Judges 1–3: Beginnings

The story begins, after Joshua's death, with the Israelites asking God which tribe will begin fighting the Canaanites. Judah, chosen, defeats King Adoni-bezek (Adonibezec) and cuts off his thumbs and big toes, as he had earlier treated 70 kings. Coming to Debir, or Kiriath-sepher (Cariath-sepher), Caleb offers his daughter Achsah (Axa) to the man capturing it. Othniel (Othoniel) succeeds, and also gains land given to Achsah by her father as well as the upper and lower springs she further requires of him. But despite some military success, Judah cannot drive out the inhabitants of the plain with their iron chariots. A man of Bethel (formerly Luz) betrays his city to the house of Joseph, but many Canaanites (Chanaanites) remain, either undefeated or subject to forced labor under the Israelites.

An angel announces that the Lord has left the Canaanites as adversaries because Israel failed to tear down the altars of their gods; and Israel indeed proceeds to worship these gods, to be plundered by its enemies, and then saved by judges raised up by the Lord, the first being Othniel.

The sparse account of Othniel (3:7–11) encapsulates a framework repeated, and varied, in Judges. The people turn from the Lord. He brings upon them

foreign oppressors. They cry for help. He then raises up a deliverer who defeats the oppressors, and the people enjoy "rest." This pattern of reward and punishment is often viewed as the book's dominant theme, though some, especially recently, see already in chapter 1 the suggestion that life rarely comes so neatly packaged.

By the eighteenth century, discrepancies between Joshua and Judges had become a problem: why do cities captured or destroyed in the former reappear, still inhabited by Canaanites in the latter? Indeed, did Joshua not annihilate *all* the Canaanites? Such historical questions about Israel's origins and early organization continue to dog scholars.

Though these early chapters lack the engaging stories that follow, readers over the centuries have not hesitated to derive lessons about justice from Adoni-bezek or about proper behavior from Achsah, her father, and her husband.

Ancient and Medieval

Early Christian and Jewish interpreters pay Judges 1–2 little attention, focusing rather on the major figures of subsequent chapters. Rabbinic reference is usually related to a text from the Torah. In discussing the beginning of Leviticus ("And Yhwh called to Moses"), *Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* (1:1) takes the angel appearing to the Israelites at Bochim (Judg 2:1–5) as evidence that *mal'ak* ("messenger," "angel") can refer to prophets as well as members of God's heavenly host, for this *mal'ak* "came up to Bochim from Gilgal" (Judg 2:1), not "from above," to pronounce God's judgment. The rabbis agree that this "angel" was the priest Phineas (see also, on this text and Num 20:16, *Midrash Numbers Rabbah*, 16:1; Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 16).

Among commentators on the Christian life, the monk John Cassian (360–435) sees the cycle of suffering-repentance-deliverance (Judg 2:10–19) and its first two deliverers (Othniel and Ehud) as illustrating how often severe suffering will drive a person to God, "whom we scorned to follow in the days of our wealth" (*Conference of Abbot Paphnutius*, ch. 4). Much later, a thirteenth-century guide for anchoresses (*Ancrene Wisse*, v [158]), stressing confession as a devotional practice, reads allegorically the book's opening where God nominates Judah as leader after Joshua's death. Joshua means "health" and Judah "confession." Joshua is dead when the soul's health is lost through deadly sin. Canaan is the sinful self, the devil's land, reclaimed by confession, that is, by Judah who "goes before you."

Othniel, the first deliverer in Judg 3:9, plays an earlier role in 1:13 as Caleb's younger kinsman who captures Kiriath-sepher (called Debir) in order to win in marriage Caleb's daughter, Achsah. (The story is also told in Josh 15:15–17.) Kiriath-sepher means "city of the book." An ancient Jewish tradition takes this name literally: Othniel captured 1,700 legal traditions the Israelites forgot while mourning Moses' death. "Said R. Abbuha: Nevertheless Othniel the son of Kenaz restored [these forgotten teachings] as a result of his dialectics" (*B. Talmud Temurah*, 16a; Rashi on Joshua 15; cf. Ginzberg, VI, 185). Accordingly, Othniel is remembered by some as a great scholar who set up an academy for Torah study (e.g. Targum to 1 Chron 2:55). Indeed, according to rabbinic texts identifying him with Jabez (1 Chron 4:9–10), Othniel's righteousness was so great among his fellow Israelites that God did not hold him accountable for Israel's continued unfaithfulness during his reign, but granted him eternal life, allowing him to enter Paradise alive (see Ginzberg, VI, 187).

Jewish historian Josephus (c.37–c.100 CE) tells of the indolence and political lethargy of the Israelite masses. By their luxury they forfeited their hard-earned independence and prosperity, and Keniaz (not Othniel, who is Kenaz's son in the Bible) was hard-pressed to find a few Israelites who, "out of shame at their present state and a desire to change it," would help him attack the Cushan garrison. Only after seeing his initial success were more Israelites willing to join him (*Antiquities*, v.182–4 (3.3)). (Whiston translates "Othniel, the son of Kenaz" anyway; Josephus's contemporary Pseudo-Philo has Cenaz as the first judge, but tells a very different story.).

