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The Failures of the Northern Tribes

1: 22-36

The failures of the Northern 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 fail to drive out the Canaanites? What does that say about them?

REFLECT: What does a “holy war” look like today? Who are we fighting against? Who are the Canaanites 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? Is it possible that there is an area of compromise in your life now?

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

The account of **the northern tribes** of **Isra’el** begins on a positive note with the success of **the house of Joseph** in **their** victory over **Bethel** because **ADONAI’s** presence was with **them**. Reference to the success of **the house of Joseph** concludes the account of **the northern tribes** in **1:35b**, but between these two is a long list of **failures** as **they** struggled to take possession of **their** allotted territory. These accounts of **failure** grow increasingly worse as the chapter progresses, beginning with **the Canaanites** living among **the tribes (1:29-30)**, then **the tribes** living among **the Canaanites (1:31-33)**, and then **the Canaanites** forced **the tribe of Dan into the hill country (1:34)**. At the beginning and end of the list of **failures (1:27 and 1:35b)**, the author reminds us of the success of **the house of Joseph** over **the Canaanites**, but highlights **their** decision to exploit **them** as forced labor rather than eliminate **them** as commanded by **ADONAI** (see **Deuteronomy [Dp](#) - Regulations for a Holy War: Canaanite cities within the Land**), a **failure** that will be highlighted in **2:1-5**.

The Victory over Bethel (1:22-26): Now the house of Joseph went up and attacked Bethel (1:22a Hebrew). As the leading tribe in the north, the house of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) is mentioned first. Since they will be mentioned separately below, the focus here is on the combined efforts of both tribes, a description that reminds us of the initial account of the southern tribes (1:3 and 17). Bethel means *The House of God* and is twelve miles north of Jerusalem. Given its commanding position, its capture was of great strategic importance. It also had considerable sentimental and religious significance. Bethel had Israelite connections reaching back to patriarchal times (Genesis 12:8-9 and 35:9-15), so in that sense the taking of Bethel was reclaiming, by the Israelites, of a place which they may have felt was theirs already.²¹

Bethel was actually given to Benjamin, according to Joshua 18:22, but since Bethel was situated on the southern border of the house of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh could not tolerate the Canaanites on its border. So just as the tribe of Judah took Jerusalem for Benjamin, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh took Bethel for Benjamin. Therefore, the author once again shows Benjamin's failure to do what the other tribes succeeded in doing. Then comes the divine role: and ADONAI was with them (1:22b Hebrew).²²

Verses 23 to 26 proceed to give the details of the deliverance following the summary statement in verse 22. When they sent men to scout Bethel, formerly known as Luz (1:23 NIV) they saw a man coming out of the city, apparently from a secret entry, which the scouts could not see. And they said to him, "Show us the entrance to the city and we will have mercy on you (1:24 Hebrew). In return for the information, the man was going to be allowed to live in much the same way as Rahab (Joshua 6:17 and 6:22-25). So he showed them the entrance to the city, and the tribes of Joseph put Bethel to the sword, but spared the man and his whole family. He then went to the land of the Hittites, where he built a city and called it Luz, which is its name to this very day (1:25-26 NIV). So once again, a Canaanite escapes the sword by helping the Jews. The difference is that Rahab had already become a believer in the God of Isra'el. There is no indication that this man became a believer. He betrayed his city, only to survive, and there is nothing spiritual about that.²³

Was the house of Joseph's taking of Bethel really a success? ADONAI went with His people against that city, but the result was that while the old Luz was destroyed, a new one was built, perpetuating the Canaanite culture which

Ha'Shem had appointed for destruction (see **Leviticus Ff - Cherem**). Are we not meant to contrast the first battle in **the north** with the first one in **the south**? There, **the Lord of Bezek** was unjustly spared by **the tribe of Judah**; here, **the man of Luz** was unjustly spared by the **house of Joseph (1:25-26)**.

