

Judges 1:8

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Now the children of Judah had fought against Jerusalem, and had taken it, and smitten it with the edge of the sword, and set the city on fire.

Analysis

Now the children of Judah had fought against Jerusalem, and had taken it, and smitten it with the edge of the sword, and set the city on fire.

This verse presents a historical puzzle: Judah conquered Jerusalem and burned it, yet verse 21 states "the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem." This apparent contradiction reflects the incomplete nature of the conquest. Judah achieved temporary military victory, destroying the city's defenses and structures, but failed to permanently occupy and hold it. The Jebusites reoccupied Jerusalem's fortified position, maintaining control until David's definitive conquest (2 Samuel 5:6-9).

The phrase "smitten it with the edge of the sword" (vayakkuha lefi-charev, וַיַּכּוּהָ לְפִי־חֶרֶב) is a standard biblical idiom for complete military defeat (Joshua 6:21, 8:24, 10:28). Setting the city on fire (vehair shilechu va'esh, וַהֲעִיר שְׁלָחוּ בָאֵשׁ) follows the pattern of herem warfare—devoted destruction preventing Israelites from profiting materially from conquest (Joshua 6:24, 8:28). This practice emphasized that conquest served God's glory and judgment on Canaanite sin, not Israelite enrichment.

Jerusalem's theological significance pervades Scripture—the future city of David, Solomon's temple, the prophetic focus of God's dwelling with His people, and ultimately the New Jerusalem descending from heaven (Revelation 21:2). That

Judah could not permanently secure this city in the judges period foreshadows the need for a greater son of David—Christ, who establishes an eternal kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:28). Reformed theology sees earthly Jerusalem as a type pointing to the heavenly city, the true homeland of all believers (Hebrews 11:13-16, Galatians 4:25-26).

Historical Context

Jerusalem (Jebus in Jebusite control) occupied a strategic hilltop position with steep valleys on three sides, making it naturally defensible. During the Late Bronze Age, the city occupied only the southeastern ridge (later called the City of David), roughly 10-12 acres with perhaps 1,500-2,000 inhabitants. Archaeological excavations have identified Middle and Late Bronze Age walls, pottery, and structures confirming continuous occupation. The Jebusite fortifications included massive stone walls and towers, making the city formidable despite its small size.

The city's importance derived from strategic location controlling north-south trade routes through the central highlands. Water access from the Gihon Spring provided reliable supply, essential for withstanding siege. The Amarna letters (14th century BCE) mention Urusalim and its king Abdi-Heba, who complained to Pharaoh about threats from 'Apiru raiders—possibly connected to early Israelite activity in Canaan.

Judah's burning of Jerusalem aligns with archaeological evidence of destruction layers at various Canaanite sites during the Late Bronze-Iron Age transition (c. 1200 BCE). However, fire damage alone cannot definitively identify biblical conquest versus other conflicts (Egyptian campaigns, Sea Peoples' raids, inter-Canaanite warfare). The Jebusite reoccupation demonstrates the challenge of holding conquered territory—destruction was relatively easy, but permanent occupation required sustained presence and resources Israel lacked during the decentralized judges period.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. What does Judah's inability to permanently hold Jerusalem teach about the limits of partial obedience and human strength in spiritual warfare?
2. How does Jerusalem's eventual conquest by David foreshadow Christ's establishment of an eternal, unshakeable kingdom?
3. In what ways should Christians view earthly institutions and victories as temporary, pointing toward eternal realities?

Interlinear Text

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|----------------|------------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------|------------|----------|
| וּלְחָמ ו | בְּנֵי | יְהוּדָה | בִּיר וּשְׁלָם | וּלְכָד ו | אוֹתָהּ | |
| had fought | Now the children | of Judah | against Jerusalem | and had taken | | |
| H3898 | H1121 | H3063 | H3389 | H3920 | H853 | |
| וּכְוָה | לְפִי | חֶרֶב | וְאֵת | הָעִיר | וּשְׁלָח ו | בְּאֵשׁ: |
| it and smitten | it with the edge | of the sword | | the city | and set | on fire |
| H5221 | H6310 | H2719 | H853 | H5892 | H7971 | H784 |

Additional Cross-References

Joshua 15:63 (References Jerusalem): As for the Jebusites the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the children of Judah could not drive them out: but the Jebusites dwell with the children of Judah at Jerusalem unto this day.

Judges 1:21 (References Jerusalem): And the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem; but the Jebusites dwell with the children of Benjamin in Jerusalem unto this day.