilah scoffingly muttered to Samson.

Samson moved, but didn't awaken. Delilah pushed his head off her lap and prodded him with her foot. (Judges 16:18-19.)

"Get up, Israelite!" she smirked. "You have company!"

Only half awake, Samson slowly got to his knees, at the same time sleepily rubbing his head.

When he felt the absence of hair, his eyes popped open and he lurched to his

feet. Because he reeled slightly due to coming out of deep slumber so suddenly, the hiding Philistines believed that he had suddenly become very weak. At last, after running from Samson several times, they had the courage to charge out and swarm over him.

Samson at first tried to beat them off as they came on, but suddenly realized he no longer had his great strength. He began wondering how he had lost his hair and if God had completely deserted him because of his breaking his nazarite vow. The answer was plain when it became apparent that he was powerless against the group of brawny Philistine soldiers. Samson's love for a pretty pagan had been his undoing, just as God had warned the Israelites. (Exodus 23:31-33; Joshua 23:12-13.)

The Philistines hauled Samson to the floor, then pinned him down and bound him. By this time Delilah had disappeared. She had slipped out to collect the 5,500 pieces of silver from the agents who were close at hand.

From then on, for the next hour or so, Philistines closed in from all directions. Samson was dragged outside and confronted by a growing number of enemy officers who were most jubilant about the great victory over one man—a victory it had taken them more than two decades to accomplish because God had planned it that way.

Amidst the shouts and cheers of the Philistines, Samson realized that he had been betrayed by a woman he should have shunned, and that God was punishing him. Bitter indeed was the distress of this mighty man who had just been outwitted and overpowered by a woman of very low character.

To add to his misery and apprehension, the bound Samson suddenly was aware that someone was shoving two red-hot pieces of metal directly toward his eyes! (Judges 16:20-21.)



Samson was suddenly aware that two red-hot pieces of metal were being pushed directly toward his eyes!

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

FROM REBELLION TO IDOLATRY!

HAVING lost his special God-given strength when his hair was cut off during his sleep, Samson finally fell into the hands of the Philistines. They didn't choose to kill him, because they wanted to show him off around the country. To make certain that he wouldn't continue to give them trouble, they intended to deprive him of his sight. (Judges 16:15-21.)

Samson's Tragic Penalty

When Samson saw the red-hot irons being pushed toward his head, he threw every ounce of his vigor into trying to snap the thick leather cords binding his arms and legs. Although his natural strength was most unusual, he couldn't even begin to break his bonds without God's help.

In that awful moment when the hot iron took away his sight, the Danite realized that it was his punishment because he had fallen for Philistine women. Too late, he finally realized he had fallen for their good looks—their eye-appeal—and not for character. God had warned the Israelites that they should not intermarry with the people of surrounding pagan nations because they would lead the Israelites away from following God. The Israelites were to be a special, holy people. (Deuteronomy 7:1-6.)

Amid growing crowds of yelling Philistines, the wretched, degraded, pain-ridden Israelite was paraded out of town and southward to the city of Gaza, the gates of which Samson had previously carried away. There he was bound with chains and imprisoned. Later his chains were loosened just enough so that he could be put to

work at the menial task of pushing a millstone in the grain-grinding room of the prison. (Judges 16:21.) Ordinarily several men were required to keep the heavy stone turning, but the Philistines often forced Samson to move it all by himself until his strength gave out.

In the months that followed, the Danite was a great object of interest and ridicule for his enemies. Thousands, a few at a time, came to the prison to watch him struggle with the millstone. At various times he was taken to important public gatherings so that more people would be able to see the pathetic figure who for so long had been their mighty enemy. Meanwhile, Samson's hair was again growing to an unusual length.

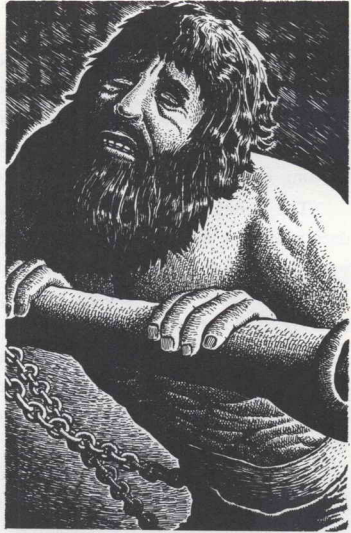
To show their thanks to their pagan god, called Dagon, for helping them win out over Samson, the Philistines planned a special meeting at a large temple in Gaza. The temple contained a huge image of their idol, to which they intended to make unusual sacrifices. It was to be a most extraordinary event at which all the Philistine leaders were to be present. (Judges 16:22-23.)

When the time arrived for the celebration, about three thousand spectators were gathered, including all the rulers, military leaders and other dignitaries and their wives or women friends jammed into the best viewing area. (Verse 27.)

The idol Dagon was a towering monstrosity with a human-like head and torso. From the waist down it resembled the rear half of a fish. Before it was a wide stone altar on which sacrifices were to be made. Pompous Philistine priests stood by to await their part in the ceremonies, some of which were disgustingly lewd.

Debauch and Degradation

Because the emphasis was on pleasure in this special celebration, wine flowed freely all day. By noon so many people were in some stage of drunkenness that there



Day after day the blind Samson was forced to use his increasing strength—as his hair grew to a great length again—in pushing or pulling heavy millstones.

arose a chant for Samson to be brought before them. As the hours passed, the demand became louder and louder.

The priests of Dagon were greatly discouraged by this turn of events. They felt that the high point of the celebration should be the sacrifices and exciting ceremonial rites, and they realized that an appearance by Samson would probably upstage their part of the show. Accordingly, they sent word to the Philistine rulers present, requesting that the loud demands of the crowd be squelched.

The priests were the ones who were squelched, however. It developed that the ones who were most loudly demanding Samson's presence included the wives and companions of the Philistine leaders in the balconies, and it wasn't the wish of the leaders that their ladies should be disappointed. An official order soon went out to bring Samson to the temple.

When the Danite appeared before the crowd, a mighty surge of derisive remarks and laughter broke out. Most of the people expected their prisoner to be dragged out by several strong guards. Instead, he hesitantly came on stage with a small boy who led him by the hand!

This piece of showmanship to degrade Samson and please the audience resulted in such drawn-out clamor that a high official finally had to appear on the altar to quiet the crowd.

"Let us proceed with the ceremonies to show our thanks to our great god Dagon for what he has done for us!" he shouted. "Then we shall bring back the blind Israelite to perform a few feats of strength for us!" (Judges 16:24-25.)

This pacified the crowd. The speaker motioned for the boy to lead Samson out of sight, and festivities continued.

Samson had been in the temple once before he had lost his sight. He remembered that it was built in such a way that the main structural strength of the building depended on two huge columns.

"Lad, lead me to the two main pillars of the temple," Samson said to his young guide.

"I can't do that," the boy replied. "I was told to stay right here with you until the sacrifices are over. Then I am to take you out in sight of all the people again."

"But I am weary from working at the mill," Samson explained, "and these dangling chains on my ankles are very tiring. If I could prop myself between those two close pillars for a few minutes, I would be a bit refreshed for what I am to do later before the people." (Judges 16:26.)

Samson's Desperate Plan

Samson was hoping the boy would find that the attention of all officers and officials nearby was directed to what was happening out on the altar, so that his young guide would find it easier to do as he was asked.

"Well—" the lad faltered, "it's really only a little way to the pillars, and I don't see anyone watching us. Maybe I could get you over there if you'll tell anyone who asks that it was your idea and not mine."

"I promise," Samson said. "And I think I can give you some very important advice in return for your favor."

The moment Samson was led within touch of the pillars, he quickly felt the distance between them. It turned out, as he had remembered, only a few feet. This suited the plan Samson was devising for getting revenge on all the great Philistine leaders.

"Thank you for doing this for me," Samson said to his youthful guide. "Now I'm going to give you that important advice I promised you. I want you to leave me at once and run out of the temple as fast as you can!"

"Why must I do that?" the lad asked unhappily. "It's my duty to stay with you. If I don't, I'll be beaten!"

"It could be worse for you if you don't leave now!" Samson whispered harshly to the boy. "Go before it is too late!"

The Israelite realized the value of every second. He spent no more time talking. He bowed his head and silently and fervently asked God to once more strengthen him to the extent that he could perform a feat by which he might be avenged for the loss of his sight by the Philistines. It was God's plan that Samson should feel strongly about this personal request, so that he would make the effort and sacrifice He had in mind. (Judges 16:27-28.)



Most of the Philistine leaders had gathered to worship the monstrous image of their god Dagon, supposed to be half human and half fish.

After his prayer, Samson groped out quickly for his young companion, but he felt nothing.

"Where are you, lad?" he called out.

There was no response. The boy, realizing something was afoot, had quietly scampered out.

Samson waited a few moments, then stepped back between the pillars. He spread his hands and feet out and pressed them against the columns on either side so that he was firmly wedged between the two columns. From that point he squirmed his way upward until he was several feet above the floor.

Excited shouts suddenly came to him above the rising babble of the roused crowd.

"Get Samson!" someone suddenly yelled. "He's trying to escape!"

The Danite heard the sound of frantically approaching footsteps. He knew that he had been discovered. Momentarily he expected a spear or a knife to thud into his body. He had hoped to work higher up on the pillars to a point where pressure would be more effective, but there was no more time left for maneuvering. Time was fast running out for a try at one final great feat of strength.

"God of Israel, help me to bring death to these Philistines, even though I have to die with them!" Samson prayed.

A Tragic Success

Using all his natural strength, Samson strained desperately against the two pillars. He was at first unable to move them, and relaxed himself a moment for a second try. It was then that God imbued him with superhuman power. Just as some Philistine soldiers were about to reach him and jerk him down, Samson managed to move the pillars. They bowed away from each other, then buckled, the stone blocks slipping out of place to allow all that was above to come thundering to the floor. Samson and the men who were about to seize him were crushed and buried.

The two main columns having been connected directly with and supporting the rest of the structure, the whole temple crumpled and came crashing down within a matter of seconds. The wild shouts of drunken celebration abruptly turned to screams of terror as three thousand people plummeted to their deaths on hundreds more people below. Pagan priests at the altar lost their lives at the same time as the idol Dagon crashed face downward in the dust of destruction.

In those few seconds when so many of the leaders of Philistia were wiped out along with Samson, the Israelites of southwest Canaan were freed for a time from

their oppressors. Without their leaders, the Philistines could do little against the Israelites. In spite of his weakness, Samson's life and his death were not in vain. God used him in a mighty manner for the benefit of his people. (Judges 16:29-30.) Word of the great destruction quickly spread, and the Israelites realized they no longer need have such great fear of the Philistines.

Inasmuch as the Israelites suddenly lost their fear of the Philistines, Samson's relatives boldly went down to Gaza to find and claim his body. They took it back to the territory of the tribe of Dan, where Samson was buried next to his father in the family cemetery near his home town. (Judges 16:31.)

Because God spoke in the Bible so plainly about Samson's weakness for pretty Philistine women, some people have misunderstood the meaning of Samson's life. Samson's accusers have forgotten that God Himself said He allowed Samson to fall prey to this weakness in order to bring Samson into conflict with the Philistines. Read it in Judges 14:1-4. Samson's accusers have also forgotten that Samson was a man of extraordinary faithfulness to God in every way except for this one major weakness—and in a time when most of the Israelites were steeped in idolatry.

Out of his great love for God and for his fellow Israelites, Samson faithfully kept God's commandments and fulfilled all of the requirements of his nazirite vow—except for that one major weakness which God knew he had. Because of the grief



Samson's buckling the two main pillars of the pagan temple triggered the collapse of the whole building. Within the next few seconds thousands of Philistines died in the crumbling ruins.

brought upon him by his love for Philistine women, Samson struggled even harder to deliver his people from oppression than he would have if no trouble had befallen him.

Samson cheerfully, without complaining, accepted the life of trouble and heartache that came upon him in God's service. He laughed at grief and made a joke of disappointment. Who among us has so cheerfully borne grief?

Samson wasn't concerned about his sufferings, because he, like Abraham and God's other faithful servants of old, was concerned about God's salvation and the heavenly city made by God, in which they shall have an inheritance after being resurrected. (Hebrews 11:10, 14-16, 32, 35, 39-40.) These men had faith that God would establish that great city on earth as the eternal home of His children. (Revelation 21:1-4.) Samson's great faith in God enabled him to overcome most of his temptations—and he very likely overcame his fondness for pagan Philistine women and repented of that sin while he was in prison.

How Idolatry Starts

Samson was one of the last of the judges. In the period when these leaders were in and out of power in various parts of Canaan, Israel was never quite right with God. After Joshua's death the people went so far into idolatry that God gave them no leaders or deliverers for many years. Without leadership or punishment, people degenerated to the point where each person lived as he thought best (Judges 17:6), a condition which led to all kinds of trouble. God had commanded the Israelites for their own good not to do what they thought best, but to obey Him. (Deuteronomy 12:8.) The Israelites repeatedly disobeyed, doing as they pleased—as they thought best—to their sorrow.

For example, to go back to an era before the first judge appeared on the scene, there was a man by the name of Micah, in the tribe of Ephraim, who had stolen eleven hundred shekels of silver (about \$700 or more) from his elderly mother. Considering herself of a religious nature, Micah's mother had in her own way decided to dedicate the eleven hundred shekels to God. She was so upset when she found the money missing that she pronounced a curse on the thief, whoever he was.

When Micah heard his mother pray that some evil thing should overcome the thief, he was quite worried. He, too, in a superstitious way, feared the God of Israel, though he didn't know too much about how to please God. Because his parents had not trained him to obey God, Micah was a thief and a scoundrel. Afraid that some evil thing would befall him, however, he confessed the theft to his mother, and gave all the money back to her. She was saddened to learn that her own son would

rob her, but at the same time she was so pleased to realize that her son was conscience-stricken that, still doing as she thought right, instead of obeying the scriptures, she offered the money back to him. (Judges 17:1-3.)

"I dare not take it," Micah said. "You pronounced a curse on the one who took it, and I don't want that curse to fall on me. You should use the money as you first intended—doing something for God!"

Micah's mother agreed. Micah and his mother weren't earnestly looking to God to learn how to live. They didn't obey Him, but lived as they pleased and convinced themselves their way was all right with God, as long as they did some little physical thing religiously. Their religion had degenerated to the level of superstition—a man-made idolatry. Micah's mother had spent hours designing a certain kind of image, or idol, that she thought would be pleasing to God, and her first act was to use some of the silver to have such a carved image heavily coated. The metal worker she hired also melted more of the silver down into a solid metal idol for her. Eager to help in this misguided project, Micah carefully created several small idols such as were found in most pagan homes. He also produced a vestment of the type he fancied should be worn by an Israelite priest.

Micah then chose one of his sons, who was full grown, to be a priest. (Judges 17:4-6.) This was another wrong thing to do because only those of the family of Aaron were to be priests in Israel. (Exodus 28:1-5; Leviticus 8:35-36; Numbers 3:10; Deuteronomy 21:5.) No one can appoint himself to God's ministry. (Numbers 16; Numbers 17; Hebrews 5:4.)

Idolatry Caused by Spiritual Neglect

What Micah and his mother were attempting to do, in their superstitious zeal, was to set up their own temple of worship, patterned slightly after what they had heard or supposed it was like at the tabernacle at Shiloh. The farther they got into idolatry, the more righteous they felt. The religions of the surrounding pagan nations had been so mixed in with God's laws over the years that very few Israelites could remember what God expected of them. It was somewhat as it is today with so many church denominations that try to decide for themselves how to worship God. Most of them teach and promote ancient pagan beliefs gotten by hearsay and tradition, as in Micah's case, mixing them with a few true Christian principles—something the Bible repeatedly states is loathesome in God's sight. (Deuteronomy 12:29-30; II Kings 17:15.)

Micah and his mother had no Bible to instruct them and made little or no effort to learn God's laws on the Sabbaths and during the Festival assemblies as

they should have done. (Deuteronomy 6:1-12; Acts 15:21; Deuteronomy 31:9-13; Nehemiah 8:1-3.) Otherwise, they probably would have done things much differently. As it was, Micah in his paganized way felt that he was fairly successful in doing his part to revive respect for God in his part of Israel just as people in false churches do today. He wasn't aware of how wrong he was.

One day a young Israelite stranger stopped at Micah's home, explaining that he was a Levite looking for work. When Micah heard this, he became very excited.

"I've heard that Levites make the best priests!" he exclaimed. "How would you like to work for me as *my* priest?" (Judges 17:7-10.)

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

A MINISTER FOR HIRE

THE wandering Levite who had come to the home of Micah, an Ephraimite, was warmly welcomed. Micah immediately learned from which tribe the stranger had come and that his name was Jonathan. (Judges 17:5-8.) He had heard that Levites were especially suited to be priests, though he didn't know exactly why.

Had he known God's laws, he would have realized that God had chosen them for a special purpose. In the days of Moses, God chose out of the tribe of Levi the family of Aaron to be His priests. (Exodus 28:1, 40-43.) The other Levites were to do the physical work of caring for the tabernacle. (Numbers 1:47-54.) They were all to be teachers.

A Grandson of Moses

"My son is now my priest here at our humble little shrine," Micah enthusiastically told the stranger. "If you, a Levite, would consent to replace him, I shall provide all your clothes, priestly vestments and objects, food and lodging! Besides, I shall give you ten shekels of silver a year!"

The Levite should have been terribly shocked to find such apostasy in Israel. But he wasn't. In fact, he was wandering about because he had been thrust from his office for his sins.

The stranger realized that this offer was more profitable and more to his liking than what he had been doing, even though ten shekels of silver amounted to only about seven dollars. Since most Israelites were failing to pay God His tithe, many Levites had no income. They had apparently failed to teach the people tithing.

Being one who was inclined to make the most of a good thing, Micah's guest acted for a time as though he couldn't make up his mind. At last, realizing Micah wouldn't raise the offer, the Levite slowly nodded his head in silent agreement. (Judges 17:9-10.)



Micah intended that his chapel be a sacred place where God could be worshipped, but at the same time he set up two images that anything but pleased God.

"Good!" Micah exclaimed happily. "Let us lose no time in consecrating you as my priest. From then on you will be the one who will conduct ceremonies and talk to God for me. Certainly your prayers will be honored more because you are a Levite, and therefore God will surely prosper me!" (Judges 17:11-13.)

This remark made it obvious why Micah was so anxious to be considered a very religious man. He superstitiously believed that the combination of images, priest and God would surely bring him material wealth. Many people today put the same superstitious confidence in using statues, beads and rituals in church services, thinking they are serving God.

As for the young stranger, whose name was Jonathan, his motives weren't any better than Micah's. He was stepping into a false office. He should have known better. The original inspired Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament tell us he was the grandson of Moses! At a much later date the Jews tried to hide the identity of Jonathan. They thought that by doing so they were honoring Moses. So they inserted above the line the letter "n," changing the original word from Moses to Manasseh! That change has crept into the King James Version. (Judges 18:30.)

At this time many of the families

of the tribe of Dan were discouraged because most of their share of Canaan was still held by the powerful Amorites. (Judges 1:34-35; 18:1.) The mountainous area around Zorah and Eshtaol, which was all they had been able to conquer, did not give them enough land. They were unhappy because their small area was hemmed in so solidly by their enemies. In the broad valley below them, to the west, the many Amorite chariots had been able to hurl back every Danite attack.

