

I don't really want to tell you my story, but Puah insists that I do...what are friends for, right? She never lets me forget that we stood up to the most powerful man in the world, and changed the future of the human race. She wants our story told.

Puah... She might be exaggerating a little bit? We were a couple of lowly slaves who were good mid-wives...and good liars. We did save thousands of babies...baby boys, and a few of them did turn out to be pretty special. One in particular!

Midwives and liars, I've gotta smile at that. You know what a mid-wife is...you still have them. Throughout the centuries, and into your time, trained doctors have not always been available to help women through the birth process. That's where we come in. Mid-wives are trained women, and men, who help moms through the birth process. It is the best job in the world. New life is our business. LIFE! Okay, yes, there's a lot of pain mixed into that *best job in the world*. In my day, we mid-wives had special knowledge of herbs and potions that helped women through the pain, and helped them speed the birth process. As painful then as it is now. Oh, but when you hear that baby cry, and see that mother's face...Puah and I didn't have any children then. But, our joy was complete in what we did.

Let me set up my story: More than three centuries before my time, Joseph and the other sons of Jacob moved from Canaan to Egypt. Joseph—such a powerful politician, the Egyptians allowed his family to settle in the Goshen region. They were shepherds. This was not a big deal, because the Egyptians were primarily farmers, not shepherds. Joseph's father Jacob was also named Israel, his descendants were known as the Twelve Tribes of Israel, or the Israelites.

The Israelites had large families, and after many generations there were hundreds of thousands of them. They were located way over in Goshen. But when a new Pharaoh came to power, he recognized the danger of them. What if they rebelled? What if all those Israelites, hundreds of thousands of them, united in a rebellion. So, he made them all slaves. They were forced into hard labor, they worked building public monuments and other buildings. Without machinery. Backbreaking, soul-crushing work. And it was endless. The Israelite slaves were treated ruthlessly by the Egyptians.

Puah and I were well-known midwives, pretty much the only well-known midwives, really, and we stayed busy. The Israelites produced babies as fast as desert rabbits. With every baby, we saw the joy of life under the heavy hand of rule. With every baby, the Pharaoh got more frightened of rebellion.

Finally, the Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the known world summoned Puah and me...two unknown, lowly midwives. I know, I know, I said we were well-known, but we thought that was just in our pregnant, Hebrew women circles. We were wrong. We were commanded by the Pharaoh himself... to kill the babies, if they were boys. Kill babies. But...we feared God more than the Pharaoh, so we did no such thing. Months later when nothing had changed in terms of population control, the Pharaoh called us in again and demanded to know why the baby boys survived.

“Well,” I said, “The Hebrew women deliver so quickly, the babies arrive before we get there! Pop right out, like desert rabbits” We didn’t say that last part. God was so pleased with us... he gave us families of our own! We had our own kids! But, as pleased as God was, Pharaoh was just as displeased. He commanded us, and all of the Hebrews, to throw their baby boys into the Nile and drown them.

One of the Hebrew descendants of Levi, married a woman from the same tribe. They had a daughter. Then, years later, a son. After three months, they obediently threw the son in the Nile...BUT...before doing so, they placed him in a waterproof basket. And they made sure the basket ended up in the exact location where the Pharaoh’s barren daughter bathed. The baby’s sister waited nearby.

Pharaoh’s daughter came to the river, discovered the basket, and took pity on an obviously Hebrew baby.¹ I say obviously because that is an important part of this story. Pharaoh’s daughter knew it was a Hebrew baby because the boy had been circumcised! No other people group circumcised their children. Just the Hebrews. This would be a reminder to the baby all of his life that he was a Hebrew.

The baby’s sister popped out of the reeds and asked if Pharaoh’s daughter would like her to take the baby back to the Hebrews where he could be nursed until a safe age. The baby’s sister, Miriam, would play a big part in his later life. That arrangement was made, and Pharaoh’s daughter agreed to pay for the baby’s care.

Pretty good deal. The parents saved the boy and got paid to raise him. At the appropriate time, the boy was brought back to the Pharaoh’s daughter. She named him Moses, and she raised him in the court of the Pharaoh. He received the best food and education. Our disobedience to the powers that be resulted in a Hebrew boy becoming part of the royal family of Egypt. Puah and I laughed for hours and hours about this.

Let me digress a little bit. Egyptian pharaohs were considered to be gods. When they died, their successors were considered to be gods, also. Unlike some other societies, the daughters of pharaohs often came into power. Sometimes, a son and daughter got married to keep things orderly.

¹ Exodus 2:6

The Bible doesn't say, but it is likely that Pharaoh's daughter had several children and nieces and nephews who vied for power. As a Hebrew, Moses would have been at a big disadvantage to becoming Pharaoh, but he very likely was a threat to other possible heirs.

Spoiler alert: In the far future, Moses will have a severe confrontation with a Pharaoh. That Pharaoh will likely be one of the relatives Moses grew up with in court... basically, a brother.

Moses is now an adult. One day, he leaves the palace and walks among the commoners, the Hebrews. He sees an Egyptian master beating a Hebrew slave.. No one is around, so Moses kills the Egyptian, and hides him in the sand. The next day, he goes out among the Hebrews again. He sees two of them fighting. He attempts to stop the fight, they turn around and taunt him, they ask "Will you kill us like you killed the Egyptian?" His murderous act was known! Being the step-grandson of the Pharaoh would not be enough to protect him, especially from his adopted relatives who were also his competitors. Moses flees the court, the palace, and the country to escape Pharaoh's wrath.

Moses travels to Midian, a desert area more than two hundred and fifty miles east of Egypt. While waiting by a water well, he encounters the seven daughters of Ruel, the priest of Midian. When some shepherds try to drive the daughters and their sheep from the well, Moses protects them. In gratitude, Ruel has Moses eat bread with him, and allows him to live with the family. Eventually, Moses marries one of the daughters, Zipporah. They have a son named Gershom.

After many years, Moses' step-grandfather died. The new Pharaoh was even harsher to the Israelites. They were given less resources and were expected to get more work done. Hours were long, conditions were unconscionable. The Hebrews suffered in ways few people groups in your time could identify with. There are some groups exploited like this today, but most of Western culture is shielded from their plight. No one helps the slave. There is no record in the Bible that God had had direct contact with the Israelites since the time of Joseph, hundreds of years before. The memories of their one true God were surely distant and dim, they were, however, in daily contact with the Egyptian gods in the culture around them. The Israelites called out to the only source who could save them, they cried out to God for relief.

God heard their prayers and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; that the Israelites were to have the land of Canaan. Change was coming.

Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Ruel², on Horeb, the mountain of God, pretty much just him, his staff, the sheep...when the angel of the Lord appeared in a flame of fire burning a bush. Moses saw that the bush was in flames but was not burning up. He was curious, he approached the bush.

"Moses, Moses!" It was God. "Take off your sandals. Don't come nearer. You are standing on holy ground." Can you imagine all the things going through Moses' mind? "I am the God of your

² Also named Jethro

father, of Abraham, of Isaac, and Jacob.” Moses hid his face. If he saw God’s face, he would surely die.

God continued. He had seen the Hebrews in their distress. He was determined to send them back to Canaan, the land he’d promised to Abraham. And here is the best part. God wanted someone to lead them out of Egypt— Moses.

Now think about it. A God that Moses barely knows is sending him back to the royal court that wants to kill him. Moses, like most of us would do, starts making excuses for why he should not go back. He definitely should not go back to Egypt. He definitely should not and does not want to go back to Egypt

Moses explains “I’m a nobody.” God tells him, “That doesn’t matter,” and that God himself will provide the power and the incentives for Pharaoh to set them free.

Moses insinuates that the Hebrews themselves won’t recognize his authority and that they don’t even know God. Who should I say sent me? “Tell them I AM, the god of their ancestors, sent you,” God says. The leaders of the Hebrews will go with you to Pharaoh, and he will refuse you until I punish him severely. Finally, you will actually plunder the Egyptians in their desire for you to leave.”

Moses makes more excuses. No surprise there. It’s a sticky situation. It’s family. *Royal* family. *Estranged*, Royal family. Moses herding staff? God turns it into a snake, then he strikes Moses with leprosy, and then heals him. In the end, God even allows his older brother, Aaron, to go as his side-kick. Moses is out of excuses. He gives in, he agrees to go back to Egypt.

As usual, the Bible doesn’t provide exact dates for the events in this story. But according to the text, Moses was eighty years old when he went back to Egypt from Midian. Aaron was eighty-three.³ The Bible says that all of Moses’ original enemies were dead when Moses took his wife, his sons, and Aaron back to Egypt. Picture it: A band of shepherding nomads emerge from the desert and descend upon the royal courts of Egypt. As an Israelite, I’ll tell you right now, I would not have found that inspiring. At all. Even as a mid-wife and one of his biggest fans.

When they arrived in Egypt, Moses gathered together the leaders of the Hebrews, and Aaron told them everything the Lord had said to Moses. They performed signs before the people, and they believed what Moses told them. And when they heard that God was concerned about them, they bowed down and worshiped.

These Hebrew slaves were fired up and ready to go. Their misery was almost over, they were sure of it! All Moses and Aaron had to do was go appear to Pharaoh and their slavery would end.

³ Exodus 7:6-7

They were sadly mistaken.

There are some Old Testament scriptures that are strange. Odd. Simply straight-up weird to people of today.

I live in the time when the Israelites have been enslaved in Egypt for many years. I am the daughter of Ruel, also named Jethro, a priest of Midian. That statement itself is a little weird. What does it mean to be a priest of Midian? My name is Zipporah, and probably that name is a little weird, too.

I will tell you of one of the weirdest Old Testament Scriptures. From the beginning of time, people have wanted to be safe and prosperous. And then safer, and more prosperous. In an effort to continually increase their safety and prosperity, people all over the world have worshiped things. Things that are worshiped are called gods.

Gods take many forms. The most common in my time are aspects of nature: animals, the sun and moon, water, earth, and so on. We live so close to nature that these things have the most effects on our lives, and are the most obvious to try to appease and control.

Gods might also be represented by meteorites or misshapen trees, or other quirks of nature. We often make our own gods out of wood, metal or rocks. Since we make these things, they clearly have no spiritual power, although we tell ourselves, and thereby fool ourselves, into hoping they do.

Over time, our gods become very dear to our communities, our families, individuals. Our societies often revolve around worshiping gods. Yours do, too. Professional sports, social media, even your children. Don't believe me? Let's talk come football season. In our society, we think nothing of swapping gods or incorporating other gods into our worship if we think it might help us better survive and thrive.

The first example of household gods in the Bible is when Rachel, the wife of Jacob, stole her father's household gods.¹ These were apparently figurines small enough to hide under a saddle, and valuable enough for Laban to want them back. Now, this story in itself is a little weird, because the God of Abraham protects Jacob and Rachel so they can steal Laban's household gods. Rachel will continue to worship these household gods until Jacob makes her quit.²

¹ Genesis 31:19-55

² Gen. 35:2-5

Let's go back only a few decades in time to see why this is weird. Abraham lives in Harran, in modern Turkey. His God tells him to move from there to Canaan, in modern Israel. Genesis 1 through 9 makes it clear that Abraham's God is the one who created the universe in Genesis 1.

Abraham is so faithful to God, that God promises to make him a great nation, to make his name great and make him a blessing to all the families of the earth. Essentially, this means God will make him extremely safe and extremely prosperous, although the timing of when that will happen is not known. It is also not known how much of this will happen in Abraham's lifetime.

I've been setting a trap for you, let's see if you have avoided it. I've told you that the God of Abraham is very powerful. And I described household gods and other gods in such a way that they seem entirely powerless. But nothing could be further from the truth. Even the God of Abraham acknowledged that other gods had power. Weird, right? Sometimes they had power only through Satan, but it seems they may have had innate power as well.

Many people think of the Exodus as a time when the Hebrews completely quit worshiping other gods and worship only the God of Abraham. But it's not that clear cut. While the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt, they started worshiping the Egyptian gods, along with the God of Abraham. Over time, the God of Abraham becomes more and more of a distant memory, while the Egyptian gods become more and more real.

The first job of Moses is to convince the Hebrews that the God of Abraham remembers his covenant with Abraham and wants to bring them out of slavery. His next job is to convince the Hebrews and the Egyptians that the God of Abraham is much more powerful than the Egyptian gods. Moses and God prove this through the famous ten plagues.

Moses' next job is to convince the Hebrews to give preeminence to the God of Abraham in their worship. Notice what the first of the Ten Commandments says: "You shall have no other gods before me."³ In the Song of Moses, he acknowledges that other gods exist.⁴ My own father, Ruel, said, "I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods."⁵

This time period is followed by the transition to where Hebrews are to worship only the God of Abraham, and not worship any other gods at all! You can see that this transition takes many years by hearing Joshua's speeches more than half of a century later. He acknowledges that many of the Hebrews continue to worship other gods. In one of Joshua's most famous statements, he says, "Choose this day whom you will serve: whether the gods which your

³ Exodus 20:3

⁴ Exodus 15:11

⁵ Genesis 18:11

fathers served in Egypt or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live: but as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”⁶

It boils down to this: much of the Old Testament is the story of God trying to lead the people to see he is the ONLY god people should worship. God is a jealous god and will not allow anyone to worship any god but himself. Though they are supposed to be the people who follow and defend the one true God, the Hebrews are continually drawn to worship other gods in addition to the one true God, and sometimes to the exclusion of the one true God. That is the sad story of the Old Testament. It’s kind of the same sad story today, it seems to me.

Now, the weird scripture. In Abraham’s time, his one true God is so powerful that many people around Abraham start worshipping his God. Abraham’s God became incorporated into the worship of many people outside of Abraham’s family. The practice of circumcision becomes well known for those people willing to endure it who desire to be protected, become safer, and more prosperous.

Fast forward a few hundred years. Abraham’s direct descendants through Isaac become the enslaved Hebrews of Pharaoh. They barely remember the God of Abraham, but are very familiar with the gods of Egypt. However, many other people around the Middle East still have the God of Abraham incorporated in their worship, and still remember the rite of circumcision.

My father, the priest of Midian, worships the God of Abraham and many other gods, too. That explains what a priest of Midian does. My family doesn’t practice the rite of circumcision for a very simple reason...my father has seven daughters, no sons. Ok, OK, here’s the weird scripture.

One day, my sisters and I are taking care of our family flocks, and we go to water them at the community well. As we begin, some mean shepherds come to drive us away so they can water their flocks first. We are used to this because it happens nearly every day. They are afraid to hurt the daughters of the priest, but not afraid to bully them.

A handsome Egyptian shows up from out of nowhere, he protects us and we go first. You can only imagine that all seven of us fall for this handsome, powerful man.

We thank him and take our sheep home, earlier than normal. Our father asks why we’ve returned so early and we tell him the story of the Egyptian, leaving off the part of how handsome he is. Our father is incensed at our rudeness, and makes us go find him to invite him to dinner. We are thrilled.

This handsome stranger turns out to be Moses. He stays with our family, and he eventually becomes my husband. We have a firstborn son named Gershom, and later have other sons. We live as a very happy family for about four decades.

⁶ Joshua 24:15

When Moses is nearly eighty years old, he encounters the God of Abraham in the burning bush. After a long negotiation, God assigns Moses the task of rescuing the Israelites from Pharaoh, and leading them to the Promised Land.

Moses comes home that night and tells my father and me all about the burning bush, his new assignment, and his fancy staff. As a priest of Midian, Jethro is very familiar with God and sends Moses and our family back to Egypt with his blessing. Moses, our sons, and I leave on a donkey and start back to Egypt, taking along the staff of God.

Now, here is the weird Scripture that I will explain to you. Not fully, but I will enlighten you a little. The Bible says that we were at a lodging place on the way back to Egypt.⁷ All of a sudden, the Lord meets Moses and is about to kill him. But I take out a flint knife, cut off my son's foreskin and throw it at the feet of Moses, and say, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me." So...God lets Moses live.

Now really, that is some pretty weird stuff, right? We were all familiar with the rite of circumcision, and how Abraham had circumcised his son, and mandated that all of the male descendants of Abraham were to be circumcised. I knew that Moses had been circumcised.⁸ But, we had not circumcised our own son! We were being disobedient but not aware of the penalties for doing so. I knew exactly what to do, and did it immediately. My poor son. He was in extreme pain, but at least we saved the life of Moses. We could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble if we had obeyed much earlier. In a way, this is a foreshadow of what the Israelite nation as a whole will have to endure before they enter the Promised Land.

With this act of circumcision, Moses is ready and qualified to face Pharaoh. And...the gods of Egypt. Not so weird after all.

⁷ Exodus 4:24-26

⁸ Exodus 2:6. How did she know Moses was a Hebrew baby? He had been circumcised!

It can always get worse...a saying we had in my day. Life was hard, but we assured ourselves, it could be worse, much worse. I am an elder of the tribe of Issachar in the time when Hebrews are slaves of the Egyptian Pharaoh. We have forgotten who God is. Even the Elders. Sad, really. But when a stranger appears claiming he knows who God is, we have to wrestle the question: Who gets to decide who God is? And in our dire situation, the answer is a matter of life and death.

To answer our opening question, we need to run through the backstory. Abraham is the father of the Hebrew nation through his son, Isaac...and through his son, Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel. That is why Hebrews are also called Israelites.

