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The Failures of the Southern Tribes

1: 1-21

The failures of the southern tribes DIG: What was significant about the death of Joshua? In what sense were Simeon and Judah brothers? What was the purpose of driving the Canaanites from the Land? Why was it important to eliminate them? What was the problem of war in the TaNaKh? How many times in these verses did the Israelites or their alien armies fail to drive out the Canaanites?

REFLECT: What does a “holy war” look like today? Who are we fighting against? Who are the Simeonites in your life? Do these verses turn on your competitive drive to win? Or does it turn your stomach in revulsion? Under what conditions would you “go to war” with your blood brother or your spiritual brother? When is it hard for you to obey God? Why? Who are the Canaanites that you are battling with today?

Instead of ridding the land of the Canaanites, Isra’el became like the Canaanites.

The War Against Adonai-Bezek (1:1-7): The death of Joshua links what follows to what preceded it (see the commentary on **Joshua**, **to see link click Cu - The Death of Joshua**). Have you ever noticed how new beginnings in the Scriptures are punctuated by **the death** of **God’s** servants? **Exodus** begins with **the death** of **Joseph**; **Joshua** begins with **the death** of **Moses**; **Judges** begins with **the death** of **Joshua**; and **First Kings** begins with **the death** of **David**. And yet for all that, **God’s Kingdom** does not collapse, not even when **ADONAI** takes **His** most useful servants.⁷

Therefore, **Joshua’s death** did not end **Isra’el’s** story; something followed it, and the book of **Judges** will tell us what it was. But the same words also separate what follows from what has gone on before. **The death of Joshua** was a boundary event, dividing **Isra’el’s** time into “before” and “after,” just as **Yeshua’s** death was later to divide world’s time into BC and CE. **Moses** personally commissioned

Joshua as **his** successor (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Fs - Moses Went**), and **Joshua's** ministry had been a continuation and completion of **Moses'** ministry (**Joshua 4:14** and **23-24**). **The death of Joshua** was the end of an era. **Isra'el's** life would go on, but it would never quite be the same again.

The first difference **Isra'el** had to confront as **they** went forward was one of leadership. After **Moses** there had been **Joshua**, but after **Joshua** there was no obvious successor. Who would lead **the Israelites** now? Certainly no one with the same commanding presence and character. So the question asked at the beginning of the book is a natural one under the circumstances.⁸ **The Israelites asked ADONAI, "Who will lead us now that Joshua is dead, who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites" (1:1 NIV). In the critical moment when they were deprived of leadership, the people sought divine guidance by consulting the Urim and Thummim (see Exodus Gb - The Urim and Thummim: The Means of Making Decisions) through the high priest who, at the time, was Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron. The method of determining the will of ADONAI was, according to Rabbinical tradition, as follows: The Tetragrammaton, meaning the four-letter name of YHVH (Yud Hay Vav Hay), was placed in the high priest's breastplate (see Exodus Ga - Fashion a Breastplate for Making Decisions), in which were set twelve precious stones, each engraved with the name of a tribe. By the power of the Divine the stone bearing Judah's name was illuminated.**

ADONAI replied: **The tribe of Judah will go up; behold, I have handed the Land over to them (1:2 NIV).** The tribal **Wars** against **the Canaanites** were responses to **Joshua's** last address, encouraging **them** to finish taking **the Land**. **The men of Judah** were not merely to conquer the territory assigned to **them**, but **they** were to conquer **the** whole **Land** on behalf of the other **tribes**. This was why **Judah** took **Jerusalem, a city** that belonged to **the tribe of Benjamin**, even though the tribe of **Benjamin** was unable to hold onto **it**. **Judah** was chosen to spearhead the attack because, in **Jacob's** blessings, **Judah** was appointed to be the champion of **his brothers** (see **Genesis Lg - The Scepter Will Not Depart from Judah Until He Comes to Whom it Belongs**).⁹

Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, "Come up with us into the territory allotted to us, to fight against the Canaanites. **Judah was Simeon's brother not only in the sense that all the sons of Jacob were brothers, but Leah was their mother. Chosen as an ally because of the close proximity of their land which lay to the south. The Simeonite**

towns were within the territory of Judah (cf. **Joshua 19:1-9** with **Joshua 15:26-32** and **42**). As a result of **Simeon's** planning and participation in the slaughter at **Shechem** (see **Genesis 1e - The Slaughter at Shechem by Simeon and Levi**), **Jacob** had prophesied that the tribe of **Simeon** would be scattered (see **Genesis 1f - Simeon and Levi**). So, by the time of the second census the number of **their** fighting men had shrunk from **59,300** to just **22,220** (see the commentary on **Numbers 1f - The Tribe of Simeon**). Placing **Simeon** as a **region** within **Judah** rather than giving **them** their own distinct borders fulfilled this historical prophecy. **The proposal from Judah was that if the Simeonites would help them in their fight against the Canaanites, then Judah would, in turn, help the Simeonites conquer their own region. The proposal was the unification of their forces against a common enemy. So the men of the tribe of Simeon went with the men of Judah (1:3 Hebrew).**

Verse 4 presents a summary statement. **So**, the men of **Judah** went up. **They** alone were mentioned because **they** were the primary partner in the attack. **And ADONAI gave them victory over the Canaanites and the Perizzites.** **Canaanites** is a general term (the pre-Israelite inhabitants of **Canaan**); **Perizzites** is a specific term (those who lived around **Bezek**). According to **Genesis 13:7**, the **Perizzites** were already living in **Canaan** during **Abraham's** lifetime, probably (here) in the central **hill country** to the north of **Jerusalem**. **And they killed 10,000 enemy warriors at the town of Bezek (1:4 NLT).** The size of the enemy force is impressive and underscores the significance of the victory. It would also shed further light on why **Judah** sought assistance from **Simeon** for this campaign: given the size and strategic importance of **Jerusalem**, engagement with a major enemy force could be expected.¹⁰

Following this summary statement, **verses 5** through **7** provide the details of **the war**. **It was there that they found Adonai-Bezek.** Since **Adonai-Bezek** means "the Lord of Bezek," the name was probably a dynastic title for **the king of Bezek**. **The men of Judah fought against him and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites (1:5 ESV).** Here the author follows a narrative pattern that repeats itself throughout the Former Prophets (**First Samuel 4:10** and **17, 13:1; Second Samuel 2:17** and **18:6-7**). This pattern briefly describes the battle, its outcome, and its casualties (**verse 4**), followed by an account of the death of a main character and the importance of the defeat of the enemy (**verses 5-7**).¹¹

With **his** army decisively defeated, **Adonai-Bezek fled**, as **Sisera** would do later in the battle at **Kishon (4:15)**. **But the Israelites soon captured the king and**

cut off his thumbs and big toes (1:6 NLT). Adonai-Bezek thought to **himself: Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off have picked up the scraps under my table.** The reference to **seventy kings** is probably intended to be a round number meaning *all the chieftains in the area*. **Now, god has paid me back for what I did to them.** This statement is ambiguous, but as a **Canaanite**, it would have been unusual for **him** to have named **YHVH**, the **God of Isra'el** as **his Judge**.

However, **Adonai-Bezek's** comment is loaded with irony. Here, by quoting **the Canaanite king**, the author offers the first hint of the Canaanization of **Israelite** society during the period of **the judges**. The fact that **the king** wasn't executed was telling, for it points ominously to the actions of **Isra'el** in the rest of the book. **Then they brought him to Jerusalem and he died there (1:7 NIV).** But letting **Adonai-Bezek** live out **his** days in **Jerusalem** violated **God's** command: **When ADONAI your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out many nations before you . . . you are to strike them down, then you are to utterly destroy them. You are to devote them to destruction and show no mercy to them (Deuteronomy 7:1-2).** Apart from the issue of having spared **a man** who clearly should have been executed with the rest of **his** subjects, instead of following **God's Word** in **the Torah**, **the Israelites** used **the Canaanites** as models when deciding how to treat captives!