And the contrast continues. Instead of victories of **Judah**, we find an alarming sequence of events in which **the Canaanites** were allowed to live at a distance from **the Israelites (1:22-26)**, then **the Canaanites** were allowed to live among **the Israelites (1:27-30)**, then **Israelites** were allowed to live among **the Canaanites (1:31-33)**, and finally **Israelites** were allowed to live at a distance from **the Canaanites (1:34)**. Here too, a tiny epilogue, corresponding to **1:20-21**, sums it up nicely: the inhabitants of **the land** proved so tenacious that for all **Judah's** successes, even **the southern border** is still thought of as an **Amorite** one. **The border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akrabbim, from Sela and upward (1:36)**.

In a word, our review of the field-report has to be: Disappointing. An excellent start falls apart even before we leave **Chapter One**. But we must get this sobering pattern firmly in our minds, for it will be the pattern of the whole book. We note that **Chapter One** begins with the obedience of **Judah** and ends with the disgrace of **Dan**, and we should not be surprised to find that the overall history of **the twelve judges** follows the same ominous pattern all the way from **Othniel the Judahite** to **Samson the Danite**. **ADONAI** keeps **His** promises, but will **His people** do **their** part? Will **they** accept judgment; that is, what **He** judges, or decides is to be done and then acted upon, or will **they** ignore **Him** and to **their** own thing?²⁴

The first step the new generation took toward defeat and slavery was neglecting **the Word of God**. **ADONAI** had commanded that **the priests** should read **Deuteronomy** aloud every **seven years** to all **the people** at **Sukkot** (see **Deuteronomy Ff - The Reading of Deuteronomy**) during **the Year of Release** (see **Deuteronomy Cy - The Year of Release**). **He** wanted every **Israelite** to be aware of, and understand, **His** expectations of **them**. **They** were to completely destroy **the Canaanites** (see **Deuteronomy Ca - Warning Against Idolatry**). **Ha'Shem** didn't want the filth of the **Canaanite** society and religion to contaminate **His people Isra'el**. **She** was, and is, **the apple of His eye (Deuteronomy 32:10)**, chosen to fulfill divine purposes in this **world**. **Isra'el** would be given the knowledge of the true and living **God**, the Holy Scriptures, and **the Savior**. In order to accomplish **God's** purposes, **the nation** had to be separated from all other nations, for if **Isra'el** was polluted, how could **the** Holy

Son of God come into **the world**? **Ha'Shem** is continually at war with sin. This is the explanation for **His** desire that **the Canaanites** would be totally exterminated. But **Isra'el** didn't obey.



The Failure of Manasseh (1:27-28): The cities mentioned in this verse controlled one of the most important trade-routes of **Canaan**, which passed through the valleys of Jezreel and Esdraelon and formed a wedge between **the Israelites** occupying **the hill country** to the north and south. While victories were recorded in **Joshua 12:21** and **23** against **the kings** of some of these **cities**, it is clear that **the Canaanites** were able to dominate the low-lying areas, where **they** were able to deploy **their** chariots effectively (**Joshua 17:11-13**).²⁵

According to the book of **Joshua**, **the tribe of Manasseh** received two territories, one east of the Jordan, allotted to it by **Moses (Joshua 13:29-31)**, and the other west of the Jordan given to it by **Joshua (Joshua 17:1-11)**. Only the latter is in view here in **Judges 1**. According to **Joshua 22:9**, the eastern half of **the tribe of Manasseh** had already gone back across the Jordan and settled in its territory there. Interestingly, according to **Joshua 17:11** all the towns mentioned here in **Judges 1:27** belonged to a special category; **they** were assigned to **Manasseh**, but actually lay within the territory of **the tribes of Issachar** and **Asher**, to **Manasseh's** north. Why **Manasseh's** border was not drawn further north we do not know. It is easy to understand, however, why **Manasseh**, as a more numerous

and powerful **tribe** than its northern neighbors, was assigned the task of conquering and occupying the following particular cities: But **the tribe of Manasseh failed to drive out the people living in Beth-shean, Taanach, Dor, Ibleam, Megiddo, and all their surrounding settlement, because the Canaanites were determined to stay in that region (1:27 NLT).**²⁶