The Danites didn't trust God to fight their battles as He had promised. (Deuteronomy 7:1-2.) Out of fear they decided to go somewhere else and take some weak people's land.

In an effort to learn more about territory in distant areas, Danite leaders sent five, strong, well-trained scouts from their towns of Zorah and Eshtaol. It was an expedition somewhat like the one sent many years before into Canaan by Moses. They were in search of land that would be easier to conquer.

On their way northward they came to the Mt. Ephraim region and by chance arrived at Micah's somewhat secluded home as night was coming on. When Micah saw they were Israelites, he invited them to stay until morning. (Judges 18:2.)

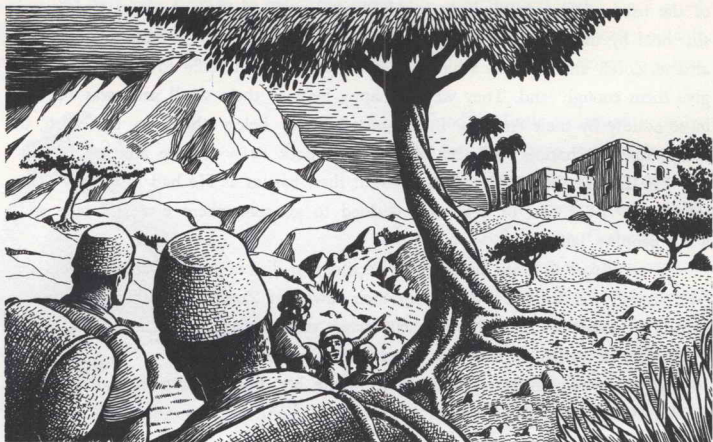
One Sin Leads to Another

Suddenly they heard the voice of Jonathan, whom they already knew. When they went in, they met Jonathan, who by then had become established as Micah's priest. Jonathan told them how he had come into such an office. These Danites and their whole tribe had strayed far from God. They probably didn't realize the seriousness of Jonathan's sins. When the Danites discovered that they were at a place where divination was used, they wanted Jonathan to get in touch with the god of this world.

"Find out for us if our expedition will be successful in the direction we plan to take," they eagerly asked. This is a sad example of how far the Israelites had strayed from God's law into fortune-telling. They should have remembered that God commanded them to go only to the High Priest to inquire as to whether or not they should go to battle. (Numbers 27:21.)

The Levite obligingly donned his priestly vestments and went alone into the room where the idols and other religious objects were. After a while he returned to announce to the Danites what he thought would please them. They would be safe in their journey, and God would lead them to a place such as they sought. (Judges 18:3-6.)

The five scouts were greatly pleased by this report—which of course



On their way through the Mt. Ephraim area, the five Danite scouts sought lodging at Micah's home.

was something Jonathan had made up to gratify Micah's guests in the same manner that an astrologer or palm reader would seek to please patrons. Jonathan felt sure his guess was a good one because the Israelites were successful in most of their efforts.

Assured of success, the Danites continued northward for several days. Eventually they arrived at a very fertile region near the southwest corner of Syria. It was north of Lake Huleh—which is also called the *Waters of Merom*—and southwest of Mt. Hermon. There they noted that the people were prosperous and seemingly were not fearful of raids or attacks by neighboring nations. The inhabitants had little contact with the outside world. They carelessly enjoyed their prosperity without maintaining an adequate defense system.

The city in this area was Laish. When the scouts saw how unprotected it was, they were doubly certain that Micah's priest was indeed a sound oracle of God. This part of the land, they reasoned, was surely meant for at least some of the Danites.

They hastily returned southward to their people in the Danite cities of Zorah and Eshtaol, about fifteen miles west of Jerusalem.

"We found a spot far to the north that is a paradise!" the scouts told their people. "The inhabitants are well off and are peaceful and at ease. A surprise at-

tack by a well-equipped force would mean quick victory. We feel sure that God intends us to take the area. Let us prepare at once to go there!" (Judges 18:7-10.)

Many Danite families decided quickly to go. Since they had not yet settled into permanent homes, because of the scarcity of land, they were able to pack quickly. When they moved out next morning, six hundred Danite men, armed as soldiers, marched northward with their families and livestock. At the end of the first day they camped by Kirjath-jearim, only a few miles to the northeast, and named the spot "The Camp of Dan." On the second day they approached the home of Micah near Mt. Ephraim. The five scouts had deliberately guided them there.

"We are near the place where the priest lives who consulted God and told us that we would be successful in this venture," the scouts told the leaders of the journeying Danites. "In that house you see in the distance are valuable sacred objects that we should own to help insure our future success and protection. If our procession will stay by the gate, the five of us will make a hasty visit to the priest to make him an offer." (Judges 18:11-14.)

"You Shall Not Steal"

The leaders agreed, and the scouts went at once to Micah's home and greeted the Levite. They then took him out to the gate and introduced him to their leaders. While he chatted with the crowd at the gate, the scouts returned quickly to the chapel. No one was there. Without waiting for anyone to show up, the scouts seized all the objects and clothing they considered sacred. The Danites were very superstitious. They thought pillaging a chapel of these silly little idols would bring success. As Jonathan stood at the gate chatting with the leaders, he turned to see the scouts running toward him with the objects of his chapel in their hands.

"What does all this mean?" the Levite anxiously inquired. "Why have you returned to steal these things? Micah is away, but if I should call for help his neighbors will come after you!" (Judges 18:15-18.)

"Don't be foolish!" the scouts warned. "A shout for help could spoil your chance to better yourself!"

"What do you mean by that?" Jonathan demanded.

"We mean that we want you to come with us!" they explained. "All these people you see are our fellow Danites going to a better land north of here. Why be a priest to just one man when you can be a priest to all of us? Go with us this minute, and we'll make it worthwhile for you!"

Jonathan needed no more urging. With hardly a glance backward he gladly

picked up his belongings and joined the hundreds of Danites. They placed him in a position of safety in the middle of their lengthy column. Then the Danites moved on to the north. (Judges 18:19-20.)

Shortly after they left, Micah returned to his home. He was informed by a neighbor that during his absence many people had marched up to his gate, that Jonathan had joined them and that the people had moved on.

Micah was perplexed by this report. He rushed to Jonathan's quarters to find that the Levite's belongings were gone, which seemed to indicate that the priest didn't intend to return. And when Micah discovered objects missing in the chapel, he was quite upset.

"My sacred things have been stolen!" he excitedly announced to his family and servants. "Call all our neighboring men together! Tell them to come armed to help pursue a band of thieves!"

By this time the Danites were quite a distance away. But because most of them were moving afoot with their children and livestock, it didn't require long for the mounted Ephraimites to catch up to them. Micah shouted at them to halt. The Danite procession stopped, and some of the soldiers in the rear guard turned to confront the Ephraimites.

"What reason do you have to pursue us with so many armed men?" they grimly demanded. (Judges 18:22-23.)

"You have stolen my priest and my images!" Micah shouted as he rode toward them. "Why do you ask why we have been pursuing you while you are fully aware that we have come to rescue them from you?"

At a motion from their leader, all three hundred soldiers of the rear guard moved back to surround Micah and confront his men.

"Don't raise your voice against us!" the Danite leader snapped. "If you shout at us again, some of our men will probably be irritated to the point of attacking you. And after doing away with all of you, they might decide to turn back and wipe out all your homes and families. I trust this will end our conversation unless you decide to talk about matters that are more pleasant to us."

With this statement the Danites deliberately turned their backs on the Ephraimites and continued on their journey. Micah realized that his lesser number of men couldn't stand against them. There was nothing to do but return home without the priest and the images in which he had put so much confidence for a wealthy future. (Judges 18:24-26.)

The Trail of Dan

When the Danites came within sight of the city of Laish, they stopped. That night they camped behind a rise so that their campfires couldn't be seen from the city. A little before dawn the six hundred soldiers crept up on Laish. While it was yet dark they made their surprise attack. The inhabitants perished while they were still in bed. Fire was set to everything that would burn—except valuables.

The Danites attributed their success to their priest and the little images. But their success in battle was not due to either. Success came to them because a well-trained army caught a defenseless small town sleeping.

In the months that followed, the Danites rebuilt the city and named it *Dan*, after the father of their tribe. (Joshua 19:47.) A chapel was built for Jonathan and his so-called sacred objects. The religion of the Danite conquerors continued permanently on this basis to the fall of the House of Israel. Jonathan, and the sons he had later, carried on as priests until many years afterward when God sent Assyria to take over all Israel because of idolatry. (Judges 18:27-31.)

One might think today that a half-pagan, half-Christian religion is better than none at all. God doesn't look at it that way. A half-pagan religion is really *all* pagan. The Israelites very quickly forgot God's commandments. Each did what *he* thought was right—or did as he pleased (Judges 17:6)—instead of obeying God.



The families of the Danite soldiers watched at a distance while their men attacked and burned the city of Laish.

That is the way of pagans—the way of sin and death. God had commanded them for their own good to obey Him instead of doing what they thought was right. (Deuteronomy 12:8.) God allows people to go their own way now, but soon He will do away with all heathen religions and all the competing church denominations that observe pagan ways. (Daniel 2:44-45; Revelation 11:15; Zechariah 13:2; 14:9; Ezekiel 22:25-31.)

The "New Morality"

In that era when Israel was without a national leader, with everyone generally doing as he pleased as long as he could get away with it, another episode occurred that brought tragedy. Misery and death came to thousands because the people were living apart from their Creator. This event started near Mt. Ephraim, where another Levite lived with his common-law wife. They believed in the "New Morality" of that day. They, like so many couples throughout history, lived in sin. They didn't obey God's laws that would bring family happiness. The woman then began to live with other men. Later she left to return to the home of her parents in the town of Bethlehem in the land of the tribe of Judah. (Judges 19:1-2.)

After she had been gone four months, the man decided he couldn't get along any longer without her—and hoped she would now be ready to come home. He and a servant set out on burros for Bethlehem, about twenty miles to the southwest. When they neared the home of the woman's parents, the man was pleasantly surprised to see his common-law wife coming out of the house and happily rushing out to meet him.

"I am sorry I left you," she told him, "and I am glad you came after me. I should be pleased to return with you to Mt. Ephraim!"

She led him into the home of her parents, who welcomed him cordially. In fact, because they were happy to see him and because they wanted their daughter to stay with them as long as possible, they kept the couple as guests for three days.

On the fourth day the Levite intended to leave for home, but the father-in-law prevailed on him to stay a few more hours. Time slipped by, and then it was too late to set out. (Judges 19:3-7.)

On the fifth day the couple prepared to leave early, but again the woman's parents treated them so well with food, drink and pleasant conversation that they were delayed into the late afternoon.

"Why start out at this hour?" the Levite's father-in-law asked. "You can't get very far before dark. It would be wiser to **stay** here one more night and

plan to start out in the morning. Meanwhile, relax and enjoy yourselves.”

“No, we must start out this afternoon,” the Levite said, realizing that if he continued to give in, they would never get home.

The woman’s parents knew that they had kept their daughter as long as possible.

Tearfully they saw the couple off on their trip northward.

By the time the Levite, his common-law wife (called a “concubine” in the Bible), a servant and two burros reached Jerusalem, about four miles away, it was almost sundown. (Judges 19:8-10.)

“I suggest that we stop here for the night, sir,” the servant remarked. “If we travel after dark, we’ll risk being robbed.”

“I don’t prefer to stay here in Jerusalem,” the Levite said. “The people here are Canaanites, and I don’t trust them. It is better to spend the night among our own people. I would rather go on into Gibeah or Ramah where the people are Israelites.”

It was about two and one-half more miles to the Benjamite city of Gibeah. The sun went down just before they got there. (Judges 19:11-15.) They sat down in a prominent place to wait for someone to invite them into his home for the night, since a small town like Gibeah probably didn’t have an inn. Soon an elderly Ephraimite, returning home late from working in the fields, walked up to the little group.

“You look like strangers here,” the old man said to them. “Where have you come from and where are you going?”

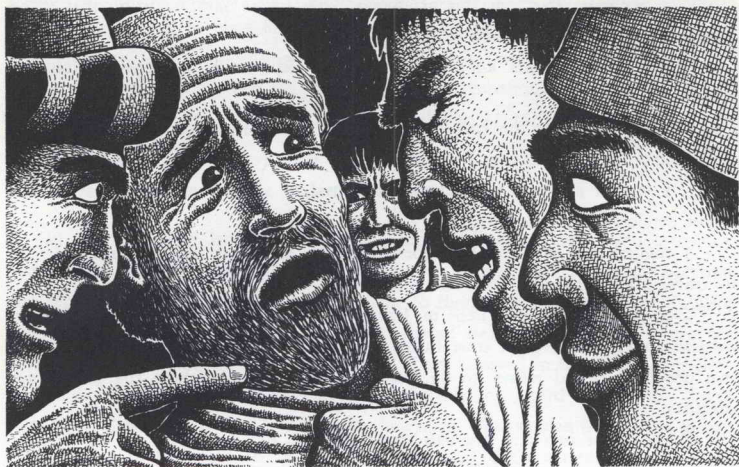
The Levite explained that he and his concubine and servant were travelling from Bethlehem to the Tabernacle at Shiloh. He mentioned that they had plenty of food and wine for themselves and feed for the animals, but no place to sleep. (Judges 19:16-19.)

Is Anyone Safe?

“Ah, but you’re welcome at my home!” the old man declared enthusiastically, motioning them to follow him. “And I have plenty of food for all and provender for your burros, so keep what you have. Otherwise you might run short. Come! Let’s get off the street. It isn’t safe here at night!”

Later, when all of them were comfortably eating and conversing in the old man’s house, there was a loud rapping on the door. The host opened it, only to be jerked outside by a group of mean-looking young men.

“We know that you have a stranger in your house!” one of them growled



The sinister group of depraved men demanded that the old man send out his Levite guest to them.

menacingly. "Send him out here at once to us, or you'll be in for plenty of trouble! And don't tell him anything! Just get him out here!"

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

THE "NEW MORALITY"

THE old man, who had invited the three strangers to spend the night at his home in Gibeah, was pulled outside by hoodlums. They demanded that he send out the Levite guest. The old fellow shook his head in fear and disbelief when he realized what these vile men wanted to do. (Judges 19:16-22.)

Willing to Compromise

"Please go away and leave us alone!" he pleaded. "This Levite is my guest along with his wife and servant! It would be a terrible disgrace to let anything happen to him at my home. Surely you can find your pleasure elsewhere!"

The old man was very concerned about his reputation. But he was much less concerned about the drift into the decaying morality of that time.

"Do as we say," the men growled, closing in more tightly around him, "or you'll never get back into your house!"

The elderly Ephraimite was sure that by now the man they wanted probably had heard the unfriendly voices, and wouldn't come out under any circumstance. In a frantic attempt to escape from this nightmare situation, the old man was moved to make a miserable suggestion. To save his male guest—and his own reputation as a host—he self-righteously stooped to an unthinkable compromise.

"Look, fellows," he begged, "Don't consider such a terrible perversion. I have a young daughter inside! We'll send her and my guest's wife out to you to do with as you please if you'll only forget about the man!" (Judges 19:23-24.) The miserable old man thought men were more important and more worthy of protection

than women. He reasoned that what he was suggesting was a lesser perversion and would be less sinful. He should have been willing to protect all the household with his own life.

"We don't care about the women!" was the angry reply.

Sick with fear, the old man ambled back into the house. Hesitantly he whispered the situation to his guest, who turned pale at what he heard. Like his host, his frenzied mind quickly sought a wretched way of escape. As a Levite from the Tabernacle at Shiloh, he especially should have trusted God for His promised deliverance. (Leviticus 26:3, 6; Deuteronomy 4:31; 20:4; 31:6.)

"Don't let them in!" the Levite muttered cravenly, seizing his common-law wife. To save himself, he was ready to do anything—even sacrifice the woman he should have been protecting.

He hauled the surprised woman up to the door, yanked it open and thrust her outside. (Judges 19:25.) Quickly he closed and bolted the door, hoping the mob would be more gentle with her than depraved mobs usually are. It happened so suddenly that the poor woman hardly knew what was happening until she found herself being stared at by the depraved men waiting outside. She wheeled around to get back into the house, pounding feverishly on the door. The men stared lustfully at her, noting for the first time that she was unusually attractive.

"Let's take her and forget about the man for now!" one of them suggested.

The others nodded in agreement. The frightened, struggling woman was dragged away. Though she repeatedly screamed for help, there was no one to even try to rescue her. The men who should have protected her were hiding behind locked doors, completely lacking in the compassion and courage they should have displayed under the circumstances. Theirs was the corrupt type of character that prevailed in a time when Israel was far from God.

Hours later, just before sunrise, the woman came staggering up to the house and fell down at the door. (Judges 19:26.) In the meantime, her cowardly common-law husband was preparing to leave without her. He didn't know where she was, but he was afraid to look for her lest he run into trouble with the depraved men who had taken her.

On opening the door to leave, he was surprised to find her lying there face down. His conscience stung him because of the cowardly, brutal way he had acted. But instead of helping her up, he chose to assert himself as her master, even in the face of her pitiable circumstance.

"Get up, woman!" he barked. "I want to get going for home right away!"



Next morning, when the cowardly Levite started to leave the house where he had rested, he found his assaulted common-law wife lying at the doorstep.

There was no answer or movement. The man motioned for his servant to help the woman up. The servant tried to get her to her feet. It was then that they discovered she was dead.

A Desperate Plan

Without a word the Levite lifted the body onto one of his burros and started for home. (Judges 19:27-28.) On the way he had plenty of opportunity to consider how cruel and cowardly he had been. He regretted his terrible conduct, but at the same time he hoped that he could place the blame for his common-law wife's death elsewhere. The more he thought about the depraved Benjamites, the more he considered their guilt and the less he considered his. By the time he arrived home, his anger and desire for revenge had grown to such an extent that he conceived a gruesome plan.

The first thing he did was compose twelve copies of this message, a copy to be sent to each of the twelve tribes of Israel:

"My wife was lately seized by wicked Benjamites in their city of Gibeah. She died because of their brutal advances. I am sending proof of her death. I ask that something be done to execute vengeance on the foul men who are responsible."

The Levite immediately sent the letter to all parts of Israel by swift carriers. Wherever it arrived it was startlingly effective, but not just because of the words. With each message the angry Levite included a piece of his wife's body, having cut her up into twelve parts!

Even though most of Israel was in a state of lawlessness and idolatry at the time, people were shocked and angered to hear of the atrocity by the Benjamites. (Judges 19:29-30.) Following a hasty exchange of communication, the various

leaders of all tribes, except Benjamin, soon met at the city of Mizpeh, not far from Gibeah, to decide what to do. The head men of the tribe of Benjamin did not attend because of being offended at the ghastly accusation that had come to them from Mt. Ephraim.

Representatives at this meeting asked the complaining Levite to come and give them a more concise report of the miserable event. The Levite welcomed the chance to do so, explaining in detail most of what had happened. He made no mention of how he had thrust his wife into the hands of the men of Gibeah in an attempt to save his own life.

Crime Must Be Stopped!

"It's true that I performed the awful act of cutting her in pieces, but she was dead many hours before I did so," the Levite informed his listeners. "I went to this horrible extreme to try to awaken Israel to the fact that there are such evil men in the city of Gibeah. I trust that I have moved you to do something about this shameful matter!" (Judges 20:1-7.)

