

Judges 1:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass, that the children of Israel asked the LORD, saying, Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first, to fight against them?

Analysis

Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass, that the children of Israel asked the LORD, saying, Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first, to fight against them?

This opening verse establishes the historical transition from Joshua's leadership to the period of the judges. The Hebrew phrase acharei mot (אַחֲרֵי מוֹת, "after the death") signals a new era beginning with crisis—the phrase echoes Leviticus 16:1, creating literary connection to priestly instruction. The Israelites' inquiry of the LORD through the Urim and Thummim (1 Samuel 28:6) demonstrates initial spiritual faithfulness, yet the question itself reveals incomplete understanding of God's commands.

The conquest should have been finished under Joshua (Joshua 23:4-5), but incomplete obedience created ongoing conflict. The phrase "children of Israel" (benei Yisrael, בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) emphasizes covenant identity—they are God's chosen people descended from Jacob/Israel. Their question "Who shall go up first?" (mi ya'aleh-lanu, מִי יַעַלְהֶלְנוּ) suggests tribal competition rather than unified national purpose. The verb alah (עַלֵּה, "go up") carries military connotations but also spiritual significance—going up to battle, going up to worship.

Theologically, this verse introduces the book's central tension: Israel begins with apparent faithfulness (seeking God's will) but incomplete obedience that will lead

to cyclical apostasy. The focus on military conquest without addressing spiritual reformation foreshadows the internal decay that will characterize the judges period. Cross-reference to Deuteronomy 7:1-5 shows God's original command for complete conquest and separation from Canaanite religion.

Historical Context

Historical Setting: The Book of Judges covers approximately 350-400 years (c. 1375-1050 BCE) between Joshua's death and the establishment of the monarchy. This transitional period corresponds to the Late Bronze Age collapse (c. 1200 BCE) and early Iron Age in Canaan, characterized by the disintegration of major empires and shifting regional powers. Egyptian control over Canaan was weakening, Hittite power had collapsed, and Assyria had not yet risen to dominance, creating a power vacuum that allowed localized conflicts.

Leadership Transition: Joshua's death created a leadership crisis for Israel. Unlike Joshua who succeeded Moses with clear divine appointment (Joshua 1:1-9), no single leader emerges to replace Joshua. The inquiry about "who shall go up first" reveals the shift from centralized national leadership to tribal autonomy. Archaeological evidence from this period shows gradual Israelite settlement in the hill country with simpler material culture than Canaanite cities, confirming the biblical picture of incomplete conquest.

The Canaanites remaining in the land posed both military and spiritual threats. Canaanite religion centered on Baal (storm and fertility god), Asherah (mother goddess), and Anat (war goddess), with cultic practices including ritual prostitution, child sacrifice, and sacred prostitution at "high places." Israel's failure to completely drive out these peoples (as commanded in Deuteronomy 7:1-5, 20:16-18) would lead directly to the religious syncretism and apostasy that characterizes Judges.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. What areas of incomplete obedience in your life create ongoing spiritual battles similar to Israel's incomplete conquest?
2. How do leadership transitions in the church or Christian organizations test our dependence on God versus human leaders?
3. In what ways does modern culture pressure Christians toward religious syncretism or compromise similar to Canaanite influence on Israel?

Interlinear Text

בָּנִים וְיֻמָּת אֶתְּנָשָׁן מִתְּהִשְׁבָּא לְבִנֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל
H1961 Now after the death of Joshua asked it came to pass that the children
H310 H4194 H3091 H7592 H1121

אֶל כִּי יַעֲלֵה יְשַׁבָּא לְבִנֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל
of Israel the LORD saying Who shall go up H0 H413
H3478 H3068 H559 H5927

בְּזַהֲלֵל הַפְּנִינָן
for us against the Canaanites first to fight H0
H3669 H8462 H3898

Additional Cross-References

Numbers 27:21 (References Lord): And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the LORD: at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he, and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation.

Judges 20:18 (References Lord): And the children of Israel arose, and went up to the house of God, and asked counsel of God, and said, Which of us shall go up first to the battle against the children of Benjamin? And the LORD said, Judah shall go up first.

Judges 20:28 (References Lord): And Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days,) saying, Shall I yet again go out to battle

against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And the LORD said, Go up; for to morrow I will deliver them into thine hand.

Exodus 28:30 (References Lord): And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goeth in before the LORD: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the LORD continually.

Judges 1:27 (Parallel theme): Neither did Manasseh drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and her towns, nor Taanach and her towns, nor the inhabitants of Dor and her towns, nor the inhabitants of Ibleam and her towns, nor the inhabitants of Megiddo and her towns: but the Canaanites would dwell in that land.