Israel had twelve sons. Each of those sons became the head of a family dynasty, or tribe. That is why the Israelites are called the Twelve Tribes of Israel. These tribes stayed as identifiable family units, but they also stayed identifiable as one big family unit. They remained this way until most of the tribes, known as the Northern Kingdom, were wiped out by the Assyrians many centuries after my time.

The remaining tribes were the small tribes of Benjamin and Levi, and the much larger tribe of Judah. That is why the Israelites also came to be called Jews. About fifteen million descendants of those tribes still exist to modern time, and they are still known as Jews.

You have probably been taught that the first leader of the Israelites was Moses. His leadership role was assumed by Joshua, then the judges, transitioning to the prophets through Samuel. During Samuel's time, God appointed King Saul to lead the Israelites. King Saul was followed by David, Solomon, and many others. The kingship of Israel ended when the Israelites were taken into captivity by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

Except for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple under the leadership of such men as Ezra and Nehemiah, you probably don't know much about the leadership of the Jewish nation until the time of Jesus. At that time, you probably think that Israel was ruled by the emperors of Rome, who appointed local kings, such as the Herods. Under them, the Jewish leaders were the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Not bad. In a couple of minutes, I described what most modern Christians think of when they think of the history of governance of ancient Israel, right? Moses, Joshua, King David and his family, Romans, Pharisees, Sadducees. And done. Wrong! These are the people who get all the

press, but most Christians today completely miss a critical piece of the history puzzle. That's why *you* may not even know who gets to decide who God is!

It's easy for me to see why you miss this puzzle piece. Let me lead you to the answer by using a technique used by many of your modern psychiatrists – word association.

“Elder”... what is an elder? Maybe you grew up in a family where older people were highly respected, or at least were supposed to be highly respected. Maybe your parents told you, “Respect your elders.” Parents say that sort of thing when they are telling you what to do.

If you are a Christian, you might think of Paul appointing elders in Acts, or the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy or Titus. Maybe you think of the other instances where elders are important in the early church.

I'm pretty sure that few Christians today immediately think of elders of the Jews in the Old Testament. Surprising because they are referenced much more often than New Testament Christian elders!

Let me drill down on the Israelite history. You'll love this. While the Jews were in slavery under Pharaoh, they developed a leadership structure where each tribe had leaders called elders. Those tribal elders led the Israelites in conjunction with Moses, Joshua, the judges and Samuel.

The kings led the nation of Israel in conjunction with the elders. In fact, it was the elders who confirmed David as king,¹ and the elders who caused the split in the nation into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms.

The elders functioned as local leaders of the Jews throughout the New Testament! In fact, Jesus and his disciples were accused of violating the tradition of the elders.² Throughout the history of the Jewish people, the elders have been critically important.

I am an elder of the tribe of Issachar in the time when Hebrews were slaves of the Egyptian Pharaoh. I live in the time when Moses is chosen by God to lead us from captivity. For you to have a good understanding of the Old Testament, I think you need to have a better understanding of my thought process, and the thought processes of the other Hebrews of my time. In order for you to do that, I need to give you a better sense of time.

About six centuries before me, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be numerous, and they would inherit the land of Canaan. Abraham knew God well.

¹ 2 Samuel 5:3,

² Matthew 15:2

About four centuries before me, Joseph was the second in command of Egypt, and moved the twelve tribes of Israel to Egypt from Canaan. Joseph knew God well.

Over the last four centuries, we Israelites moved from being in a favored position with Pharaoh to being slaves of Pharaoh. God has been silent during these long, long four centuries. We do not have any written scripture, so what we know about God has been passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation over four centuries. That is FOUR HUNDRED years! What did your ancestors of four hundred years ago believe? You don't know. Most of you don't even know who your ancestors are. Or if you do, what your great grandparents believed.

The God of Abraham is a distant memory to us. He must not love us very much, because the Egyptians are mistreating us so badly. What is very real to us, though, are the Egyptian gods. Their statues and priests surround us. They seem to be very powerful gods because the Egyptians are very prosperous. Many of us worship the Egyptian gods because we want to be prosperous, and because they seem much more real to us than the God of our far distant ancestors. We want to be free from slavery, and the Egyptian gods seem to be our best bet. We don't really care about moving to another country, we just want to quit being slaves. We just want it to quit getting worse.

One evening some of my fellow elders and I are just trying to recover from a hard day of making bricks and hauling them around. Resting and talking. Up walk these two strangers who appear to be shepherds by looks of their robes and staffs. The taller one says he is Aaron ben Amram, and the other is his brother, Moses.

At the name of Moses, we freeze. We know the story of a Hebrew named Moses from 40 years ago who lived in the Pharaoh's palace. But that Moses had to flee Egypt after killing an overseer of Hebrew slaves. He's a wanted man. Surely, he cannot be that Moses! But he most certainly is.

Now, get this. Aaron keeps on talking, but Moses doesn't say a word. Aaron tells us how Moses saw God in the burning bush. How God said he had seen the Hebrews in their distress, and he is determined to bring them back to Canaan, the land promised to Abraham. And – here is the ironic part – God is going to have Moses, the wanted guy, lead the Hebrews out of Egypt.

Aaron tells how Moses explained to God that he is a nobody, but God didn't listen, how Moses insinuated that the Hebrews themselves wouldn't recognize his authority, and that they don't even know God. How God said to tell them that I AM, the god of their ancestors, sent you. The elders will go with you to Pharaoh and he will refuse you until I punish him severely. You will actually plunder the Egyptians in their desire for you to leave.

Aaron says Moses made more excuses. To shut him down, God turned Moses' shepherd staff into a snake, struck him with leprosy, then healed him, and then even allowed him to take his brother, as his side-kick. Aaron. Moses finally ran out of excuses. So, he says, here we are.

That is the most fantastical story any of us have ever heard. After considering the story for a while, we ask Moses to perform some of those signs, and he does.³

We find ourselves in a check mate. We elders have to decide who God really is, and what we should do about it. Who are we to make such a momentous decision? We are born slaves, we have no education, we barely remember anything about that God. What are we to do?

We know the Egyptian gods and are comfortable worshiping them. We can see them in the sun and moon and Nile River. Those gods seem to be real and powerful. The pharaoh that serves them is definitely powerful, and will surely punish us severely if we rebel or even complain.

We can hardly remember this god named I AM, the god who purports to be the God of our ancestors, the one True God. This Moses guy seems to be able to do miracles, but he certainly doesn't seem as rich and powerful as Pharaoh.

It is a quandary for us. We are paralyzed with fear, we don't want things to get worse. Then...Aaron...changes everything. He says that God cares for us, God wants for our misery to end. We're in shock. Speechless. The Egyptian gods could not care less about us. In fact, it seems that they are happy for us to suffer if it makes the lives of pharaoh and his priests better.

We begin to weep, and then bow down and worship God. Aaron and Moses tell us more about the I AM God of the Hebrews. Some of our elders miraculously start remembering stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and about their God.

We fear Pharaoh, but hope God will protect us. And then it hits us. No matter what it looks like, this is not a battle of God versus Pharaoh. This is a battle between God and the gods of Egypt to determine who God is.

By daybreak, we are hesitantly ready to support Aaron and Moses.

It's a gamble. But, honestly, it can't get any worse.

³ Exodus 4:29-31

We were so excited that we would no longer be slaves! Aaron and Moses went straight to Pharaoh and requested that he let us hold a festival in the wilderness to honor our God. We would be gone about a week.

I am an elder of the tribe of Judah in the time when the Jews were slaves of the Egyptians.

Pharaoh blew a gasket! He ordered the slave drivers to take away the straw that was essential in making bricks. If we had time for parties in the wilderness, we had time to find straw for the bricks.

We were furious. Furious at Aaron and Moses. They promised to deliver us, but they only made our lives worse. Much, much worse. Pharaoh's hatred for us had intensified.

Moses and Aaron returned to the Lord and asked what was going on. Why had he allowed the lives of the Israelites to get worse? The Lord reaffirmed to them that he would surely bring the Israelites out of Egypt. The more Pharaoh refused, the more God would punish him. Eventually he would let the Israelites go.

Now, that sounds all well and good in retrospect, but at the time, we were profoundly suffering. We were disheartened, demoralized, beyond anything you can imagine. We didn't believe Moses. We didn't want words, we wanted action.

God commanded Moses and Aaron to go Pharaoh and demand he let the Hebrews go. Not just go to the wilderness for a festival, but to leave the country for good. If not, the consequences would begin.

Let me remind you of something. This battle was not between God and Pharaoh, as is so often assumed. Pharaoh was just a representative of the Egyptian gods. This wasn't even a battle between the One True God and the Egyptian gods. This was a supreme showdown before the very eyes of both cultures to witness who was the supreme being.

You can see this in the form of the signs and plagues that God sends on the Egyptians.¹

When Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites leave, Aaron threw his staff on the ground and it became a snake. Pharaoh's magicians did the same thing, but Aaron's staff swallowed their

¹ Much of this lesson is based on a well-documented Bible study lesson, "Gods @ War" taught by Clint Hill.

staffs. This was not just unfortunate but a powerful symbol to them. *Wadjet* was an Egyptian goddess depicted as a snake-headed woman, or a snake. She sometimes took the form of *Uraeus*, the snake on Pharaoh's crown. She was responsible for the protection of the kingdom and Pharaoh himself. By this sign, God was communicating that *Wadjet* could not protect the kingdom, that God alone had the power to free the Hebrew slaves.

In the first plague, God allowed Aaron to turn all water from the Nile River into blood, killing all the fish. The Egyptian magicians were able to duplicate this event using their secret arts. *Hapi* was the god of the annual flooding of the Nile. This annual flooding and the fish of the Nile were necessary for prosperity. *Khnum*, an early Egyptian god, was thought to be responsible for water and procreation. *Osiris*, an Egyptian god of the dead, was associated with resurrecting dead vegetation to bring life. By this plague, God was asserting his power of life and death. And...he was making the Egyptian gods detestable to all the inhabitants of the land.

The second plague was for the land of Egypt to be overrun by frogs. Everywhere. There were frogs everywhere. Stinking, slimy frogs... everywhere. *Heqet* was an Egyptian goddess of fertility in the form of— a frog. By this plague, God showed that *Heqet* was a goddess taking away life, not giving it. And again, he was making the Egyptian gods detestable to all the inhabitants of the land.

The rest of the plagues similarly demonstrated how God was ultimate power, much more powerful than Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods. It wasn't even a competition. Only in the minds of the people was it a war. The same pattern over and over. God plagued the Egyptians in a way that showed his power undermining the supposed power of the Egyptian gods. Still, Pharaoh would not let God's people go.

Let me remind you that Moses is eighty years old when he confronts Pharaoh. For the last forty years, Moses has been a shepherd in the desert. Wiry, rock-hard...physically and mentally. When he tells Pharaoh to let the people go, you can imagine that cushy, insulated Pharaoh trembles a little.

Now remember, Moses grew up in the court of a previous Pharaoh. He probably grew up with this Pharaoh and knows his strengths, and weaknesses. Pampered in every conceivable way, this Pharaoh is most likely fat and soft, and superstitious beyond belief. He is supposed to be a god himself, but he knows he is not. He knows, and this may have led to doubt about the Egyptian gods themselves. Pharaoh trembles as he understands that the God of Moses is awesome in power.

Let's jump to the tenth plague, the last plague needed. If God's instructions weren't followed, the first-born children and animals of the inhabitants of Egypt would die. The Israelites were instructed to paint blood on their doorways in a specific way. The Egyptians, including the Pharaoh, did not do so. *All* of their firstborn died. The Israelites did so, and their firstborn were saved. This is the basis of the Israelite's annual Passover festival.

The plague created a disaster. Pharaoh was so anxious to get rid of the Israelites that he summoned Aaron and Moses in the middle of the night to beg them to leave. Not only did the Israelites get to walk right out of slavery, but they took their herds and flocks with them. The Egyptians were so anxious for the Israelites to leave that they showered them with clothing, silver, and gold. Just as God had promised, the Israelites plundered the Egyptians.

God wanted to take the Israelites straight to Canaan, but to take the direct route, meant going through dangerous Philistine country. They had been slaves for a very long time, God knew they were not prepared to face war, or, temptation. So, God led them by the desert road toward the Red Sea.² God led them with a cloud during the day, and a giant column of fire at night to give them light.

Pharaoh's grief subsided, and he came to a stark realization. Egypt had lost its workforce: Israelite slaves, innumerable valuable slaves, and valuable assets along with them. Like any good politician, Pharaoh changed his mind and decided to get them back. He led all of the chariots of Egypt, along with horsemen and troops, to chase the Israelites down.

Pharaoh's spies knew exactly where the Israelites were. Pharaoh was ecstatic when he saw the Israelites trapped in front of the Sea. It was going to be an easy task to drive them back to Egypt. That night, the column of fire in front of the Israelites moved between the two groups, preventing them from seeing each other.

The Israelites were in a panic. They berated Moses, "Weren't there enough graves in Egypt for us to die there?" "Didn't we tell you to leave us alone in Egypt and serve the Egyptians there?" It was obvious that we were not prepared to battle against Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. In fact, we were more than willing to return to being slaves rather than trust God.

Moses told us not to be afraid, but to watch the deliverance from the Lord... "the Lord will fight for you, but you have to be still."

"Why are you waiting," the Lord asked Moses, a heavenly smile on his face. "Tell them to move on. Raise your staff and the sea will part, and the Israelites will pass through on dry ground. Then, I will punish the Egyptians so everyone will know that I am the Lord."

Moses stretched out his staff over the sea, and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land, all night long. The Israelites went across on dry land with a wall of water on each side.

The Israelites were nearly finished crossing, when the column of cloud moved. Pharaoh saw the Israelites escaping, and he went into a raging frenzy. All of the chariots and horsemen raced across the dry land. At least it was dry for a while. The chariots started bogging down in the sand, and the Egyptians realized the Lord was against them. It was their turn to panic, they

² Exodus 15:22

retreated, but Moses lowered his staff and as the waters crashed over them, they drowned. Not one survived.

When the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord crush the army of Pharaoh, they understood who God was. They put their trust in him and in Moses. That day, God demonstrated complete victory over the gods of Egypt.

My people have been slaves for so long that they don't know how to be free. And, they have worshiped the gods of Egypt so long that they default to worshiping them. As an elder of the Israelites, I am skeptical. *Today*, they know who God is. God was able to take the Israelites out of Egypt, but I fear he won't be able to get the Egyptian gods out of the Israelites' hearts. The war with Egypt may be over, but the war for the hearts of my people...is far from over.

I did not grow up with my brother, he lived somewhere else. But, he did know who I was, knew I was a talented speaker. I wasn't an elder of Israel, but I was well respected among the people. My name is Aaron.

I am the first-born son of our family; a first-born son of the tribe of Levi. I am three years older than my younger brother, Moses, the greatest prophet of all time. Our older sister, Miriam, was also a prophet.¹ I was eighty-three years-old when the exodus from Egypt began.

I joined Moses when he was on the way to confront Pharaoh. I helped him communicate with both the Israelite elders and Pharaoh. God gave me great powers to make sure Pharaoh let the Hebrews leave Egypt. I was Moses' closest confidante and his right-hand man. I always covered his backside whenever he was attacked. Well, unless I was the attacker.

I was by Moses' side as we talked to Pharaoh and sent the ten plagues. I was by his side as we crossed the Red Sea, and watched Pharaoh and his men drown, the leadership and army of entire country, completely destroyed.

Imagine the party we had once the Lord let us pass through the Red Sea, and after he destroyed our Egyptian enemies! The singing and dancing! Young and old! No longer slaves! Free at last. Free. What can possibly go wrong?

My father used to say, "The key to happiness is having low expectations, and nobody has lower expectations than me!" My father was one of the happiest men I ever knew. And he was a slave. Was he joking? I never really knew but he taught me to be aware of people's differing expectations.

Within days of leaving the Red Sea, there was a huge difference in expectations. I knew the Hebrew people expected to be free, to be without hunger or thirst, and to have a life of comfort. I wasn't sure what God wanted, but it certainly wasn't limited to what the Hebrews wanted.

Our party ended as Moses led us straight into the Desert of Shur. We went three days without finding water. Finally found some and it was undrinkable, so awful, so bitter, we couldn't drink it. In the chaos of kids crying and animals bleating, the people complained to Moses, "What are

¹ Exodus 15:20

we to drink?" It was a legitimate question. My brother was just as frustrated as the people, and he cried out to the Lord.

Well, God had their attention. He told them that if they would be obedient to his commands and do what is right, he would keep them healthy. He showed Moses a piece of wood that Moses threw in the water. Immediately, the water was sweet. Drinkable. Delicious.

Shortly thereafter, God took us to Elim, a place with twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. Elim seemed like a pretty good place to stay, but God had other ideas. So, about six weeks after the Red Sea, we headed into the Desert of Sin. Differing expectations reared their ugly heads again. The further we got into the desert, the hungrier and thirstier the people became. And the worse their memories became. They complained that Moses could have just left them in Egypt where they had all the food they wanted.

Rather than correct their faulty memories, God provided something for them to eat. Manna. Maybe you've heard of it. Every day, except the Sabbath, manna appeared on the ground and the people collected enough to eat. On the day before the Sabbath, they collect double the manna needed for the day so they would have enough for the Sabbath and would not have to work on the Sabbath. The Israelites ate this manna until they entered the Promised Land.

From the Desert of Sin, we traveled from place to place as the Lord commanded. We eventually reached Rephidim, but, once again, there was no water for the people, nor for herds of animals to drink. The people demanded that Moses give them water. He asked them why they demanded this of him. He understood their problem more deeply. "Why are you testing the Lord?" he asked.