The Israelites remembered God's command that any murderer should be executed. (Numbers 35:19-21; Deuteronomy 19:11-13.) Enforcing this law would make others fear to commit murder. (Numbers 35:33-34; Deuteronomy 19:20.)

The leaders of the eleven tribes were not long in agreeing that the matter would be investigated as soon as possible. They went so far as to claim that none of them would return home until it was cleared up. They decided that a tenth of all the capable men of each tribe would be drafted into service to supply the army with food and water in the event that force would be necessary against the tribe of Benjamin. (Judges 20:8-11.) Meanwhile, men were sent throughout the Benjamite territory to make a careful inquiry and to demand the death penalty for the murderers.

When the investigators came to the leaders of the tribe of Benjamin to ask about the matter of the Levite and his common-law wife, they were received coldly. All the Benjamites refused to punish the murderers. Instead, they stubbornly defended them.

"This sort of thing you speak of could happen anywhere in Israel these days," the Benjamites observed. "Why point to us as the black sheep of the whole nation?"

"We are not to be put off so easily," the investigators countered. "No matter where such a crime happens, the guilty ones *must* be punished. We have orders to demand that you seek out the offenders in this case and turn them over to us to be put to death for their crime! We expect you to act right away!"



Mounted couriers raced to all areas of the tribes of Israel with the message from the Levite and packages containing grim reminders of the crime against his common-law wife.

"Go back to your leaders and tell them that we can take care of our own affairs!" the head men of Benjamin retorted angrily. "Tell them also that we shall resist any effort to force us to do anything about this matter!" (Judges 20:12-13.)

Surrounded by a growing group of hostile men, the investigators had no choice but to return to Mizpeh empty-handed. When they reported what had happened, a state of war was declared by the leaders of the eleven tribes. Men were organized into units to form an army numbering four hundred thousand.

At the same time the Benjamite soldiers gathered at Gibeah, numbering about twenty-six thousand besides the seven hundred men of Gibeah. This was only a small fraction of the size of the army of the other tribes of Israel, but the Benjamite soldiers were well trained. Besides, they were angry because of the accusation that had been made against them, and had more of a desire for battle. They felt confident also because seven hundred of their soldiers were left-handed and unusually skillful with slings. Some of them could sling a stone to hit a man as far away as six hundred feet. (Judges 20:14-17.)

Partial Obedience NOT Enough!

The army of the eleven other tribes was almost ready to march on Gibeah. But one more thing needed to be done. God should be consulted in the matter.

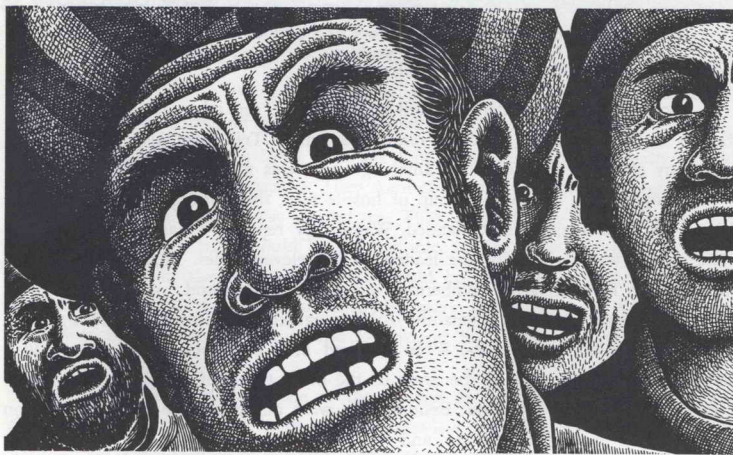
The Israelites went to the city of Shiloh where the Tabernacle was, to ask Phinehas

the priest to inquire of God which soldiers should lead the attack. Phinehas was surprised that the leaders of the tribes of Israel would ask advice of the Creator instead of going to some pagan oracle. Seeing their sincerity, he spoke to God for them, although he could see they were self-righteous.

God answered Phinehas' prayer by making it known to the priest that the soldiers of the tribe of Judah should be foremost in an attack on the Benjamites. (Judges 20:18.)

Next morning the troops of the eleven tribes marched toward Gibeah. When they were only a mile or so away, they lined themselves in fighting formation with the soldiers of Judah forming the first ranks. The commanders of the four hundred thousand men planned on surrounding the city and then demanding that the Benjamites surrender. If they refused, the large army was to close in and crush the opposition into defeat.

It didn't quite turn out that way.



The Benjamite leaders were angered by the demands of their Israelite brothers, and bluntly told them that they preferred to take care of their own affairs.

Suddenly the whole army of Benjamin poured out of the gates of Gibeah and rushed madly toward the would-be attackers! This unexpected event caused such confusion in the larger army that the troops fell into terrible disorder. The foremost ones broke rank and plunged backward into those following, causing a uselessly struggling, screaming mass of humanity!

By afternoon there was no more action on the field of battle. The Benjamites had withdrawn into Gibeah and most of the army of the eleven tribes had fled to the north. They had left twenty-two thousand soldiers on the battlefield, but these had no more desire to fight. They were all dead. (Judges 20:19-21.)

This unexpected victory by the Benjamites was a sobering blow to the other tribes of Israel, who had assumed that their cause was so important and just that there was no need of asking help from God. They had thought the eleven tribes could easily defeat the Benjamites. Although the people were shocked and saddened, there was still no appeal for divine aid. Instead, the Israelites went again to Shiloh to weep and merely ask Phinehas to inquire if there should be another attack against the Benjamite army. They still thought they were righteous just because they were trying to punish the Benjamites.

Through Phinehas, God indicated that another attempt should be made to overcome the Benjamites at Gibeah. Next day the troops of the Israelites pushed toward that city just as they had done in the first attack. This time the commanders felt that their men were prepared for anything, and that there would be no more frenzy and disorder.

The Benjamites didn't pour out of the city to meet their opponents as they had done before. This gave the larger army the opportunity to start surrounding Gibeah as had been originally planned. Just as their front ranks were splitting up and going to the right and left, the Benjamites rushed out through hastily opened gates to catch their enemies in such a thinned-out condition that the larger army was again thrown into a sudden state of confusion!

A Bitter Lesson Brings Results

When the action of battle had ceased and each army had withdrawn, the ground was again strewn with dead and dying. This second combat had cost the eleven tribes eighteen thousand more men. (Judges 20:22-25.)

The loss of a total of forty thousand soldiers was an awesome price to pay to try to avenge one person and punish the Benjamites. Leaders of the eleven tribes were so shaken that they all went to Shiloh, along with many other Israelites, to humbly make offerings at the Tabernacle and to ask for God's help. Tears of sorrow and repentance flowed from many eyes as the people realized that their sad losses had occurred because of their departing from God's laws.

After making their offerings and fasting for at least most of a day, they asked God through Phinehas if they should go into battle once more against the Israelite brothers or drop the idea of trying to punish them. All this should have been done

in the first place. After Phinehas had made this third request at the Tabernacle, God disclosed to him that one more attack should be made. Moreover, He promised that, if they sought Him in real earnest, this next attempt would result in victory for the eleven tribes. When Phinehas passed on the Creator's pronouncement to the people, they were thankful and greatly encouraged. For the time being they resolved to be more obedient so that they might receive more help from God. (Judges 20:26-28.)

Next day part of the troops of the eleven tribes again marched toward Gibeah. Those troops who didn't march had been sent during the night to a hiding place south of the city and to a palm grove to the east of it.

The Benjamites were expecting another attack. They rushed out to meet the enemy troops coming from the north when they reached a point a short distance from Gibeah. At sight of the oncoming Benjamites the attackers halted. Then they turned and fled—just as they had been told to do!

Believing that their enemies were in the same state of fear they had shown twice before, the Benjamites pursued them vigorously in the hope of effecting a quick victory. They proved to be the faster runners. Soon the distance between the two groups was so lessened that the men with slings started hurling their missiles.



Many of the Benjamite soldiers were so well trained with slings that they could hurl stones with deadly accuracy for hundreds of yards.

About thirty of the fleeing Israelites were struck and killed before someone among the pursuing Benjamites began hollering excitedly and pointing backward.

The pursuers glanced back. They came to a quick halt when they saw the great cloud of smoke billowing up over their city. Not until then were they beginning to be aware that enemy troops had somehow made their way into the city and set it on fire. When they turned and saw the Israelites rushing back toward them without a sign of fear, they realized that they were the victims of well-planned strategy. (Judges 20:29-32.)

The Worm Turns

It was the Benjamites' turn to panic. Pursued by the ten thousand Israelites who had turned on them, they raced for the hilly area east of Gibeah. As they ran, they could see throngs of their people hurrying out of the city in a frantic attempt to escape the men who had rushed in as soon as the Benjamite soldiers had left. Hundreds were not able to get out.

The escaping inhabitants also headed for the hills to the east. Just as the first of their numbers topped the first large rise, they stopped, then rushed back in the opposite direction. Behind them suddenly appeared the first ranks of the largest division of the army of the eleven tribes. At the same time the troops who had raided the city came out of it from the west in hot pursuit of the inhabitants. (Judges 20:33-34.)

The people of Gibeah and the whole Benjamite army were rushing into a tremendous three-jawed trap that was closing in on them just as fast as they were moving into it!

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

“YOUR PEOPLE ARE MY PEOPLE”

THE ARMY of the eleven tribes of Israel had divided into three parts.

After setting the Benjamite city of Gibeah on fire, they managed to bottle up the people who had escaped from the city—plus the whole Benjamite fighting force. (Judges 20:29-41.)

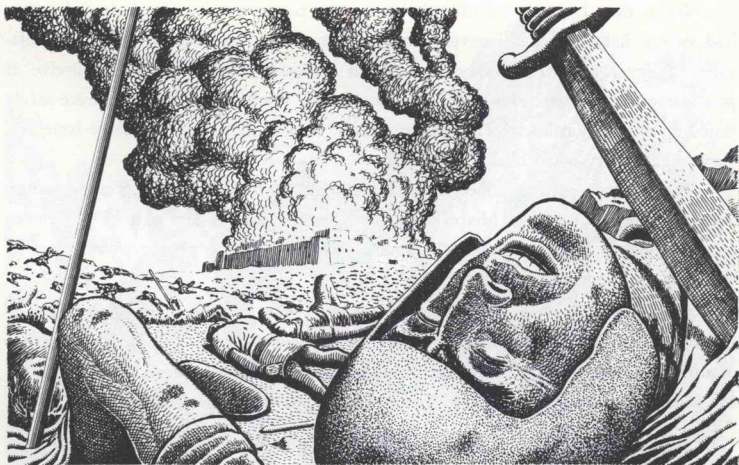
Unrestrained Slaughter

In the furious battle that followed, about eighteen thousand soldiers of the tribe of Benjamin died. With so many troops involved in such close action, a few thousand Benjamite men managed to escape. Most of these took to the roads leading northeast, hoping to reach a certain mountain hideout.

A part of Israel's massive army hadn't yet been very active that day. These soldiers set off in pursuit of the weary Benjamites, easily overtaking them. About five thousand of the fleeing men were killed in their race for freedom. Another two thousand or so were overtaken and slain in another engagement a few miles farther on.

About six hundred succeeded in reaching a place in the mountains called Rimmon Rock. This was in such a rough, cliffy area that the pursuers gave up the chase. (Judges 20:42-47.)

Very few Benjamites had been killed in the first two battles. The almost-complete army of the Benjamites, still numbering almost twenty-six thousand, came to an end in one day. But the action against the rebel tribe that approved homosexuality didn't end there. After a night's rest the Israelite troops moved over all the ter-



The plains close to the burning city of Gibeah were littered with the dead and dying bodies of thousands of Benjamites left after the attack of the superior Israelite army.

ritory of Benjamin to burn all the cities and kill all the people. (Judges 20:48.)

This destruction was so thorough that the only men left were those who had escaped to Rimmon Rock. This near-death of one of the tribes was a terrible thing, but God allowed it, as well as the deaths of at least forty thousand other Israelite soldiers, because of the disobedience of so many people in all of the tribes. God was letting Israel learn from bitter experience that carefree ways of living would lead only to grief. If the Israelites had continued obeying the laws of their Creator, who constantly warned them against falling away from those laws, their wretched civil war would never have happened.

Not long after these miserable events, the people of the eleven tribes began to be sorry that they had dealt so harshly with the tribe of Benjamin. The leaders of the tribes met to discuss what could be done to make amends, and to express to God their hope that the tribe wouldn't be wiped out. This was indeed a change in attitude.

To show that they regretted their extreme actions, they went to their meeting place at Shiloh. There, to gain God's favor, they made burnt offerings and peace offerings. (Judges 21:2-4.)

When they had met at Mizpeh before the battles to decide what to do, they had sworn that they would never allow any of their daughters to marry a Benjamite. (Judges 21:1.) This seemed to make it impossible for the tribe to survive as pure Israelites. What could they do about the six hundred soldiers who were safely holed up at Rimmon Rock? They had no wives. And if they couldn't marry Israelites, they might marry into Canaanite tribes.

The leaders carefully looked for a loophole out of this discouraging circumstance. At their council of war at Mizpeh, they had decreed that if any part of the eleven tribes failed to help with the war against Benjamin, those people would later be punished by the sword. (Judges 21:5-7.)

So many things had been taking place that there had been no opportunity to check for any family, region or city that might have failed to supply soldiers. An inquiry was made. It disclosed that the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead, a city east of the Jordan in the territory of Gad, had not joined in the civil conflict.

Wives Gotten by Violence

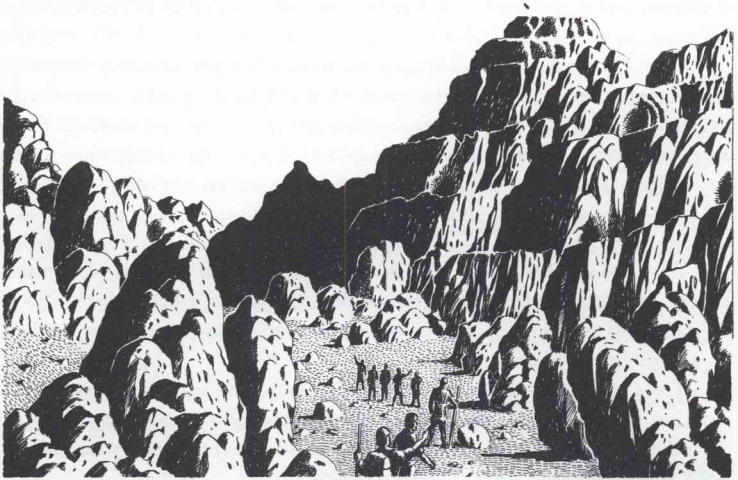
This seemed to present an answer to their problem. Twelve thousand troops were picked to march on Jabesh-gilead and punish the inhabitants by killing everyone except unmarried women. Following so soon after the regretful attitude toward the men of Benjamin, this was an abrupt switch by the Israelites back to their mania for rash action.

After the new senseless slaughter—which wouldn't have occurred if the people had stayed close to God—all the spared women and teen-age girls were carefully questioned. The questioning soon revealed those who weren't married and those who had not committed fornication. Four hundred such females were acquired. Others who didn't pass the requirements suffered the fate of the rest of the people of Jabesh-gilead. (Judges 21:8-12.)

Even though their lives had been spared, these four hundred virgins were anything but happy to be dragged away against their will so quickly. They didn't even get to attend the mass burial of their relatives and friends. They were brought to Shiloh and kept there under guard to await the outcome of a trip to Rimmon Rock by Israelite scouts.

This visit to this rugged area was a dangerous one. Those who entered it could easily be picked off by men hiding in the caves and among the rocks. It turned out that the scouts were allowed to come very close. Then a voice coming from some uncertain source commanded them to stop and state their business.

The hiding Benjamites expected to be asked to surrender or expect a mass attack



Scouts were sent to Rimmon Rock to take a message to the hundreds of hiding Benjamite soldiers, who at first imagined that they preceded an army to come in and flush the Benjamites out if they refused to surrender.

by their Israelite brothers, and so were quite surprised to hear words on quite a different topic.

"Listen, men of Benjamin," one of the scouts shouted in a voice that echoed and re-echoed from one cliff to another. "We are not here to ask you to surrender. You are the only remaining men of the tribe of Benjamin. All the rest of your people are dead because they approved of sex vices.

"But because the leaders of Israel want you to continue as one of the tribes, we have come to make an offer of peace. At Shiloh we have four hundred virgins from whom you may choose brides. If you want them and want to rebuild your tribe in peace, come to Shiloh. First there will have the best choice! Don't be afraid to come. No harm will come to you as long as you are peaceable!"

At first the Benjamites thought that this was a ruse to get them out in the open where they could be attacked. They made no reply. Finally the scouts left. Benjamite lookouts reported that no enemy troops were in sight on the adjoining plains or behind nearby ridges. The six hundred survivors then began to believe that perhaps their Israelite brothers were telling the truth.

They crept in small groups to the Shiloh area. There, by cautious spying, they

found out that there were indeed four hundred women being held to give them as wives.

Up to this time, it wasn't known by the eleven tribes just how many Benjamites had escaped to Rimmon Rock. When six hundred men suddenly put in an appearance to claim wives, the competition became somewhat heated. The two hundred Benjamites who emerged empty-handed complained so bitterly that the Israelite leaders felt obliged to produce two hundred more virgins. (Judges 21:13-15.)

Violence on Top of Violence!

This wasn't such a simple task, though finally someone came up with another extreme and violent plan. At this time of year there was a religious festival about to be observed near Shiloh. A part of its social life included dancing in a nearby field by a large group of young women.

It was suggested to the two hundred wifeless Benjamites that they stay at Shiloh until just before the dance was to be performed and hide in adjoining vineyards. Then they might be able to rush forth and seize two hundred of the young women when they came out to dance. (Judges 21:16-21.)

This scheme was even more fantastic than the one by which the four hundred wives had been obtained, though certainly not as bloody. Anxious as they were for wives, the Benjamites questioned the plan.

"This idea sounds good up to a point," they told the Israelite leaders, "but won't the families of the girls create trouble for us if we succeed in taking away their young women?"

"Don't be concerned about that," the leaders advised. "Probably the fathers and brothers of the girls will be angry at first, but we'll stop them from any rash action. We will persuade them to let you keep their daughters and sisters without causing trouble because we took the lives of all your women. We swore that none of us should give our women to you men of Benjamin. But if you take them forcibly from us, that is another matter. The fathers will not be guilty of breaking their vow and you will have your wives."

The Benjamites considered this explanation somewhat odd. Nevertheless, they went to where this dance was about to take place and successfully concealed themselves in surrounding vineyards.

When the several hundred young women came to the field to perform, the hidden men had sufficient opportunity to observe and choose. At a planned signal, the Benjamites rushed out of the vineyards and swarmed into the mass of leaping, swaying femininity.