Josephus also establishes a chronological order to the book's events which has continued into the modern period. The story of the Levite and the Benjamite war (Judges 19–21) and the Danite migration (Judges 18) occur early in the period of the judges, not at the end. This arrangement was well supported in Jewish tradition and adopted by Christian commentators (for details, see below on Judges 17–18).

Early Modern and Modern

It is universally noted, writes Matthew Henry (1662–1714), that Joshua left no successor with like authority. Hence it became incumbent on the tribes themselves to consult God through an oracle, as at the book's outset: "For God himself, as he was their King, so he was the Lord of their Hosts" (*Exposition*, 1708). The "judges" of the book, says Thomas Scott (1747–1821), "were not a regular succession of governors, but occasional deliverers, of different tribes and families, employed to rescue the nation from oppressors, to reform reli-

gion, or to administer justice. They do not seem to have assumed any degree of regal magnificence, or to have exercised any expensive or burdensome authority; yet they were for the time the immediate vicegerents of JEHOVAH the King of Israel" (*Holy Bible*, 1788–92).

For Scott, the book shows, "in a most affecting manner, the consequences of attending on the worship and service of God, or of neglecting them, in respect of national prosperity or adversity." Israel's condition "does not appear so prosperous, nor the national character so religious," as might have been hoped. A little later he is less restrained, speaking of the people's "sloth, cowardice, and unbelief" which "created them almost an infinity of trouble and misery afterwards." But echoing other readers, he thinks it probable that sanctuary worship was regularly maintained by a pious remnant "amidst the repeated apostacies and multiplied idolatries of the nation in general." Often cited as evidence is the book of Ruth, set in the time of the Judges, with its exemplary characters, Naomi, Boaz, and the Moabite woman, Ruth.

A recurring issue for readers of Joshua and Judges is the apparent discrepancy between their accounts of conquest. Cities the former declared captured, destroyed, and their inhabitants wiped out, apparently need capturing all over again. (The problem is also internal to Joshua; cf. chs 10–11 and chs 16–17.) Hence the campaigns against Hebron and Debir (Judg 1:9–13) – in Josh 10:36–40 these cities are utterly destroyed – often prompt the conjecture that the old inhabitants had returned while Joshua was absent subduing other parts of the country (so Symon Patrick, *Commentary*, 1702; Henry, *Exposition*). That there were no inhabitants left, according to Joshua 10, is a further problem best left unmentioned.

Skeptical philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778) is only too happy to mention such problems. On Judg 3:8, where Cushan-rishathaim of Mesopotamia makes Israel serve him for eight years, Voltaire cites an English Deist. Thomas Woolston "dares declare frankly that either the story of Judges is false, or that of Joshua is, from one end to the other. It is not possible, he says, that the Jews could have been enslaved immediately after having destroyed the inhabitants of Canaan with an army of six hundred thousand men." Equally inconceivable is how the 600,000 men could have exterminated all the original inhabitants but then be allied with them. "This crowd of contradictions is unsustainable." In his own voice Voltaire pretends to confess that Scripture is indeed difficult to understand. Perhaps there have been copyists' transpositions, he wonders, adding that it takes only one to spread obscurity in any history. But having sewn enough doubt and implicitly equated Scripture to just any history, he ends with his typical mock allegiance to orthodoxy: "We repeat that the best thing is to rely on the approved interpreters of the Church" (*Bible enfin expliquée*, 1776 [133]).

Twentieth-century critics basically agreed with Voltaire – the stories were not easily reconciled, and Joshua's sudden conquest was historically unreliable. Instead, the "gradual settlement" of Judges 1–2 (and Joshua 16–17) represented more accurately what happened. German scholar Martin Noth developed a popular hypothesis of tribal political organization, modeled on the ancient Greek "amphictyony" whose constituent members retained independence but united around a central sanctuary to wage war (*Das System der Zwölfstämme Israels*, 1930). By the century's end, however, Noth's amphictyony was largely discarded, and few scholars thought it possible to write a history of the Judges period based on the biblical text. The stark contrast between Joshua and Judges, moreover, was reassessed by literary critics reading the former as itself presenting a complex understanding of how the Promised Land was taken (cf. L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled*, 1991).

Jerusalem's conquest in Judges 1 has its own problems. First, Adoni-bezek in verse 7 is taken by his Judahite captors to the city, where he died, whereas verse 8 tells, as if a subsequent event, that the Judahites fought against the city, took it, put it to the sword, and burned it. Second, Judg 1:21 reports that the Benjamites did not dispossess the Jebusites of Jerusalem who have lived with them there "to this day" (confirmed by Josh 15:63). In Judg 19:11–12 it is a city of Jebusites, with no Israelites. David, moreover, had to capture the city from the Jebusites to make it his capital (2 Sam 5:6–10). Responses to the problem are various and ingenious.