A glance at a map, however, will show that these **cities** were widely separated, so that, while **the Canaanites** were able to maintain control of the valley itself, there would still be considerable freedom of movement between **the Israelites** and the highlands that were nearby. **Beth-shean** was an important fortress commanding the junction between the Jordan valley and the valley of Jezreel. **Ibleam** controlled the southern exit of the Esdraelon valley to Shechem and Bethel. **Taanach** was five miles south-east of **Megiddo**, with which it is often associated (**Joshua 12:21, 17:11, Judges 5:19, First Kings 4:12**), and these two cities dominated the south-western pass from the Esdraelon valley to the Plain of Sharon and beyond.

Megiddo was under Egyptian control until the middle of the twelfth century BC when it was suddenly destroyed, remaining unoccupied for a considerable period of time (**5:19**). **Dor** was situated on the Mediterranean coast just south of Mount Carmel.²⁷ However, **when the Israelites grew stronger, they forced the Canaanites to work as slaves. We are not informed when the final subjugation took place, but it could not have been before king David's reign. The Israelites' struggle with the Philistines must have weakened their power already in the days of king Sha'ul, because Beth-shean was in Philistine hands at that time. All these cities became subject to Solomon (First Kings 4:11ff), but then never drove them out completely (1:28 NLT).** This is the key problem that sets the stage for the rest of the book. The territory allotted to **Ephraim** lay immediately south of **Manasseh's**, and it extended from the Jordan River to the coastal plain (**Joshua 16:5-9**).

The Failure of Ephraim (1:29): Now the author provides the summary statement that we might have expected in **1:22**. **The tribe of Ephraim failed to drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, so the Canaanites continued to live there among them (1:29 NLT).** **Gezer** is mentioned in **Joshua 21:21** as one of the cities in **Ephraim's** territory that was set aside for **the Levites**. But taking it proved to be very difficult. **It** lay in the foothills on the southwestern border of **Ephraim (Joshua 16:3)**, about 19 miles west-northwest of **Jerusalem**, overlooking the coastal plain. **Gezer** lay at a key ancient crossroad where the trunk road leads to **Jerusalem** and sits in the hills where **it** branches off from the *Via Maris* [Way of

the Sea].

It seems likely that **the Ephraimites**, finding **Gezer** in a weakened state after the defeat of its army by **Joshua**, were able to enter **the city** and establish a strong presence there; but they either could not or simply didn't expel its **Canaanite** inhabitants, who **continued to live there among them**. Given this situation, plus the generally chaotic nature of the times, it's not surprising that **Gezer** and other cities set aside for **the Levites** were not realized during the period of **the judges**. This also helps to explain the unsettled condition of **the Levites** seen at the end of the book (see **Bz - The Epilogue of Judges**).²⁸

In the far eschatological future, **Joseph, Ephraim's** father will be substituted in the list of undefiled **Jews** who will be part of the **144,000** during the Great Tribulation (see the commentary on **Revelation Cr - Then I Heard the Number of Those Who were Sealed, 144,000 from all the Tribes of Isra'el**), because like **Dan** (see below), **they** became synonymous with spiritual adultery. After the death of **Solomon** they set up a **golden calf** to substitute for the true worship of **ADONAI** in **Jerusalem**. Mercifully, however, **Dan** and **Ephraim**, will have a portion of Land in the Messianic Kingdom (**Ezeki'el 48:1-29**).²⁹

The Failure of Zebulun (1:30): The tribe of Zebulun failed similarly to **Manasseh** and **Ephraim** because **they** didn't drive out the residents of **Kitron** and **Nahalol**. As a result, again, **the Canaanites continued to live among them**. But for those **the people of Zebulun** were able to subdue, **the Canaanites were forced to work as slaves (1:30 NLT)**.