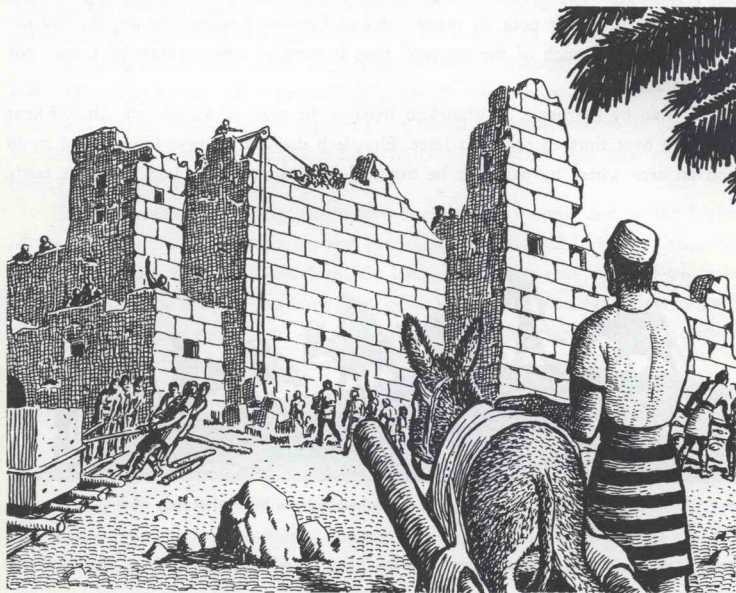
Shrieks filled the air as the girls realized that they were being set upon by strangers. Two hundred struggling dancers were whisked off the field and away into the vineyards almost before anyone could comprehend what was going on.

The rest of the screeching girls fled into the stunned crowd that had come to watch the dance. By the time the men in the assemblage realized that the kidnapping wasn't a new part of the dance, it was too late to rescue the young women.

The six hundred surviving Benjamites lost no time in returning to their territory with their brides. Whether or not their women were ill-gotten seemed of no great matter. No one seemed to care. The war with Benjamin was over, and the tribe was saved from extinction.

Even so, the troops of the eleven tribes didn't disband and go to their homes until the Benjamites were again safely settled in their territory and had started to repair their cities.

In this whole episode, which occurred shortly after the death of Joshua, wisdom and good judgment were rather rare. Everyone did what *he* thought best, in-



After the civil war was over, the Benjamites worked hard to repair their damaged towns and cities.

stead of obeying God. (Judges 21:25; Deuteronomy 12:8.) This was a prime example of how death and suffering came to the people when they fell away from God and into idolatry. (Judges 21:22-24.)

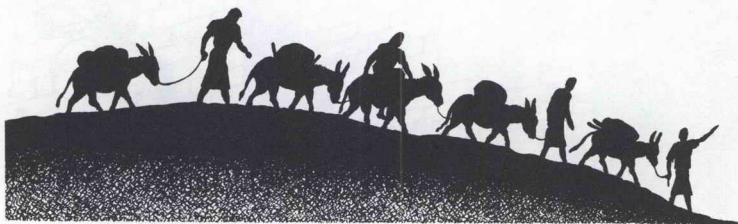
Not All Rebelled

But even at such times there were a few Israelites who were loyal and obedient to God. Their lives were rich, meaningful and without violence, though not always without trouble and tragedy.

The story of Ruth depicts that sort of life—the happy result of obeying God. Ruth was a Moabite, a descendant of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. She had been reared a heathen, but was converted after seeing how God's laws benefited others. She left her land and pagan training to become an adopted Israelite and obey the laws of the God of Israel. She became one of the ancestors of David and of Jesus Christ. Ruth was a type of the New Testament Church which is to come out of the world and be joined to Christ.

During the early years of the time of the judges, there was a drought which made crops especially poor in many parts of Canaan. Besides, the neighboring nations carried off much of the produce, thus helping to create a state of famine for many Israelites.

A man by the name of Elimelech lived in the town of Bethlehem, where Christ was born over thirteen centuries later. Elimelech decided to leave Canaan and try to find an area where he wouldn't be troubled by destitute neighbors. He was fairly



Elimelech and his family left Bethlehem for the land of Moab, about a week's journey away.

prosperous, and had become weary of so many people coming to him for food and money.

To move out of Canaan and into a heathen land was not the best thing for

Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. In fact, not long after he was settled in the pagan-populated land east of the Dead Sea, his life ended, possibly because he had been so selfish. (Ruth 1:1-3.)

Later, Elimelech's two young sons married Moabite women. About ten years later both men died. Their wives, Orpah and Ruth, had become greatly attached to Naomi, their righteous mother-in-law. Although they had been taught to worship pagan gods, they had great respect for Naomi's beliefs and her desires to go according to the ways of the God of Israel.

Life in Moab, without their husbands, became increasingly difficult for the three childless widows. Not only were they very lonely, but they soon became very poor. It was evident that something would have to be done to improve their welfare. That something was sparked when Naomi heard that living conditions had been greatly improved by good weather and abundant crops in many parts of Canaan, including the territory of Judah. Immediately she decided to return to her native land.

Naomi didn't ask her daughters-in-law to return with her, but they helped pack three burros and willingly set off with her to the west. After they had gone a few miles, Naomi stopped to tell them what was on her mind. (Ruth 1:4-7.)

"Much as I want both of you to go with me back to Canaan," she explained, "I feel that it is unfair to you to move to a nation that is strange in your sight. You have been reared to believe in many things in which I cannot believe. If you go to Bethlehem with me you will probably find things so different that you will regret having left your own country.

"For this reason I'm asking you to turn back to your people and to the homes of your parents. You are yet young, and you should be married to men of your nation. I can return alone to Bethlehem. Go back, and I pray that my God will take care of both of you because you have been good wives and good daughters-in-law!"

Ruth and Orpah were distressed at Naomi's words, and especially when she kissed them goodbye as though to finally dismiss them forever from her life.

Each Must Decide Whom to Serve!

"We don't intend to leave you," they assured her after recovering from their tears. "We want to go back with you to your people!" (Ruth 1:8-10.)

Naomi was moved by their display of loyalty, but she felt that they really preferred to stay in their own country, though they were willing to make this sacrifice for her. She tried to make it easier for them to decide to stay, by pointing out that she had nothing more to add to their lives.

"Even if I had another husband and were to bear more sons," she told them,

"you wouldn't want to wait till they were grown to marry them. You would seek other husbands long before that, so you can see why it would be wise to go back to your people. I am very sorry you have lost your husbands."

This last little speech by Naomi convinced Orpah that her mother-in-law was right. She sadly kissed Naomi and Ruth farewell and turned back with her burro and possessions toward the place where her parents lived in Moab.



Orpah decided not to go on with Naomi and Ruth to Canaan, and tearfully turned back into Moab.

"Your sister-in-law has wisely decided to return to her people," Naomi pointed out to Ruth. "You would do well to try to catch up with her." (Ruth 1:11-15.)

"Why try to talk me into doing something I don't think is right?" Ruth asked. "I want to stay with you. Wherever you go I will go. I will stay where you stay. *Your people shall be my people. Your God is my God.* I want to die in the place where you die, and be buried where you will be buried. If I fail in any of these things, let God deal with me as He chooses."

Naomi was so moved by these remarks that she said nothing more to Ruth about parting. She was convinced that her daughter-in-law was converted and meant all that she said, for which she was very happy. (Ruth 1:16-18.)

The two women arrived at Naomi's run-down house in Bethlehem a few days later, fortunate not to have been bothered by roving bandits. Naomi was glad to

see the familiar places and faces, though at first she wasn't recognized because she had changed in appearance. When a neighboring friend realized who she was, however, a crowd of acquaintances quickly gathered about her and Ruth.

"Can it really be Naomi?" some of them asked.

"Yes, it is I, returned from Moab with my daughter-in-law, Ruth," Naomi said to them. "But perhaps it would be well not to call me any longer by that name. It means *beautiful* and *pleasant*, and I am not now beautiful and my life is no longer pleasant. I have aged, mostly because of losing my husband and two sons. It would be more fitting if you would call me Mara, which means *bitter*."

"No! No!" some of the bystanders exclaimed. "All of us have aged, Naomi, but you are still a beautiful woman. We are sorry to hear that God has allowed your loved ones to be taken, but we are happy to have you back among us."

Naomi's many friends showed their concern by pitching in on the house-cleaning so the two women would have a suitable place to live. They were comfortable for the moment. But their meager amount of money was practically gone, and Naomi wasn't the sort to prevail on the goodwill of her friends and neighbors for her needs.

Something had to be done right away, or the two widows would run out of food.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

"YOU ARE A VIRTUOUS WOMAN"

AFTER coming from Moab to Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth ran very low on money. (Ruth 1:19-22.) Just when Naomi was becoming very concerned about matters of food and fuel, Ruth came to her with a most timely suggestion.

"It's spring harvest time," she reminded Naomi. "Just this morning I watched women gleaning barley in a field not far from here. Why shouldn't I go tomorrow to one of such fields and glean the barley that the reapers drop? Perhaps I could bring back much grain just for the taking!"

God Provides for the Poor

Gleaning was the gathering of any produce that was left behind when harvesting took place. It was not stealing. One of the civil laws given to Israel stated that whatever the harvesters left of value in fields, vineyards or orchards could be claimed by the poor, passing strangers, and widows. As poor widows, Naomi and Ruth had a legal right to share in the gleaning. (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22.)

Naomi was pleased and encouraged by Ruth's enthusiasm. She knew this could be the difference between going hungry and having enough to eat—at least for the present. At the same time she didn't like to see a comely young woman like Ruth venture out by herself among strange harvesters.

"Go if you wish, my daughter," Naomi finally told her with a smile. "But try to find a field not too distant, and don't follow closely behind the harvesters unless you get permission from the owner of the field or his foreman." (Ruth 2:1-2.)

Next morning Ruth took a large cloth bag and set out for a field where barley

was being harvested. When she arrived, she noted that a great part of it had already been worked over, and that the harvesters were at quite a distance away. She felt that they were so far ahead of her that no permission would be necessary to pick up what she could find. Nevertheless, she sought out the field foreman to ask if she could glean, and was told that she could.

By the middle of the day she had filled her bag less than half full of barley that had been overlooked or dropped when it had been bundled. In her zeal to accomplish more, she failed to notice that the workers had stopped for the noon meal at a tent just ahead. She looked up to see some of them staring at her. One or two of the women harvesters motioned for her to join them in the shade of the tent.

At that moment Boaz, the owner of the field, rode up on a horse and eyed Ruth with even more interest than the harvesters showed.

"God be with you!" he called to the workers with enthusiasm.

"May God bless you!" was the cheerful response from the people in and around the tent. (Ruth 2:3-4.)

Such friendly and sincere greetings showed that these men and women had a high regard for each other and for their Creator, and knew that it was God who watched over them and provided their needs. When an honest man like Boaz was a community leader, the people always had a higher regard for their Creator than when evil men were looked to as leaders.

"Who is that young woman?" Boaz asked his foreman as he glanced at Ruth. "I don't recall hiring her."



Ruth saw the barley harvesters working on farms near Bethlehem, and realized that she should do something to help earn a living.

An Unexpected Acquaintance

"She's not working for you," the foreman explained. "She came to me early this morning to ask if she could glean, and I told her she could. She's the Moabite woman who lately came here with Naomi, the widow of Elimelech. She has been here working all day, except that she spent a few minutes getting acquainted with the women in the house before starting her work."



As soon as Boaz saw Ruth in his barley field, he went to his harvest crew foreman to ask about her.

Boaz walked over to Ruth, who at first thought that he was angry with her for some reason.

"If you must glean, young woman," he said to her, "I trust that you won't go to other fields. Stay behind my women harvesters, and you won't end the day empty-handed. And don't be afraid of any of my men. They'll have orders to treat you with the greatest respect. You are welcome to any of the privileges that the people have who work for me." (Ruth 2:5-9.)

Ruth was so overwhelmed by this unexpected treatment that she fell on her knees before Boaz and bowed her head to the ground.

"Why are you being so considerate?" she asked. "I am a stranger here, and there is no reason that I know of to show such favor to me."

"Ah, but there is," Boaz replied gently, helping her to her feet. "I have heard about how well you have treated your mother-in-law, and how you chose to come here with her instead of staying in Moab. She has told all her friends about your goodness to her. May our God reward you for what you have done, and may He protect you for looking to Him for your way of life!"

"Thank you," she murmured to Boaz. "You have made me feel as though I am as welcome here as one of your workers."

"I am happy that you want to be with us," Boaz smiled. "Now please come into my tent and have lunch with us."

Ruth was a little ill at ease among so many strangers, but she was pleased when the owner of the field sat among his workers and passed food to her. He even had one of his helpers prepare a package of food to take home to Naomi. When the meal was over, Ruth expressed her thanks and quickly slipped back to a spot well behind the harvesters. (Ruth 2:10-14.)

As soon as she was gone, Boaz instructed his foreman to tell the workers that the new gleaner should receive special privileges.

"Let her go wherever she wishes, even if she wants to glean at the heels of the harvesters," the foreman was told. "It might even be a good idea if they purposely dropped a little grain now and then."

The foreman nodded solemnly, but shook his head and grinned knowingly as soon as Boaz had turned away.

A Cheering Bounty

That afternoon Ruth surprisingly found that there were many more stalks of barley left on the ground than there had been in the morning. Close to evening she had emptied her bag several times by the threshing shed. Night being not far away, she worked hastily to beat out the grains on an unused part of the floor. To her great satisfaction the result was about eight gallons of fine barley—enough to make many loaves of bread after the chaff was sifted out and the grains were ground. (Ruth 2:15-17.)

Ruth easily swung the tied bag of grain over her shoulder and left for home just as it was growing dusk. It wasn't difficult for her to carry in such a manner. If she tired of carrying it that way, she was quite adept at balancing a load on her head.

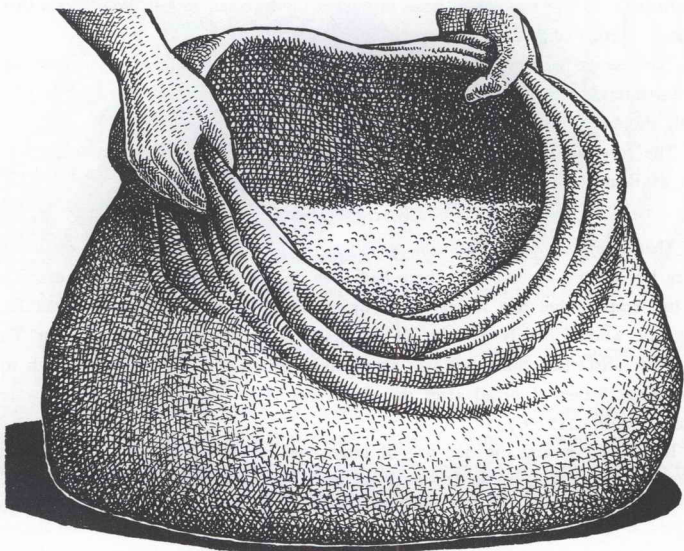
When she showed Naomi the grain and the package of food, her mother-in-law was pleasantly surprised.

"What welcome bounty!" Naomi exclaimed. "Where did you go to receive such special favor? May blessings come to the one who has treated you so well!"

"I went to a nearby field where barley is being cut," Ruth explained. "The foreman over the workers told me I could glean, but during the morning I was discouraged by the small amount of barley I had gathered. Then the owner of the field arrived on a handsome horse. He invited me to eat in the harvesters' meal tent. He even asked me not to glean anywhere except in his fields. In the afternoon I picked up so much barley that I was able to thresh out all the grain you see. And this package of food is especially for you from Boaz. That's the name of the owner of the field." (Ruth 2:18-19.)

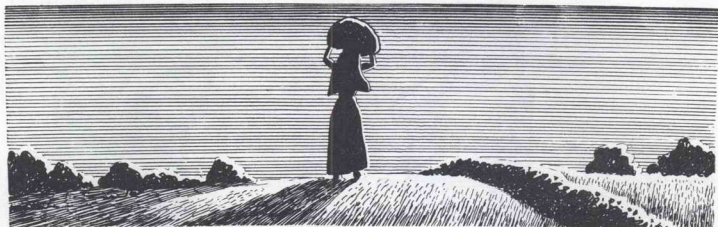
Naomi was happily startled at this last bit of information.

"I know who Boaz is!" she exclaimed. "He is a close relative of my dead husband, and a wealthy and God-fearing man! God has been good to direct us to him. You would indeed be wise not to be seen in any other fields but his. You can be sure that you will be safe if you stay on his property."



Ruth was surprised and happy to find that her first day's gleaning had resulted in eight gallons of fine barley!

Ruth gladly stayed in the fields of Boaz for the full harvest time of barley and wheat, which was for a month or so. (Ruth 2:20-23.) Meanwhile, she was treated with special attention by Boaz, insomuch that there was an increasing affection between them, though neither of them expressed it very much in words. Each could see that the other was a person of very high moral standards. As for her gleaning, Ruth daily brought home so much grain that the two widows made a small income by selling part of it.



During several weeks of harvesting in Boaz' fields, Ruth went home almost every evening with what would have been considered an unusual amount of grain, even for the best of gleaners.

From the glowing reports Ruth brought home about Boaz, it was plain to Naomi what was taking place. She planned to do what she could to push the situation into full bloom, lest it fail to fully develop naturally.

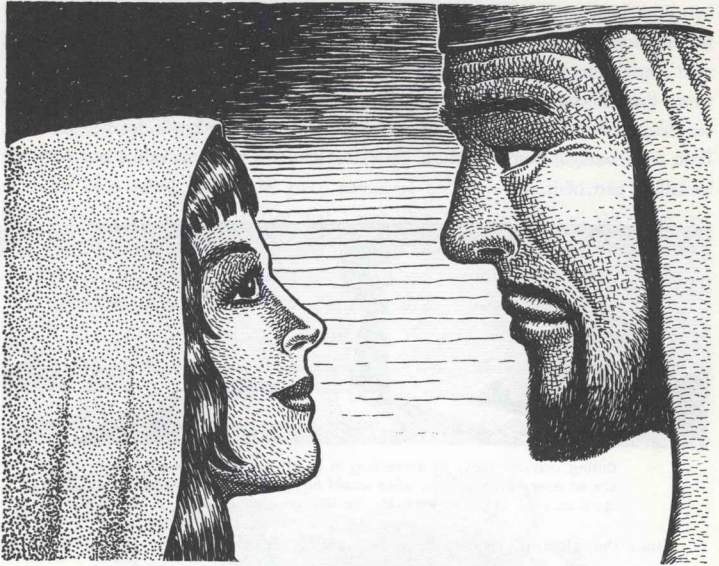
Boaz was spending most of his time at the threshing shed, where his crew was removing chaff from the grain with the help of strong evening breezes. Naomi knew that the workers didn't go home until after midnight, and that Boaz then slept in the shed to save time in going to his home and back again to work just a few hours later. Besides, he preferred not to leave his large stock of grain unattended, what with thieves constantly prowling about.

Naomi Plans Wisely and Justly

"You know that I want what is best for you," Naomi reminded Ruth, "and continuing to live here with me in this small home isn't the best for a young woman who should have a more promising future. Boaz cares deeply for you, but he hasn't mentioned marriage because you haven't shown him that you're greatly in favor of it."

"I am very happy here with you," Ruth told Naomi. "As for Boaz, I don't want him to think that I'm too bold."

"But you should make him aware of how you feel," Naomi continued, "and



One had only to watch Ruth, whenever Boaz came near her in the field, to know what she thought of him.

the sooner the better. I suggest that you use your best perfume, put on your prettiest clothes and go to the threshing shed where he'll be staying tonight. Watch from outside till he has gone to bed. Then slip inside and lie down at his feet!" (Ruth 3:1-4.)