In the late sixteenth century, the widely used Geneva Bible put verse 8 in parentheses and translated, "Now the children of Judah *had* fought against Jerusalem, and *had* taken it" (italics added). The official King James (or Authorised) version of 1611 (KJV) dispenses with the parentheses but keeps the tense, to the same effect: the capture had happened earlier, in Joshua's time. Others disputed this solution. Although Joshua defeated Adoni-*zedek*, king of Jerusalem, and took all the other cities in the vicinity, Jerusalem itself is not mentioned as taken. Rather, they say, Adoni-bezek had probably seized the city after Adoni-zedek's death left the throne vacant. (Alternatively, Joshua took the city only to lose it on going to take other parts of the country.) After capturing Adoni-bezek, the Judahites brought him to the *siege* of Jerusalem, while it was still holding out. As for inconvenient verse 21 (the Jebusites have dwelt in Jerusalem "to this day") and David's taking the city, it is explained that although the Judahites won the city, they could not take the stronghold or castle where the Jebusites remained until David's time. It was this "fort" (KJV) that David took (cf. Patrick, *Commentary*; Henry, *Exposition*).

Yet another version has the Judahites previously taking the lower city but not the upper city where Jebusites still lived (squaring with Josh 15:63). It was to the lower city that Adoni-bezek was taken. Soon after, the Judahites seized

and sacked the upper city (squaring with Judg 1:8). Subsequently, during one of the "oppressions," the Jebusites regained control and rebuilt the upper city (an incident unreported) where they remained until David retook it (Kitto, *Bible History*, 1841 [193]).

Adoni-bezek earns credit for accepting his mutilation and providing an edifying lesson. As one writer observed to General Washington, as he prayed that God would arm him against all evils, "Sir, men of great honour and worldly glory stand but in slippery places. Adonibezek, a mighty prince, was made fellow commoner with the dogs" (Stephen Case [?], *Defensive Arms Vindicated*, 1779 [716]). On a more practical note, it was often explained, convincingly, that the point of the mutilation, aside from equity, was to render the king "uncapable of War hereafter, being unable to handle Arms, by reason of the Loss of his Thumbs; or to run swiftly (which was a noble Quality in a Warrior) by the loss of his great Toes" (Patrick, *Commentary*, 1702).

For those uncomfortable about the Israelite retaliation, it was probably done by the "secret instinct and direction of God"; otherwise, it was carried out upon being informed by others of the king's tyranny and cruelty; either way, it was a just requital (Matthew Poole, *Annotations*, 1685). Certainly as far as Mrs Trimmer (1741–1810) was concerned, writing for the improvement of English youth, the matter was entirely straightforward: he was "justly condemned" (*Sacred History*, 1783 [xlvi, 202]). Esther Hewlett (1786–1851), with a similar audience, points out that the captured king acknowledged the "retributive justice" that had overtaken him. "How often has it been seen," she advises, "that with what measure we mete to others, it is measured to us again!" (*Scripture History*, 1828, 3). Young Americans read the Rev. John Howard (1795–1868) expatiating on the same theme. He adds that Adonibezek's punishment "is a warning to those in authority that God will judge mankind as they themselves have judged their fellow-creatures; and if this be not verified in this life . . . it will certainly be in the next" (*Illustrated Scripture History*, 1840 [126]). Or, as the author whom these educators seem to have been reading puts it, a little more strongly, "the great and mighty Men of the Earth shall be mightily tormented if they abuse the Power they are intrusted with, for the glory of God, and for the good of their Subjects" (Nicolas Fontaine, *History*, 1690 [80]; cf. Joseph Reeve's version of Fontaine's *History* for Catholic youth, 1780).

Children's Bible histories begin appearing in the eighteenth century, and Trimmer is among the pioneers. While she, Hewlett, and Howard refer to Adoni-bezek's fate, and Howard includes an illustration, the king is more often missing from such books, the more so as the nineteenth century wore on. In the twentieth century he is rarely discussed at all, let alone pictured with his bodily parts being severed.

Earlier, however, his mutilation was regularly pictured in Bibles, histories, and pictorial suites, from the first days of printed illustrated Bibles in the late fifteenth century until well into the nineteenth century. It is the only illustration from Judges in the suite of woodcuts by Hans Holbein (1497–1543), court painter to Henry VIII (*Historiarum Veteris Testamenti Icones*, 1538) (PLATE 1.1b). He derived it from a Venetian Bible of 1490. Since the story comes early in Judges 1, the picture often heads the book: typical is a 1690 Vulgate from Venice. As with Holbein's king, it seems he is about to lose all of his fingers, not just his thumbs (PLATE 1.1c). Likewise, in the famous suite of copperplate engravings (*Icones Biblicae*, 1626) by Matthäus Merian (1593–1650), used in Zetzner's Luther Bible of 1630 (the "Merian Bible"), were it not for a successfully singled-out thumb and great toe already on the chopping block, we might expect Adoni-bezek shortly to lose five more toes (PLATE 1.1d). There is no such problem, however, in the influential "Great Bible" of 1700, published by Pieter Mortier (1661–1711) in Amsterdam. Here (Jan Goeree is the designer) the instrument of choice is a chisel (PLATE 1.1e). The scene later fell into disfavor, and an American reader of Harper's celebrated *Illuminated Bible* of 1846 might have been surprised to find it at the head of Judges. These executioners also clearly know their business (PLATE 1.1a).

> Behold the punishment so just,
> Of him who had a tyrant been.
> God's righteous judgment ever must
> O'ertake us all, though not foreseen.
> (Howard, *Illustrated Scripture History*, 1840)

Contrasting with Adoni-bezek are Caleb and Achsah (Judg 1:11–15), a story repeated from Josh 15:15–19. It tells the familiar tale of the hero who wins the hand of the king's daughter. ("Fathers among the Israelites . . . exercised a more absolute authority, in disposing of their daughters in marriage, than is customary among us; and these generally acquiesced in the choice made for them," says Thomas Scott (*Holy Bible*, 1788–92).) Told in few words, the narrative demands of its reader mental leaps, while difficulties in the Hebrew text have also occasioned head-scratching.

Othniel's family affiliation is ambiguous: literally "son of Kenaz brother of Caleb who was younger than he." Some have thought him to be Caleb's nephew, others his brother. The ancient Greek versions are split on the matter, but in the Vulgate he is Caleb's brother, and so into the modern period. Symon Patrick (1626–1707) notes that if Othniel were Caleb's brother, that would make him Achsah's uncle, and the marriage improper. He insists that Caleb is consistently

PLATE 1.1 Adoni-bezek's fate: (a) *Harper's Illuminated Bible*, 1846; (b) Holbein, 1538; (c) Latin Bible, 1690; (d) Merian, 1626; (e) Goeree, 1700. (See p. 23)

called the son of Jephunneh (e.g. Josh 15:13) so Othniel, son of Kenaz, cannot be his brother. Rather, "brother" should be taken more broadly as meaning "kin" (*Commentary*, 1702, on Josh 15:17; similarly Poole, *Annotations*, 1685). Along similar lines, it has recently been suggested that Othniel is described as a Kenizzite by clan and a kinsman ("brother") of Caleb (Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, 1975).

The narrator tells us that Achsah came, but not from where. Had she been sent away for the campaign's duration, or was she arriving at her husband's home from her father's house? More significantly, did *she* press *him* to ask her father for a field (so the Hebrew text), or was it the other way round (as in the Greek versions and the Latin Vulgate)? Patrick, again with propriety in mind, wonders whether this means that she moved her husband "to give her Leave to ask it of her Father." He then would have given her permission, perhaps thinking it "more proper" for her to ask than he himself (*Commentary*). Accordingly she did, says Matthew Henry, "submitting to her Husband's Judgment, tho' contrary to her own" (*Exposition*). The reverse argument is that having his wife press or "nag" him (the verb is usually pejorative) reflected badly on the image of the first "savior judge" and so was probably a "tendentious" change from an original where the husband nagged the wife (so Boling, *Judges*) – which behavior apparently did the hero's image no damage.

A woodcut in John Kitto's *Pictorial Sunday-Book* (1845) illustrates the scene by borrowing from Nicolas Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds* (Paris, Louvre), painted c.1650 and very popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Poussin's shepherd traces with his finger a tomb inscription (*Et in Arcadia ego*, "Even in Arcadia, [there] am I"). Kitto's woodcut replaces the tomb with a spring, and Othniel points now to Achsah or perhaps to the water. Either way, life has replaced death as the central symbol. The viewer is left wondering whether Othniel is pressing Achsah to ask for this water or congratulating her for having won it (PLATE 1.2a).

Whichever text is read, Achsah does the asking. She asks for a present, a "real, tangible" blessing (George F. Moore, *Judges*, 1895). Another debate concerns what first happens when she arrives on the ass. The Hebrew word translated "lighted from off" (KJV) or "alighted from" (RSV) occurs only here (= Josh 15:18) and in Judg 4:21, and its meaning has been discussed, particularly since the ancient Greek and Latin has her sighing and crying out from her ass. Alternative proposals, however, have tended to be found wanting, some more than others: the proposal to render "she broke wind" as in the New English Bible "has not found wide acceptance" (Boling, *Judges*).

Caleb greets her with "What wilt thou?" (KJV), as though he already knows she wants something. Or his question might be translated, "What's wrong?"