The people went nuts, completely out of control. Moses approached the Lord, and asked what to do. The Lord told Moses to take his staff with which he struck the Nile during the plagues, and take some of the elders of Israel, and stand in front of the people. The Lord said that he would stand by the rock at Horeb, and when Moses struck the rock, water would come out of it for the people to drink. The people got their water, but they had demonstrated that they had no trust in the Lord.

God clearly wanted the Israelites to follow wherever he led them. God also wanted to protect the Israelites while they traveled to the Promised Land. The foreign people they came into contact with were supposed to leave them alone, and most of them did.

The Amalekites, were a wild, vicious people having every intention of taking advantage of a peaceful people who seemed to be defenseless. They decided not to let the Hebrews travel uncontested. Moses appointed Joshua to choose some men and fight them off.

Moses was going to take part in the defense plan as well, but chose to fight in his own way. He took his staff of God, our friend Hur, and me to a hill overlooking the battlefield. As long as Moses held up the staff, the Israelites would dominate, but when he lowered the staff, the

Amalekites surged ahead. When those trends became apparent, Hur and I moved a rock over for Moses to sit on, and then we held his hands up. Until sunset. The Israelites, led by Joshua, won the war!

The Lord was so angry with the Amalekites for attacking us, that he said he would blot out their name from under heaven. Moses built an altar to confirm the victory and give God the glory, and declared that the Lord would be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.

Until the time of David, the Amalekites harassed the people of Israel. For more than four centuries. Then one day, they attacked David's defenseless camp and kidnapped all the people. David chased them down, wiped them out, and they are not mentioned again in the Bible.

One afternoon, we received word that Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses who lived in Midian was coming into the Israelite camp we'd set up in the wilderness. He was bringing Moses' two sons with him, Moses rushed out to meet them. Moses told Jethro all that God had done for the Hebrews. Jethro was a priest of Midian, and responded by acknowledging that the Lord is greater than all other gods, and he brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to the Lord.

All the elders of Israel and I came to eat with Jethro. We were quite impressed with his burnt offering and sacrifice to God. We wondered if that was something we should do, but none of us were priests, and we weren't sure if that would please God or not. So...we did nothing.

The next day, my brother sat to act as judge for the people. There were hordes of people standing around wanting his attention. Moses sat in that same spot listening to the people and sorting out their issues from morning until night. Jethro watched this from a distance.

This wasn't a time of huge problems, but it was a good time to prevent future ones. Jethro gave some advice that should resound with religious leaders for the rest of time. "What you are doing is not good, for you or the people," Jethro said, "You are wearing yourself out. You cannot do this alone." He then instructed Moses on how to delegate his authority to chiefs of thousands of people, groups of hundreds of people, fifties and tens. The chiefs judged the easy cases, and Moses sat in judgment on the hard cases.

We'd been gone from Egypt about three months, and it was clear that we should be settling in for the long haul, not expecting things to be over soon. God was providing manna, we had a new judicial system, and we were in the middle of nowhere. Jethro's advice should have changed the expectations of all of us. There was no way that this was going to end in the next few days, for sure.

But our lives were about to change. In fact, the course of history for the entire world was about to change.

We were moving from the desert to the mountains, but not for a scenic vacation.

Let me apologize in advance for my lack of communication skills, and my weak voice. Even God agrees that speaking is not my spiritual gift or talent. He is so gracious that he gives me my brother, Aaron, to speak on my behalf when needed.

Let me also apologize in advance for these people that I lead. They can be out-spoken, pessimistic, and hard-headed. They do what they want even when it gets them in trouble. And, they act in one way that absolutely drives God crazy...they grumble and complain.

Lastly, a disclaimer about a verse in the Bible, Numbers 12:3. Many people believe I wrote all or most of the first five books of the Old Testament, but I don't want to claim Numbers 12:3. If you don't remember that verse, it says that I am the most humble man on the face of the earth.

People today have some psychological terms that I really like. One of them is "father complex." This term alludes to the fact that people psychologically evolve to deal with heavy patriarchal fathers, absent fathers, abusive fathers. If such a thing had existed in my time, I probably would have had one.

I was a Hebrew who grew up for a very short time with a father who was a slave before I was removed from that household and became an adopted grandson of the most powerful man on earth, the Egyptian Pharaoh. He paid no attention to me at all. Most of the Egyptians in court despised me, but they had to put up with me because Pharaoh's daughter was my mom. I was the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. Pharaoh's grandson.

"Acting out"...that's another term I like. When I was about forty, I acted out in frustration. An Egyptian was abusing a Hebrew, so I killed him. I was a Hebrew, but I didn't grow up as a Hebrew. I had no real emotional attachment to the Hebrews at all, but in my frustration, I still acted out.

"Father figure" is another useful term. My father figure came into my life after the murder incident. Jethro, he was the priest of Midian. He was my hero. I learned how to deal with God, people, and sheep from Jethro. For the next forty years, he acted as my father figure. And then, a different hero came into my life.

I had the burning bush moment when I came into direct relationship with God. From that day on, my life changed. People's lives always change when they come into true relationship with God. He had me lead the Hebrews out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the desert. I was to be God's representative...their father figure.

It's been about three months since we left Egypt, and we are camped in the Desert of Sinai, in front of the Mountain. The people and herds stretch as far as I can see. The sounds and smells are overwhelming. The people watch as I climb up the mountain, follow the voice of God. I'm eighty years old, but the climb does not tire me out. I reach a flat spot near the top.

God tells me what I am to say to the Hebrews. Words that could change the future of the world. "I brought you out of Egypt to myself. Now if you will obey me, and keep my covenant, you will be a special treasure for me above all people. You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The challenge is cast. What will my people choose to do?

I go down the mountain and call the elders of Israel together and tell them of God's offer. All of the people answer together. "All the Lord has said, we will do." I shouted with joy, but I also wish I'd said, "Are you sure you will do all the Lord has said? Do you really know what it means to obey the Lord?" But I don't. I report their answer back to the Lord. He sends me back to sanctify them for three days. He tells me to control the people tightly so they don't get hurt when the Lord himself comes to them.

On the third day, a cloud comes upon the mountain, a warning horn sounds, and the people shake with awe. The people come out of the camp and stand at the foot of the mountain. The Lord descends in fire, the whole mountain shakes and smokes. After God and I speak in front of the people, he calls me to the top of the mountain again. He tells me to go warn the people to stay behind the boundaries or they will get hurt.

I go down and warn the people, and Aaron and I go back up the mountain. When we arrive, we hear the words that will reverberate throughout the ages...The Ten Commandments. The Lord continues with many, many more commandments for the people to follow. The people confirm they will do everything...everything...*everything* the Lord says.

Aaron, his sons, and seventy of the elders of Israel follow me up the mountain. At God's command, I go close, but they stay at a distance. I write down everything the Lord says. I read these to the people, and they again agree to do everything the Lord says.

I take Joshua further up the mountain with me, and leave Aaron behind. I instruct the people to wait for me, and talk to Aaron about what to do if there are any disputes. For six days, the glory of the Lord and a cloud is on the mountain. On the seventh day, the Lord calls me into the cloud. I stay there for forty days. Forty days!

During those forty days, God gives me lengthy instructions for the Israelites, and amazingly detailed instructions on building a new portable worship building, known as the Tabernacle, and all of its furnishings. I don't know it then, but the Tabernacle will last until the time of Solomon, when the Temple is built.

Now, get this. After God finishes speaking, he gives me two stone tablets with the covenant law written on them. The writing is inscribed by the finger of God! These tablets are so special that I know the Hebrews will value them forever, and will never do anything to violate the agreement we have made with God. I can't wait for us to start building the Tabernacle.

Those thoughts are still being celebrated in my mind. "Go down off my mountain." God thunders, "The people have done an unforgivable thing. They are bowing down to a golden calf as if it is their God. Leave me alone, so that I may destroy them in my anger. And I will make *you* into a great nation!"

For a moment that sounds good to me. I am so mad at my people, I agree with God. Then I remember...I am the father figure for my people. I beg God to relent. I remind him that the Egyptians will say that he lured the Israelites away just to destroy them. I remind him that he promised Abraham to make his descendants into a great nation. I beg God to relent, and he does.

All the way down the mountain, I am bewildered by God's statement "a golden calf being used as an idol?" How can that have happened? I find out the story.

I had been on the mountain for many days, the people became impatient. They convinced Aaron to build them idols like their gods in Egypt. He took all of their gold earrings, melted them down, and made them a golden calf. He instructed them to worship the thing he made as if it were God. He built an altar, and they sacrificed offerings to the thing they made themselves. The...the stupidity.

So, I come off of the mountain, and there they are, the people - dancing and worshiping the golden calf. I am infuriated, I take the stone tablets, written by the very hand of God, and throw them to the ground. They shatter into pieces. The people were not following the covenant they had made with God so the tablets were worthless. At least that's what I believed at the time. I grab the golden calf and grind it into powder. I mix it with water and make the people drink it until it is gone. All the while, Aaron babbles some ludicrous story about how the people *made* him make an idol for them, and when he melted the gold, the calf formed itself.

I look at the people, they are still indulging in revelry so shameful. Delivered from 400 years of slavery, with zero chance of freedom for who knows, 400 more years? Until a loving God, whom they had all but forgotten worked on their behalf. It was nothing they had earned or deserved, and this is what they do in return, return to worshipping a man-made god, spitting in his face, so shameful that the surrounding peoples will laugh at them. I shout for anyone who is on the Lord's side to join me, and the people of my tribe of Levi step up. I instruct them to take swords and go through the camp indiscriminately and kill those reveling in their blasphemous, unconscionable idolatry. They kill about 3,000 men that day. For their service, from now on, the Levites are set apart to serve God.

After more repentance and more punishments, God decides to let us go on to the promised land of Canaan. He will send an angel to drive out the people living there. However, God warns that he won't be with us, so as to prevent himself from wiping us out because we are so obstinate and contrary... stiff-necked. This gets the people's attention.

Eventually, we get back on good enough terms with God that he lets me carve replacement stone tablets with the ten commandments on them. He also gives us more instructions to follow and prepares us to build the tabernacle.

Finally, I think, we are ready to follow through on our commitment to God: follow his instructions, let him drive out the people, enter the promised land, and then we destroy any idols there.

So simple. Obey God, and he will provide for us beyond anything we could imagine.

What is the book of *Exodus* about? You may say Moses, the plagues, the exodus of the Hebrews through the Red Sea. That's about one-third of *Exodus*. It's about Mount Sinai, the Golden Calf, the Ten Commandments, and other commandments. That's about another one-third of *Exodus*.

What is the remaining third about? Even excellent Bible students usually can't answer this. God allots as much space to this overlooked item as the other well-known parts, so it must be just as important.

The remaining one-third of *Exodus* is about a tent and its furnishings. The most famous tent in history! How famous? More than three thousand years after Moses, books and movies about this tent and its furnishings will be best sellers and blockbuster hits. Wars will be fought over the furnishings of this tent. If any part of it existed today, the pieces would auction for millions and millions of dollars.

God lived in this tent for more than forty years. Well, not full-time, but he did live in it part-time. He made sure that the tent and its furnishings were made precisely to his instructions. And, he did not miss out on a single detail. I should know. I designed and supervised the construction of the tent and its furnishings. Do you know the tent...the Tabernacle?

My name is Bezalel ben Uri ben Hur. Just call me Bezalel. I am of the tribe of Judah, the same tribe as King David and Jesus.

I know what you are going to ask first... "Bez, where are a bunch of ex-slaves going to get the cash and materials to build an extravagant tent? Here's where. During the tenth plague, virtually all of the Egyptian families had firstborn sons that died. They wanted the Hebrews gone. In order to hasten the departure, these Egyptian families showered money and other goods on the Hebrews.¹ The Bible says the Hebrews "plundered" the Egyptians.

Next, you are going to ask, "Bez, where did a bunch of ex-slaves get the skills to build the Tabernacle?" And...you are asking that question to the right guy. God filled me with his Spirit, and filled me with skill, ability, and knowledge of all sorts of artistic crafts...from metalwork to jewelry to woodwork. God also gave a friend of mine named Oholiab, and me, the ability to teach others to be master craftsmen of any skill needed.

¹ Exodus 12:36

Now your question is probably, “Why do I need to learn about the Tabernacle? It no longer exists, and it has no bearing on my life.” The first part of that question is true...kind of. There is no record of the Tabernacle existing after the time of King David. However, many of the furnishings existed for more than a thousand years, most notably the Ark of the Covenant. Some believe the Ark still exists today. Like I said, blockbuster movies.

Even though the Tabernacle was replaced by the Temple, and even though the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, the Tabernacle’s meaning still has relevance today. It demonstrates how important it is to have God’s house be pure and as perfect as possible, even if that house is you! God lives in you, you are his house.

There is another very important reason to know about the Tabernacle, I’ll save that until later. And, you will be glad you listened carefully to my description of the tent and its furnishings first.

As you approach the Tabernacle from the east, you see a 75 feet wide curtain in front of you. This curtain runs 150 feet deep to the west. The area that this curtain surrounds is known as the Outer Courtyard. It is about one-quarter the size of a football field.

As you enter from the east, you see in front of you the Altar of Burnt Offerings, and behind it the Brazen Laver, a bronze basin. Behind the Brazen Laver is the Tabernacle itself. The Tabernacle is 15 feet wide, 15 feet high and 45 feet deep,

From the east, you enter the first compartment known as the Most Holy Place. It is 15 feet wide, 15 feet high, and 30 feet deep. It comprises two-thirds of the tent. On your right is the Table of Shewbread, special Sabbath bread, and on your left is the Candlestick. In front of you is the Altar of Incense, and behind it is the Curtain.

Behind the Curtain is the space named the Holy of Holies. It is a cube that is 15 feet wide, high, and deep, a cube. It contains the Ark of the Covenant and Mercy Seat, that’s the cover of the ark that has the cherubim on it...Yes? No? Go watch that blockbuster movie, it’s in there. All of this is a very brief description of the Tent and its furnishings. In addition to this are the garments that the priests wear. The brevity of my description completely understates the magnificence of everything. Let me give you an idea of the scale of the whole structure and its furnishings.

In total, the project uses one ton of gold, three and three-quarters tons of silver and two and one-half tons of bronze. Adding in the cloth and workmanship, the tabernacle today would cost about \$50 million dollars. However, the people were so generous, Moses had to command them to quit bringing offerings to build it.

And from those weight numbers, you can imagine how hard it is to set up, take down, and transport. It’s portable, but not by your standards. And we don’t have semitrucks. God gave very specific instructions to the Levites on how to move it and set it up. You may remember

that the Levites are given special privileges to serve God because of how they supported Moses during the debacle of the Golden Calf.

Let's go back to how the Tabernacle is made. You approach the Outer Court from the east. The Outer Court is made of a curtain of finely twisted linen, with silver and bronze hooks and bands. It stands about seven and one-half feet high, and covers a periphery of 450 feet. It surrounds an area about one-quarter the size of a football field.

As you enter the Outer Court, the Altar of Burnt Offering is in front of you. It's made of bronze covered acacia wood. All of its implements are made of bronze. It is about four feet high, and almost eight feet wide and deep.

Behind the Altar of Burnt Offering is the huge Brazen Laver for priests to wash their hands. It is made of bronze from the mirrors of women who serve at the entrance to the tent of meeting.²

As you walk past the Brazen Laver, you enter the Tabernacle from the east. Tabernacle... 15 feet wide, 15 feet high, and 45 feet deep. And it's covered with ten curtains made of finely twisted linen, and blue, purple, and scarlet yarn which are embroidered in very intricate patterns. Each curtain is about 42 feet long and 6 feet wide. The curtains that separates the Holy of Holies and the entrance are made of the same materials.

Over the tent, is a layer of goat hair, covered by red ram skins, covered by hides of sea cows. All fabrics are held up by acacia wood frames and posts, with gold, silver, and bronze loops, stands and bases.

As you enter the Tabernacle from the east, the Table of Shewbread is on the right. It is made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold. It had loops of gold with poles of gold-covered acacia wood to carry the table. All of its plates, bowls, and dishes were made of gold.

The Candlestick, or lampstand, is on your left. It is made of about 75 pounds of gold. It has seven lamps, and everything is intricately crafted into exceptional, distinct designs.

In front of you is the Altar of Incense. It was about one and one-half feet wide and deep, and three feet high. It was made of gold covered acacia wood.

Behind the curtain is the space known as the Holy of Holies. Inside of it is the Mercy Seat and Ark of the Covenant.

The Mercy Seat is the lid for the Ark of the Covenant. It is made of gold, and is about four feet long and over two feet wide. On this are two cherubs made of gold. The cherubs are placed at each end, facing each other, with wings upraised. The Mercy Seat is where God appeared to meet with Moses.

² Exodus 38:8

The Ark of the Covenant contains a gold jar of manna from the exodus trip, Aaron's staff that budded, and the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from the Mountain.³ It is about four feet wide, and a little over two feet deep and high. It is made of acacia wood overlaid with gold inside and out. It has gold rings for poles of acacia wood that are gold-covered and used to carry the Ark.

Solomon placed the Ark in the Temple, but at that time, it only contained the two stone tablets.⁴ The last specific mention of the location of the Ark of the Covenant in the Bible is when it is placed in the Temple built by King Josiah.⁵

In addition to the tent and its furnishings, God gave very specific instructions about how to make the garments for the priests, including the ephod, the sleeveless garment they wore, and breast piece.