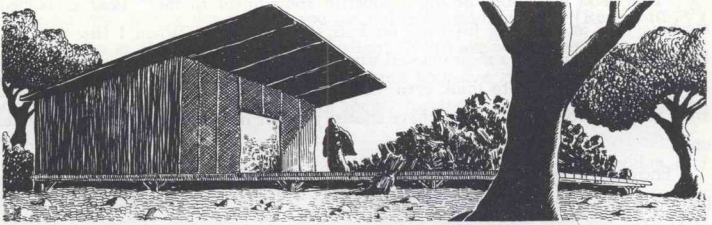
Ruth was startled at the suggestion. When Naomi saw her expression of wonder, she hastily reminded her that it was an Israelite custom and duty that the nearest eligible male kin of a dead husband should marry the widow in the event she had no children, so that she might have the opportunity to have offspring through the family that had chosen her. (Deuteronomy 25:5-6.)

"Boaz realizes just how he is related to you," Naomi observed. "I'm sure he will understand your good intentions and treat you fairly."

At first Ruth didn't want to do what Naomi suggested. To her it seemed a bit too forward, but the more she thought about the matter, the more she was convinced that this was something that should be done in accepting the right ways of Israel.

"I shall do as you say," she finally told Naomi. (Ruth 3:5.)

Before midnight Ruth went to the threshing shed, careful not to be seen by



It was almost midnight when Ruth moved silently to the open door of Boaz' threshing shed.

anyone. The workers had gone, but there was a light inside the building. She peered inside to see Boaz finishing a late meal and relaxing with a mug of wine. She watched him wearily stretch out on the straw-covered floor, lean his head against a sheaf of barley, pull a blanket over himself and snuff out the oil lamp. Ruth patiently waited outside until she could hear the slow, deep breathing that indicated sound sleep. Then she slipped quietly inside, lifted the part of the blanket over Boaz' feet, and carefully and silently lay down with the blanket partly over her. (Ruth 3:6-7.)

Even though Boaz had fallen into a deep sleep, Ruth's presence awakened him. He was alarmed when he felt something warm and alive pressing against his feet. Could it be some kind of animal seeking a snug place, or was it some intruder who meant him harm? There was enough moonlight being reflected from the roofless part of the threshing floor to make it possible to see dimly. Boaz slowly pulled his blanket toward his head, gradually exposing the object at his feet. He blinked in disbelief when he realized that he was uncovering a woman curled up on the floor. He was even more startled when he recognized her.

"You!" he blurted. "What are you doing here, Ruth?"

Ruth glanced up in embarrassment, then dropped her gaze to the floor.

Boaz—A Man of Honor

"I'm here to remind you that you are my closest of kin among men in Israel," she answered in a quiet voice. "I understand that according to your custom, you may marry me, since my husband was your close relative. Spread your blanket over me to show if you are willing to be married!" (Ruth 3:8-9.)

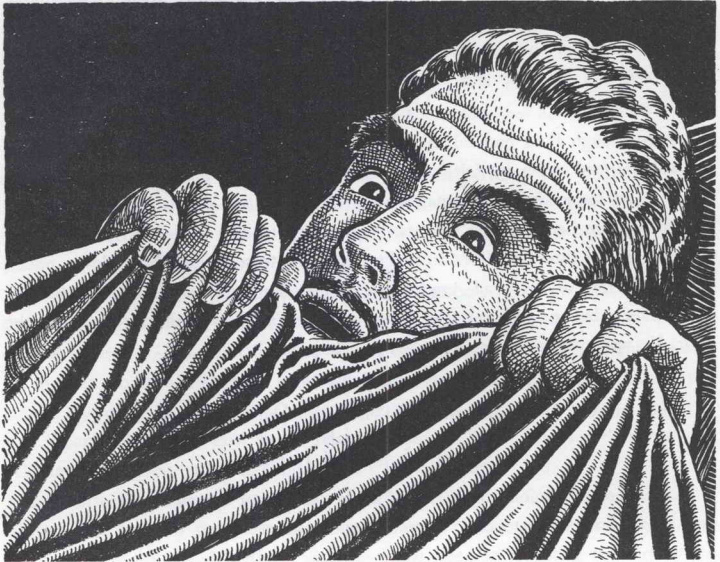
Boaz was so surprised that words failed him for a few moments. This added to Ruth's discomfort.

"May God bless you for this wonderful compliment to me!" Boaz exclaimed, reaching over and putting his hand on Ruth's veiled head. "When I first met you, I thought that you were a most unusual woman because of your beauty and humility. But now I have reason to think even more of you. Everyone in our city knows you are a virtuous woman. You could have chosen younger men even among the wealthier ones."

Encouraged by these words, Ruth forgot her embarrassment and raised her eyes happily and expectantly up to Boaz.

"It's true that I am a relative of yours," he continued. "But I am not your nearest of kin here. There is another man living in this area who is more closely related to you than I am."

Ruth's smile faded. There was an awkward silence as the woman from Moab realized that in a way she was talking to the wrong man!



Boaz awakened after midnight to feel some moving thing pressing against his feet!

"But Naomi, my mother-in-law, thought that you—" Ruth's voice trailed away as she stared ruefully at the floor.

"Don't worry," Boaz said softly. "Leave this matter to me, and I'll take care of it tomorrow. Just lie down where you are and rest until morning." (Ruth 3:10-13.)

Ruth lay at Boaz' feet till nearly daylight. When she was about to leave, Boaz spread her sheet-like veil out on the floor and poured a sizable gift of barley on it. Pulling up the corners, he tied them snugly together, thus making a bag of the veil.

"This is a big load," he said, "but I know you are capable of handling it. I also know that you are known as a virtuous woman, so there's no reason to risk spotting your good reputation by telling anyone except Naomi that you have been here to talk with me."

Ruth arrived home before anyone was stirring that morning and related everything that had happened. Her mother-in-law didn't seem too concerned about another man being more closely akin to them than was Boaz.

"I don't know the intentions of this one of whom Boaz speaks," she said, "but don't be upset. If Boaz promised you that he'll straighten matters out, then that's what he'll do."

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

VIRTUE IS REWARDED

RUTH, the young Moabite woman, had real affection for Boaz, the wealthy, elderly Israelite grain grower. She hoped that Boaz would marry her. Boaz, who himself was probably a widower, hoped that it would be that way, too.

But there was another man in Bethlehem who was more closely related to Ruth's dead husband. He had more claim to Ruth as a wife than did Boaz. (Deuteronomy 25:5-6.) However, this other man had given the matter no real thought. (Ruth 3:10-18.)

Boaz Plans Wisely

During the weeks Ruth had gleaned in his fields, Boaz had come to love the Moabitess, and he was determined not to lose her. The morning after he found that Ruth cared deeply for him, he went early to the main gate of Bethlehem, the place where most business was conducted in that area. There he stayed, hopeful of finding the unmarried man who was more closely related to Ruth's dead husband, and whose traditional duty it was to marry the widow if she were childless. Boaz was confident he would see the relative before he left town to spend the day working in his fields.

Fortunately, the man soon showed up at the busy place. Boaz sought him out and invited him to share the bench where he, Boaz, had been patiently sitting. (Ruth 4:1.)

"I have some important news that could be very good for you," Boaz told him. "If you will sit here for just a few minutes till I return, I'll tell you about it."

It was the custom then that several other people be present as witnesses when business decisions and agreements were made. Boaz wanted to make certain that what he was about to do was duly witnessed. Being well known in Bethlehem, he succeeded in quickly summoning ten of the leading men of the region who were present in the crowd at the gate. They gathered around him and the man he had detained to see that matters were properly attested to.

"I'm here to inform you that Elimelech's wife, Naomi, who recently returned from Moab, has a fine field for sale at a reasonable price," Boaz explained. "Inasmuch as you are Elimelech's nearest relative, you should have the first opportunity to purchase the land. If you prefer not to buy it, then I should like to do so as the next of kin after you." (Leviticus 25:25.)

Ever since Naomi had returned from Moab, Boaz had known that she had intended to sell the piece of land. She didn't want to part with it, but her increasing needs made it necessary. Boaz' colorful description of the field caused his relative to feel that it was indeed a bargain without his even seeing it, though he knew the location.

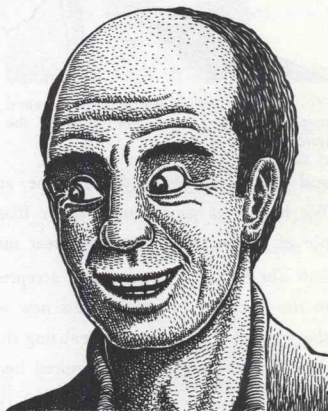
"I'll buy it!" he exclaimed. "Tell Naomi that I'll bring her the money this very afternoon!" (Ruth 4:2-4.)

"Good!" Boaz said. "And now I have a pleasant surprise for you. The sale of this land also includes something else—marriage to Elimelech's childless daughter-in-law, Ruth, and having an heir to Elimelech by her!"

The relative's jaw dropped. He stared unhappily at Boaz, who had hoped for just that reaction.

"Then I can't afford to buy it!" he declared disappointedly, when he knew he couldn't get just the field for himself. "From what I've heard, this Ruth would make a wonderful wife. But I can't afford to spend my money to provide an heir for Elimelech. It would be much simpler if you would buy the land, Boaz, and thereby have Ruth in marriage."

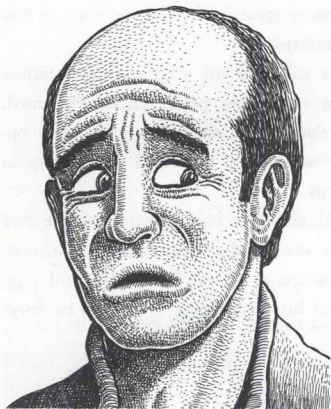
The man thereupon yanked off one shoe and handed it to Boaz, which was



Believing he had come across a rare bargain, the closest of kin to Naomi's dead husband was quite anxious to purchase Naomi's field . . .

a custom indicating that the nearest of kin declined to carry out his obligations, and left them to the next of kin after him. All this was just how Boaz had hoped and planned that matters would turn out. (Ruth 4:5-8.)

A Happy Solution



. . . but his enthusiasm suddenly melted away when he heard the terms of the purchase.

and Leah, from whom Israel came, and may you have great success in your work. We hope that your house will be like that of Pharez, from which part of the people of Judah sprang in such great numbers!" (Ruth 4:9-12.)

The tribute was graciously accepted by Boaz, who then lost little time in getting to the home of Naomi and his new wife Ruth. When Ruth saw him approaching, she was filled with anxiety, realizing that the man who was nearest of kin to Naomi's dead husband could have acquired her in marriage, even though she had never met him.

Her fears were swept away the moment Boaz entered the house. She could tell by his excited grin that he had, with God's help, somehow made matters work out right. She fell into the arms of her new husband, silently thanking God that such happiness could be hers.

Naomi slipped quietly out of the room, smiling to herself because of how well matters had turned out, though she didn't yet know what Boaz had done to make them that way.

Some who read the story of Ruth, which gives an insight into the lives of a few of the obedient people of Israel in troubled times, might question the marriage of an Israelite to a Moabitess from the heathen land of Moab.

The answer is Boaz married a woman who had renounced the pagan religion and gods of Moab. She had a desire to become as an Israelite by obeying and worshipping the God of Israel. Further, the Moabites were not of another race. Their ancestor Moab was a son of Abraham's nephew Lot. (Genesis 12:5 and 19:36-38.)

God's church has always been made up basically of Israelites, but Gentiles have been able to come into the church and become "spiritual" Israelites by forsaking their wrong practices and beliefs and repentantly and earnestly seeking the ways and laws of the Creator, who chose Israel to help carry out His plan.

In due time Boaz and Ruth had a son. Friends suggested that he be named Obed, which means *servant*.

"Ruth is better than seven sons," they told Naomi, "because she has stayed with you, and now she has given birth to a grandson who will give you great happiness in your latter years. He will also become famous, a man in whom you shall be pleased."

The Ancestry of Jesus

This prediction, whether or not inspired, turned out true. Naomi became a nurse to Obed, and greatly enjoyed the privilege of helping rear a boy. Obed not only became an outstanding Israelite, but he also was an ancestor of Jesus Christ. (Ruth 4:13-17.)



Ruth had forsaken the worship of the idols of Moab. Otherwise, God wouldn't have allowed her marriage to Boaz, whose descendants led to the birth of Christ.

The lineage of Christ at the time of Judah (see Genesis 38, especially verses 27-30) had a strange twist at the birth of Judah's twin boys. The midwife present, realizing that two babies were to be born, noticed that a little arm was first to appear. She hastily tied a red thread around the protruding wrist to indicate for certain which baby obviously was to be born first, inasmuch as the firstborn son would ordinarily be the one to whom the greater honor and heritage would be due. In this case, the royal line ending in Christ would be carried on through the one born first.

The baby with the red string on his wrist wasn't the first, however. The other twin was born before him, to the surprise of the midwife. He was named Pharez, the one referred to by Boaz' witnesses when they expressed their hope that all would go well with him. The other baby was named Zarah. (Genesis 38:27-30; Ruth 4:18.)

This unusual birth situation was mentioned in the Bible because it had to do with who and where Israel is today—something that presently isn't understood by most ministers, religious leaders and Bible scholars.

There were seven generations and about four and a half centuries from Pharez to Obed. Obed was the grandfather of David (Ruth 4:19-22), and then there were twenty-eight more generations of the line of Judah to the time that Jesus was born. (Matthew 1:17.)

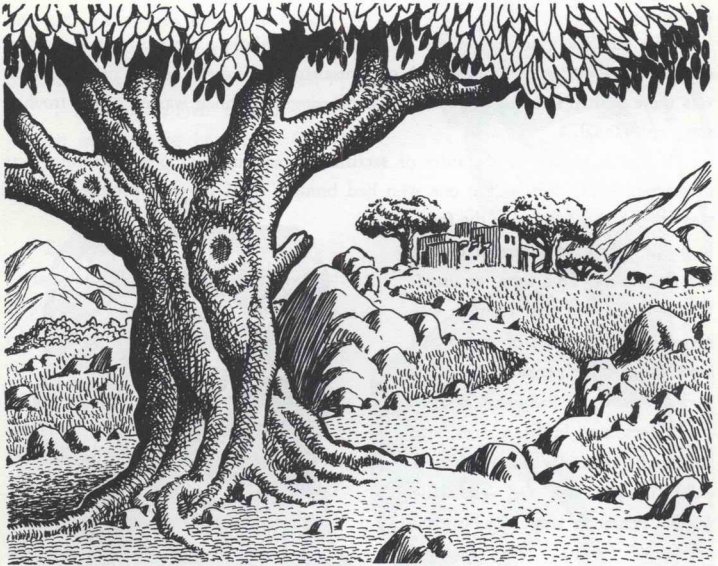
There were several long generations among the ancestors of David after the Israelites arrived in Canaan. Boaz was born after the arrival in Canaan. Yet his great-grandson David—the third generation afterward—was born about three hundred years later. The Bible tells us Jesse was very old compared to other men when his son David was a young boy. (I Samuel 17:12.) Some of these men must have been over a hundred years old when their last sons were born, just as Abraham was. (Genesis 21:5; Genesis 24:1, 67; Genesis 25:1-2.)

In those days people were healthier and had a more natural diet and got plenty of exercise. They were vigorous until they were very old. (Deuteronomy 34:7.)

God had a hand in what occurred in this matter of His Son's ancestors. This doesn't mean that people are always caused to think and act only as the Creator wills. If that were so, we would be little better than robots. But God does choose to work through certain people. Those whom He chooses don't always realize that God is leading them to decide to do certain things in certain ways inasmuch that it all results in some end God had in mind.

About a century and a half after the birth of Obed, there was a man by the name of Elkanah living in a town in the high elevations of the Mt. Ephraim re-

gion. He was a Levite, and he had two wives. This wasn't right and he, being a Levite, should have known better. But there were many things not right in Israel in those times when the people had fallen so far away from God. However, the fact that this man had two wives for so many years was part of the means through



Elkanah, the Israelite who unwisely had two wives, lived in the high region near Mount Ephraim.

which he was used to later bring another of God's servants onto the scene. (I Samuel 1:1-2.)

Bigamy Leads to Heartache

Elkanah tried to obey God the best he knew how for the most part, including observing the annual Sabbaths. But still, because of his bigamy, all was not peace and harmony in his home. One of his wives, Peninnah, was jealous of the other, Hannah, because their husband showed Hannah more affection. Hannah, however, was unhappy because she had no children and Peninnah had several. To add to the trouble, Peninnah often vexed Hannah, telling her that she wasn't a good wife, and that it was obvious because she had no children. Hannah could hardly bear up under such

taunts, what with it being considered a disgrace in ancient times for a woman to be childless in Israel.

Elkanah would have spared himself and his family much grief if he had wisely considered how matters were bound to turn out for a man craving and taking on two wives. On the other hand, God eventually allowed this tragic situation to serve a purpose.

The tabernacle and ark were still located at Shiloh, a town in the mountains of Ephraim about twenty miles north of Jerusalem. During one of the times Elkanah was there with his family to make peace offerings, Peninnah was especially troublesome to Hannah.

It was according to the rules of sacrificing that meat for peace offerings was in most part returned to the one who had brought it, if he were present. Then it was ordinarily consumed at the family meals that were prepared during the feast days. This time, as usual, Elkanah saw to it that Hannah was served twice as much of the choice meat as any other person in his family was served. (I Samuel 1:3-5.)

"Does our husband feel that you might at last be able to bear a child if you are fed especially well?" Peninnah smugly whispered to Hannah.

Hannah winced at this remark. She realized that she had trouble in being as loving and kind as she should be to Peninnah's children, but she didn't feel that Peninnah had sufficient reason for constantly making such snide statements. She

arose from the table and walked away to seat herself at a distance. When Elkanah noticed what she had done, he went to her and was grieved to find her sobbing.

"Why are you crying?" he asked her tenderly. "Why did you leave the table?"

"Don't worry about me," Hannah breathed, struggling to hide her tears.



Peninnah, Elkanah's other wife, constantly made snide and insulting remarks about Hannah's not having any children.

She said nothing about Peninnah's cruel conduct.

"I wish you wouldn't be unhappy because you are not yet a mother," Elkanah murmured. "There is a lot of time yet. Meanwhile, don't you believe that I love you even more than ten sons could care for you?" (I Samuel 3:6-8.)

"I know," Hannah replied. "But just let me sit here by myself for a while."

Take the Problem to God

Elkanah understood that she wanted to be alone. He returned to the table to join the others of his family, unaware of the smirk on Peninnah's face.

Hannah sat by herself for quite a while. Then she went into the tabernacle enclosure and started to pray, though not aloud. Because her eyes were closed, she wasn't aware that she was being closely watched by Eli, the old high priest, who was sitting in an elevated seat close to one of the corner posts of the tabernacle fence.

"God of Israel, please make it possible for me to give birth to a baby boy," she fervently prayed. "If you will just do this for me, I will gladly give him to you to use in your service all the days of his life!"

Hannah kept on praying silently. Her lips were moving, and she was unwittingly bending farther and farther forward in her state of great emotion. Eli was still watching her. Finally he got to his feet and strode over to where she was crouching. (I Samuel 1:9-14.)



Hannah, whose eyes were closed in prayer, didn't realize that the high priest was standing over her.

"Young woman!" he snapped impatiently. "Young woman, straighten up! You should be ashamed of yourself! How much longer do you intend to hang around here in your drunken condition? If you want to stay around this tabernacle any longer, stop drinking before you pass out completely!"