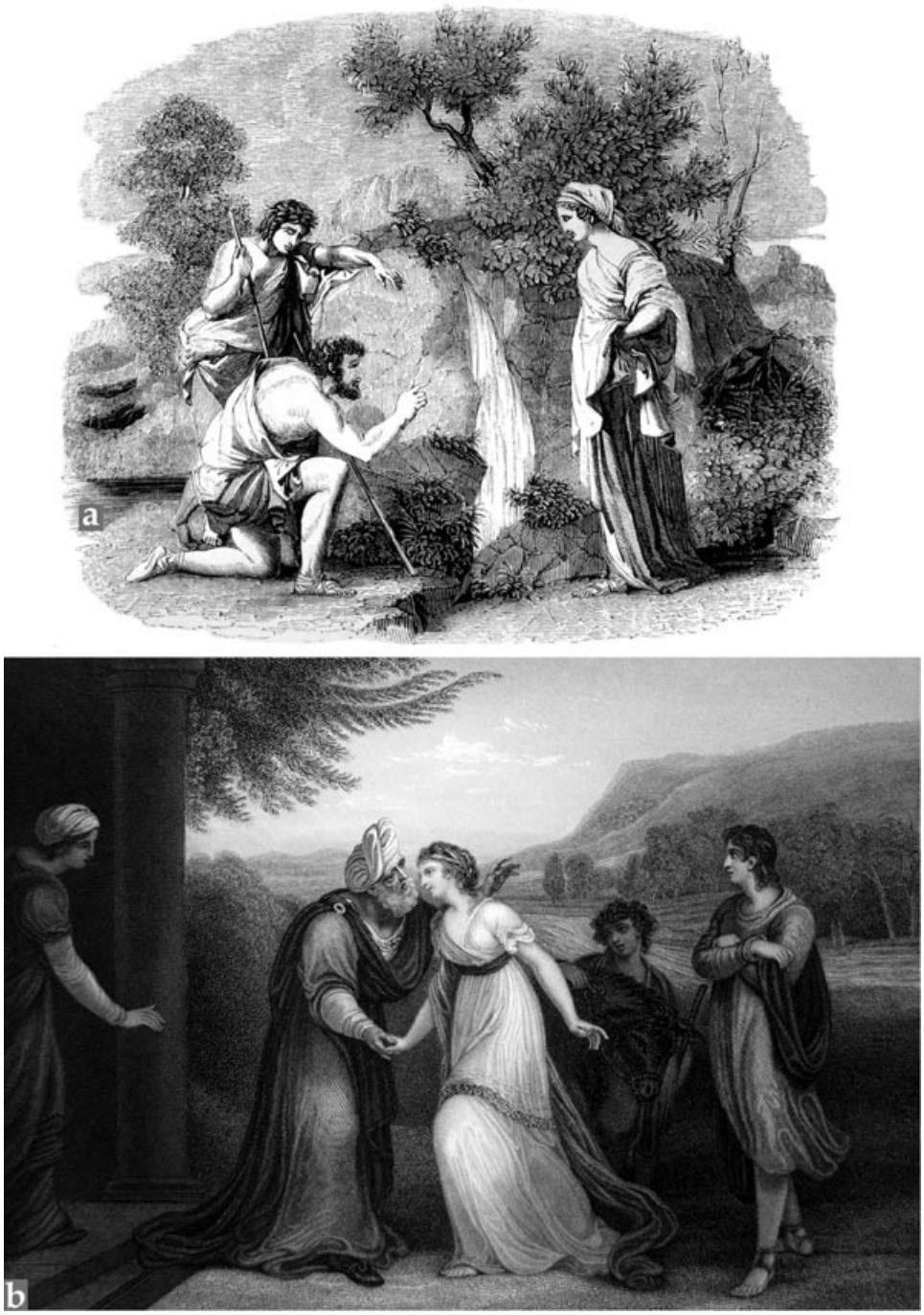

PLATE 1.2 Achsah: (a) Kitto's *Pictorial Sunday-Book*, 1845; (b) Singleton, c.1800. (See pp. 25, 27)

(Boling), as though her demeanor was amiss. "You have given me a south land" (KJV) or "Negeb land," she says to her father, a "dry country," that is: "Give me also springs of water." Clearly the reader lacks information: Caleb has already given her land, but it does not satisfy her. She is asking for more. If she has dry land, she needs springs of water. Or as one writer paraphrases: "Thou has already given me a pleasant Estate in the South Part of the Country; but it is hot and dry; and likely to prove barren; give me, I pray thee, this Parcel of Land, which is well watered" (Laurence Clarke, *Compleat History*, 1737). The story ends simply: without further word, Caleb gives her not one source of water but two, the "upper springs" and the "lower springs."

Henry supposes these to be two fields, named from their springs, though he is partial also to the thought of one field, watered from the heavens above and the earth below, alluding to blessings of soul and body (*Exposition*, on Joshua 15). He much approves of Achsah. She dutifully consulted her husband, and she managed the undertaking "wonderful well" and "with a great deal of Art." We learn thereby that not only should husbands and wives "mutually advise, and joyntly agree about that which is for the common Good of their Family," but "much more should they concur in asking of their Heavenly Father the best Blessings, those of the upper Springs."

Othniel too wins approbation. It would seem he had a soft spot (a "kindness") for Achsah before Caleb's offer which prompted his bold undertaking. "Love to his Countrey, an Ambition of Honour, and a desire to find Favour with the Princes of his People, would not have engaged him in the great Action, but his Affection for Achsah did . . . and so inspir'd him with this generous Fire. Thus is *Love strong as Death . . .*" (Henry, *Exposition*).

A little cooler is Thomas Gaspey (fl. 1840–60) in *Tallis's Illustrated Scripture History for the Improvement of Youth* (1851, 88). "The daughter, like some young ladies who have lived since her time, seems to have thought it would be right to get as much as she could from her father for her husband . . . she was so fortunate as to obtain all she asked." Children will naturally look to their parents for aid, and parents, inasmuch as they are able, will be disposed to give it. Still, children should not be too importunate, for "the most selfish are not always allowed to fare the best." Somehow we seem to have strayed a little from the story. But H. Singleton's picture (cf. PLATE 1.2b), and the accompanying verse, bring us back.

Achsah her lord to Caleb brings,
  Already his fair field possessing,
To ask the boon of water springs,
  And with them the paternal blessings.

Romantic novelist Grace Aguilar (1816–47) has no hesitation commending the story to young Jewish women, for it is, she argues, "the very first instance of chivalry which history records." Chivalry – "when marvellous deeds were done, and dangers dared, all for the smiles of women" – had the virtue of making woman "a subject of consideration, respect, and love," very different to the "slavery and degradation" the critics saw as her lot in ancient Israel. (Aguilar might well have had Voltaire in mind.) Caleb clearly knew the esteem in which Achsah was held, or would not have offered her as a reward for valor. And Caleb sought her for herself, not her property, since she had to urge him to ask her father for a field. Achsah herself was not afraid to ask her father and judged him right. Aguilar concludes: rather than confirming "our being degraded," does it not "elevate us to a perfect equality with our brother man?" (*Women of Israel*, 1845, 215–17).

Christian commentators in the early modern period and later resume the ancient rabbinic discussion of the name Kiriath-sepher, as the city of Debir was formerly called (Judg 1:11). The city, Patrick notes, was probably where the ancient archives were kept, a city of learning, as Athens was among the Greeks.

John Kitto (1804–54), self-taught scholar and widely published author, devotes one of his "family circle" readings (*Daily Bible Illustrations*, 1850 [II, 282–5]) to the "Book-City," no doubt so named from being either eminent for books or archives, or the resort of men conversant with literature. He notes that the ancient Jewish Targum calls the place Kirjath-arche – or the city of the public records of the Canaanites. In verse 49 it is called Kijath-sannah, which may refer to traditional law and learning, and is translated in the ancient Greek versions a "city of letters." In short, this city tells us that there were books in Canaan. "By the dear love we bear to books, which place within our grasp the thoughts and knowledge of all ages and of all climes, we exult in this inevitable conclusion." And whatever the quality or number of those books, "they were precious in the eyes of the Canaanites." But what, asks Kitto, became of those books? When Caleb acquired the city, did he preserve or destroy them? Whereas Henry supposed that a desire for Israel to acquaint itself with ancient Canaanite learning spurred Caleb to master the city (*Exposition*, on Josh 15:13–19), Kitto doubts that Caleb would respect books containing, to him, much that was "profane and abominable."

> Besides, the collection very probably included records and covenants respecting the ancient arrangements of estates and territories, which a conquering people could have no interest in preserving, but had a very obvious interest in destroying. So it is by no means unlikely that old Caleb threw the entire bundle of books that formed the library of Kirjath-sepher into the fire.

The books of Kiriath-sepher also interest feminist critic Danna Nolan Fewell, reflecting on Achsah and the "(e)razed" City of Writing (1995). Spelling out the city's former name as "city of books" casts the conquest in a different light for a reader who respects learning and culture. Though the predominant tone of Joshua and Judg 1:1–18 is triumphalism, by mentioning the former name the text shows "traces" of other values undermining the triumph. Fewell is also interested in how Achsah's story may be read as a whole, what meanings present themselves, and what undermines these. Her larger point is that biblical texts, like others, are inherently unstable, always subject to the choices readers make and what drives those choices.

Fewell leads her own reader through the text's ambiguities, setting out choices. Are Caleb and his clan Kenizzites, so not strictly Israelites but foreigners? In that case, instead of celebrating a conquest by Israel or Judah, does the story suggest it took foreigners to do what Israel/Judah could not? Achsah's name means "bangle" or "anklet." Asks Fewell, "Is she a person? Or is she a trinket? Is she a subject in her own right? Or is she simply an ornament in the story, a 'charming personal touch'?" Considered as "trinket," a reader might see her as but another spoil of war. "To her father, she is bait. To her future husband, she is his due reward. . . . Who needs to consider seriously a girl named Trinket?" Yet she takes initiative and insists on a gift. How, then, does she understand herself? "Is she aware that she, like the land, is to be taken and owned by a victorious soldier? Or does she see herself as the landowner, attempting to improve her property?" What is her relation to her husband, Othniel? Does she "urge" him or "nag" him? Or is it rather Othniel who is the subject of this verb? Fewell notes what we saw above, that often the decision favors Othniel's interests. "In the end," she argues, "we see how interpreters are preoccupied with how the biblical text models men."

Finally, Fewell offers alternatives. Is the text literal or figurative? Does Caleb represent God, Othniel Israel, Achsah the land? "Isn't God's promise of the land conditioned upon a successful conquest?" Or perhaps Othniel and Achsah represent an ideal Israel, undaunted by obstacles – like a few iron chariots. (Of the Israelites in verse 19 Thomas Scott writes, "their courage and faith failed them at the sight of the iron chariots . . . They forgot how Joshua had attacked and destroyed the Canaanites . . . and when they lost their confidence in God they could do nothing" (*Holy Bible*, 1788–92).) Or does Achsah tell of Israel finding itself in a land which is not exactly the promised land of milk and honey, an Israel needing to ask to be blessed with the very basic necessity of life, water? Does the story, then, subvert the divine promise? Not necessarily, says Fewell. An imperfect land "may be what provides life its challenge. It may be what provides the plot for the ongoing story. It may be the very thing that will build Israel's (and God's) character."