Adonai-Bezek is the first **Canaanite** we meet in **Judges**, and as a leader **he** is more than a random individual. **He** represents the kind of **Canaanite** regimes that **YHVH** will overthrow through **the Israelites**, who (we are to understand) are the agents of **His** judgement. This cameo appearance opens a window to **the Canaanite** culture as represented in **its** leaders – a culture ripe for judgement, whose day of reckoning should have come (**Genesis 15:16**).¹²

The War for Jerusalem (1:8): **The men of Judah attacked Jerusalem and captured it, killing all its people and setting the city on fire (1:8 NIV).** In this short note with little detail, the author relates **Judah's** military success at **Jerusalem**, where **they** not only took **the City** but also inflicted **the cherem judgment** on **its** inhabitants (see **Leviticus Ff - Cherem**).¹³ However, the capture of **the city of Jerusalem** was only temporary, because it was lost again, according to **verse 21**, and later in **19:11-12**, where **Jerusalem was considered a foreign city**. It was **Judah** who took **the City**, but since **Jerusalem** was in **Benjamin's** territory, **Judah** did not settle there. However, **Benjamin** failed to take advantage **Judah's** victory and **the Jebusites** came back, rebuilt **Jerusalem** and

lived there, where it remained under **Jebusite** control until the days of **David**.¹⁴

The War for the Judean Territory (1:9-10): After that, the men of Judah went down. Because of **Jerusalem's** unique location high atop the **Judean Mountains**, almost any journey from **the City** requires a physical descent to a lower elevation. So, **the men of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who lived in the hill country in the north, the Negev in the south, and the foothills in the west.**

They advanced against the Canaanites living in Hebron, a key city in **the hill country in the north** of Judah. Hebron was actually taken by **Caleb** (see below) according to **Joshua 15:13-14**; but **he** was a member of **the tribe of Judah**, so the author credits the conquest of **Hebron** to **Judah**. **And defeated the forces of Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi (1:9-10 NIV).** These three names connect the victory with **a specific Hebron tradition that the reader is assumed to be familiar with. They were supposedly descendants of Anak, whose father was Arba, the great man among the Anakim (Joshua 14:15, cf. Joshua 15:14, 21:11 and Numbers 13:22).** Therefore, the parenthesis in the middle of the verse (**formerly called Kiriath Arba**) provides the link between the general statement that precedes it: **Judah advanced against the Canaanites living in Hebron**, and the particular one that follows it: **and defeated the forces of Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi**. The presence of **people** in **Hebron** still using these names is testimony to the tenacity with which **the Canaanites** (here of **the Anakim** kind) clung to **their** land and traditions, despite the repeated attempts of **the Israelites** to dislodge **them**. Although this was a victory, it has embedded in it hints of the problem of the continued presence of **Canaanites** in “conquered territories” which gradually emerge into a full-blown problem for **the Israelites** as the chapter proceeds.¹⁵

The Conquest by Caleb and Othniel (1:11-15): From there they went to fight against the people living in the town of **Debir** (formerly called **Kiriath-sepher**, meaning *book* or *scribe city*). The book of **Joshua** also includes **Isra'el's** fighting against **Debir** where **Joshua** took **the city and completely destroyed everyone in it, leaving no survivors (Joshua 10:38-39).** So, this is another example of **a city** that had been taken by **the Israelites**, but not held. More **Canaanites** moved back into **Debir** so that another battle had to be fought to regain it. In **Judges**, sometimes these efforts were successful, but too many times they were not.