GOD RULES HIS MINISTRY

HANNAH, wife of Elkanah the Levite, was at the tabernacle praying when she was startled by the harsh voice of Eli, the high priest. He accused her of being drunk. (I Samuel 1:12-14.) Prayer was so rare in Israel that Eli did not realize Hannah was praying.

Having become lost to her surroundings because of her fervent request to God for a son, Hannah opened her eyes and looked up to see the priest frowning down on her.

"I assure you, sir," Hannah said respectfully, "that I am not in a drunken condition."

A Change of Attitude

"But you have been acting very strangely," Eli told her. "There are certain young women who stay around the tabernacle for wrong purposes. If you are one of them, I prefer that you leave."

"I am not one of them," Hannah explained. "I am sorry to have given you the wrong impression. If I seemed to have had too much wine, it was because I have been very unhappy. I am childless, and I was bringing my problem to God. I told Him that if He would give me a baby boy, I would give up the baby so that he could become God's servant for the rest of his life!"

"That is indeed a worthy purpose," observed Eli, who was not convinced that Hannah was telling the truth. "If it's a son you want, where is your husband?"

"He is the man Elkanah, sitting over there at that table," Hannah answered,

pointing to a little group eating by themselves. "Unfortunately, I must share him with another wife whom you see there. The children around them are hers."

"I am beginning to understand, my daughter," said Eli. "I am sorry I spoke to you as I did. I should not have misjudged you, but there have been so many young women come here for no good that I considered you just another one of them. Return in peace with your husband to your home. I believe that God will grant the request you have made of Him." (I Samuel 1:15-17.)

This encouragement from the high priest of Israel was a great help to Hannah. She was so inspired with hope that she cheerfully returned to her husband's table to join in the meal. Elkanah was elated to note her change of mood, but Peninnah was perplexed and troubled. She saw nothing good in Elkanah and Hannah being in such a happy state.

Next morning, after making a last offering, Elkanah returned home with his family. Although most of Israel was in an ill spiritual state, there were many such as this Levite who made a special effort to observe the annual Holy Days God had instituted. They were more obedient to God than millions and millions of English-speaking Israelites are today, because church-goers today are told by their leaders to have nothing to do with God's Holy Days that He set apart to be observed forever—and that means the present day as well as back then. (Compare Leviticus 23:1, 41 with I Corinthians 5:7-8 and Acts 18:21.)

When Elkanah went back to the tabernacle a year later, Hannah didn't go with him and Peninnah and her children. It wasn't because she didn't want to go. It was because she had given birth to a son! She named him Samuel, which meant *asked of God*. (I Samuel 1:18-20.)

A Good Reason to Stay Home

"I shouldn't go to Shiloh until after our son is weaned and trained," Hannah told her husband. "When he is of the proper age, I shall deliver him to the high priest for a life of service at the tabernacle just as I promised."

"If you think you should stay home, so be it," Elkanah agreed, "but I shall miss you while we are away."

Hannah was sad to see her husband leave, but at the same time she was relieved to be out of Peninnah's presence for a few days. Peninnah could no longer chide her for having no children, but this envious wife had now developed other types of caustic and unkind remarks with which to try to keep Hannah uncomfortable. In spite of these things, Hannah was happy because of her son.

Hannah didn't go to Shiloh the following year or even the year after that. In



Elkanah and his family returned to their home in the hill country of Ephraim.

those times a child was often two years old before it was weaned, a custom that prevails today to some extent among various peoples in the Middle East.

When Samuel was at last taken to Shiloh, he was probably nearly three years old. Besides the usual meat to be offered, Elkanah took three bullocks, over seven gallons of flour and a leather bag of wine—often called a “wine skin” in modern translations of the Bible. These extra things were to be used in the consecration offering having to do with little Samuel. (I Samuel 1:21-24.)

As soon as they arrived at the tabernacle and made an offering, Hannah took her son to Eli, who was still high priest. So much time had passed that Eli didn't at first recognize her.

“I am the woman who was here praying by myself a few years ago, and to whom you spoke because you thought I was drunk,” she explained. “Perhaps you will remember that I told you that I was pleading to God for a baby boy, and that if God would give one to me, I would dedicate him for his whole life to the service of the tabernacle. God heard and answered my prayers, just as you said at the time that you believed He would. Here is the boy. I have come to the tabernacle to turn him over to you!” (I Samuel 1:25-28.)

Eli remembered Hannah. He knew that it required much courage for a mother to give up her only child. It occurred to him to refuse to accept such a young lad, so that he might spend a few more years with his parents, but he realized

that it would be even more difficult for the mother to bring Samuel back again.

When the time came for the consecration offering, Hannah voiced an unusual prayer of praise. She was so thankful for what God had done for her that she was happy even for the opportunity of giving up her son. (I Samuel 2:1-10.)

After the time of worship was over, Elkanah and his family returned to their home, leaving little Samuel to be reared and instructed in the simple duties he would at first be required to perform at the tabernacle.

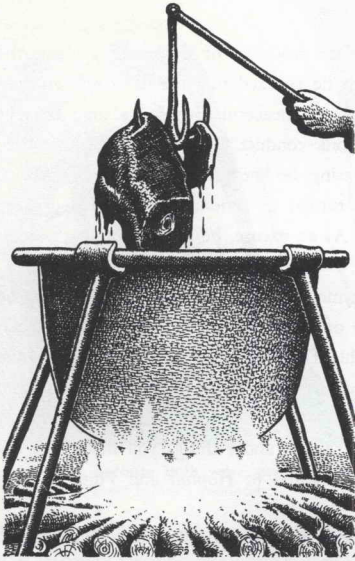
The Priesthood Profaned

At this time matters were anything but right at the tabernacle. Eli's two sons, priests next in rank under their father, had the same duties and authority as those of Aaron's two sons when the tabernacle was at Mt. Sinai. Those two, Nadab and Abihu, met sudden death when they overstepped their authority. (Leviticus 10:1-2.)

Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's sons, were swiftly heading for a similar fate. They were committed to serving God with fear and reverence, but they had become increasingly greedy, careless and immoral. They were careful to try to hide their evil conduct from their father, but they didn't seem to care what God thought of them. They were far from fit to be priests, but God allowed them to carry on for a time, just as He often allows sinful men to continue in their ways. If every person were struck dead the moment he first sinned, there would be nobody living. But there is always a point at which God deals with those who continue to break His laws.

According to the Creator's instructions for making peace offerings at the tabernacle, a carcass was to be divided three ways: the part for God, including the fat, the part for the priests, including the right shoulder and breast, and the portion that was left, which was to go back to the one who offered it. Only God's part was to be roasted on the altar. The rest of it was to be boiled for the priests and Levites and for the family making the offering. (Leviticus 7:11-17; 28-34; II Chronicles 35:13; Ezekiel 46:20, 24.)

Hophni and Phinehas didn't go along with such rules any more. When a carcass was brought in as a sacrifice, they seized their share of the meat before the rest of it was taken to be used elsewhere. Often they would roast their part of it before God's part was burned on the altar. Furthermore, they would go to the huge seething pots that had just been filled with raw meat to boil, and yank out as much as they wanted of it with large, three-pronged hooks. They would thus take much of the meat belonging to persons who had brought it for offerings. Everyone could see they were violating God's ordinances. Those people who were bold enough to



Hophni and Phinehas often went to the boiling cauldrons to take out more than their share of raw meat so they could roast it.

special shoulder garment that caused him to look very official, for a young boy.

It was a happy week for Hannah, who spent many hours visiting Samuel. She gave him a coat she had made, and for a number of years afterward she brought him a new coat each time she and her husband came to the tabernacle, which was during the fall at the Festival of Tabernacles. The parents of Samuel had no difficulty attending God's Festival each year as it was still a time of peace under Gideon, shortly before an Ammonite-Philistine invasion. (Judges 10:7.)

God Rewards the Generous

During one of the festivals, Eli asked a special blessing on Elkanah and Hannah because of their giving their only child to the service of the tabernacle.

"Reward this couple for bequeathing their firstborn son," the high priest asked of God. "Make it possible for them to have more children."

God answered Eli's request. In time Hannah gave birth to three more sons and two daughters. Having a total of six children, she no longer felt secondary

object to this unlawful practice were told that the priests would do as they pleased, even if they had to get their way by force.

This situation was so difficult that even the most zealous Israelites came to abhor the offerings they knew they should make. (I Samuel 2:11-17.) They feared to complain, having been warned that no one should accuse a priest of doing wrong. (Exodus 22:28; Acts 23:5.) The conduct of Hophni and Phinehas was damaging to Israel, just as the disobedience of today's religious leaders is doing great harm to our people. The priests' sins within a short time led to the spread of idolatry (Judges 8:33), after the death of Gideon.

A year after Samuel had been dedicated, his parents came to Shiloh as usual. There they saw their son busy in his service at the tabernacle. He was dressed in a

to Peninnah, who by that time had given up her efforts to appear as the superior wife. (I Samuel 2:18-21.)

As Samuel was growing into a young lad who was of increasing worth at the tabernacle, Eli was reaching an age at which he realized that his life could end any day. He had hoped that his last years would be peaceful, but for a long time he had been receiving indirect reports of his sons' conduct. At first he gave little heed to these rumors, but when they began increasing, he knew he would have to speak to Hophni and Phinehas. Eli's intention wasn't turned to action, however. He dreaded the unpleasant task of reproaching his sons. As an excuse, he kept reminding himself that the rumors possibly weren't true.

That was before he received an anonymous tip that his sons were carrying on in a shameless, wanton manner with some of the women who stayed in the tabernacle area. Eli had noted evidence of this flagrant misconduct by Hophni and Phinehas, but he had chosen to overlook it. Now that the people were beginning to be aware of it, he realized that he could no longer delay rebuking his sons.

"I have been receiving some alarming reports about things you have been doing here at the tabernacle," Eli grimly announced to Hophni and Phinehas next time he saw them alone.

The two priests glanced at each other with expressions of righteous indignation.

"Who are those who dare tell lies about the priests of Israel?" Hophni demanded.

"The people have no right to judge us!" Phinehas muttered.

"Both of you would probably be better off if they did," Eli told them, frowning. "However, it is God who judges us, and I know you have much to fear from Him for the outrages you have been committing. Don't you realize that you are causing the people to sin because of your bad examples and by your driving them away from the tabernacle? If your misbehavior were only against man, it would be bad enough. But you have been defying the Creator whom you have been chosen to serve! Unless you give up your evil ways now, God will take your lives!" (I Samuel 2:22-26.)

"Those who have accused us are the ones who should repent!" snapped Hophni as he turned to stride away with Phinehas.

It was plain to Eli that his sons only resented his remarks, and had no intention of changing their ways. He knew that further words would only be wasted. He was painfully aware that if he had been properly strict with them years before, this calamitous situation probably never would have occurred. There was only one course left now for the good of Israel. That was to put Hophni and Phinehas out of



Because both were guilty, Phinehas and Hophni were irritated by their father's reminder.

their capacity at the tabernacle, and replace them with two priests next in line for such offices. That, however, was something that Eli didn't quite have the courage or inclination to do.

Eli Is Warned

Not long afterward an unusual stranger came to the tabernacle to talk to Eli. When Eli saw the man, he was somehow uncomfortable in his presence. There was something about him that made the high priest feel as though the fellow could read his innermost thoughts, and that he was aware of all that had been going on at the tabernacle. When the man spoke, Eli was startled to learn that he *did* know what was going on.

"When your forefather Aaron was in Egypt, God chose his family for the priesthood," the stranger reminded Eli. "At that time God gave definite instructions concerning the offerings and the manner in which the tabernacle was to function. I have been sent to tell you that God is well aware that you and your sons have failed miserably in running matters rightly. You honor your sons above God—which is idolatry. You have allowed them to steal from those who brought offerings so that all three of you might gorge yourselves." (I Samuel 2:27-29.)

"Even though God promised that the priesthood should be in the family of

Aaron forever—and set your family in the priesthood—the Creator can't go on using men like you as His most high-ranking servants. You will die soon, but not before you see an enemy come on the Israelites to take away their wealth. As for your sons, they will both die the same day, and not long from now. Then God will choose from among Aaron's other descendants a high priest who will be faithful. Others in your family will come and beg him for food and for work. Furthermore, all your male descendants shall die before they are of middle age. Consider these things, and how you have brought them on yourselves!" (I Samuel 2:30-36.)

When the stranger finished speaking, Eli was so upset that he was speechless. He was shaking as he watched the man stride away from the tabernacle and disappear.

At this time Samuel was probably about twelve or thirteen years old. He was of increasing help to Eli, who was a heavy man in his last years, and who needed someone in attendance because of the high priest's having difficulty in moving about. For this reason Samuel's bedroom was close to Eli's in the high priest's quarters near the tabernacle, so that the lad could quickly wait on Eli in the event he needed help during the night.

One night Samuel was awakened by a voice speaking his name. Thinking that Eli had called, the boy ran to the high priest's bedroom.



Young Samuel was awakened by a strange voice calling his name.

"Here I am, sir!" Samuel whispered out of the darkness.

Eli's loud breathing ended with a sudden snort.

"Is that you, Samuel?" the high priest muttered sleepily. "Why have you awakened me? I didn't call you. Go back to bed!"

Samuel returned to his room, puzzled as to the source of the voice. Before he could fall asleep, he distinctly heard his name spoken again. He jumped up and once more announced his presence to the sleeping priest, who again informed him that he had not called.

Samuel returned to his bed. He was too perplexed to get back to sleep. (I Samuel 3:1-7.)

"Samuel! Samuel!" a voice startled him for the third time, strangely seeming to come to him from all directions.

CHAPTER EIGHTY

"THE ARK OF GOD IS TAKEN!"

ONE night young Samuel, who was sleeping in a room adjacent to Eli's near the tabernacle, heard a voice calling his name. Thinking that Eli, the high priest, had summoned him, he hurried to Eli's quarters. The high priest told Samuel he didn't call him. The same thing happened a little later, and again Eli told him that he hadn't called. (I Samuel 3:1-6.)

A Call From God

After Samuel returned to his bed he heard the voice speak his name for the third time. He hesitated to bother the high priest again, but there was just the chance that this third call had come from the increasingly helpless old man. So for the third time he went to Eli's quarters and timidly asked if he could be of service.

Eli slowly sat up and peered through the gloom at the boy, who was fearful that he would be rebuked.

"If you heard someone speaking your name, it wasn't I," Eli muttered thoughtfully. "What was the voice like?"

"The first time it sounded a long way off," Samuel explained. "The second time it seemed closer. The last time, just a couple of minutes ago, it sounded closer yet, as though it came from everywhere!"

Eli sat in silence for a few moments. He realized that an awesome thing was taking place. He was certain because this thing had happened to him in the past. For some purpose God was speaking to Samuel! (I Samuel 3:7-8.)

To Eli this was a snub from God, inasmuch as the high priest was the one to

whom the Creator usually spoke unless there was a leader in Israel who was unusually close to God. Eli understood why God had chosen to contact another, even one who was only a child. It was because of the careless manner in which he, Eli, had conducted matters at the tabernacle.

"Go back to your bed, my son," the high priest sighed. "If the voice comes to you again, be sure to answer, 'I hear you, Lord! Please tell me why you are calling me.'"

This instruction was puzzling to Samuel. He obediently went back to bed, but he didn't sleep because of being so curious and excited by what the high priest had told him to do about the mysterious voice. He was so keyed up that when he distinctly and closely heard his name pronounced again, he almost forgot what he had been told to answer.

"Y-yes, Lord!" he stammered, not really knowing whom he was answering. "I'm listening!" (I Samuel 3:9-10.)

"Do not be fearful," the voice went on. "I am the God of Israel, here to inform you of some important things."

Samuel was greatly startled to learn that God was speaking to him. But somehow he became at ease as the seconds passed. He listened intently as the voice continued to come to him out of the night.

"I am going to cause some very unhappy events in Israel. If I were to announce to all the people what I shall do, their ears would tingle with the dread words. First I shall bring judgment against the family of Eli. Even though you are yet very young, you should know that your high priest has been offensively careless in his high office. He has allowed his sons to do some very vile things. The sins of all three have been so great that no sacrifice or offering can atone for them. Because of their disobedience, the lives of these people will violently end at a time I shall soon choose." (I Samuel 3:11-14.)

A Very Unpleasant Duty

Samuel was stunned by what he had heard. He had never been aware of Eli or his two sons doing anything wrong. To be informed that his superiors had displeased the God they served was a shock to him. There was little sleep for him the rest of the night.

Next morning he got up as usual to open the entrance to the tabernacle. With the coming of dawn, the event of the night before became to him as a strong dream he almost wanted to forget. He had no intention of revealing it to anyone, but when Eli called him later to talk to him, he was fearful that he was

going to be asked to give an account. It isn't always pleasant to be a prophet.

"I know and now you surely know that it was God who spoke to you last night," the high priest told Samuel. "He must have called you again after the third time I told you to go back to bed. He must have had some message for you. I want you to tell me everything that He told you. Don't hold anything back, or God might deal even more harshly with you than He would deal with me if I were to disobey."

Frightened by these words, Samuel related all that God had spoken. When Eli heard what God had to say about him and his sons, he almost regretted questioning Samuel. He bowed his head and stared submissively at the ground.

"If it's God's will," he murmured, "then it will surely happen the way He has planned it." (I Samuel 3:15-18.)

God hadn't revealed just when these things would happen. For the next several years Eli was in a state of fearful uncertainty for himself and his sons. Meanwhile, Samuel grew up to become a well-known young man. All of Israel knew him as one whom God had chosen as a prophet. Samuel didn't *ask* to be made a prophet: God chose him. He increased greatly in wisdom and intelligence, and foretold events that came true with startling accuracy because God continued to speak to him from time to time. (I Samuel 3:19-21.)

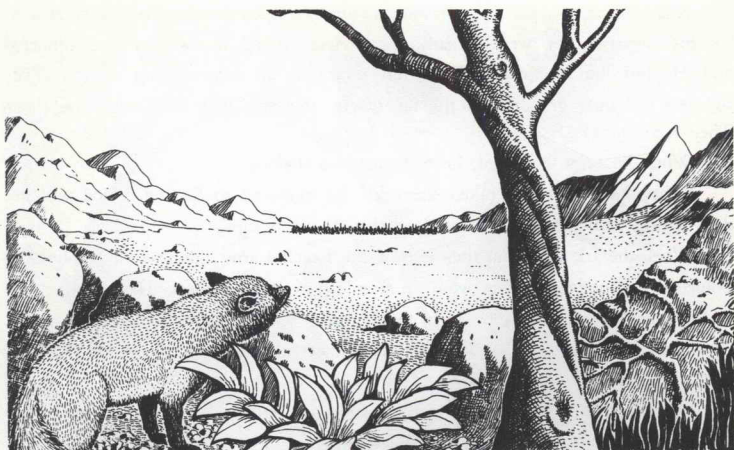
The leaders of Philistia, the coastal nation that had for several years lorded it over Israel, meanwhile had received increasing reports of the rising young leader at Shiloh. Fearing that Israel might be organizing a rebellion against them, they sent out an army to march among the Israelites and remind them that it would be foolish to rise against the Philistines.

When it was reported that a Philistine army was moving into an area about twenty-five miles west of Shiloh, the elders of Israel quickly formed a fighting force that moved swiftly to within a few miles north of where the enemy stopped to camp.

When the Philistines learned of the presence of the army of Israel, they decided to attack before the Israelite soldiers could become greater in number. The Bible doesn't state how many troops were in each army, though there were probably at least forty or fifty thousand on either side. Whatever the numbers, when the encounter was over and each side had withdrawn from the battlefield, the Israelite army went back to its camp with about four thousand less soldiers. (I Samuel 4:1-2.)

No Help for the Wicked!

The leaders were stunned by this defeat. They felt that their forces weren't meant to lose because they were part of God's chosen people! They seemed to have



When the Philistines learned that an Israelite army was encamped only a few miles away, they sent their soldiers to attack.

forgotten that Israel was chosen for an example of obedience, not for special favors. What with most of Israel being in a state of disobedience, the leaders had no sound reason to expect victory.

Nevertheless, some of the elders came to the camp with an idea they thought would insure the Israelites' winning any other encounter with the Philistines.

"We should have the ark with us," they suggested. "Our ancestors took it with them in times of war. They had it with them when they went against Jericho, and the whole city fell. God wouldn't let anything happen to the ark, and he would have to spare us to keep the ark safe!"

This stratagem was vigorously acclaimed by the troops. Men were sent at once to Shiloh to bring the ark to the camp with all possible haste so that it would be on hand in the event the Philistines attacked again.

When the soldiers arrived at the tabernacle to request the ark, Eli was greatly troubled. He felt that it would be a grave mistake for a sinful nation to rely on the presence of the ark as a kind of fetish to insure safety in battle.

"I think the ark should remain in the tabernacle," Eli resolutely informed the men. "I can hardly agree to your taking it!"

Having been awakened because of this matter, the old priest shuffled back to his bed, leaving a group of very disappointed men.

Next morning young Samuel went as usual to open the gates of the tabernacle. To his surprise they were already open. After trying in vain to find Phinehas and Hophni, he awakened Eli to tell him that his sons weren't on duty. The sightless old man groped into the tabernacle, thinking that they might be there. They were gone!

When he came back out, he was pale and shaking.

"They have unwisely taken the ark!" he muttered to Samuel. "God will not deal lightly with those who have done this awful thing!"

When the ark arrived at the camp of the Israelite army, along with Hophni and Phinehas, a thunderous cheer went up from the waiting soldiers. The shouting was so loud that it was plainly heard in the Philistine camp a few miles to the south. Alarmed officers feared that it meant that powerful reinforcements had arrived for Israel. (I Samuel 4:3-5.)

"We should have attacked again instead of retiring," some of them bitterly observed. "Now it may be too late for another victory."

A little later they learned from spies just what had caused the Israelites to cheer so wildly.

"The God of Israel has come into the camp of the enemy!" the spies excitedly declared. "We learned that He is in a box, and that this box was brought from Shiloh tonight! The enemy troops were so pleased to learn that their God had come to help them that they shouted like madmen with glee!"

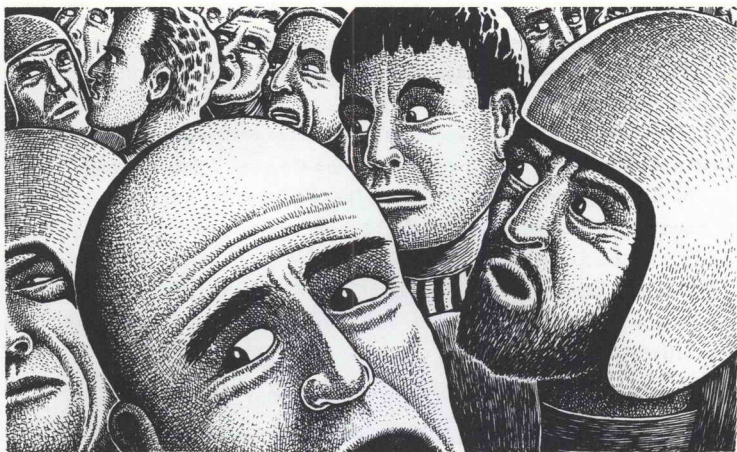
"I have heard of that mysterious box," a Philistine officer said. "It is said to be the dwelling place of a powerful God—the one who long ago brought some horrible plagues on Egypt so that the Israelites could escape!"

"I have heard that when the God of Israel is angered, He is more powerful than any other god," another Philistine added. "If that is true, we might be wise to return to our country."

Fear Turned to Courage

The superstitious Philistines, filled with growing fear and futility, were on the verge of agreeing to give up their war on Israel. Then one of the leading officers demanded to be heard.

"We brought our army here for a purpose!" he shouted angrily. "Now what is all this cowardly talk about running back to our homes? Why are we imagining that we are destined to lose to Israel? We are strong, and we must use that strength to make certain that the Israelites continue to be servants to us. If we give in, we



The Philistine soldiers, resting after battle, were startled to hear loud cheering coming from the Israelite camp five miles away!

will become servants to them! We must fight! We must prove to all that we are men determined to do what we have set out to do!" (I Samuel 4:6-9.)

This short speech was so inspiring to the Philistines that they decided to set out even before dawn for Israel's camp. The Israelites were depending on the ark to keep them safe, and weren't as prepared as they should have been. The Philistines suddenly swarmed in among them with such savage force that within minutes the ground was strewn with dead and dying Israelites. Many were trapped in their own tents. Others who were out in the open foolishly tried to escape by dashing into their shelters. The shouts, the screams of pain, the clashing of metal against metal produced more noise than had gone up from the cheering men only a few hours previously.

On slashing into one of the larger tents, Philistine soldiers came upon two men crouching close to a large box-shaped object covered with a fancy cloth. Spears hurtled into the two men, killing them at once. The Philistine soldiers had no way of knowing that they had just put to death two priests of Israel—Phinehas and Hophni. They strode toward the covered object to see what it was. (I Samuel 4:10-11.)

"Don't touch that!" one of the soldiers barked. "That must be the box where Israel's God dwells!"

The soldiers froze in their tracks, then backed off a few steps.

"Why should we be afraid of that thing?" another soldier muttered. "It didn't keep us from killing these two fellows who must have been here to guard it!"

Anxious to show his courage, the soldier stepped up and touched one of the poles by which the ark was carried.

"See?" he triumphantly asked. "Let's take this to our commander. We'll receive some special favors for being the ones to capture the God of the Israelites!"

By that time the fighting was over. The only Israelites in the camp were dead or wounded. All others, and that didn't include very many, were either fleeing or hiding.

Israel had been defeated to the amount of thirty thousand dead soldiers! If there had been obedience to God instead of reliance on the ark, matters would have turned out differently. (Leviticus 26:3-8.)

The Tragic Result of Sin!

Killing thirty thousand Israelites was a great triumph to the Philistines. But, in a way, the capture of the ark was even a greater one, inasmuch as many of them really believed they had captured a god. The ark was taken to their camp, where a noisy celebration took place. There was great curiosity and speculation as to what was inside the object, but somehow no one dared to try to open it. Most of the Philistine soldiers, having heard wild rumors about the ark, chose to stay away from it. They were superstitious.

A few hours later a tattered Benjamite soldier who had escaped from the Philistines staggered wearily into the main streets of Shiloh.

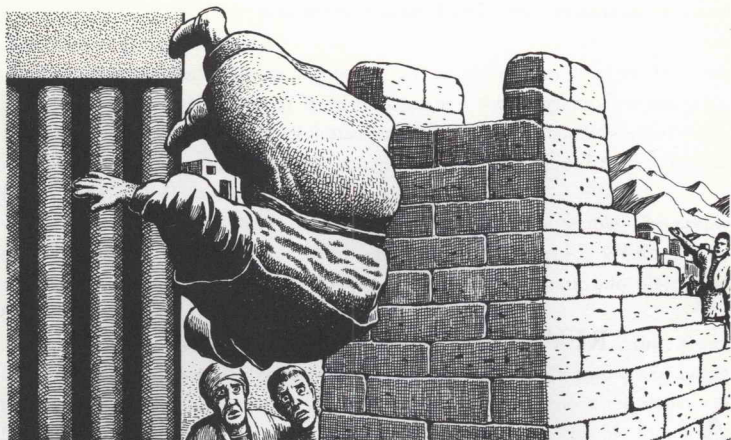
"Our army has been wiped out!" he shouted as he scooped up a handful of dirt and tossed it on his head. (I Samuel 4:12.)

As the bad news spread through town the people began groaning and shrieking. The depressed high priest, sitting at his usual outdoor place where the people could easily contact him, wondered at the cause of the noise. It was then that the exhausted Benjamite trudged up to him to announce that he had run all the way from the Israelite camp to bring news.

Trembling, Eli anxiously asked what had happened.

"The Philistines attacked our camp this morning," the Benjamite muttered hoarsely. "Only a small part of us escaped. The rest are dead, including your two sons. They died when the ark was captured."

This was too much for the old priest. He knew that when God removed His protection from Israel and let the ark be taken, He had forsaken His people. Eli



The news of the capture of the ark was such a shock to the elderly high priest that he toppled backward from his seat on the stones to the ground.

reeled backward and toppled off his elevated chair.

The soldier ran to him, but Eli was already dead. He was a very heavy man, and the fall had broken his neck. (I Samuel 4:13-18.)

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

“REVERENCE MY SANCTUARY”

AN ANGEL had told Eli, the high priest of Israel, that he and his two sons would soon lose their lives. All three of them had knowingly failed to conduct themselves as proper servants in God's service. (I Samuel 2:27-36; I Samuel 3:11-14.)

The prediction came true when Eli's two sons were killed by Philistine soldiers. Eli fell and broke his neck just a few hours later. (I Samuel 4:10-18.) God had warned Eli and the people: "...reverence my sanctuary..." (Leviticus 26:2). He had warned them that only authorized persons should touch the ark, and that it should not even be looked upon except when authorized. (Numbers 4:15; Leviticus 16:2.)

Ark in Pagan Hands

To add to the family tragedy, the wife of Phinehas, one of the two slain sons of Eli, was about to give birth to a baby. Then she heard of the death of her husband and father-in-law and about the capture of the ark, which the priests had removed from God's sanctuary. She was so shocked and troubled that she died shortly after her son was born. Just before she died, she gave her son the name of Ichabod, which was meant to refer to the wretched state into which Israel had fallen. (I Samuel 4:19-22.)

While this was going on at Shiloh, the Philistine army was triumphantly marching into Ashdod, one of the chief cities near the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Ashdod was one of the places where there was a temple containing a statue of one of their main gods, Dagon. The ark was placed in front of the idol to defy the

ark or whatever might be in it to try to prevent Dagon from continuing to tower over the ark. (I Samuel 5:1-2.)

Next morning the priests of the temple got up earlier than usual to gloat over the sight of the sacred treasure of Israel reclining as a sort of gratitude offering before their god. They froze in fearful amazement when they entered the main room.

Some time during the night the statue of Dagon had toppled to the floor in front of the ark! (I Samuel 5:3.)

In the next few hours there was feverish activity within the temple. The people of Ashdod weren't allowed inside or to learn what had happened. Workmen who struggled with ropes, pulleys and pry poles to haul the idol back into place were threatened and warned—and sworn to secrecy.

It was an awkward day for the Philistine priests, who tried to convince themselves that their idol had been erected off balance, and that a slight earthquake during the night was just enough to cause it to topple. Late that afternoon the statue was hoisted back into place in time for the public to come into the temple to worship that day.

Next morning there was still a greater shock for the priests. They arrived to discover that the statue of Dagon was again on the floor. This time it was mysteriously broken off at the base part, which remained where it was. The arms and head were sheared off and scattered in pieces across the threshold of the temple.

This time the fear and consternation of the priests couldn't be hidden. Within hours it was known all through Philistia that the God of Israel had struck down the statue of Dagon in Ashdod. The disgrace was so great in the minds of the Philistines that the leaders decreed that no one should put foot on the threshold of any temple containing a statue of Dagon because of what had happened. (I Samuel 5:4-5.)

Philistines Befuddled

This destruction of an idol was embarrassing and unpleasant for the Philistines. But God didn't stop there in dealing with them. He brought misery to the people of Ashdod and those who lived for miles around. Overnight they became afflicted with bleeding ulcers, painful to such a degree that they couldn't even sit down without great distress. The superstitious Philistines were right in their guess that this trouble had come on them because of their treatment of the ark. (I Samuel 5:6-7.) Leaders met to decide what to do to try to escape the plague that had come to a part of their people.

"If giving that box back to the Israelites will relieve us of this miserable



The priests of the temple of Dagon were shocked to find that their idol had fallen toward the ark, and that the arms and head were broken off.

condition, I'm for sending it to Shiloh right away!" the ruler of Ashdod declared.

There was a chorus of disagreement.

"The capture of the ark of Israel was a great triumph for our armies!" the ruler of the Philistine city of Gath exclaimed heatedly. "Without it, Israel will soon crumble, but you want to give it back! I say no!"

"You wouldn't say that if you were in my condition!" Ashdod's ruler retorted, grimacing with discomfort. "If you think that fancy box should remain in our nation, take it to *your* city and see what happens!"

There was a chorus of approval. None of the rulers of the other cities of Philistia wanted to be responsible for keeping the ark. The ruler of Gath realized that he had spoken with too much haste. He had no choice but to agree that the ark should be transported at once to his city.

This time it wasn't put in the same room with an idol, but it was only a matter of hours before the people of Gath, several miles southeast of Ashdod, began to feel the pain of the same kind of plague that had come to Ashdod. Within a few days it had spread to every Philistine family in and around the city. Some, as in Ashdod, were so painfully afflicted that they died. (I Samuel 5:8-9.)

The people of Gath pleaded that the ark be sent elsewhere. Through various pressures and arguments, the ark was moved to Ekron, a main Philistine city about

fifteen miles northeast of Gath. Almost as soon as the ark arrived there, the people of Ekron were struck by the same ulcerous condition that had come to the people of Ashdod and Gath. (I Samuel 5:10-12.)

At the same time the area was visited with hordes of mice that seemed to come out of nowhere to overrun fields, barns, homes, streets and public buildings.

All this was too much for the inhabitants of Ekron, who begged the rulers of the leading cities to meet in Ekron and consider moving the ark elsewhere.

"We have had enough!" the ruler of Ekron complained to his fellow leaders when they met. "Our people are suffering terribly. Many of them are dying. If the ark isn't taken away soon from here, we'll all be dead. Your people in Ashdod and Gath are recovering, and we want the same opportunity."

Philistines Test God

"But there is no real proof that the Israelite box is causing your trouble," one of the leaders observed who hadn't yet kept the ark in his city, but wasn't in favor of giving it back to Israel. "Before we make any rash move, let us send for our chief priests and seers and ask for their advice on this matter."

Most of those present agreed on this proposal, inasmuch as most Philistines believed that their priests, magicians, seers and astrologers had unusual wisdom. After a meeting of those revered men, a spokesman made their opinions known.

"Probably it would be wise to return the ark to the Israelites," he declared. "It shouldn't be returned without a trespass offering, however. If the Israelite God is actually punishing us because we have this box, we should at least try to make amends by doing something that might please Him."

"What should this trespass offering be?" the Philistine rulers asked.

"Because Philistia is divided into the leadership of five main cities," the spokesman explained, "it would be fitting to send an equal number of costly images of the things that have plagued us. If we return the ark to the Israelites, we should send along golden images of five mice. As you know, it is our custom to appease our own gods by making images of things that have brought trouble to us. Therefore we should even make five images of the type of sores that have come to Philistia. They should also be made of gold and included with the five images of mice. It would be well to remember the tales that have been handed down about how the God of Israel dealt with the Egyptians when they held the Israelites against their will. [Exodus, chapters 7 through 12.] To make a further effort to avoid such curses, the ark should be returned in a fine, newly built cart drawn by untrained cows whose calves have been taken so far away from them that they won't be turned

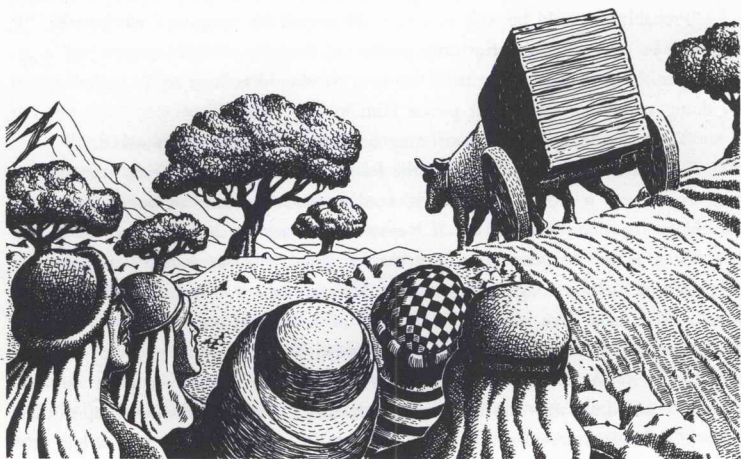
aside because of sensing them in any direction. The animals should then be sent off with what they have to pull. This way we can test the God of Israel and see if He is the One who brought our troubles upon us. If the cows take the cart to Beth-shemesh, it will be a sign to show us whether the God of Israel is powerful enough to work miracles. But if the cows choose to haul the ark in any direction they choose except that of the Danite village of Beth-shemesh, then we will know that it was only by chance or by natural conditions that the sores and mice have come to Philistia." (I Samuel 6:1-9.)

Fantastic and even droll as this plan might seem, the Philistine leaders took it quite seriously. They believed in the ideas of their priests and seers.

The suggestions were carried out as soon as possible. The cart and golden images were made and the images were put into a coffer, or box. The ark and the box containing the golden images were loaded onto the cart. Two cows with calves were brought to hitch to the cart, and the calves were taken to the opposite side of the city of Ekron. (I Samuel 6:10-11.)

The Sign of the Cows

As soon as the cows were harnessed to the cart, everyone stood back to see what would happen. A few moments passed. Then the cows suddenly set out together



The Philistine leaders anxiously watched to see what direction would be taken by the animals that were hauling the ark.

to harmoniously pull the cart as though they had been trained all their lives as a pair to do just that.

The Philistine rulers and others present stared in amazement, but not just because the two cows had agreed on how to pull the cart. The astonishing thing was that the animals had chosen to go directly to the road that led to Beth-shemesh! This was the sign that was supposed to prove to the Philistines that the ark was the source of their trouble.

"This means that the God of Israel has been dealing with us because of our capturing the box!" one Philistine ruler exclaimed.

"I'm not convinced yet," another observed. "The animals are starting out in that direction, but they could turn at any moment and go elsewhere. I'm in favor of following them to see what they'll do."

The others agreed. It was an odd sight—two cows lowing for their calves as they pulled the new cart along, and the five Philistine rulers and their aides and advisors following curiously on their various mounts.

The animals didn't turn to right or left from the road that led into Beth-shemesh about twelve miles southeast of Ekron. Some Israelite harvesters just outside the village caught sight of the unattended cows pulling the cart, just as they reached the field of a man named Joshua, but not the same Joshua who had many years before led Israel across the Jordan river. (Joshua 3:9-17.) They ran to the road, stopped the animals and swarmed around the cart to see what it contained. (I Samuel 6:12-13.)

When the Philistines saw this, they turned off the road and watched, unnoticed, from a nearby grove of trees. They saw the Israelites rip off the top of the box containing the golden idols, then move around excitedly when they discovered what was inside.

Many of the harvesters ran to the nearby villages to tell others that the ark had been found. It resulted in every inhabitant of that area rushing forth to see for himself. The cows and cart were taken off the road and into a nearby field. From there they were guided up a large, rocky mound that jugged up through the field.