The third cameo story in Judges 1 tells of the man of Luz (Bethel) who showed the spies from the house of Joseph how to enter the city (Judg 1:22–6). In return they undertook to "shew mercy" to him (KJV), or deal "kindly" (RSV), "justly" (Boling), or perhaps better, "loyally" with him. After the city was taken, the captors honored their undertaking and let him and his family go free. He went to Hittite territory and built another Luz. The similarity to the story of Rahab and the spies at Jericho is frequently noted (Joshua 2, 6). But whereas Rahab and her extended family afterwards joined Israel, so "she dwelt in Israel to this day" (Josh 6:25), the man of Luz and his family separate themselves from their conquerors and re-establish their city. "He seems to have acted, not from faith to God, or love of Israel, but out of fear, and to save his life; and therefore, when set at liberty, he did not unite interests with the worshippers of Jehovah as Rahab had done" (Thomas Scott, following Henry).

Divine agency in the plot of Judges has been a source of confusion for readers, nowhere more so than in Judges 1–3. Did the Israelites, through their own failures, allow the Canaanites (the "nations") to remain in the land, as much of chapters 1–2 suggests, or were these failures caused by God, as 2:20–3:6 has it? Taken as a whole, the text seems to want to have it both ways, rather as the story of the Exodus tells both that God hardened Pharaoh's heart and that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Readers, however, tend to opt for one or the other, as we see below with Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. Esther Hewlett, in the nineteenth century, is typical when she blames "the slackness of the people and the consequent want of the divine blessing among them" for their enemies' presence among them, intermarriage, and the people's slide into idolatry. Divine activity ("Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them," Judg 3:1) becomes for Hewlett divine passivity ("want of the divine blessing"), and we are left with human "slackness" as the fundamental cause (*Scripture History*, 1828, 15).

In his *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), Martin Luther (1483–1546) uses this passage to illustrate a principle: worse sin and vice occur in time of peace than "when war, pestilence, illness, and all manner of misfortune burden us." Moses understood this: "My beloved people has become too rich, full, and fat: therefore have they resisted their God" (Deut 32:15). Thus the Israelites, now settled in the Promised Land, needed to discipline themselves by keeping God's commandments. John Calvin (1509–64) finds in Othniel's role as deliverer a lesson of God's goodness, power, and providence: "For sometimes [God] raises up open avengers from among his servants, and arms them with his command to punish the wicked government and deliver his people, oppressed in unjust ways, from miserable calamity" (*Institutes*, 1550, iv.20.30). Like others, he fails to mention that it was, however, God who brought the oppression from which

the people needed deliverance. If the oppression was unjust, then this calamity, the text might seem to say, was of God's making.

As we have seen, some approve of Adoni-bezek for accepting the divine justice of his fate. Thus, in his posthumous collection of sermons, *The Crook in the Lot* (1737), Scottish Presbyterian minister Thomas Boston (1677–1732) points to him as one who rightly sees "the doing of God" in his affliction. Boston's book continues to be widely read. Two months after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon building in the United States, a new edition appeared, to speak directly to this trauma. The cover displays a photo of the Trade Center's twin towers, along with the subtitle, *The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God Displayed in the Afflictions of Men*. From Adoni-bezek's twin thumbs to New York's twin towers and the thousands of lives therein, apparently, God's guiding and judging hand may be seen.

> "Then God was angry with them; and He punished them by sending cruel nations to conquer them, to burn their houses, to steal their children, and drive away their cattle. . . ."
> "Served 'em right for going back on their promises," said Willie.
> "Yes, brother," answered Clara, "and we must remember if we disobey God we are sure to be punished."
> "Right again, my child," said Aunt Charlotte; "all the Old Testament history has its lessons for us now."
> (Charlotte M. Yonge, *Aunt Charlotte's Stories*, 1898, 137–8)

Another way of reading Judges 1–3 is to relate it to the larger story of which it is a part, Genesis–2 Kings. Adoni-bezek speaks of captured kings eating at his table. At the end of Kings, with nation devastated and people scattered, Jehoiachin, king of Judah, eats at the table of his captor, the king of Babylon. Israel's dispossession, insists the narrator, has been divine punishment. Given this ending, Adoni-bezek's story reads like a parable. As Israel constantly breaks its covenant with God, as in the first chapters of Judges and as the story unfurls, what would be its just requital? A thumb for a thumb, so to speak, would have brought the story to a swift conclusion. As it turns out, the larger story from Judges to Kings seems to suggest more like a thumb for 70 thumbs. God "has a way of offering two springs of water instead of one, and requiting one thumb for seventy" (David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative*, 1993, 158–63).