After the Tabernacle's completion, Moses inspected it in fine detail before approving it, and then he blessed it and presented it to the Lord. The Lord had us set it up, and the most amazing thing happened.

The cloud descended and covered it, and the glory of the Lord filled it. For a while, even Moses could not enter it to meet with the Lord. It was too much power and glory for a human being to withstand. From that time on, whenever the cloud would lift, we Levites would pack up the tent and all that gold and silver and bronze, and follow the cloud. Whenever the cloud settled on the tent, we Levites would stay put with the rest of the people.

The cloud of the Lord was over the tent by day, and fire was in the cloud at night. This was in sight of all of all Israelites throughout all of our travels.

So, what could possibly be the very important reason to know about the Tabernacle. According to the writer of *Hebrews*, the Tabernacle is a shadow and copy of what is in heaven. That's why Moses was warned to build it *exactly* to the specifications in the instructions God gave him on the mountain.⁶ It was heaven on earth.

I assure you, I built the Tabernacle exactly according to those instructions. Heaven on Earth.

³ Hebrews 9:4

⁴ 1 Kings 8:9

⁵ 2 Chronicles 35:3

⁶ Hebrews 8:3-5

Mosaic Covenant. It's a million-dollar phrase, huh? What does it mean? In my words? A deal. God and Moses made a deal. God promised to make the Israelites his treasured possession and a holy nation if they would obey him fully. The Israelites agree to fully obey God. It's a deal. Moses made a sweet deal for the Israelites.

Shortly after they struck the deal, Moses went up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. When he came down from the mountain, he found the Israelites worshipping a golden calf, made by his brother, Aaron, and the people. Worshipping a golden calf they had made with their own hands as their God! Oh, Moses. He called for support from the people to punish the idolaters. Only one tribe came to his aid. His tribe. Only the tribe of Levi, was willing to support him and punish the idolaters. For that...act... of support, the tribe of Levi was set apart for all time. We didn't know what being set apart meant, but we were to find out a few months later.

My name is Nadab of that tribe, the tribe of Levi. I am the oldest son of Aaron, the brother of Moses. Or rather, I *was* the son of Aaron...until God killed me.

Part of the deal that God and Moses made was that the Israelites would obey everything God told them to do. Don't forget that. It turns out that God was very detailed in what he wanted to them to do. His commandments to the Israelites fill page after page after page in your Old Testament. Every detail concerning the priests' duties, feasts, sacrifices, Tabernacle, their clothes, even their health...*everything* laid out in excruciating detail.

You may be thinking to yourself, "God's so picky!" I mean what about the massive effort the priests had to expend in all those details, maybe he could have been more considerate, how do the priests feel about all this work they've suddenly been assigned? I felt exactly the same way. What I didn't realize was that God was trying to set-up a long-term pattern of communication with his people, and it would only succeed if there was 100% transparency and obedience. Another thing I could not have possibly known, until the writer of Hebrews revealed it about fifteen centuries after my death, was that the tabernacle was an exact model of heaven.¹ God was insistent that it and all worship procedures followed his commands precisely.

Let's fast forward to about six or eight months after God and Moses made the deal. Six to eight months, not very long! The Tabernacle is complete, and it is time to consecrate both it and the priests.

¹ Hebrews 8:5

Even though my father had been a major instigator in the Golden Calf incident, God forgave him. God chose my father and his four sons to be priests over Israel. In a very elaborate ceremony, God had Moses purify the five of us through a ceremonial washing with water. He designated Aaron the high priest by clothing him with a special robe and tunic. He put the ephod garment and breast piece on him. Finally, he placed a turban on Aaron's head, with a sacred gold plate on the front of it. Every step was very detailed.

After consecrating the tabernacle and every single, solitary thing in it, Moses put tunics on all of my brothers and me. He tied sashes around us, and placed caps on our heads. Just as the Lord commanded. Every detail. From that day forward, we were priests. Well, we were priests by name...we just didn't know what to do.

Through Moses, God taught us precisely how to make sacrifices. How to properly take offerings, and accurately follow all of the Lord's commands without error. He told us that our duties were so sacred that if we did not follow his instructions exactly, we would die...and by exactly, I mean *exactly*. Every detail. Or we would die.

Why was God so fanatical about having his instructions followed exactly? He knew that we, the priests, were setting the example others would follow for thousands of years. Any little errors we made would be exaggerated over time until they became giant errors.

After we were consecrated as priests, in front of all of the people, we made sacrifices to the Lord. He was *so* pleased that fire came out of the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offerings on the altar. The people were so joyful that God was pleased with their complete obedience, that they fell facedown and worshiped the Lord.

From the first, we priests were maniacs to follow God's instructions perfectly. We certainly had no desire to die because of carelessness. To this day, I still don't know why my brother, and I decided to purposely violate God's instructions. We were prideful, I suppose, but maybe we were just lazy. We were surely being stupid.

Anyway, we were given containers for burning incense, and that incense was required to be burned by fire sourced in a very particular way. But...fire is fire, right? My brother and I knowingly put fire from an alternative source, unauthorized fire, into our containers and offered it to the Lord. We violated the rules of Moses and angered God. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and burned us to death. To death!

Moses refused to let my father and two remaining brothers mourn openly for us, because that would have made it look like God had done something wrong instead of us. So, my father and brothers stayed at the entrance to the Tabernacle, and continued worshipping God.

I envy Christians. According to your beliefs, you don't have to follow the numerous laws given to Moses for the Hebrews to follow. You have a New Testament that justifies your position for

not following the laws given to the Hebrews through Moses.

Ironically, the book is named, *Hebrews*. The writer of *Hebrews* says that Jesus is able to completely save those who come to God through him, because he intercedes for them.² It also says that since Jesus is the perfect high priest, he doesn't have to sacrifice day after day for his sins and the sins of the people. Instead, He sacrificed for their sins once and for all when he offered himself up as the perfect sacrifice.³

Because the laws of Moses are not directly binding on Christians, many Christians don't bother to read the book of *Leviticus*. This third book of the Bible sets out detailed instructions of sacrificial offerings and other intricate rules for the Hebrews and their priests to follow. However, since the New Testament writers refer to *Leviticus*, it is to your benefit to know about it and how its principles are applicable to you and your family.

My death, for instance, is one example for you. God is very serious about being honored and worshiped in the appropriate way. And by appropriate, I mean in the way that he has set forth to be worshiped, *not* in the way you feel like you want to offer worship.

Leviticus is a lengthy lesson in understanding that worship is all about God and what he wants, not about you and what you want. That doesn't change from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

It is a reminder of a theme that runs from *Genesis* to *Revelation*. God wants to live among people. In *Leviticus*, people are able to do that through appropriate offerings, rituals, and actions that allow the covering of their sins.

Leviticus opens with five chapters concerning types of offerings to the Lord. One lesson to be learned from these chapters is that God expects offerings to him to be without flaws. Without blemish is how it's often stated. They are to be the type that God wants, given in a manner that God wants.

Another lesson to be learned from the offerings is that people can sin unintentionally and unknowingly. Even so, it is still sin. That may not square up with your modern notion of fairness, but take it from me, it is something to seriously keep in mind.

After the first five chapters concerning offerings, there are five chapters concerning instructions to the priests, and institutions of the priesthood for Aaron and his sons. This is where you will find my story. God knows that the priests will guide the people on religious matters for many, many centuries. He makes every aspect of their responsibilities perfectly clear.

² Hebrews 7:25

³ Hebrews 7:26-27

After the five chapters on offerings and five chapters about the priesthood, there are five chapters on cleanliness and uncleanness, and the correct procedures for treating them, or at least dealing with them.

On a practical basis, the Hebrews have moved from a moderate climate with plenty of water, to a desert climate with little water. They have moved from a place where Egyptian masters told them what to do to a time of freedom. They have moved from permanent dwellings to permanent journey. They have moved into a season where a mass of people live in close proximity to one another, and to herds of animals.

Some of the regulations seem to be purely for sanitation and health reasons. Other regulations have a ritual basis for cleanliness before God.

Chapter 16 is about the Day of Atonement and its highly structured and detailed sacrifices. Once a year, the High Priest is to make reparations for himself, the Most Holy Place, the Tabernacle, the altar, and the people. He does this through a sacrifice of a bull to atone for the sins of his family, a goat to atone for the sins of the people, and two rams as burnt sacrifices. Another goat is known as the scapegoat. It is taken in the wilderness and released. This is to be done for the sins, wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites. When all of this is done properly, down to the last detail, the sins of the Israelites for that year are covered. *However*, the sins start piling up again immediately but won't be covered until the next Day of Atonement.

The following ten chapters are about different aspects of personal holiness. In excruciating and exacting detail, God instructs the Israelites about how to live peacefully with one another, and with him. Among other things, these rules of behavior prescribe a life that is significantly different than those of the peoples they live around now, and those they will displace from the Promised Land.

These chapters touch on matters of food, sexual behavior, neighborliness, and crimes. They talk of rules for sacrifices, festivals, and blasphemy. The last chapter in this group explains the benefits of obeying God, and the punishments for disobeying God. When you read these chapters, it makes you wonder...why anybody would consider disobeying God. It also makes you realize that sin must be a very powerful, attractive force.

The last chapter of *Leviticus* should be precious to Christians, because it establishes the concept of redemption. Redemption is the idea that something that belongs to the Lord can be purchased for a reasonable price plus a premium. This exact Old Testament concept does not translate to Christianity, but the *idea* of redemption does.

The New Testament teaches that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the necessary price to pay to redeem people from spiritual death. From *Leviticus*, you can infer that Christ had to be sinless to be an acceptable, perfect sacrifice. From *Leviticus*, you see why only a perfect sacrifice is acceptable to a holy God.

Even though Christians are not bound by the rules of Moses that are set out in *Leviticus*, many of the things you learn in *Leviticus* will help you understand the heart and nature of God. And that is a good thing, because, unlike me, you want to make sure you offer God a perfect and pleasing sacrifice. The Apostle Paul says it best, “Offer yourself as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.”⁴ And from the way I see it, it’s your end of the deal, and you definitely want to keep it.

⁴ Romans 12:1

Only two people are qualified to tell this story. My partner is one of them. I am the other. We're spies. We are the only two who completed the forty-day mission. You may have guessed that my name is Joshua, but I'm his partner, Caleb. And yes, we are also the only two of our spy unit to survive the Hebrew's forty-year trek in the wilderness and additionally participate in the conquering of the Promised Land.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, as spies often do, especially retired spies. I want to tell you about the book of *Numbers*, the fourth book of the Old Testament. It picks up the exodus story from the end of Deuteronomy. It gets its name from the two censuses it describes – one at Mount Sinai, and the second when the Hebrews enter the Promised Land.

The first nine chapters of *Numbers* talk of the preparation of the journey of the Hebrews from the Desert of Sinai that took place approximately a year after the exodus from Egypt. God's intent was for them to go directly from Egypt to the Promised Land and take necessary provisions for it. A census showed that there were more than six hundred thousand men of fighting age among the Jews, not counting the Levites who were required to take care of the Tabernacle.¹ This section of the book of Numbers includes great detail about the Levites, health precautions, tabernacle worship, and moving the huge camp.

God spoke directly with Moses in the Tabernacle. When he was in the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum where the presence God actually dwells, the voice of God would come to him from between the two cherubim on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant.²

¹ Numbers 1:46

² Numbers 7:89

The cloud stayed above the Tabernacle. During the night, the cloud looked like fire. Whenever the cloud lifted, the Israelites moved to the next destination. When the cloud remained above the Tabernacle, the Israelites stayed put.

The next five chapters of *Numbers* tell of the journey of the Hebrews from the Desert of Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea. This is an action-packed section. I love it. First, some people complained about their hardships, and the Lord punished them by fire. Then some got tired of eating manna, and complained. They said they wanted the food they had enjoyed in Egypt. God sent so many quail for them to eat that they were overcome with them. God punished them for complaining about his provision and the leadership of Moses.

In a jealous rage, Aaron and Miriam rebelled against the authority of Moses, they complained about his wife. God punished Miriam, striking her immediately with leprosy. However, when Moses prayed for her, she was healed.

The most important part of these chapters is the story of the spies. And that's not solely because it's my personal story. It's a good one, if I do say so myself. This is the first time I am mentioned in the Bible. God told Moses to send spies into the Promised Land. Think about that, a spy mission originated by God to obtain more information so that Moses could make decisions about how to proceed. Moses chose twelve spies, one from each tribe. I was chosen from the tribe of Judah, the same tribe as David and Jesus. Joshua was chosen from the tribe of Ephraim, the smallest of the tribes.

Canaan was the land that God had promised us. So, over the next forty days, our team of twelve spies traveled throughout Canaan. The land literally flowed with milk and honey. The grapes were enormous. We brought back a branch with one cluster of grapes, it was so big and heavy that we needed two men to carry it. At the end of forty days, we returned to the Israelite camp.

We showed the fruit to the people. Told them of the milk and honey. Ten of the spies reported that Canaan's cities were large and fortified, that the people were giants and should be feared. They lacked faith in God's ability to deliver the land

into our hands. Cowards! “We can do this, take possession of the Land” I begged. With the Lord we would certainly take it.

The ten spies repeatedly discouraged the people from fighting for the land. The people were so scared that they rebelled against Moses and Aaron. They threatened to stone Joshua and me. God was furious with the people and their lack of faith. Their punishment? To wander in the desert for forty years. During this time, every adult who grumbled would die. Only Joshua and I were given permission to live and go into the Promised Land.

The third section of *Numbers* includes roughly seven chapters. It tells of our trip from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab. These seven chapters cover approximately thirty-seven years of time, so they only talk of a few things in detail.

One of the stories concerns Korah and his leading a rebellion of more than 250 men against Moses. They did not want to follow Moses. Moses set up a contest for the Lord to choose between him and them. It was no contest. The earth swallowed up Korah and his associate, their families and their possessions. The remainder of the men were burned up by fire from the Lord. About 15,000 people died as a result of this rebellion. You would think that the people would figure out not to rebel or complain against God and Moses, but they did not.

On another occasion, the people complained about not having enough water for them and their livestock. God told Moses to take his staff and talk to a rock, and water would flow from it. In his anger and pride, Moses chided the people by saying, “Must we bring you water out of this rock?” and struck it like he had the previous time. By not giving God the sole glory by doing exactly what he was told, Moses sinned. His punishment was not being allowed to enter the Promised Land.

It is possible that Paul referred to this rock in 1 Corinthians 10:4 when he said, “They drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them.” Paul seemed to think that the rock was a portable drinking fountain that moved with us.

This section ends with the Hebrews defeating Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan. By doing so, we took possession of the Amorite lands east of the

Jordan River. These lands would become the possession of the tribes of Gad, Reuben and Manasseh.

The fourth section of Numbers is about four chapters long. It is the story of the prophet Balaam and Balak the King of Moab. Balak tried to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. Every time Balaam tried to do so, he blessed the Israelites instead.

This story has one humorous incident and one tragic incident. When Balaam first went to Balak, God decided he should not go. He placed a killing angel in his path. Balaam's donkey was able to see the angel and refused to go forward, but Balaam could not see the angel. The enraged Balaam beat the donkey to make it go forward, but the donkey balked three times. Finally, God enabled the donkey to talk to Balaam. The donkey talks so rationally to the irrational Balaam that you have to smile. It said, „Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?“ After a short conversation with the donkey, Balaam was allowed to see the killing angel and realize his brush with death.

As for the tragic incident...while Balaam was not able to curse the Israelites, he did something far worse. He taught the Moabite women how to best seduce the Israelite men so that they would join them in sexual immorality and the worship of idols.³ Many Israelite men gave in willingly, and easily, to their seduction. This had disastrous, long-term effect upon the Israelites.

The last section of *Numbers* is about eleven chapters long. This section tells of the final preparation of the Israelites to enter the Promised Land of Canaan. Once again, a census was taken, and once again there were just over six hundred thousand men of fighting age, not counting the Levites.

When the census was taken, it was determined that only Joshua and I remained from the Israelite adults who entered into the wilderness!

³ 2 Peter 2:15-16, Jude 11, Revelation 2:14

Joshua had the spirit of leadership, so God commanded Moses to give him some authority in front of the people as a sign that he would succeed Moses. This was done by Eleazar the priest in front of all the people.

I shouldn't jump ahead of the story, but like a person my age, I'm going to do it anyway. I want to tell you what happened to me.

Joshua led the people into the Promised Land. Their first victory was Jericho, when its walls fell. Then, under the leadership of Joshua, we set out to completely drive out or destroy the people living in Canaan.

I was forty years-old when our spy team had gone into the Promised Land. That means I was more than eighty-five years-old when Joshua reached the piece of the Promised Land that was promised to me. I was as strong then as when I was forty, and I was anxious to prove that I could drive out the people that the other spies feared. I did so, and my family captured Hebron, and owned it for the future.

Incidentally, Hebron was David's first headquarters as King. Remember, David and I were of the same tribe.

I wish that I had also been given the assignment to capture Jebus, the city that David had to capture a few hundred years later. You know Jebus by another name...Jerusalem. And even at 85, I would certainly have taken it so that David would have already had his capital city.

Am I a good guy or a bad guy? Moses thinks I am a good guy. God thinks I am a good guy. But you, with your modern sensibilities, you may very well think I'm a bad guy: Intolerant of others' choices; willing to define what is evil; and, violent. Yeah, a very bad guy according to current norms.