"God has chosen the people of our village to find the ark!" a leading citizen loudly proclaimed. "Let us show our devotion to our God by sacrificing these two cows!"

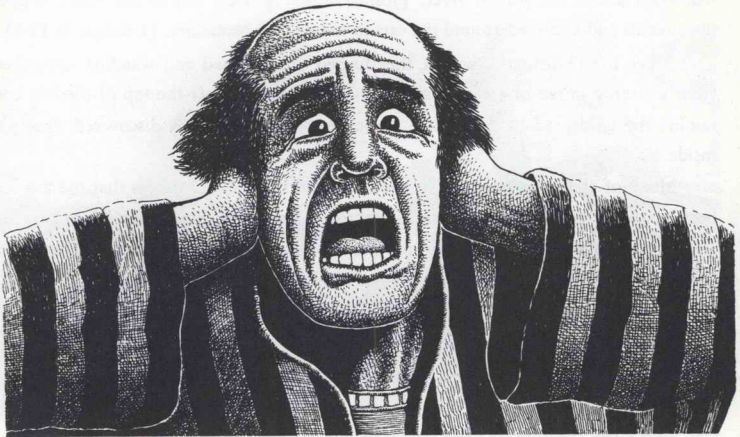
There was a chorus of agreeing shouts. The animals were immediately slaughtered and dressed by the village's Levites. The wooden cart was broken up and set ablaze under the carcasses. While thousands of the people watched with rapt attention, other thousands inspected the odd trespass offerings sent by the Philistine rulers.

Ark of the Sanctuary Profaned

Unfortunately, there were many who examined and handled the ark without proper reverence for God, even to the extent of lifting the lid and peering inside. Obviously they weren't aware of or hadn't remembered what had happened to certain other people who had touched the ark. That ark represented God's throne. Such crass disrespect was bound to bring an awful penalty.

These things were witnessed by the Philistines. They at last had seen enough to convince them that they had blundered in taking the ark away from the Israelites and holding it in Philistia for seven months. They returned that same day to their country to commend their priests and diviners for giving them proper advice concerning the ark. The rulers could never know that the God of Israel had caused matters to work out as they did, even to the extent of working through the so-called wise men of Philistia. (I Samuel 6:14-18.)

Following the departure of the Philistines, a "great calamity" fell on the village of Beth-shemesh and on all the country around. Fifty thousand and seventy men suddenly were seized with a strange, painful condition that brought death to all upon whom it came. (I Samuel 6:19.) These were thousands who had treated the ark irreverently. Not even the Philistines had done so to it! The Israelites should have known better, what with a part of them being Levites who surely



One of thousands from the villages around Beth-shemesh who had carelessly touched the ark. Every one was seized by mysterious pains that resulted in quick death.

realized that God had warned the Israelites that death would come to any who looked into the ark or touched it except by its carrying poles—or showed any lack of reverence for God in their conduct toward the ark. (Leviticus 16:2; 26:2; Numbers 4:5-6, 15.)

There was loud mourning in the villages for the next few days. Some felt that God had dealt unfairly with them. (I Samuel 6:19-20.) Most of the people were anxious to have the ark taken away. Messengers were sent to the nearest town, Kirjath-jearim, to ask men there to come and remove the ark from the area of Bethshemesh.

The officials of Kirjath-jearim were pleased at the opportunity to have the ark in their town, though some of the people there feared it. They hurriedly sent more than enough men to carry it.

At Kirjath-jearim, built on a hill, the ark was taken to the home of a man named Abinadab. His son, Eleazar, was chosen to keep and guard it. No one would have guessed then that it would remain in that place for the next twenty years. (I Samuel 7:1-2.)

Meanwhile, the Philistines continued to trouble Israel by constant raids and attacks. Life became increasingly miserable for those in western Canaan, and their complaints to Samuel increased accordingly. Always Samuel's answer was that if the Israelites would give up their worship of pagan gods and turn back to the one real God, they wouldn't be troubled by their enemies. The Israelites were so weary of grief that they did gradually pull away from idol worship.

And Finally—Repentance

Though this change required several years, Samuel was greatly pleased. When the time for the Festival of Tabernacles came, he called the people to meet at Mizpeh, only a few miles from Kirjath-jearim and the ark. There many thousands of Israelites prayed, fasted and acknowledged their sins. The assemblage was led and directed by Samuel, who spent most of his time and efforts in giving advice and instruction to those who had problems and needed help. (I Samuel 7:3-6.)

Just when the people were in the midst of this long-due event, a man rode swiftly into Mizpeh.

"The Philistines have learned that we are gathered here!" he shouted excitedly. "They have sent a huge army that will be here very soon!"

Within minutes the startling news had spread to all the people. Even though many of them were armed, a large part of the Israelites fell into a state of panic because of a fear of being slaughtered. They realized that escape to the east wasn't



A man rode into Mizpeh to excitedly warn the thousands of Israelites camping there that a Philistine army was only a short distance away!

very probable, inasmuch as there weren't enough roads for so many of them to use.

Thousands quickly milled around Samuel's quarters, and thousands of voices joined in a thunderous plea for help from Samuel. At last the Israelites realized only God could help them.

"Ask God to save us from the Philistines!" they shouted. (I Samuel 7:7-8.)

CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

“WE WANT A KING!”

THE immense gathering of Israelites at Mizpeh in the autumn of the year had resulted in many thousands repenting and pledging themselves to greater obedience to God. (I Samuel 7:6.) It was the season of the Feast of Tabernacles.

As soon as it was over the news came that a Philistine army was approaching. The people fell into a state of panic. They pleaded with Samuel to ask God to spare them from their enemies. (Verses 7-8.)

God Answers!

After Samuel had made certain that the Philistine army was indeed near at hand, he had a lamb prepared for a burnt offering to God. Samuel officiated at the ceremony. He had God's authorization to do so because the priesthood at that time had passed from Eli to himself.

(Although Samuel was not of the priesthood family, he was a Levite. He had been consecrated to God's service as a nazirite and trained in the priesthood by Eli. (Numbers 6:1-6; I Samuel 1:11; 2:11, 18, 26; 3:1.) Until a worthy descendant of Aaron could be trained in the responsibilities of the priesthood, Samuel served as priest, as well as prophet. Thus it was proper for him to make this offering.)

As the lamb burned on the altar, Samuel prayed fervently. (I Samuel 7:9.)

“God of Israel, deliver your people here at Mizpeh from their enemies!” he cried. “You have seen and heard how they have come to admit and repent of their wrong ways. You have promised to protect the repentant and the obedient.

Now I claim that promise of protection for these people, and commit their lives into your merciful hands!"

Even before Samuel had finished praying, the Philistine army swept into the Mizpeh area intending to set upon the thousands of families camped there. Although many of the Israelite men were armed, they weren't organized or prepared to meet an onslaught by so many well-trained and determined enemy troops.

Just before the Philistine army came into view, the sky clouded over with alarming rapidity. The clouds were low, very dark and swirled about in a most unusual manner. As the attackers came almost within reach of the outermost tents pitched around Mizpeh, great bolts of lightning forked down from the brooding overcast, striking directly into the foremost ranks of the Philistines! (I Samuel 7:9-10.)

As the thunder roared, an earthquake shook the ground around the Philistines and threw their whole army into disordered confusion. Scorched and blasted bodies were tossed in all directions. Those near the front ranks who witnessed the blinding slaughter cringed back in stark fear, then turned to collide with and trample the troops behind them. This set off a disrupting chain reaction that carried all the way to the soldiers in the rear ranks. What had been a confident advance was turned to swift retreat, to the awesome roar of ear-splitting thunder!

This sudden turn of events was the cue for the armed Israelite men to act. Quickly banding together, they set out in swift pursuit of the fleeing Philistines. Those who had no weapons picked up weapons that were dropped by dying or fleeing Philistines. The enemy soldiers had just gone through a long, fast march, and were easily overtaken. In their state of fatigue they were no match for the Israelites. Not very many Philistines escaped the lightning—or the swords, spears and arrows of the pursuers.

Shortly after the battle, Samuel had a large stone pillar set up at the site of the conflict, which was a few miles north of Jerusalem. It was a monument to commemorate the help God had given them that day. (I Samuel 7:11-12.)

Samuel's Foolish Sons

This was the turning point in the struggle of Israel against Philistia. The Philistines had long since captured Israelite towns from Ekron to Gath, a distance of about fifteen miles in an area not far from the coast. Israel at last took the towns back. At the same time hostilities ceased with the Arameans to the east. They dwelt in the old land of the Amorites, whom Moses destroyed. The Arameans came to be known at this time in history by the name Amorites, because they dwelt in the land of the uprooted Amorites. (Verse 14, last part.)

All this was a reward from God because most of Israel had turned away from worshiping the idols of surrounding nations.

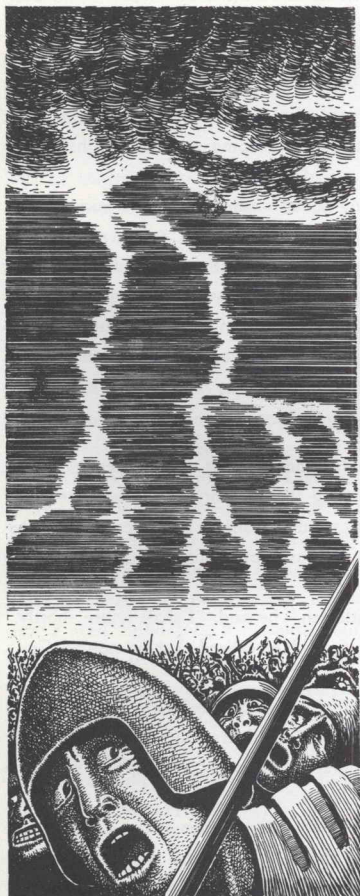
Samuel was the spiritual advisor to Israel for the rest of his long life—about fifty years. He didn't return to Shiloh because God had forsaken the city and the tabernacle. (Psalm 78:55-64.) Shiloh was destroyed during the trouble with the Philistines, although the Bible gives no detailed account of such a great loss. (Jeremiah 7:12 and 26:6.)

Samuel chose to live at Ramah, six or seven miles north of Jerusalem. There he built an altar to be used for sacrifices to God.

Every year Samuel moved his quarters for a time to the cities of Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpeh. This made it more convenient for people to contact him for matters of spiritual judgment. (I Samuel 7:15-17.)

After many years of such activity, Samuel began to feel the strain. Gradually he delegated more and more of his duties to his two sons, Joel and Abiah. He spent most of his time at Ramah, while his sons took over a large part of his work by establishing quarters in Beer-sheba in the territory of Simeon to the south.

Although Samuel had carefully reared his sons in the right ways, and felt that they were prepared to be assistant judges because of their ample training and ability, matters didn't work out as he expected. Out from under the watchful eye of their father, the two men began to take advantage of their



Blinding bolts of lightning stabbed down from the dark overcast, blasting the foremost ranks of the Philistines attacking Mizpeh!

positions by secretly taking bribes for judging some cases unfairly. (I Samuel 8:1-3.)

This corrupt practice was carried on for only a few years. While Joel and Abiah were becoming increasingly greedy and wealthy, a growing number of Israelites were unnecessarily suffering in one way or another because of injustice. Samuel had no knowledge of what was going on, or he would have acted at once to remove his sons and make amends for their unfair deeds.

One day a group of the leading men of Israel came to Ramah to talk to Samuel, who had no idea of their intention.

"We are here to protest the conduct of your sons at Beer-sheba," one elder explained. "We want no more of them. Instead of helping people, they have been harmful!"

"Sirs, I don't know what you are talking about," Samuel said in a puzzled tone. "Please explain what my sons have done."

"It would take days to tell of their wrongdoings," another elder observed. "We have found they aren't honest and just, as you are. If you were twenty or thirty years younger, we might be satisfied with you as our leader. But we need someone else—someone who can be more than a judge to Israel. We want the kind of leader that other nations have—a king!" (I Sam. 8:4-5.)

" . . . a King?"

Samuel could scarcely believe what he had heard. This sudden demand for a change in form of government was so startling that he forgot for the time being about the accusations against his sons. He carefully scanned the faces of those before him. It wasn't difficult to tell by their serious expressions that they were quite determined.

"Please excuse me a few minutes, gentlemen," he said. "I shall return shortly."

He went at once to a private room to pray. He realized that he needed God's advice on how to answer the elders.

"What must I say to these men?" Samuel earnestly asked God. "If I say that I will have no part in helping them with their impudent request, they will surely turn against me. If I so much as think of agreeing to their demands, that would be against your will."

"Don't be too upset over this," God answered Samuel, though the Bible doesn't explain how He communicated with him. "The elders and the people they represent do indeed want a king. It isn't that they don't want you as their leader. It's because they don't want *me*, their Creator, to rule over them. Ever since I brought the Israelites up from the land of Egypt, they have rejected me again and again by

rejecting the men I have chosen as leaders. During the past several years most of Israel has turned back to me in some degree. Now they are again going back to the ways of the pagan nations about them. You haven't known it, but your sons have given them cause to protest. They are using this as a reason for rejecting my government and demanding a change to a man-made form of government. If they insist on a king, that's what they deserve. Tell them they can have one. At the same time warn them what they can expect if a king is to rule them." (I Samuel 8:6-9.)

Samuel was most unhappy to hear about his sons' conduct and about the direction Israel was once more taking. As he had promised, he went back a little later to confront the Israelite leaders.

"I have taken your request to God," Samuel addressed them. "He isn't pleased with what you are asking, so He has decided to grant you something that in the long run won't really please you—a king!"

Feeble grins broke out on the faces of only a few of the elders. Samuel's manner of describing their so-called victory didn't seem to inspire cheerfulness in most of them.

"Now let me tell you what you can expect if a king is made the head of Israel," Samuel continued in an ominous tone. "In the first place, he will draft your young men into a great standing army. A king chooses whom he pleases for what he pleases. Many of your sons who are trained toward being master craftsmen in various pursuits will be forced into lesser careers in the bloody art of war. At the same time, many who have lesser ability will become military leaders.

"He will also take your young women to be bakers, cooks, maids, housecleaners, dishwashers and for every service for which a king and his princes and underlings have a need. Besides, he will choose your best fields, vineyards and orchards to take from you to give to those in high offices under him. He will demand a tenth of what all farmers and wage earners produce. He will take your servants and your animals if they are to his liking. Even some of you may become his lowliest servants. In time many will cry out in despair because the king has taken so much from them. In that day God will do nothing to help you because of the choice that you are now making." (I Samuel 8:10-18.)

God's Warning Ignored .

There was silence among the elders following Samuel's warning. Then the men began to talk in subdued voices among themselves. After a period of discussion, a spokesman approached Samuel.

"We have considered all you have told us," he said to Samuel, "but we can't believe that any king of Israel would ever do as you have pointed out. You can't convince us that we won't be better off with a leader like the ones other nations have—one who is able to preserve order as well as successfully fight our battles."

Samuel sorrowfully surveyed the men before him. He knew that Israel would soon face her enemies, who were beginning again to make attacks at the borders. This was one of the reasons why the elders wanted a fighting leader. There was no need for a massive fighting force for the Israelites as long as they obeyed God, but they inclined to go their own ways and now looked to an army for protection. It is the same way in present-day Israel.

"Sirs, you will soon learn what will be done to carry out your unusual request," Samuel told the assembled leaders. "I trust you all will return safely to your various cities." (I Samuel 8:19-22.)

Shortly afterward, in the territory of Benjamin, an ordinary event took place that had a great bearing on Israel's future. There a man by the name of Kish, who owned a farm and raised fine donkeys, discovered that his mare donkeys and their colts had disappeared from his grazing fields. Fences around farms weren't common in those times—except for low stone walls around some of their vineyards, gardens and fields. Livestock often roved far away, sometimes to be recovered only after searching for them a long time.

Realizing that his missing animals might be in some distant area, Kish decided to send his son Saul after them. The stock raiser was a large and powerful man, but his son was even larger. Young Saul had developed a strong physique in his years of labor on his father's farm, and towered to a height of about seven feet! Kish knew that if his son found that someone had stolen the donkeys, he wouldn't have too much trouble convincing the thief to give them back.

"Take provisions for a few days for both yourself and one of our servants," Kish told Saul. "Bring the animals back even if you have to search behind every hill in the high country of Ephraim." (I Samuel 9:1-3.)

Setting out with donkeys, Saul and the servant zig-zagged north through the territory of Benjamin and into Ephraim. There they turned back southeast to pursue a circular course through the rugged Mt. Ephraim and Benjamin area into the northern region of Judah.

God Leads Saul to Samuel

"We shouldn't waste any more time," Saul told his servant. "We have covered many miles and have been gone over two days and have accomplished nothing.



Taking a servant and donkeys, Saul set out to the north to try to find his father's missing livestock.

By now my father is probably much more concerned about us than he is about the donkeys. We should return home at once. Later we can look for the animals in other directions."

"I have a suggestion, sir," the servant said. "We are very near the city where lives the man of God who is Israel's prophet. If we were to visit him, he might be able to tell us where the donkeys are."

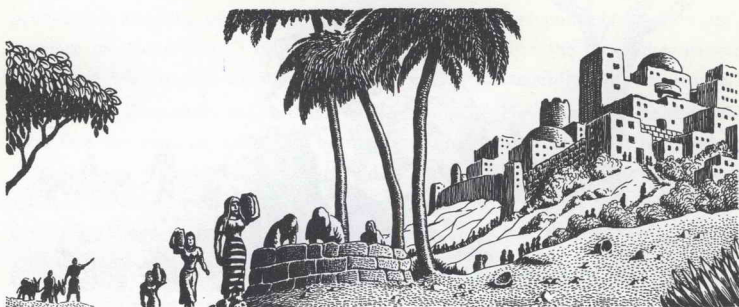
"Do you mean Samuel?" Saul asked. "Should we bother the leader of most of Israel with a matter such as ours? Besides, we have nothing to bring him as a gift. Even all our food is gone."

"Perhaps we have enough money to give him," the servant suggested.

There was little need for the two men to be carrying much money with them, inasmuch as they had brought what they considered sufficient provisions. All they could come up with was a quarter shekel, which would be equal to about fifteen or twenty cents. But it had good value in those times. Saul decided that it would suffice as a token of respect, and they set out to try to find Samuel. (I Samuel 9:4-10.)

Just outside the city they met some young women carrying water from a well. From them they learned that Samuel lived most of the time outside of town, but that he would soon be arriving to officiate at a special sacrifice that was to take place that day.

The day before this took place, God had spoken again to Samuel, informing him that about twenty-four hours later He would send him a young Benjamite to be the new leader of Israel and a staunch captain against the Philistines.



From young women drawing water out of a well, Saul learned that Samuel could be found soon among the people going up to the city.

"You won't recognize him when you see him," God explained, "but I will let you know who he is."

As Saul and his servant came into the city, they noted that other people were hurrying to the place where the special sacrifice was to be made. Among them was a well-dressed, elderly man with a friendly but dignified appearance.

"Sir, could you tell me where I can find Samuel, the chief of Israel?" Saul asked the elderly one.

Samuel turned to look. When he saw the young giant striding along behind him, he stopped and regarded him with unusual interest, wondering if he could be the one God revealed he was to meet. At the same instant he heard a voice. "This is the one who will soon reign over my people," the voice spoke. "Anoint him captain of Israel as soon as you have the opportunity to be alone with him!" (I Samuel 9:11-17.)

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