The Failure of Asher (1:31-32): While most of **the tribes** were able to occupy at least some part of **their** allotted territory **the tribe of Asher** seems to have failed completely to dislodge **the Canaanites**, hence the significant charge that **the tribe of Asher failed to drive out the residents of Acco, Sidon, Ahlab, Aczib, Helbah, aphik, and Rehob (1:31 NLT)**. The first four **cities** listed here were all situated on the coast north of Mount Carmel. In this area **the Canaanite inhabitants of the land** retained the strength which was lost elsewhere, and this region developed into the important maritime kingdom of Phoenicia, which **David** and **Solomon** entered into alliance (**Second Samuel 5:11** and **First Kings 5:1-12**). It was the Phoenician princess, **Jezebel** (see the commentary on **Elijah and Elisha At - The Wrath of Jezebel**), who introduced the worship of **Ba'al** into **Isra'el** following her marriage to **Ahab (First Kings 16:31)**, with disastrous results. **Instead, the people of Asher moved in among the Canaanites, who**

controlled the land, for they failed to drive them out (1:32 NLT). The same situation applied to **the tribes of Naphtali** and **Dan**. We must understand that the allocated territories given by **Joshua** were merely goals. But what was intended was never achieved and the resulting disorganization affected the tribal boundaries which were completely occupied by **Canaanites**!³⁰

The Failure of Naphtali (1:33): **Naphtali's** allotted territory as described in **Joshua 19:32-39** was to the east and north of **Zebulun's**. Its northern half bordered directly on **Asher's** territory, and on the south it had a common border with **Issachar**. **Likewise, the tribe of Naphtali failed to drive out the residents of Beth-shemesh [House of the Sun God] and Beth-anath [House of Anath, the Canaanite goddess of fertility and war].** These two **cities** hint at **their** deeper significance for what was happening in **Judges Chapter One**. Not merely a military clash for control of land, but a clash between two mutually incompatible religious cultures: The worship of **YHVH** versus the worship of natural phenomena such as the sun or gods such as **Anath**. Furthermore, given **Isra'el's** belief in the one true **God** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Bw - Sh'ma Isra'el**), no accommodation was possible without compromising the very heart of **Isra'el's** covenant faith. But **they** did compromise. **Instead, finding the Canaanites in these cities too entrenched to expel, they moved in among the Canaanites, who controlled the land.** However, **the Israelites** eventually wrestled control away from **the Canaanites** and **the people of Beth-shemesh and Beth-anath were forced to work as slaves for the people of Naphtali (1:33 NLT).** Unfortunately, as the rest of the book shows, **the Israelites** were in turn subdued by the **Canaanite** gods. So, this brief report of **Naphtali's** fortunes is a kind of microcosm of what happened to **Isra'el** as a whole following **Joshua's** death.

The Failure of Dan (1:34-35): The **failures** of **the northern tribes** reached a climax when **the tribe of Dan** was unable to occupy the territory allotted to **them** due to the opposition of **the Amorites** and then the pressure of **the Philistines (Joshua 19:41-46).** **They were forced back into the hill country, where they were confined to a very small area on the border of Judah because the Amorites would not let them come down into the plains (1:34 NLT).** This note is important in two ways: first, it anticipates the northern migration of **the tribe of Dan** later in **Chapter 18** (see **Cb - The Migration of Dan to the North**); and second, because **Dan** was being **forced back into the hill country**, it marks the end of the decline of **Isra'el's** fortunes in **Chapter One**. The final sad story of **Dan**

also corresponds to the final sad story of **Samson the Danite** in the series of twelve **judges**. **The Amorites were determined to stay in Mount Heres, Aijalon, and Shaalbrim, but when [the tribe of Manasseh] became stronger, they forced the Amorites to work as slaves before they migrated (1:35 NLT).** Rather than **having no pity** and destroying **them**, **the tribe of Manasseh** used **them** for **forced labor**.³¹

In the far eschatological future, **the tribe of Dan** will be omitted from the list of undefiled **Jews** who will be part of **the 144,000** during the Great Tribulation (see the commentary on **Revelation Cr – Then I Heard the Number of Those Who were Sealed, 144,000 from all the Tribes of Isra’el**). **Dan** was the first tribe in **Isra’el** to introduce and embrace idol worship. After the death of **Solomon** they established a false priesthood and set up **a golden calf** to be worshiped, turning away from the true worship of **ADONAI** in **Jerusalem**. (see the commentary on **the Life of King Solomon Dd – Golden Calves at Dan and Bethel**). Mercifully, however, **Ephraim** and **Dan**, will have a portion of Land in the Messianic Kingdom (**Ezeki’el 48:1-29**).³²

The Amorite Appendix (1:36): The **failure of the tribe of Dan** is immediately followed with a description of **the border of the Amorites**, a striking reminder to us of **Isra’el’s failure** in its struggle against **the Canaanites** introduced at the beginning of the chapter. **The border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akrabbim, from Sela and upward (1:36 ESV).** By the time we reach the end of the chapter, the focus has shifted away from the more or less successful occupation and settlement of conquered territory. This verse is telling us that when the whole process of conquest and settlement had run its course, the only border of any significance was **the border of the Amorites**. Simply put, **the Amorites/Canaanites** were still **the people of the land**, and far from driving **them** out, **the Israelites** lived **among them**. So, this verse provides a final mocking comment on the chapter as a whole, since it contains no reference to **the northern tribes**; indeed, no part of **Isra’el** at all . . . a silence that speaks volumes about **her** failure to reach the high expectations with which the chapter began.³³

After some short-lived success, **the northern tribes** descended into spiritual adultery. This would set the stage for the disastrous reigns of most of the kings of **the Northern Kingdom** after the death of **Solomon** (see the commentary on **the Life of Solomon Dn – The Kings of Isra’el**), and ultimately, the Babylonian Captivity (see **Jeremiah Gu – Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule**).

This survey of **Isra'el's** fortunes after the death of **Joshua** begins positively enough, with **the Israelites** consulting **ADONAI**, **the tribes of Judah** and **Simeon** cooperating, and families functioning normally. Even so, this chapter is saturated by unfulfilled commitment, incomplete obedience, and compromising tolerance. Even when **the Israelites** gain the upper hand over **the Canaanites**, **they** refuse to carry out **God's** agenda. Instead of reshaping the world in the image of **ADONAI's** will, **they** live in and with **the world (First John 2:15-16)**. Instead of making this **the land of the people of God**, **they** become like **the people of the land**. This not only explains why the time of **the judges** turned out to be so dark, but it also serves as a permanent reminder of the deadly consequences of compromise and disobedience to all who claim to be **the people of God**. At the same time, the chapter announces that if anything positive is accomplished by **the people of God**, it is because of **His** gracious presence and **His** action on our behalf.³⁴

But we cannot leave **Chapter 1** without finding some encouragement alongside those relating to **Jerusalem** and **Bethel**. This is the account of the capture of **Debir**, which has already appeared in **Joshua 15:14-19**, but is no doubt recounted here in **1:11-15** because it points forward to so much else that we shall find in **Judges**. For the moment, we simply note one thing. In taking **the Canaanite** town, **Othniel** also wins the hand of **Caleb's daughter**, and fruitful **farmland** with it; that is, in a chapter which is generally very disappointing we have a story of a task well done, a promise kept, a gift given, and a marriage made. As the rest of Scripture unfolds, we are aware that marriage is going to symbolize the relationship between **God** and **His people**. Maybe we have here one key to **Judges**, the hope that where **Isra'el's** behavior is wedded to **His** judgments, and **her** behaviors to **His** power; then, **Isra'el** becomes the bride of **her LORD**, and things begin to be as they should.³⁵

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise You for always being so wonderful! What a joy it is to know that no battle is too hard for **You**. However, **Your people** must be obedient to **Your Word** for the victories to be won. As believers, **You** will be with us, but we must obey. **Isra'el** will always be **the apple of Your eye**; however, when **she** sins against you and violates **Your** covenant with **her**, there will always be consequences. We bow before **You** in love, willing to fight whatever battles **You** have for us. In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of His resurrection. Amen*