If you think I'm a bad guy, you may very well think God is a bad guy, too. Intolerant, violent. Willing to define evil exactly. No getting around that if you read the Old Testament. And a New Testament writer says God doesn't change like shifting shadows, so the New Testament God of love is the same being as the Old Testament God.¹ So...what's up? How do you make sense of it all?

God HATES evil. That's where it starts. He hates evil. He does not dislike it, or disapprove of it a bit. He hates it with his entire being.

Why? Because God loves people, and evil destroys people, both physically and spiritually. Evil spreads itself, and preserves itself. In my time, evil is perpetuated through the worship of false gods, so God hates false gods, too.

My name is Phinehas, son of Eleazar. My grandfather is Aaron, the brother of Moses. I am a priest of the Most High God of the Hebrews. And I'm definitely one of God's good guys.

A little over four decades ago, Moses and Aaron led the Hebrew nation out of Egypt. Their destination was the land of Canaan, later known as Israel. God had promised the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham and Isaac, and he was making good on that promise.

After the Hebrews had been traveling for a few years, God ordered them to go and take over the land from the people who lived there. The Hebrews were afraid so they refused. Defiant and rebellious. The consequences? God sentenced them

¹ James 1:17

to wander in the wilderness for forty years. And then he used those forty years to purify the people. He wasn't just punishing them to be mean. The survivors learned to depend solely on God for every good thing. The rebellious people died during that time; the people who grew up with the gods of Egypt, died in the desert.

More importantly, during that forty years, the Hebrews had little contact with the outside world and were not enticed by foreign false gods. After forty years in the desert, the Hebrews are much better prepared to enter the Promised Land of Canaan, but they still have a long way to go. For one thing, all of our trained fighting men died in the desert. We are not prepared for conflict, or war.

We start traveling toward the eastern border of Canaan. When we cross the Arnon Gorge, we confront Sihon, the king of Heshbon. We offer to cross his land peacefully, but he chooses to confront us in battle. God leads us to complete victory over every town. We destroy every man, woman and child, but God allows us to keep the livestock.²

We turn toward Bashan, and confront the Og the King in the battle of Edrei.³ God gives us complete victory over every town, even the walled cities. We kill every man, woman, and child, but God allows us to keep the livestock.

We are on the verge of entering and conquering Canaan, BUT our understanding of what that means is based on what God told Moses on Mount Sinai.⁴ God will use his angel and other spiritual weapons to drive out the people ahead of us. He will turn the country over to us, and we will have plenty of food, water, and will be disease free. He will do it slowly so the land will stay good and the wild animals will not take over. All we have to do is obey God, and be very careful not to worship any of the Canaanite gods, make treaties with the Canaanites, or let any of them live among us. We expect to drive them out before us, like frightened herds of sheep. No fuss, no muss, no bloodshed.

Unfortunately, we haven't been perfect little angels ourselves since God told us how he would drive out the Canaanites. The golden calf incident showed we have

² Deuteronomy 2:24-36

³ Deuteronomy 3:1-11

⁴ Exodus 23:20-33

a propensity to worship false gods. Our grumbling and complaining has shown we don't fully trust God. And our rebellion against Moses and God resulted in our wandering in the desert for forty years.

Now, we Hebrews are entering the plain of Moab. This will be our last stop before entering Canaan. No enemy can stop us now. Well, one enemy can. "We have met the enemy, and the enemy is...us." Surely you have heard that before. We could have invented it.

While we are camped in Shittim, our men begin indulging in sexual immorality with the Moabite women living nearby. They invite our men to their sacrificial feasts to their false gods, and our men go. They eat the sacrificial meals, and bow down to the gods.

We find out later that the Moabite women were purposeful in doing this. They were taught by the prophet, Balaam, that this was the way to destroy the Israelites.⁵ The women weren't being harlots, they were being warriors.

The Lord's anger begins to burn! He allows a plague to start among the Israelites.

God instructs Moses to kill the leaders of this immoral behavior, and Moses instructs Israel's judges to do so. While Moses and the people are weeping over this situation, Zimri Son of Salu prances by with a Moabite woman and takes her into his tent.

I am furious! God's righteous anger burns in my heart. I grab a spear and barge into the man's tent, to find them already committing sin. I drive the spear with such force that it goes through him and into her!

I come out of the tent, shaking, the plague stops. Twenty-four thousand Israelites die in the plague. God instructs us to treat the Moabites as enemies from now on.

God looks favorably upon my action, and he rewards my family with an everlasting agreement to be priests. The Psalmist says that my action is credited to me as righteousness for endless generations to come.

⁵ Numbers 31:16

But you cannot really understand the importance of my story without knowing why God rewards me. God rewards me because I have as much zeal for God's honor as he does. I will do whatever it takes for him to be honored OR to keep him from being dishonored.

Zeal is an English word that has gone out of favor. It means that I have intense energy and enthusiasm as I pursue my cause. I am devoted. I am so passionate that I will take action.

I have so much zeal for God's honor that I will do whatever it takes for him to be honored OR to keep him from being dishonored. I hate evil like God does.

You might be thinking that my story is Old Testament stuff and doesn't really apply to your life. Before you go there, let's trace the word "zeal" a little bit through the Bible.

My story is the first use of the word in the Bible.⁶ In my story and in other passages, God is described as having zeal, zeal that accomplishes great things. The next mention is with Elijah the prophet who also had zeal for the Lord. Jehu had zeal for the Lord. David had zeal for the Lord. Many passages in the Old Testament describe zeal for the honor of the Lord.

John reveals that Jesus was zealous when he drove the moneychangers out of the Temple, and so fulfilled a prophecy. In fact, that prophecy implies that the zeal of Jesus would consume him.

On several occasions, the Apostle Paul described himself as having zeal. In fact, I believe it is Paul's level of zeal that allowed him to stay so dedicated to the cause of Jesus regardless of the level of suffering involved.

Paul wrote this command to the Christians living in Rome: "Never have too little zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor as you serve the Lord."⁷

I don't know how you will have to show your zeal for the Lord's honor. Stand up for the Lord when somebody says something dishonoring about him or uses his

⁶ At least in the New International Version and Authorized King James Versions

⁷ Romans 12:11

name in a dishonoring way. Prepare yourself ahead of time to tell somebody about the Good News of the Lord. Spend your money in such a way as to honor the Lord. Use your power as a citizen to honor him.

Back to the Plain of Moab after the plague stopped. It may have been my imagination, but it seems as if God gave a big sigh, and threw up his hands in frustration. Imagination or not, something big changed.

Remember when I said that four decades earlier, God intended to drive out the Canaanites ahead of us. No muss, no fuss, no bloodshed. And, I said that we Israelites had failed to completely obey God in several matters. I guess the affair with the Moabite women was the last straw.

We Israelites were soon to find that we were going to have to drive the Canaanites out by ourselves, and that there was going to be tremendous bloodshed as it happened. God didn't bother to explain it to me, of course, but I've always believed that God knew the Israelites needed to learn to hate evil and to hate worshipping other gods.

That lesson needs to be learned by all generations. Above all, hate evil and hate worshipping false gods. Paul echoes this in his writings, when he tells you to abhor evil and cling to what is good.⁸ In his famous chapter on love, Paul also says not to rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoice in the truth.⁹ The writer of Hebrews says that mature people train themselves to distinguish good from evil.¹⁰

So, God and Moses think I am a good guy. Turns out, Joshua and the people of Israel think I am a good guy, too. After we conquer the Promised Land, each tribe goes back to its lands. The tribes on the east side of the Jordan River build an unauthorized altar to God as a memorial to remind people. But, God did not instruct them to do this. The other tribes hear about it. They go ballistic. Maybe God will bring another plague on all of them?! They are scared out of their minds. They gather for war, but before attacking their brothers, they send a delegation to seek a peaceful solution.

⁸ Romans 12:9

⁹ 1 Cor. 13:6

¹⁰ Hebrews 5:14

Guess who leads the delegation. Because of the moral authority I gained from the incident on the plains of Moab, I am chosen to keep another plague from happening. Me! I hated evil, and everyone knew it. After each side's explanations, I judged that everything was ok. Both sides trusted my judgement and war was averted. Just one of the good guys.

It is time for them to enter the Promised Land – the land promised to Abraham’s descendants many centuries ago. The vast camp of Israelites is pitched on the plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from Jericho. They will enter the land under the leadership of Joshua instead of me. I’ve already transferred my leadership over to him, and the Israelites have agreed to follow him.

I am one hundred and twenty years-old, but my eyesight is still excellent, and I have as much energy as I did as a young man. However, I won’t be alive much longer.

I know it is nearing time for me to die, because God will not let me enter the Promised Land. I was a powerful prophet who tried very hard to be God’s chosen leader. But...one time...I dishonored God, in front of all of his people. I *sinned* by dishonoring God in front of all the people. God told me how to miraculously bring forth water from a rock, but I chose not to follow his instructions, not *exactly*.

Prideful disobedience is a high cost to pay. I will get to see the Promised Land from a mountain, but I will not get to enter it. I agree with God’s punishment completely. My people need every bit of encouragement to follow God’s laws exactly.

My very last job is to remind the Israelites of everything that has happened to them for the last forty-plus years, and to encourage them to keep all of the laws given to them by God. My last words to God’s people, my people, are recorded in a book of the Bible that you call *Deuteronomy*.

The name *Deuteronomy* derives from Greek, it means Second Law. It is the second giving of the law to the Israelites to help prepare them to enter the Promised Land. In this book, I repeat much of the history of the last forty years. It will remind you very much of the books of *Exodus*, *Leviticus* and *Numbers*.

I start my speech to the people by reminding them that they had chosen the leaders to help me lead them and judge them. That model worked well.

I tell them how twelve spies were chosen to go into Canaan to appraise the conditions there, and how they refused to follow God and conquer the country. The penalty for their rebellion was to wander for forty years in the wilderness until all of the fighting men were dead. All except Caleb and Joshua, the only spies who wanted to obey God and conquer the land.

I remind them how God was faithful to provide for them for forty years so they lacked nothing. How after the forty years, God led them to the Plains of Moab, after defeating the kings of Bashan and Heshbon. How we divided those lands on the east side of Jordan between the tribes of Gad, Reuben and Manasseh.

Following that history reminder, I strongly encourage the people to follow God's laws *exactly*. Don't add anything to them, or take anything away. Don't forget them through the generations, follow them completely.

More than anything, I command that they not worship idols. God is the only true God. Worship him only, so that you and your children will live long in the land. The sin of idol worship will surely bring them death and destruction. It will cause them to lose the Promised Land, lose the blessing of God, God will take the Promised Land away from them. I know that this generation has seen the greatness of God with their own eyes, but worry that future generations will not be convinced of God's greatness.

I remind the people of the laws given by God at Sinai, starting with the Ten Commandments. I give them a command that will come to be known as the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

I follow that commandment with one that will come to be known as The Greatest Commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." These commands are supposed to be upon their hearts. They are to be impressed on their children by talking about them all the time, and by using symbols as reminders.

I remind them that God chose them out of all people to be his treasured possession because he loves them and because he wants to keep his promise to Abraham and their forefathers.

Over and over, I say to them...be careful to obey God...follow every commandment, *exactly*...that you may have life. I tell them of the blessings that follow obedience, and the consequences that follow disobedience.

Over and over, I say to them...love the Lord...honor the Lord...follow him with your heart and mind.

Over and over, I say to them...follow the Lord only...never, never, never worship foreign gods and idols. I warn them that false prophets are so dangerous that they must be put to death.

I make it clear to them that the Lord is not giving them the Promised Land because of their righteousness. In fact, they are receiving the Land despite their many failings, such as the making of the golden calf and their recurring grumbling and complaining.

I remind them of the many laws, rituals, offerings, and feasts mandated by God, including: tithes, the Jubilee, Passover, and so much more.

I do slip in some prophecies. I am a prophet you know! I tell them that someday they will want a king. I know this sounds silly because nothing like it is on their minds, but it won't be long before having a king seems like a good idea to them. When they choose a king, I tell them to appoint the king that God chooses, and that he must be an Israelite.

In what must be a surprise to them, I tell them that their kings must not acquire much gold, have many wives, or have many horses, most especially horses that come from Egypt. I also say that the king is to write himself a copy of the law and follow it constantly, so that his descendants will rule over Israel a long time.¹

It won't be too long before King Solomon violates every one of those rules, and not long before the Israelites won't even be able to find a copy of the law.

¹ Deut. 17:14-20

Consequently, it won't be too long before the Israelites lose most of their land and the descendants of David no longer rule.

I also prophesy that God will raise up a prophet like me. This is an easy one to make, because God specifically told me he would.² That is why many people of Jesus' time will wonder if Jesus was that prophet.

I continue to remind them of various laws and regulations, and of rewards and consequences and punishments based on their behavior.

I repeat the covenant between God and Israel. I remind them that it is well within their ability to follow the covenant and all of its regulations. I remind them once again of the rewards and blessings that will follow their obedience.

When I finish speaking, I appoint Joshua as my successor. I write down all of the law and charge the leaders of Israel to follow the laws and make sure their children do, too. I tell them to place a copy of the law by the Ark of the Covenant and keep it there.

I want to think that my words will have a long-term effect on my people, but God dashes that hope quickly enough. He tells me that the people will soon rebel against God and start worshiping foreign gods. He has me teach the people a song that will testify against them when they wonder why they are not receiving God's blessings any longer.

I give the people a very lengthy blessing. One last time, I tell them that the laws are not idle words, but they are their *life*.

Life! God's words are life! I know you live in a time when many people don't regard the Bible as being relevant or true. But, I'm telling you the same thing. God's words are life!

I'm ready to go. I've served God with all my heart, but I truly am ready to be done with these hard-hearted rebellious Hebrews. They are my brothers and sisters, and I love them dearly. But I have had enough. My life is at an end.

² Deut. 18:15-19

This afternoon, I will climb Mount Nebo. I have the energy of a much younger man. I still have great eyesight. A good thing, too. God is going to show me the entire promised land from that mountain. I will see the land all the way west to the Mediterranean Sea, north to Dan, and south to the Negev. I will look down on the Dead Sea and Jericho.

Come tot hink o fit, I've worked for eitghty years for my people to receive the Promised Land and now they are going to take posession of it. It couldn't get any better.

Yes! I've gotten to know the Lord face to face over the years. The only prophet to do so. Then, in a place nobody will ever know, God himself will bury me.

I am a war-time bride. The first war-time bride mentioned in the Bible, for what it's worth. My husband I are one of the least-known, but most important couples in the entire world. One of our descendants is King David, and another is Jesus. I like to introduce myself this way... It sounds so much better than...than... admitting I was a prostitute and a traitor to my own people.

I grew up in Jericho. During my childhood, Jericho was a rich and powerful city. Our king was proud of the fact that our city was one of the oldest cities in the world. Jericho is on a trade route on the west side of the Jordan River, just north of where it enters the Dead Sea. It is in a strategic trading and military location.

To the west, the road rises to the tiny village of Jebus, later known as Jerusalem. From there the road continues west to the Mediterranean Sea. To the east, there are some shallow fords across the Jordan River that allow access to Moab and the King's Highway trade route.

The historian, Josephus, mentions that I kept an inn. But, in my time, there is a very close tie between inns, soldiers, liquor and prostitution. The Bible makes it clear that I was a prostitute. I had little choice if I was to provide for me and my father's household.

As an innkeeper, I kept up to date with all the juicy rumors. The rumors typically revolved around our king and his latest antics. He meddled in the lives of the citizens, and he caused trouble in the region by attacking weaker cities. He never visited my inn, but many of his advisors and soldiers did. It didn't take much effort to know more about Jericho and the king, than the king himself knew.

One of king's advisors was especially quiet and distracted one day. I urged him to talk, and he told me about a people known as the Hebrews. I had never heard of them, so I asked him to tell me more. He hesitated for a full minute, then gave me a history lesson I will never forget.

Less than fifty years ago, the Hebrews had been slaves in Egypt. Their God punished Egypt with plagues until the Pharaoh agreed to let them leave. After changing his mind, the Pharaoh and his army chased the Hebrews and trapped them against the Red Sea. Their God parted the sea and allowed the Hebrews to escape. On dry land, he said, but that seemed a little, I don't know...Anyway, when Pharaoh and his army continued the chase, the waters crashed over them. Destroyed them all.

The Hebrew God had promised the Hebrew people that they would own all of the land currently occupied by the Canaanites, including the city of Jericho. To prepare for the invasion of Canaan, the Hebrews sent twelve spies into our country. The spies found the land to be very productive, but they were afraid of the land's inhabitants. When the spies told this to the Hebrews, they refused to invade Canaan. They were afraid us. Since they refused to obey God, he punished them by making them wander in the wilderness for forty years.

That forty years came to an end... not long ago, and since then, the Hebrews have been preparing to invade Canaan from the east. They've already crushed the kings of the Amorites, Sihon and Og, and may be moving to take up an invasion position to the east of Jericho. There are too many of them to count, and their God is very powerful. If they cross the Jordan River, nobody will be able to stop them.

After that history lesson, I asked why our king had not alerted our people. He told me that the king was scared to do that, the people might panic, and many of them might flee the city. The king was paranoid about the Hebrews sending spies again, so he had soldiers posted everywhere. He hoped the massive city walls would protect Jericho, as they always had.

That very night, I climbed to the top of the city tower and looked to the east. I saw a dim light in the distance. I looked down on the city walls, and I knew they would never hold against a powerful God. I made a vow. I vowed not to let my family die, no matter what it took.

Every night after, I climbed the tower and watched the light. It got brighter and brighter. Eventually, I could see that the light wasn't coming from campfires, but

from a giant cloud in the sky. The fire reflected off of the Jordan River, and made it look like the entire land was on fire.

Two strangers showed up at my inn pretending to come from Egypt. Hebrew spies. It didn't take long to figure that one out. I confronted them, and I asked to make a deal. I would protect them from discovery, if they would protect my family when Jericho was invaded. They agreed. I had to hang a red rope outside of my window when the Hebrews invaded. That was it. But if I didn't do that, they could not protect me.

We no more than agreed to that deal when I heard commotion outside my inn. I figured that the king's men were searching for the spies. I hid my two guests under a pile of flax on my roof. When the soldiers came to search my house, I ..uhhh...found ways... to keep them distracted and away from the spies.

I told them the two men had been at my house, but I didn't know who they were. I told them that the men had left the city through the gate to the east. The soldiers rushed away. They went as far as the Jordan River and didn't find anyone.

That night, I helped the spies leave the city. I lowered them out of my house window on the city wall, and sent them west to hide, the opposite direction from the Hebrew Camp. They waited three days, then the spies circled the city and made their way back to their camp in Moab.

Then one night, fire started coming from the ground on our side of the Jordan River as well as from the cloud on the other side of the river. I inquired of some soldiers, and learned that a giant dam must have been built across the Jordan, the water was backing up. The backed-up water was like a giant mirror, the cloud's fire reflecting everywhere. The Hebrew invasion was imminent.

Sure enough, the next day, the entire city could see the dust clouds from the approaching Hebrew masses. There were millions of people and animals. Everybody in Jericho prayed to our pagan gods for protection. Except me. I just hoped the Hebrews would not surround the city and try to starve us into submission. Nobody had enough food to last long.

From my window on the city walls, I could see the Hebrew camp. One morning, I saw the strangest thing. A parade. No, really, a *parade* started from the Hebrew camp.

It was led by an armed guard, seven men in funny looking costumes blowing on trumpets, five what looked to be priests carrying a gold box, and more armed guards. They were followed by a stream of rather dirty-looking men in dusty robes. They circled the city and went back into their camp. Quiet, nobody made a noise, well, except the men blowing trumpets. Next day, same thing. A circle around Jericho, and back to camp. After six days of this, the nerves of everyone in Jericho were stretched to the breaking point.

On the seventh day, the same parade started. This time, they didn't stop after they circled the city. They went around again. And, then a third time! On and on, the parade went, circling the city. Total silence from thousands and thousands of people, the costumed guys still blowing on trumpets. So bizarre.

They completed a seventh circle, and the silence came to an end. The thousands of men shouted as loud as they could. Made an Army - Navy football game sound like a grade-school playground.

A rumble started. Low frequency, you know. The walls began to tremble. Then shake. To say the people in Jericho feared for their lives is an understatement. Hundreds fainted from fear.

Portions of the wall around the city started to crumble. The rumble was now a roar. Deafening. It seemed to go on forever but wasn't really that long at all. Then silence. Everything was still. I was completely disoriented. I literally had no idea where I was. Open space everywhere in every direction, there were no walls! The walls that defined our city. The Jericho walls were gone. They had all fallen. Except...except one small section. The section with a red rope hanging out the window. My window.

The Hebrews swarmed into the city and slaughtered all of its inhabitants. *All* of them... except the household of Rahab, the prostitute. My house. With my family inside. My two spy guests came to protect my house with the approval of their commander, a man by the name of Joshua.

They took my family outside of the city and outside of the Hebrew camp. Then, they set fire to the city and destroyed everything that was not metal. Those metal things were saved for the Lord.

Me? What happened to me and my household?

A few days before Jericho was destroyed, the Hebrews circumcised all of their men below the age of forty, because they had not been circumcised while wandering in the wilderness. Days after the fall of Jericho, I asked for the males in my household to be circumcised, too. Joshua and the priests relented, and that very day, my family became Hebrews.

It wasn't too long before the head of one of the Hebrew families came to my house and spoke to my father. It seems they had fallen on hard times, and they had one son that they had not been able to marry off. When he stood before my father, I knew that he was the man the Hebrew God had been saving for me. He was pure, but I was not. With his purity, he would cover me. It wasn't long before we had our first son, and we named him...Boaz. Boaz who would one day become the husband of Ruth, and be the great-grandfather of King David.

God is so good.

My name is Rahab. I am a war-time bride. My husband and I are one the least-known, but most important couples in the entire history of the world. I was a prostitute and a traitor to my own people. But because of the goodness of God, I am the great, great grandmother of King David, and the 16th great grandmother of... Jesus.

I open my tent flap every morning and gaze at the same thing. People for as far as I can see. In every direction, people. And sheep. And goats. Dust floating up into the sky. Smells, too. Overwhelming smells of those people. And sheep. And goats. And noise. So thick you can almost touch it.

Except in one direction. Toward the Tabernacle. There you see a giant tent with a cloud over it. A fiery cloud at night.

And it's been this way for more than forty years.

Moses is dead. The Lord tells me so, and he tells me that I am now in charge of all of these people, and sheep, and goats. I watched Moses in charge of them for more than forty years, and, frankly, I'm not too excited about taking his place. But I don't have time to feel sorry for myself.

The Lord tells me to get the people ready to cross over into Canaan. As far as we are willing, go and conquer...that is the land we will inherit. From the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River, from Jordan to the desert. A territory so vast that the sea of people in front of me will be swallowed up in the spaciousness. All we have to do is follow God and do what he says.

As the military commander over a huge army, I wait for God to give me the battle plan. Will we split up and go in divisions or tribes? Or, will we go as one huge force and overwhelm the country one part at a time? Will we lay siege to the towns with huge walls or will God knock those walls down? I wait patiently for the plan, and here is the battle plan I get directly from God.

“Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to follow my laws closely. Don't quit thinking or talking about the Book of the Law, but meditate on it day and night. Be careful to follow it *exactly*. Don't be afraid or terrified, for I am with you.”

That's it. That's the entire battle plan I am given! So be it. I will be strong and courageous, and follow God like my mentor did. My mentor of more than forty years, Moses.

My name is Joshua, son of Nunn. I obey God completely and immediately, as will my namesake. You know my namesake by a slight name variation...Yeshua, or Jesus.

I have the officers of the camp order the people to get ready to cross the River Jordan in three days. We will cross the river and not come back. Except for the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh who will return to these conquered lands on the East side of the Jordan River once they lead us into battle.

I send two men into Canaan to spy out the territory, especially Jericho. The walled city is my first target. Sending two spies is a nod of recognition to Caleb. He and I were the two out of the twelve spies that wanted to conquer Canaan to start with. My spies return with specific information from Rahab. I agree to spare her and her family from destruction.

The Lord instructs me to tell the people what will happen. The priests will carry the Ark of the Covenant ahead of us. As soon as they touch the river, it will stop flowing, and will pile up as if held back by a giant dam. The priests will stand in the dry riverbed with the Ark as the people cross over on dry land. The people must be careful to stay back about 1,000 yards from the Ark, until it reaches the river. After the people have passed over the dry riverbed, one man from each tribe is to take a stone from the middle of the dry riverbed from where the priests stand with the Ark. These twelve stones are to be used to build a memorial.

The kings of the Amorites and Canaanites hear of God's drying up the Jordan. Their hearts melt in fear, trembling to even face us. All the better if they choose to abandon the land and we don't have to kill them.

The walled city of Jericho stands in front of us. I wait for my battle plan from God, and he delivers an unusual one: make a bunch of flint knives. Fairly poor weapons, I think, but this is not what God has in mind.

While we wandered in the wilderness for forty years, none of the male children born throughout that time were circumcised. The flint knives are used to circumcise all of those men and boys. After we heal from that brutal surgery, we celebrate the Passover for the first time in the Promised Land. The very next day after Passover, the manna we've been eating for 40 years stops coming down from Heaven. We eat the produce of the land.

Now, I expect to receive a special battle plan for Jericho, and I certainly get one...a very unusual one. Have an armed guard lead seven priests with trumpets, followed by the Ark of the Covenant, then a rearguard, and all of the fighting men. Have them march around the city once a day for six days, and then seven times on the seventh day. Keep the men quiet for the six days, while seven priests blow trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, after the seventh time around, have the priests blow a long blast and have all the men shout.

It is a perfect battle plan. We follow it exactly, and the walls fall down. We rush in and kill every living thing, just as God instructed...except for Rahab and her family who aided my spies. Our people are very careful not to take any plunder, but dedicate all the gold, silver, iron, and bronze to the Lord's treasury. At least that is what I think they do.

Based on our complete victory, I next send some of my fighting men to take the nearby city of Ai. They are routed and thirty-six of our men are killed. The hearts of my people become fearful. I approach God about our failure, and he tells me that one of the Israelites stole some of the precious metals from Jericho that had been dedicated to the Lord's treasury.

The next day we determine that one of us, Achan, has stolen some gold, silver and a beautiful robe. All of the people and I take Achan and his sons and daughters...and we stone them. We burn all of their possessions. When we are purified of Achan's sin, the Lord relents. Once again, we are bluntly reminded that we are to follow God's directions precisely.

We attack Ai again, and this time, the Lord allows us complete victory. We kill twelve thousand men and women, and burn the city. The Lord allows us to keep their livestock and possessions.

Then I build an altar on Mount Ebal, as Moses had commanded on the plains of Moab. I read the entire Book of the Law to all of the people, not leaving out a single word or person. Not just the Ten Commandments, but all of the numerous commandments given through Moses.

This is easy, I think. Follow the Lord completely and all will go well. Certainly, the we all can do that. Well, that simple plan doesn't last long.

A group of people who have travelled a long distance show up. Their clothes are tattered, their food, stale, and the goods they bring are old and worn out. They have come from so far, and they beg me to please make a treaty with them. And I do. Unfortunately, I did not inquire of the Lord first to determine if I should or not, because I knew we were not allowed to make treaties with the Canaanites. A few days later, we prepare to attack a nearby city of Gibeon only to find, it's the people who lived "far away."

It was all a trick. The dusty clothes, spoiled food, all lies. The Gibeonites were so scared of us, that they set up this elaborate hoax. And I fell right into it.

Rather than compound my error by destroying them, I let them live and make them our woodcutters and water carriers.

We ravage the Canaanite countryside. We take city after city, killing all the inhabitants without mercy. We take much of the land that was promised to Moses. God tells me that I am getting old, but there are still big tracts of land to be conquered. He agrees to drive out some of the people himself.

We allocate the land among the tribes, except for the tribe of Levi. That tribe of priests receives their income from the sacrifices at the Tabernacle, but they do receive the ability to use some towns and pasturelands for their livestock. We also designate some cities of refuge for people who accidentally kill someone.

When it's all said and done, the Lord gives us all of the Promised Lands that we were willing to conquer, and allocates among the tribes as he wishes. Not one of the Lord's promises is unmet...all is fulfilled. With that success, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh return to their lands on the east side of the Jordan.

I call all of the leaders of Israel together. I tell them that I am getting old, and I remind them of all the promises kept by the Lord.

I remind them to follow the Law of Moses and to keep away from idols. One sure way to do this is to stay apart from any survivors and never intermarry with people outside of the Israelites. If they do intermarry, I tell them these spouses will become snares and traps, and whips on their backs, and thorns for their eyes until they perish from the land they have just taken.

I assemble all of the people and remind them of everything the Lord has done for them. I cannot shake the feeling that the people will not be faithful very long. Moses often felt the same way. I tell them to throw away the gods their ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt. I tell them to choose between those gods and the Lord. "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Over and over, the people agree to worship only the Lord and no other gods. Their words will be their own judge if they fail.

But I won't be there to see it. I die at the age of one hundred and ten. Unlike Moses, I am able to be buried in the land of my inheritance in the Promised Land.

During my life and during the lives of the elders who outlive me, the Israelites are obedient to the Lord.

Our ancestor, Joseph, who was second in command to Pharaoh had instructed his relatives to take his bones back to Canaan.¹ When Moses led the Exodus, he retrieved the bones of Joseph. We carried those remains for more than forty years. It was a dusty, noisy, smelly journey for Joseph's bones. But finally, we buried them at Shechem in the land Jacob had bought from the Sons of Hamor. Jacob's land now held Joseph's bones and all of his descendants.

Forty years, their journey. We are finally ready to be God's people, and only his people.

¹ Genesis 50:24-25

I will tell you about a critical period in the history of Israel. This period lasted more than three hundred years, but most modern Christians know little about it, and some of what they think they know is wrong.

You know who I blame for this lack of knowledge in Christians of today? The New Testament writers, including me.

New Testament writers talk a lot about Abraham, Moses, the kings and prophets, so Christians know those types of Old Testament things are important.

However, one period of time in Jewish history that we New Testament writers almost never acknowledge is the time of the judges, the time period of the Old Testament book of *Judges* and the prophet Samuel. This period lasts from the death of Joshua in about 1390 BC to when Saul becomes Israel's first king about 1050 BC.

The Israelites originated from the sons of Jacob, who was renamed Israel. Each of his twelve sons had a tribe made up of their own descendants. His favored son, Joseph's tribe was split between *his* two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. So, there were eleven full tribes and two half-tribes of Israel, commonly called the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

God promised to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson, Israel. So, Canaan became known as The Promised Land.

Interestingly, the sons of Israel originally lived in Canaan, but because of a severe famine had to relocate to Egypt. The original family of seventy thrived there, and their descendants existed in Egypt for a total of about four hundred years, swelling to a nation of more than 2 million people. However, the Israelites ended up as slaves to the Egyptians. They escaped Egypt under the leadership of Moses, and wandered in the desert for forty years. After that, the now numerous

Israelites finally entered Canaan and conquered most of it under the leadership of Joshua.

Under Joshua, the land of Canaan was distributed to each of the twelve tribes, except the tribe of Levi, who were priests. When Joshua died, God did not appoint a successor to him.

At that point in time, the leadership structure looked like this: each tribe had tribal elders who made the decisions and judgements for that specific tribe. The tribes were independent of one another, but they were supposed to work together when needed since they were tribes of one nation.

God had authority over all of the tribes. They were to worship him, and him only, at the Tabernacle located in Shiloh under the direction of the priests. As long as the Israelites were faithful to God, he would make sure they prospered.

Simple, huh? And this leadership structure was enough because of some special provisions of God. First, there were *no* huge empires nearby to contend with. They did not have to contend with Egypt, Assyria, Babylon...none of those.

Second, there *were* local enemies to contend with across the borders, and a few stragglers inside the borders. These enemies were strong enough to provide "exercise," but weak enough that the tribes could easily contend with them under the protection of God.

In summary, when Joshua died, God had positioned the Israelites in the perfect place with perfect conditions to have a perfect theocracy. A nation led by the One True God. Peace and prosperity *forever* were within their grasp. No other people has had that opportunity, before or since.

To the west was the Mediterranean Sea. To the east and south was desert. To the north were mountains that provided protection from invasion. Lasting peace and prosperity within their grasp. All they had to do were two things. First, they had to finish conquering Canaan. There were a few remnant peoples and areas that needed to be vanquished. This would accomplish the important goals of securing their borders and keeping out the cultural influences of those people that were always a detriment to the Israelites commitment to God. Since God said he would

continue leading them, it would have been relatively simple for the Israelites to finish the task of completely conquering Canaan.

The second thing they had to do was to fulfill their side of the deal they had made with God...they had to follow the laws given to Moses. By staying isolated from other people groups, it was actually very much easier to follow God's laws, very much easier not to fall into the trap of worshiping other gods.

Finish conquering Canaan and follow the Laws of Moses, the future of the Israelites hangs in the balance. Will the Israelites choose to follow through on their end of the deal and achieve perfect prosperity and protection...forever?

The book of Judges is about God giving them more than three hundred years and numerous do-overs to accomplish those two things.

As you read the book of *Judges*, don't be misled by the rather odd stories and people. The book is filled with the failures of the Israelites to completely conquer Canaan or follow the laws of God.

When you read about a Canaanite or Amonite person, you can assume those people exist because the Israelites did not conquer the land and vanquish the people as God commanded.

When you read about the Philistines, you can assume those people live in Canaan because the Israelites failed to secure its borders all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, and so the Philistines lived on the coast. Once the Philistines entrenched themselves, the Israelites could not dislodge them.

With mention of a Canaanite or Philistine woman, you can predict the story will likely involve an Israelite man hoping for a sexual relationship with her...against the laws of God. In the process, that man is likely to get involved in worshiping or allowing the worship of false gods.

You can't help but be encouraged when you first start reading *Judges*. The Israelites seem anxious to conquer the land. They ask who gets to go first to fight the Canaanites. The Lord says it is to be the tribe of Judah. They ask the tribe of Simeon to join them. Wise move. In return, Judah will help Simeon fight the enemies they need to dislodge.

Judah attacks the Canaanites and Perizzites and routs them completely. They kill ten thousand men in the first fight. They capture their leader, but they do not kill him as they were instructed. They cut off his thumbs and big toes...but do not kill him.

Judah defeats Jerusalem. Judah pursues the Canaanites in the hill country, the Negev and western foothills, and Hebron. Nothing can stand in their way.