Caleb had been promised **Hebron** by **Moses** because **he** was one of the two faithful **spies** who came back from **Canaan** (see the commentary on **Numbers By – The Report of the Spies**). **Debir** seems to also have been given to **Caleb**, so after conquering **Hebron**, **he** enlisted others for the attack on **Debir**.¹⁶ **He** did this by offering **his daughter Aksah in marriage to the one who attacked and captured Debir**. **Caleb's** offer allowed the author to introduce the first major **judge** of the book (see **Ap – The First Cycle: Othniel**). **Othniel, son of Kenas, Caleb's nephew (3:9) was the one who conquered it. So Acsah became his wife (1:11-13 NIV).**

When Acsah married Othniel, she urged her husband to ask her father for a productive field. Apparently **Othniel** was better at capturing cities than **he** was at asking favors from **his** new **father-in-law**, so **Achsah** had to do it **herself**. **As she** went to see **her father** and **got down off of her donkey, Caleb asked her, "What do you want?"** **She** replied: **Give me a blessing** (meaning, **give me a material gift**) **since you have already given me the land of the Negev, give me springs of water also.** **Achsah** did not mean that the city of **Debir** was in **the Negev**, for it was in **the hill country of Judah**, directly south of **Hebron**. **She** meant that **the land** had **Negev-type** qualities in that the soil was good, but it lacked **water**. **She** was not asking for more fertile land – the land itself was fertile – but **water** was necessary to make it fruitful. **So Caleb gave her the upper and lower springs (1:14-15 Hebrew).**¹⁷

The Migration of the Kenites (1:16): From **the hill country in the north, the men of Judah left Jericho** – known as **the city of the palms (Deuteronomy 34:3; Joshua 3:13; and Second Chronicles 28:15)** – with the **Kenites, who were descendants of Moses' father-in-law** (see **Exodus Cx – Now Jethro Heard Everything God Had Done**). **They traveled with Judah further south into the Negev.** **The Kenites were** a nomadic tribe of metalworkers and skilled artisans who were associated with **the Amalekites (First Samuel 15:6)** and **the Midianites** (cf. **Exodus 18:1** with **Judges 1:16**). **They** were proselytes (see **Acts Bb – An Ethiopian Asks about Isaiah 53: see God-fearers**) who had been so thoroughly integrated into the faith and culture of **Isra'el** that **Caleb** represented **the tribe of Judah** when **the spies** initially went into **the Land** (see the commentary on **Numbers Bw – The Selection of the Spies**). The author followed the migration of **the Kenites southward** by noting that the important **town of Arad** was not actually conquered by **Judah**, but by relatives of **Moshe's** first wife from **Midian**. **They settled down among the people there, near the town of**

Arad (1:16 NLT). This final comment is the key to this verse. Like **their Judahite** hosts in **verses 5-7**, **they** shared in **Isra'el's** mandate to eliminate **the Canaanites**. But instead of destroying **the city** and **its population**, **they settled down among them**, thereby sowing the seeds of Canaanization that sprout up and flourish in the following chapters.¹⁸

The War of the Cities (1:17-20): The men of Judah went with the Simeonites their fellow Israelites, and attacked the Canaanites living in Zephath, located in **the foothills in the west**, and they totally destroyed the city (see **Deuteronomy Dp - Regulations for a Holy War: Canaanite cities within the Land**). Therefore, it was called **Hormah**, meaning *destruction* (**1:17 NIV**). The fact that **Zephath** is not mentioned anywhere else in the TaNaKh by name is silent testimony to the fact that **its** population was **totally destroyed**. Like two bookends, the reappearance of **the Simeonites** suggests that the larger unit that started in **verse 3** is coming to a close. Interestingly, whereas there **Simeon** went with **Judah**; here, **Judah** goes with **Simeon**. In **Joshua 19:4**, **Zephath**, referred to as **Hormah**, was in the territory specifically allocated to **Simeon**. At the very least, the mention here of both **Simeonites** and **Judahites** is an added indication of the scale of this battle, and the alliance between **the two tribes** played a decisive part in the outcome. **Zephath** was no pushover!¹⁹