Questions of theodicy and equity, however, are not the burning ones for many readers. Rather, they wonder at how readily Israel falls into idolatry: "Who would not think idolatry an absurd and unnatural thing?" For Joseph

Hall (1574–1656) the only conclusion can be the one Luther drew. "Let him that thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall" (*Contemplations*, 1615 [ix.3, 106]).

One long-standing line of thought is bolstered by the biblical metaphor denoting worship of foreign gods – instead of Israel's own god – as adultery or prostitution (so "play the harlot," Judg 2:17). It is assumed that idolatry involved illicit sex. John Kitto explains the conquering Hebrews' recurring predicament as a consequence of their failure to exterminate fully, or at least banish, the "dangerous and corrupting" Canaanites. Intermarrying with them, they wove a web in which they became entangled. Their Canaanitish relatives invited them to festivals where "lascivious songs" honored the gods, and "fornication and unnatural lusts were indulged in *as part of the Divine service*." Thus the rest of the world's propensity to idolatry "spread itself among the chosen like a plague" (*Bible History*, 1841 [191–2]).

In his *Personalities of the Old Testament* (1939), popularizing historical-critical scholarship, Fleming James describes the report of God denouncing the worship of local deities (Judg 2:1–5) as probably inserted by a later "Deuteronomic" editor to explain the people's suffering. But the explanation may have preserved a true recollection of the Israelites inclining to the "Canaanitish Baals"; and "this sensuous, narrowly local worship had let them sink back into sectionalism." Only loyalty to "Yahweh, the desert-God," could unite them in the military exploits needed (p. 66). "The peril of Israel," George Matheson (1842–1906) earlier observed (*Representative Men*, 1903, 159–60), "was not irreligion; it was too much religion of a bad kind." Worshiping Baal meant worshiping "sensuousness, if not sensuality"; it meant reverencing "the bodily nature of man" – the lust of the flesh and the eye – and pursuing animal pleasures and exercising strength; it meant reverencing "the oppression of the weak by the strong, the reign of violence and the empire of physical force."

Some years later, Jesuit priest John L. McKenzie (1910–91) discusses the two main "fertility" goddesses appearing in Canaanite religion: Ashtar (Astarte) and, prominent in the epic texts from Ugarit, Anath. The goddess, he claims, is the female principle deified, source of life and sexual pleasure. She is represented nude, with her sexual attributes emphasized – such clay figurines, doubtless insuring the sexual desirability and and fertility of Canaanite women, have been found in large numbers. The goddess of sex is also a goddess of violence: "The warlike Anath appears nude astride a horse and brandishing a weapon." It is thus clear why this religion was both popular and repudiated. Such a debased cult one would hesitate to call a religion. "It was more than nature worship and more than humanism; it was a candid profession of faith in sex as that alone which saves and satisfies" (*World of the Judges*, 1966, 41–2).

To Benjamin Warfield (1851–1921), conservative Princeton theologian, the focal point of the stories of Othniel and the other leaders in Judges was the

coming of the "Spirit of Jehovah" upon them. God is presented as the "theocratic Spirit," as the "source of all the supernatural powers and activities which are directed to the foundation and preservation and development of the kingdom of God in the midst of the wicked world." Accordingly the Spirit endows the "theocratic organs" of these leaders – Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, and, most remarkably, Samson – with the supernatural gifts necessary for the fulfillment of their tasks, as, for example, strength, resolution, energy, and courage in battle (*Biblical and Theological Studies*, 1895 [138–9]).

Very differently does the Rev. Thomas E. Miller (fl. 1900–30), in tune with liberal historical criticism, view the spirit coming upon Othniel (*Portraits*, 1922, 21–32). He doubts some "conscious, supernatural endowment" made him realize he was chosen: "the Spirit of God moves no doubt in a mysterious way, but He moves in human fashion and through human channels." Othniel broods and prays over the wrong inflicted by Eglon, King of Moab, until convinced that "Jehovah will not suffer a heathen foe to triumph over His people." It is then "he feels the Divine urge compelling him." This is "the answer of the human spirit to the ever-present and ever-pleading spirit of God." For Miller, like most readers, Othniel was a truly religious man, more akin to Gideon than Samson. He judged Israel before going to war, and his patriotism, courage, and sympathy for his oppressed people were rooted in his "passion for righteousness." He "grasped the truth, which even yet we are slow to learn, that righteousness alone exalteth a nation." Sin is "a clog on the wheels of progress."

Interpreters have generally found Othniel himself – unless vested with a burning passion for Achsah – a rather colorless character. His exploit against Cushan-rishathaim is told in skeletal fashion (Judg 3:7–11). Othniel is the model judge against whom all others are measured, in part because so little is said of him that there is little chance of finding flaws. He is, as the literary critics say, an entirely "flat" – "empty" even – character.

> Othniel is the embodiment of an institution; all the key words assigned to judgeship in chapter 2 [vv. 16–19] are applied to Othniel here, and his career conforms to the paradigm there. He is 'raised up' by Yahweh; he 'saves' Israel by 'judging' and going out to war. It is Yahweh who gives him victory over the enemy, a victory which ushers in an era of peace which lasts until after his death. . . . there are no complicating details. (Barry G. Webb, *Judges*, 1987, 127)