Caleb offers his daughter in marriage to the man who conquers Kiriath Sepher. His nephew, Othniel, conquers that city and wins the hand of Caleb's daughter.

A small crack in their admirable obedience appears when the descendants of Moses's father-in-law, the Kenites, go to live with the tribe of Judah in the Negev.

In fulfillment of their agreement, the people of Judah go with the Simeonites attack the Canaanites in Zephath, and destroy them.

Judah also takes the cities of Gaza, Ashkeon and Ekron, along with their territories. Judah has conquered its land almost all the way to the Mediterranean coast.

Complete victory is within their grasp. But they choose to snatch defeat instead.

Judah is unable to drive the people from the coastal plains. Since it is not easy, Judah gives up and walks away. They decide God is not able to fulfill his promise to give them the entire land all the way to the Sea. They do not conquer the coastal plains.

The tribe of Benjamin is unable to dislodge the Jebusites from Jerusalem, so they leave them there. Another direct failure to follow God's command to completely conquer the country.

The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh spare the life of a spy, and he goes to the land of the Hittites and builds a city. They fail to dislodge people from city after city. Instead of seeking help from their fellow Israelites, they live with their failures.

On and on and on. Ephraim does not drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer. Neither does Zebulun nor Asher nor Naphtali. In total opposition to God's directives, the Israelites allow the Canaanites and Amorites to live among them.

Let me stop here. The Israelites have disobeyed God in the matter of not completely dominating Canaan and ridding themselves of outside cultural influences. The rest of the book of *Judges* will describe the disastrous outcomes of that failure.

In retrospect, it's easy to criticize the Israelites for their failure to rid themselves of outside influences...but...what if you were to apply that same critical thinking to yourself?

Any bad influences exist within the boundaries of your life? Too hard to rid yourself of them? Maybe you attempt to control those influences somewhat so they don't do *too* much damage to you. Or your family?

Good and evil don't co-exist well, the Israelites are solid proof of that. Snatching defeat from victory, a critical lesson for everyone in any time. So, in the event that you find some parallels to your own life, a fresh read through *Judges* may be just what you need.

Standing on the Promises, you know that old hymn? I love the melody, but I'm not really sure that the lyrics are exactly right.

How can I be sure what are God's promises to me in the Bible and what are not? I certainly don't want to stand on something as a promise of God that is not a promise of God. Just because I want something to be a promise of God to me doesn't mean it is one.

Another reason that the gospel song makes me uncomfortable is that God makes two kinds of promises in the Bible...unconditional and conditional. And one should never be mistaken for the other.

In the time of Moses, several hundred years before me, the Israelites' relationship with God meant only one thing: follow his laws. They knew they were supposed to love God, but following his laws seemed much more important. Why? They seemingly were punished when they broke his laws, but not punished when they refused to love him. They had the promise that they would inherit Canaan, but had not yet done so.

To the Israelites of my time, everything revolved around two things: God and the land. We had been in possession of Canaan for hundreds of years. Unfortunately, the land was more important than God to most of us.

My people's agreement with God is simple – we do everything he tells us to do, and he protects and provides for us. He provides us the land of Canaan. Among the things that void his obligation to protect and provide for is...worshiping other gods. Do that, and we're in complete violation of our agreement.

One of the main subjects of the Old Testament, is the refusal of the Israelites to consistently follow God's laws. Follow them for a while, quit following them, get

punished, repent. Rinse and repeat. Worship only God, quit worshipping only God, get punished, repent. Rinse and repeat.

... standing on the promises of God my savior.... Promises. There are conditional and unconditional promises.

An unconditional promise means that God will do something no matter what. Frankly, there are very few unconditional promises of God in the Bible.

The vast majority of God's promises in the Bible are conditional. God will do "x" if his people do "y." Sometimes the conditions are spelled out specifically, and sometimes they are implied. Sometimes there are consequences — punishments— involved with not following the conditions, and sometimes none are spelled out. In other words, the promise depends on our actions, and we are not the most dependable people.

Now, the land, and why it was so important to me and the Israelites of my time.

The founder of the Jewish nation is Abraham. We Israelites even call him Father Abraham. Because of Abraham's faithfulness, God promised land to the descendants of Abraham. He confirmed this promise to Isaac and Jacob.

The land promised to Abraham stretched from Euphrates River to the Nile River. When Joshua led the conquering of the area known as Canaan, he acquired a big portion of the land promised to Abraham. Canaan became known as the Promised Land. Moses indicated that God would give the Israelites the rest of the land if they remained faithful to God.¹

The Israelites had uncontested possession of the Promised Land twice in ancient times: after the conquest by Joshua and after the conquest by David, my father. Under Joshua, the Jews worshiped only God, and no other gods. Four centuries later, under David, the Jews worshiped only God, and no other gods. Both of those times, the surest way to continued prosperity and full habitation of the Promised Land was to continue worshipping only God.

¹ Deut. 19:8-9

I will talk about what happened after Joshua died, but let me work backwards starting with what happened after David, my father, died.

Upon David's death, I took over complete control of Israel. King Solomon. I built the Temple of God in Jerusalem, I was completely faithful to God. Then, then...I decided to quit trusting God completely. I decided to willfully break his laws and ordinances.

Out of my lust and out of my desire for political alliances, I married seven hundred princesses of foreign countries and took three hundred concubines. Over time my heart turned to foreign gods.² I began worshiping the foreign gods of my wives and concubines, and led the Israelites to do so. This was the beginning of the end for the country. Never again would the Israelites have as good an opportunity to completely follow God and inhabit their land peacefully.

Back to the death of Joshua, found in the book of *Judges*. Under Joshua, the Israelites had conquered virtually all of Canaan. There were only a few cities and small areas remaining unconquered. Rather than staying unified and completely conquering the country as God ordered, the tribes broke up and decided to clean up their own allotted lands. Divide and conquer, I suppose.

Although the tribes had full intention of completely destroying the Canaanites, it was hard to do. So, they decided to let a few of them live, some even under custom treaties. This was not part of the promise, this rogue move infuriated God. He told the Israelites that the survivors would be thorns in their sides and their gods will be a snare.³ The people wept when they heard these words...but they still did not wipe out their enemies.

As long as Joshua lived, and as long as his followers lived, the people were faithful to God. Upon their deaths, the following generation did not know God or his miraculous works for Israel. The people did evil in the sight of the Lord by worshiping foreign gods.

Let me be perfectly clear about the situation; My people wanted to live in the Promised Land and enjoy God's blessings, while living in complete disobedience

² 1 Kings 11:1-8

³ Joshua 2:3

to God. They expected God to fulfill his promise, while they failed to fulfill their side of the bargain.

They didn't just *kind* of disobey God by abandoning him. They deliberately spat in his face...they worshiped the Baals and the Ashtaroth.

As you can well imagine, the all-powerful God of the Universe could not and would not stand for that level of disrespect and hatred. He gave them over to the peoples who tempted them with their foreign gods. The Israelites could not withstand their enemies. The foreigners with their attractive foreign gods plundered the Israelites. The Israelites came to harm as God had warned them.

Modern Christians see the cyclical rebellion of the Israelites primarily played out as a spiritual war for our hearts. We saw it primarily played out in the land. We owned it, we didn't own it. Borders continually shifting, paying tribute to foreign kings or being paid tribute.

The Land. We have always wanted the land promised to Abraham, but we have never been willing to be faithful to God. We want to stand on an unconditional promise that was not made.

After the Israelites conquered the Promised Land, they were perfectly positioned to completely follow God and obey his commandments. If they had, they would have prospered forever, and brought other nations to worship God, too.

The book of *Judges* would not have been necessary. It would not need to be written. In fact, none of the books in the Old Testament after *Joshua* would have needed to be written.

The Lord gave the Israelites chance after chance to live faithfully to him, but they never would do it for very long. The book of *Judges* is about this sad cycle of events. Most of the Old Testament books after *Judges* are concerned with this same cycle of obedience, disobedience, and restoration.

Instead of God, the Israelites chose to follow other gods and to disobey the commandments of the one true God. Instead of prosperity, they received consequences, instead of bringing others to God, they left God. However, instead of allowing them to completely self-destruct, God chose not to completely abandon the Israelites.

God appointed people known as judges. The judges led the people back to God.

I want to tell you about the first four judges that God provided to the Israelites.

After the Israelites entered Canaan, they did not wipe out the peoples living there as God instructed them to. They lived among the “ites,” if you will ...the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They did not resist the temptation to intermarry with them, which led to the Israelites to worship their gods.

They forgot the true God, and chose to worship the Baals and the Asherahs. This angered God and he turned them over to the king of Aram Naharaim for eight,

long years of servitude. When they finally begged God for relief, he sent them a deliverer.

Othniel was the first judge. He was the nephew and son-in-law of Caleb, the spy. They owned land allotted to them during Joshua's conquest.

Othniel overpowered the king of Aram Naharaim, and the country had peace for forty years, until Othniel died. First cycle over.

As soon as Othniel died, the people started worshiping false gods. Again, God turned them over to a foreign king, this time, the king of Moab for eighteen years. When they begged God for relief, he sent the second judge, Ehud.

Ehud was of the tribe of Benjamin. A left-handed man. Since he was left-handed, he strapped his sword to his right thigh, under his clothing...an unexpected place.

The Israelites had to pay a regular tribute to the King of Moab. They sent this tribute by Ehud and some carriers. Ehud sent the carriers away, and returned to the king to give him a secret message. The king gave Ehud a private audience away from his assistants.

Ehud told the king he had a message from God, and when the king rose, Ehud took his sword and stabbed the king with it. The king was so fat it disappeared in his blubber. Ehud went out the widows and escaped. The king's assistants waited a while, but eventually discovered his dead body.

Ehud went to the tribe of Ephraim and summoned the other Israelites. They attacked Moab through the fords of the Jordan River. They were completely victorious, killing ten thousand Moabites, and taking Moab captive. The Israelites had peace for eighty years. Second cycle over.

On the coastal plains, the Philistines had taken control of land from the tribe of Judah. God sent Shamgar to deliver them. He killed six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad, a cattle prod. He saved Israel. Third cycle over.

After Ehud and Shamgar, the Israelites, once again worshiped false gods, so the Lord gave them over to the king of Canaan who resided in Hazor. Joshua had destroyed Hazor, but the king of Canaan rebuilt it.

The commander of the king's army was Sisera, who was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. He had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron, to which the Israelites had no defense. He was extremely cruel and ruled over the Israelites for twenty years. When the Israelites finally repented and turned back to the Lord, he sent the fourth judge.

I am that fourth judge. Deborah. I held court under the Palm of Deborah, in the hill country of Ephraim. All of the Israelites came to me to settle their disputes.

God spoke me, "Call Barak as commander of the Israelites." I told Barak that he was to lead ten thousand men against Sisera, and God would deliver Sisera and his chariots into Barak's hands at the Kishon River.

Barak's response was truly shocking. "If you go with me, I will go. If you don't go with me, I won't go."

As a prophet, I told him that I *would* go with him, but because of his response, a woman would get the glory for the destruction of Sisera. At the time, we both thought I meant that I would get the glory.

Barak and I took ten thousand men to Mount Tabor and waited. When Sisera heard about our defiance, he brought all of his chariots and men to fight us. When he arrived, Barak took his ten thousand men down the mountain. The Lord routed Sisera, and his chariots.

Now you are probably asking yourself how the Lord and Barak's men defeated the chariots, they were outfitted with iron, after all. Formidable and definitely gave the Canaanites the upper hand. The Bible only gives a few hints. Chariots were normally invincible on the plains where the horse could run freely, but they were not good in the mountains. They were also not good in another circumstance. Rain and mud. Chariots could get bogged down. You can see that may have happened in this case, because Sisera had to dismount from his chariot. You can also infer it from my victory song where I sang that the heavens poured and the

clouds poured down water.¹ God turned Sisera's invincible war machines and armor into death traps by a rainstorm and an overflowing river.

What happened to the cruel and powerful Sisera? He fled on foot and found shelter at the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Jael's husband and the King of Hazor had a treaty, so Sisera felt safe there. Sisera ordered her to hide him and to tell people he was not there.

Jael gave him warm milk to drink and hid him in a blanket. As soon as she heard him sleeping soundly, she drove a tent peg through his temple and into the ground. Jael, a woman, got the glory for killing Sisera, just as I had prophesied.

Under my direction, the Israelites overcame the Canaanites, and there was peace for forty years. End of cycle four.

You may be saying to yourself, "What is wrong with the Israelite people! Four times they turned away from God, and four times he delivered them from their unfaithfulness. Can't they just stay faithful to God and not put themselves through the pain?"

Try to see things from our point of view. We want to be in control our own lives. It is hard to trust in a God that you cannot see, especially when the rewards and consequences don't seem to be correlated with our actions. We are easily attracted to things that aren't good for us. We envy other people and the things they enjoy.

We want to be friends with everyone, have everyone like us. Our lives are drab, we want some excitement. The people around us seem to do what they want, they have more money and fun than we do. We want to be happy, and if worshiping other gods might get us there, we might risk worshiping other gods.

Oh dear, that may sound all too familiar! I'm referring of course, to my fellow-Israelites. You have the Books of Judges and these four cycles to learn from. My hope is that you do.

¹ Judges 5:4

The Lord sent a prophet who reminded the Israelites that God had brought them from Egypt to the Promised Land. God drove out all of the people before us and turned their land over to us. But we had deserted him and worshiped other gods. Many times, we had deserted him and worshiped foreign gods.

Even so, God decided to give Israel another chance and send another savior to them. Me.

We were secret farmers. Everybody in the community knew we were farmers, but our family farmed in secret. We threshed wheat in the winepress so nobody could see. We hid our oxen in the forest, and only brought them out for short periods of time to plow.

Our family members were also secret believers in God. Everybody else in Israel was worshiping the Baals and the Asherahs of the Amorites and Canaanites. Because the Israelites worshiped false gods, we lost the protection of our God, allowing us to be punished by people of the surrounding lands, especially the Midianites and Amalekites.

The Midianites and Amalekites were wild and vicious. They covered the landscape like a locust invasion. Numerous is an understatement. They ravaged Israel badly, they tried to take everything we had. They so impoverished the Israelites that we finally called out to God for help. That's when he sent me.

Here I am threshing wheat in the winepress so nobody will see me. The angel of the Lord appears out of nowhere. He says to me, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."

I am Gideon, the son of Joash. Mighty warrior? I'm nothing but a poor farmer. Mighty warrior?? Ridiculous. So, because the best defense is a good offense, I say, "If the Lord is with us, why are all these bad things happening to us? Why has the

Lord abandoned us instead of doing miraculous things like he did for our ancestors?”

Instead of backing down or answering my question, he tells me to go in the strength he had given me and for *me* to save Israel from the Midianites. I want to laugh out loud, but say, “I am from the weakest tribe, the weakest clan in the weakest tribe, and I am the weak link in the weakest family of that weak clan.

The angel of the Lord says, “I will be with you. Strike down all the Midianites. Leave none alive.”

Well, if God can do that, he can surely do a much smaller miracle as a sign for me. I make an offering of a young goat and some bread without yeast. I put the meat in a basket and the broth in a pot. The angel tells me to put the meat and bread on a rock, and pour the broth over them. I do, and he touches them with the tip of the staff in his hand. Boom. Everything is consumed in a fire, and the angel disappears.

Later that night, the Lord tells me to take our family’s bull, the seven-year-old bull, tear down the altar to Baal and the nearby Asherah pole, and build an altar to the Lord. I do just that, and I use the bull as an offering on the altar. I am afraid of what my community might think, so I do all of this at night.

Sure enough, the next morning, the townspeople have a fit. They investigate. They discover I have done the damage to Baal’s altar and pole. They demand my death and that my father turn me over to them. He refuses, and convinces them that if he is a real god, Baal can defend himself.

Then the real trouble starts. The Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples join forces and invade the Jezreel Valley of Israel. This valley is the breadbasket of our country, and the invasion portends disaster.

The Spirit of the Lord comes upon me, I feel it. I blow the trumpet for my people to join me, and I send messengers to three other tribes to join as well. I look at all of the people, and realize, I am a farmer, not a general. I need more reassurance from the Lord.

I ask God to show me a sign that he will indeed save Israel, and he agrees. I place a wool fleece on the floor and ask him to make the fleece wet with dew, but keep the ground dry. The next morning, guess what. It happened exactly. I even squeeze a bowlful of dew from the fleece.

I ask God, not to be angry, but could he please show me just the opposite. Just so I'm completely sure. The next morning, you guessed it. The fleece is dry, but the ground is soaked with dew. I am convinced that God will save Israel.

Now, in modern times, the Spring of Harod is in an Israeli trailer park campground with power outlets, and hot and cold showers. The Spring of Harod is a small ground spring that flows into a pool of cool, refreshing water. The spring was like that in my time, too.

My thirty-two thousand men camp at the Spring of Harod. I try to divert their attention from the hordes of Midianites camped north of us near the hill of Moreh. The Midianite army dwarfs ours in size. So, you can understand why I laugh out loud when God says to me, "You have too many men."

Too many men! Surely God cannot be serious. But he is. He says that Israel will boast that they won through their own strength when they win. I know he is right, so I quit laughing. God tells me to send home all the men who are fearful. Two-thirds of my men walk off, and I kind of wish I was with them. Ten thousand men are left.

"Still too many men," God tells me. "Take them to the water and I will eliminate more." My ten thousand men, ten thousand thirsty men, follow me to the spring. He tells me to keep only those who cup their hands for the water and drink it out of their hands. The ones who stick their heads in the water are eliminated. They are too thirsty to stay vigilant. Three hundred men are left.

I start to protest, but God stops me, he says that is the right number. The others leave their provisions and trumpets and go home. I kind of want to go with them.

During the night, God tells me to take my servant and go spy on the enemy camp. He says that what I hear will be encouraging. The Midianites look like locusts in number, and the smell of their camels is overwhelming. I don't even have to

disguise myself to walk through camp since there are so many types of peoples. I overhear two men talking and move closer to get the details.

One man tells the other that he had a dream in which a loaf of barley bread struck the Midianite camp and overturned it. The other man interprets the dream to mean that God has given the Midianites to Gideon, to me. I know victory is in reach.

I rush back to camp and divide my men into three groups of one hundred. Each man is given a trumpet and a jar with a lit torch inside. I tell them to surround the camp and follow my lead. When I blow my trumpet, you blow your trumpets, break the jars, and shout, "For God and Gideon!"

We surround the camp and do exactly as planned. Trumpets blare, jars crash, torches shine, men shout. The Lord causes so much confusion in the camp that the Midianites kill each other, with the survivors fleeing. I call on volunteers from some of the nearby Israelite tribes, and we chase the Midianites and kill them and their leaders. One hundred and twenty thousand Midianites are dead.

We chase the remaining fifteen thousand, and finally capture them, again, killing their leaders. On the way back, we punish any towns that refused to give us supplies while we chased the Midianites.

Because I led the Lord's forces against Midian, the people of Israel ask me to rule over them, I refuse. However, I do ask that each one give me a gold earring taken from the plunder of the Midianites. I take the huge amount of gold and stupidly make an ephod, which I place in my hometown of Ophrah. The Israelites begin to worship the ephod, and it becomes a spiritual trap for me and my family.

The land of Israel has peace for forty years. As soon as I die, the Israelites go back to worshipping false gods. All of my good work is for nothing. The Israelites will not be faithful to God, no matter how faithful he is to them. Once again, they are in need of a savior.

Technology vs God. Nice title for an Old Testament story. You probably know the Sunday School version of the story of Samson and Delilah. The Philistines versus the Israelites, or my betrayal of Samson are side-stories. I will tell you the main story, but the real world version of the main story. I am Delilah.

In about 2000 BC on the island of Crete, just south of mainland Greece, the powerful Minoan culture arose. Its beautiful palace at Knossos can still be seen.

A few hundred years later, the Mycenaean culture began on the Peloponnese Peninsula of Greece. Its cities with advanced architecture can still be seen in your time, too.

The Minoans and Mycenaeans were greatly responsible for a huge trading network that extended from Egypt to Italy to Afghanistan. All sorts of goods flowed through this network, from tools with new metals to food to weapons. Something else of greater value flowed through this network, too...ideas. Knowledge and technology.

Technology was changing, and in turn changing everything. Chariots revolutionized transportation and warfare, and the invention of iron changed warfare and farming.

In Israel, the period of the Judges started about 1400 BC. This was also the time period when the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures came under immense stress. Volcanoes, earthquakes, diseases. Migrations of peoples from the north and east wanting new lands. Worn out farmland. Increasing populations.

By 1200 BC, all was chaos. The Minoan and Mycenaean cultures were falling apart. People migrating into Greece and Turkey from the north. Where could people from southern Europe go to get peace and prosperity...and farm land?

The obvious place to go for the mysterious sea people known as the Philistines was the coastal plains of Israel. It did not take long for them to establish a strong presence there. They only had to displace some unsophisticated Canaanites and Israelites. The Israelites could have kept the Philistines out had their tribes acted in concert, but they didn't.

The Philistines soon controlled the Via Maris trade route that came out of Egypt and went north. They controlled the few port cities on the Mediterranean Seas and used their modern ships to trade with other countries. They had chariots that ruled the flat lands with virtually no opposition. Their fortified cities had improved architecture, technology and administration...Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath.

The Philistines were well versed in the production and use of iron. This gave them the most advanced weapons and iron implements. Even hundreds of years later, they would still control the use of iron in Israel and restrict its use by the Israelites.¹ The Philistines had all of the best and newest technology.

What did the Israelites have? The promise of God to provide and protect them if they obeyed the Laws of Moses. Since they chose not to follow those laws, the Israelites had little. They had chosen not to completely dominate the land, so they didn't keep out the Philistines. They had to retreat to the hill country that the Philistines didn't really want. The Israelites had chosen not to eliminate the Canaanites who lived in the hill country, so they and their foreign gods were still a thorn to the Israelites.

The only thing that could make the plight of the Israelites worse was this...begin consorting with the Philistines and start worshiping their gods. God was willing and capable of protecting the Israelites against the Philistines, but only if the Israelites would follow God, and God only.

With this information, you can understand the story of Samson as an adult of the real world it should. Technology versus God.

¹ 1 Samuel 13:19-21

After being ruled by a long series of judges, the Israelites again chose to follow foreign gods, so the Lord of Israel allowed the Philistines to rule over the Israelites for forty years. When they cried out to him, he answered their call.

Samson's parents were from the tribe of Dan. They had unsuccessfully tried to have children for many years. The angel of the Lord appeared to his mother and told her that she would have a child, and they were never to allow his hair to be cut because he would be a Nazirite, a man dedicated to God according the Law of Moses.²

His parents learned from the angel what to do and what not to do during the pregnancy, and after the child was born in order to fulfill the Lord's will. His mother did not drink any alcoholic beverages or eat unclean foods. They were instructed in other ways to raise Samson in order to please God. Samson was blessed by God, and he grew, and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir in him while he was in Mahaneh Dan.

Samson and his parents moved to a town near Timnah, a Philistine city. One day, Samson went into Timnah and saw a young Philistine woman there. He insisted that his parents get her for his wife, but they objected, they wanted him to marry an Israelite. But God wanted Samson to confront the Philistines, and this was a perfect pretext.

So, Samson and his parents went into Timnah, on the outskirts they were attacked by a young lion. The Spirit of the Lord came on Samson and he tore the lion apart with his bare hands. Then he went on into town to meet the woman. He really liked her. Sometime later, he went back to marry her. On his way, he passed the slaughtered carcass... it was full of bees and honey. A truly delicious secret.

Samson's father went to inquire of the young woman, which was customary. Samson and his father held a feast. At the feast were thirty Philistine young men who acted as his party companions. "Let me tell you a riddle," said Samson. If they could answer the riddle, he would give them each a set of clothes. Thirty sets of clothes? Hard to come by for anyone. If they could not answer the riddle, they would need to give him the same. They all agreed to the deal. The riddle: "out of

² Numbers 6:1-21

the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet.” Like I said, a delicious secret.

After three days, the young men panicked. They could not afford to lose the bet. They threatened Samson’s now wife and family with death if they did not tell them the answer to the riddle. Samson’s wife begged and whined and finally got the answer from him. She told the thirty young men, they gave Samson the correct answer, he lost the bet.

The Spirit of the Lord came on Samson again, and he went to the nearby city of Ashelon and killed thirty men. He took their clothes and gave them to the young men from the wedding feast. Samson was furious, he went back to his father’s house. Now thinking Samson was never going to return, the girl’s father gave her in marriage to another Philistine.

Some months later, around harvest time, Samson went back to Timnah to his wife’s house to be with her. Her father said “I thought you hated her, so I married her off to another man.” Samson went berserk.

Anger and revenge don’t even begin to describe it all. He caught 300 foxes and tied them in pairs, tail-to-tail. Lighting a torch between their tails, he released them into the grain fields. The foxes burnt the Philistines’ ripe wheat, vineyards and olive groves.

The Philistines reacted by killing Samson’s former wife and her father. Samson was enraged. He slaughtered many of them, and then hid in the cave of Etam. Wasn’t long, the Philistines came for Samson, but the Spirit of the Lord came on him again, and he killed one thousand of the Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey.

Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines. That would be the end of the story of Samson if it wasn’t for me. Me, Delilah. A Philistine.

I live in the Valley of Sorek, just north of Timnah, the home of Samson’s first wife. Samson is in love with me, just like a bunch of other guys.

The rulers of the Philistines find out that Samson is in love with me. They come to me and promise me great riches if I can find out the source of his strength so they can overpower him. I guess they are tired of Samson protecting the Israelites at the cost of Philistine lives. Obviously, I don't care much about Samson, but the idea of great riches is very attractive to me.

At first, I just ask Samson the source of his strength, and he lies to me. It is *not* being tied up with seven fresh bowstrings. I pout and ask again. Again, he lies. It is *not* being tied up with new ropes.

I tell him to quit making me a fool, but again, he lies. It is *not* weaving his hair into seven braids.

I turn up the big heat. I nag him day after day after day. And, of course, I won't give him any love, if he doesn't act like he loves me. Finally, he gives in and tells me the truth... He's not allowed to cut his hair.

I tell the Philistine leaders and they come to my house with the money. I soothe Samson to sleep on my lap so his hair drapes over my knee. While he is asleep, they cut off the seven braids of his hair. He awakens, and he is as weak as a normal man. What do I care? I am rich.

The Philistine leaders haul him away. They gouge out his eyes and take him to Gaza where they shackle him and make him grind grain, just like the donkey, whose jawbone was used to kill the Philistines. Day after day after day. He works like a donkey, and for a long time nothing changes. Except one thing. One... slow...un noticeable thing. His hair grows back.

The Philistine leaders eventually have a giant party to celebrate his capture and blindness, and to give thanks to their god, Dagon. They had him perform like a bear on a chain and he humors them. As a closing act, Samson asks the servant who has been leading him around to place him between the pillars supporting the temple, says he wants to lean on them.

The servant leads him, the crowd watches. Very important men and women fill the massive temple. Three-thousand of them standing on the roof alone, all laughing at Samson. They don't understand Hebrew, but if they had, they would

have heard him praying to the Lord to provide him strength one more time. One more time for revenge against the Philistines.

The crowd laughs and laughs as Samson strains against the pillars. They know he is weak, too weak to do anything. What they know is wrong. Technology versus God. The finest architecture in the world fails against one human being empowered by God. The pillars come crashing down, the giant temple stones kill all the people, all the Philistine rulers.

For the next century, the Philistines and their superior technology will torment the Israelites. And then history will repeat itself. Superior weaponry of the Philistines will be destroyed by a young man empowered by God using a sling. That young man will live with the Philistines and learn about their technology and its weaknesses. Then, that young man, will grow to be the king who completely overwhelms and destroys the Philistines through the power of God. King David.

Technology versus God. I'd pick God if I were you.

In those days, Israel didn't have a king; every man did that which was right in his own eyes. The last line in the book of *Judges* is the summation of summation of the Old Testament. Seems to be the goal of modern society, for everyone to do what they want to do. But in the book of *Judges*, it was an indictment of chaos, disorder, and evil.

I should know, I was the high priest and ruled over Israel as the last judge.

I was the last pure judge of Israel. Not pure in the sense of clean or without blame. I was the last judge who wasn't also a prophet.

I am going to tell you about the end of the book of *Judges*, but I will give you the end of my story first. My family and I will be such a disaster that the people of Israel will demand that God give them a new type of leadership. After my death, the leaders of Israel will be prophets and kings, not judges.

Samuel will be the first prophet of this new era beyond the judges, and Saul will be the first king. Here's a quick recap of how the Israelites got to my time. More than 300 years before me, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, Moses led them to the shores of the land promised to Abraham.

Under the leadership of Joshua, the Israelites entered the Promised Land and conquered most of it. The twelve tribes of Israel took possession of the lands allotted to each one of them. Upon Joshua's death, God appointed people as judges to lead the Israelites .

The Israelites never completely conquered the peoples of the Promised Land, so these unconquered people and surrounding countries proved to be constant trouble to the Israelites from a security standpoint. And the Israelites continually succumbed to following the gods of these other nations.

The book of *Judges* is an account of the cycles of the Israelites following God under a judge, turning to false gods, being punished by God, and returning to follow God under the next judge. The book of *Judges* concludes by illustrating the chaos throughout the country of Israel.

In one of the last stories in *Judges*, a man named Micah took a huge amount of silver from his mother and made some priestly garments and household gods from it. He hired a Levite, a man who was supposed to be a priest of God, to be his personal priest for his false gods. In his ignorance and rebellion, he commented that the Lord would surely be good to him since he had a Levite as his own personal priest.

Syncretism. That is a word that modern people don't use much, but perhaps they should. Syncretism. It means an amalgamation or combination of different religions or cultures. That is what Micah was trying to do. He wanted the best of both worlds...worship God and worship false gods.

Syncretism. The Greeks and Romans were perfectly fine with it. In fact, most religions through time have been fine with it. After all, not many of them want to stake claim to having sole truth.

Here's the problem. The God of the Jews hates syncretism. He demands that his followers worship him and him only! He hates all other gods, and demands that his followers hate them, too. Sound harsh? It is, but it is the crux of the Bible. Love God, love people, hate false gods.

Since the Israelites weren't yet led by kings, each of the twelve tribes were guided by their tribal elders. The tribe of Dan was in a unique position. They had not conquered the peoples in the lands allotted to them by Joshua, so they were somewhat homeless. The elders chose five of them to search the land and find somewhere they could claim as home.

The five spies came to the home of Micah, and spent the night. They recognized Micah's priest and asked for his inquiry of God as to whether they would be successful in finding land. He said they would be successful. Sure enough, they

found land in Laish that seemed to be good land and easy to conquer.

The spies returned home and gathered up six hundred armed men. They went to Laish by way of Micah's home. With their superior force, they stole Micah's silver idols, priestly ephod garment, household gods...and priest. Micah and his people protested, but to no avail. In the end, the people of Dan took his stuff and defeated Laish. They finally had a home. They continued to worship the homemade gods of Micah. Stupid. Who was going to stop them? Israel had no king.

The book of *Judges* ends with a long, almost incomprehensible story of the Israelites coming together to fight against one of their tribes, Benjamin. In the end, the tribes make sure that Benjamin is punished severely, but survives.

I lived in Shiloh along with my sons, Hophni and Phinehas.¹ The Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant were housed in Shiloh. People throughout Israel came to worship at Shiloh.

My sons were wicked. There is no other way to put it. They had no love or regard for God. They stole food from the sacrifices made by the people, even if they had to take it by force. They would sleep with the women who served at the entrance to the tabernacle.

I confronted my sons. I warned them that there is no one who can protect them from their sins against God. But I was old, and they did not listen to me. The Lord would have to take care of it.

A man of God came to me to tell me that my efforts were not enough. Since my family and I had dishonored God, he was going to cut off my family line from being priests. He told me that my two sons would die on the same day, as a sign. I lamented that my family had fallen so far. The first Phinehas, in the time of Moses, was zealous for the Lord's honor. Three centuries later, my son, Phinehas, so dishonored the Lord that he destroyed our family.

¹ 1 Samuel 3

The final accounting for the Israelites started because of the Philistines. The accursed Philistines. Because we Israelites had refused to dominate the entire land, the Philistines became established in the coastal plains.

We had no choice but to fight the Philistines to retain our nearby homes. We camped at Ebenezer and the Philistines at Aphek. In the first battle, we lost four thousand men.

When the soldiers returned, the elders of Israel claimed the defeat was due to the Lord not protecting us. They demanded that we give them the Ark of the Covenant to lead them in battle. Without my consent, my two sons...my two evil sons... took the Ark of the Covenant and went to the battle.

When the Ark entered the camp, the Israelite soldiers cheered so much the ground shook. The Philistines learned the reason of the noise and went berserk. They knew of God's history of defeating the Egyptians and were terrified they were next. That was the good news.

The bad news... those terror-stricken Philistines fought even harder! The Israelites were defenseless. Even though they had the Ark of the Covenant, their evil actions had caused God's presence to depart from the Ark. The Philistines crushed the Israelites. Thirty thousand men died that day. Including both of my sons. They died on the same day, just as the man of God had prophesied.

Toward the end of the battle, a messenger ran from the front lines to Shiloh. There I was by the side of the road sitting in my chair, watching and praying. I feared for the Ark of the Covenant. The messenger ran right past me and into town. He delivered the bad news. A cry of mourning and fear erupted from the town.

I was ninety-eight years old, overweight, and nearly blind. The messenger saw me and he took pity. I was trembling with fear, and must have been pitiable. "What happened," I asked. After a long hesitation, he finally answered, "Israel fled from the Philistines after suffering great losses. Your two sons are dead, the Philistines have captured the Ark of God."

At the mention of the Ark, I fell backward over my chair and broke my neck. I died. The era of the judges of Israel died with me. The transition of Israel to a kingdom began that day.

The era of the judges lasted about three centuries. God gave us chance after chance to dominate the land and follow his commandments. We Israelites were willing to follow God for short periods of time, but never fully committed our hearts and lives to him.

“Because God loved your ancestors, he chose them and their descendants. He brought them out of Egypt by his mighty power in order to give them the lands of great and mighty nations. Know this day, and keep it in your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and upon the earth below...and there is none other. You shall keep his statutes and commandments that it may go well with you and your children after you, and that you may live long upon the earth.”

We never did follow those words of Moses. We were never willing to keep God’s statutes and commandments. We kept God from giving us the Promised Land that he so desperately wanted to give us.

Now that I’m dead, the time the judges has ended. The era of prophets and kings will follow me. They must do that which is right in their own eyes. They must do better about being God’s people. They must.