Verses 18-20 continue the account of **Judah's** fortunes. But **they** stand outside the frame formed by the references to **the Judah-Simeon** alliance in **verses 3** and **17**. In addition, **Judah captured**, but not destroyed, **the towns of Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron, along with the surrounding territories (1:18 NLT)**. At this time, **the inhabitants** had been **Canaanites**; but with **the Philistine** invasion, **Isra'el** would once again lose those territories. There was initial success because of divine aid: **ADONAI was with the men of Judah**, but once again **they were unable to drive out the people living on the plains because they had iron chariots (1:19 Hebrew)**. But in light of the danger of not finishing the battle, no one, no matter how technologically superior to **the Israelites**, should have been able to withstand **Judah's** attack. This verse must be read in light of **Josuha 17:16-18**, where **Joshua** specifically encouraged **Ephraim and Manasseh** by declaring that **the Canaanites'** superior strength and **their** possession of **iron chariots** would be no hindrance to **their** conquest of the river valleys and **plains**. So why did **the Judahites** not take **the plains** here? The author does not say, but presumably **they** lost **their** nerve at this point, or **they** might have been satisfied with **their** past achievements. The account of **Judah's** military fortunes ends with a

final reminder of their treatment of **Caleb**. **The town of Hebron was given to Caleb as Moses had promised (Joshua 14:9 and Deuteronomy 1:36). And Caleb drove out the people living there, who were descendants of the three sons of Anak (1:20 NLT).** The author ends **his** survey of **Judahite** fortunes in the fulfillment of the divine mandate to take **the Land** by offering a summary evaluation. Positively, **they** were able to wrestle control away from **the Canaanites** in **the hill country**. But negatively, **they** were unable to take **the plains** because of **the Canaanites'** technological superiority.²⁰

In the next verse the tone changes, becoming increasingly pessimistic as the author observes what was supposed to be a triumphant campaign of conquest turn into a tragedy of compromise. Throughout, he laments the failure of **the Israelite tribes** to totally destroy and eliminate the **Canaanites**, which resulted in **their** slow downward spiral into spiritual adultery (see **Deuteronomy Ca - Warning Against Idolatry**).

Benjamin Failed to Conquer the Jebusites (1:21): The account of the failures of the remaining **tribes** (see **Aj - The Failures of the Northern Tribes**) begins with a summary of the **Benjamite** failure, and foreshadows **their** future disaster of being virtually annihilated by **ADONAI** and all the other northern tribes (see **Cd - The Tribal War Against Benjamin**). In **verse 8**, it was **Judah** who took **Jerusalem**, but since **it** was in **Benjamin's** territory, **Judah** did not settle there. Unfortunately, **Benjamin** failed to take advantage of Judah's victory and **the Jebusites** came back and rebuilt **the City**, where it remained under **their** control. **However, the Benjamites failed to drive out the Jebusites who were living in Jerusalem. So, to this day, the Jebusites live there among the tribe of Benjamin (1:21 NLT). The Jebusites lived in the City until the reign of David when they were finally driven out (see the Life of David Co - David Conquers Yerushalayim).**

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for being both the magnificent conquering **Warrior** and the wise and loving **Father** who indwells those who believe in **You**. Today, many people are "fans" of **Your** great love shown in **Messiah's** offering **Himself** as the sin offering. But, being a "fan" does not qualify someone for receiving the inheritance of eternal salvation. Many in the tribes of Isra'el were "fans" of **Your** great love. They were so glad to have been delivered from Egypt and to be given a wonderful land that **You** promised **filled with milk and honey**. However, **they** forgot that **their** inheritance of **the land** was part of a covenant that **they** were to keep, to love **ADONAI** and to obey **the Torah**. **God** was very*

willing to do **His** part to give **them the land** – and **the tribes** were to do **their** part of the covenant to be **God's people**. Obedience included destroying **the** evil **Canaanites of the land (Joshua 3:10)**.

Unfortunately, the same attitude can be seen in many people today. It is much easier to simply receive a great gift, smile and say thank **You**, than to believe that you are a sinner, repent, and receive the great gift of salvation through **Messiah's** death and resurrection. Unfortunately, people today do not realize that to trust **You** means to agree to follow **You** in a covenant relationship where both parties must do their part. **Lord**, help me to keep my eyes and heart on **You**. Help me to let my life draw others to **You**. Thank you for abiding in me to help me in temptations to conquer and have victory. **No temptation has taken hold of you except what is common to mankind (First Corinthians 10:13)**. I love **You** and want to know **You** better and love **You** more. In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen