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# Joshua & Judges and Work

Theology of Work Project

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## Joshua & Judges and Work

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### Introduction to Joshua and Judges

Joshua and Judges tell the story of Israel's occupation of God's promised land and the formation of a national government. Their overall theme is that when God's people abide by his commandments and his guidance, their work prospers and they experience peace and joy. But when they follow their own inclinations and set themselves up as the ultimate authority, then poverty, strife, and every kind of evil bring grief and suffering.

Conquering, settling and governing a territory was the work of God's designated leaders, prophets, armies, and all the people of Israel. While there is every reason to expect these books to contribute to our understanding of work from a biblical perspective, it takes some work on our part to uncover how the work we see in Joshua and Judges applies to the circumstances of our contemporary workplaces. But if we look carefully, we find that insights for today's issues does arise from the incidents in the text, including leadership development and management, the relative roles of hard work and God's guidance in attaining our objectives, conflict over resources, the tension between driving for success and serving others, God's guidance in our work, and the ever-present peril of making an idol of our work. The events in Joshua and Judges give us models—both good and bad—for resolving workplace conflicts, motivating workers, meeting the challenges of elective office, and planning for new leaders to succeed those who retire or depart. The characters we meet in the books illustrate the remarkable value of women's leadership, the economic effects of war, and the complicity of the powerful in the abuse of the vulnerable at work.

The primary story line of both Joshua and Judges is that while God's chosen people are repeatedly rebellious against God, turning to serve other gods and forgetting God's covenant with them, God is always ready to respond to their crises and deliver them. Only when they cease even to desire God's blessings do they fall into misery and social devastation. This is a remarkably contemporary message, as well. We often find ourselves drifting away from God as we decide how to handle the many opportunities and challenges that arise in our work. We discover that we have elevated other concerns above receiving his love and loving and serving him through our work. The message of Joshua and Judges is that God is ready, now and here, for us to return to him and receive his blessings in our life and work.

We will organize our treatment of the books around four major themes, which roughly correspond to the flow of the narrative: Conquest, Coordination, Covenant, and Chaos. [\[1\]](#)

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## Conquest (Joshua 1-12)

The book of Joshua begins with the reiteration to Joshua of the promise of land and divine presence.

My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you." (Joshua 1:2-5)

Joshua, the land, and God's presence are all worthy of note, as we will explore in the following sections.

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## Joshua (Joshua 1)

Joshua is Moses' successor as leader of Israel. While he is not a king, he does in some ways foreshadow the kings who will rule over Israel in subsequent centuries. He leads the nation into battle, he executes judgment when necessary, and he attempts to hold the people to the terms of the covenant God made with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai.

To use modern terms, we could call the transition from Moses to Joshua an example of good succession planning. Moses, as led by God, has appointed in Joshua a leader who matches Moses' own character of faithfulness to God. He is described as a man of valor and learning, strong and courageous (Joshua 1:6-7), well-informed about and obedient to God's law (Josh. 1:8-9). More importantly, he is a spiritual man. Ultimately, the foundation of Joshua's leadership is not his own strength, nor even Moses' tutelage, but God's guidance and power. God promises him "The Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Josh. 1:9). More about Joshua's preparation to succeed Moses can be found at "[Succession Planning \(Numbers 27:12-23\)](#)" and "[The End of Moses' Work \(Deuteronomy 31:1-34:12\)](#)" at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).

As an example to today's leaders, Joshua's most notable characteristic may be his willingness to keep growing in virtue throughout his life. Unlike Samson, who seems stuck in infantile willfulness, Joshua transitions from a hotheaded young man (Numbers 14:6-10) to a military commander (Joshua 6:1-21) to

a national chief executive (Josh. 20) and eventually to a prophetic visionary (Josh. 24). He is more than willing to subject himself to a long period of training under Moses and to learn from those more experienced than himself (Numbers 27:18-23; Deuteronomy 3:28). He is not afraid to give orders in times of action, yet he continues to share leadership among a team including the priest Eleazar and the elders of the Twelve Tribes (e.g., Joshua 19:51). He never seems to refuse an opportunity to grow in character or to benefit from the wisdom of others.

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## The Land (Joshua 2-12)

Throughout both Joshua and Judges, the land is of such central importance that it is virtually a character unto itself: “And the land had rest” (Judges 3:11, 3:30, etc.). The major action of the book of Joshua is Israel’s conquest of the land God had promised their ancestors (Joshua 2:24, following 1:6). The land is the central stage upon which God’s drama with Israel is played out, and it rests at the core of God’s promises to the nation. The Law of Moses itself is inextricably bound to the land. Many of the Law’s chief provisions only make sense for Israel in the land, and the chief punishment under the covenant consists of expulsion from the land.

I will devastate the land, so that your enemies who come to settle in it shall be appalled at it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste. (Leviticus 26:32-33)

The land—the earth, the ground under our feet—is where our existence takes place. (Even those who take to the sea and the air spend most of their lives on land.) God’s promise to his people is not a disembodied abstraction, but a concrete place where his will is done and his presence is found. The place we are at any moment is the place we encounter God and the only place we have to go about his work. Creation can be a place where either evil or good dwells. Our task is to work good in the actual creation and culture where we work. Joshua was given the task of making the land of Canaan holy by adhering to God’s covenant there. We are given the task of making our workplaces holy by working according to God’s covenant also.

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## Working the Land (Joshua 5)

The land was of course bountiful by the standards of the Ancient Near East. But the blessings of the land went beyond the favorable climate, abundant water, and other natural benefits provided by the hand of the Creator. Israel would also inherit a well-developed infrastructure from the Canaanites. “I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them;

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you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive yards that you did not plant” (Joshua 24:13, cf. Deuteronomy 6:10-11). Even the signature description of the land as “flowing with milk and honey” (Joshua 5:6, cf. Exodus 3:8) assumes some degree of livestock management and beekeeping.

There is thus an inextricable link between land and labor. Our ability to produce does not arise solely from our ability or diligence, but also from the resources available to us. Conversely, the land does not work itself. By the sweat of our faces must we produce bread (Genesis 3:19). This point is made quite precisely in Joshua 5:11-12. “On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.” Israel has survived on the divine gift of manna throughout their wilderness wanderings, but God had no intention of making this a permanent solution to the problem of provision. The land was to be worked. Sufficient resources and fruitful labor were integral elements of the Promised Land.

The point may seem obvious, but it is worth making nonetheless. While God may provide miraculously at times for our physical needs, the norm is for us to subsist on the fruit of our labors.

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## Conquering the Land (Joshua 6-12)

The fact that the Israelites’ productive economy was founded on dispossessing the Canaanites from the land, does however, raise uncomfortable questions. Does God endorse conquest as a means for a nation to acquire land? Does God tolerate ethnic war? Was Israel more deserving of the land than the Canaanites were? A full theological analysis of the conquest is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>[2]</sup>

While we cannot hope to answer the myriad issues that spring up, there are at least a few things to keep in mind:

1. God chooses to come to his people in the rough-and-tumble of the actual ancient Near East, where the forces arrayed against Israel are vast and violent.
2. The work of military conquest is certainly the most prominent work in the book of Joshua, but it is not presented as a model for any work that follows it. We find aspects of work or leadership in Joshua and Judges that are applicable today, but the dispossession of people from land is not one of them.
3. The command to dispossess the Canaanites (Joshua 1:1-5) is a *highly specific* one and is not indicative of the general disposition of God’s commands to the Israelites or any other people group.
4. The eradication of the Canaanites stems from their notoriously wicked ways. The Canaanites were known to practice child sacrifice, divination, sorcery and necromancy, which God could not tolerate in the midst of the people he had chosen to be a blessing to the world (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). The land was to be stripped of idolatry so that the world might have the opportunity to see the nature of the one true God, creator of heaven and earth.<sup>[3]</sup>
5. Repentant Canaanites like Rahab (Joshua 2:1-21; 6:22-26) are spared – and indeed the putative wholesale destruction of the Canaanites is never fully realized (see below).

6. Israel will in turn practice much of the same wickedness as the Canaanites, giving a firm answer of “no” to the question of whether Israel was more deserving of the land. Like the Canaanites, the Israelites will also suffer displacement from the land through conquest by others, which the Bible likewise attributes to the hand of God. Israel is subject to God’s judgment too (see Amos 3:1-2 for example).
7. The full Christian ethic of power is not to be found in the book of Joshua, but in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who embodies all of God’s Word. The Bible’s definitive model for the use of power is not that God conquers nations for his people, but that the Son of God lays down his life for all who come to him (Mark 10:42; John 10:11-18). The biblical ethic of power is ultimately founded on humility and sacrifice.

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## Remembering God’s Presence in the Land (Joshua 4:1-9)

The ultimate blessing for the people in the land is that God will be with them. The people celebrate this blessing by passing in front of the ark of the Lord—the abode of his presence—and dropping memorial stones in the Jordan riverbed. Israel’s prosperity and security in the land are to come from the hand of God. Israel’s work is always derived from the prior work of God on their behalf. Whenever they become disconnected from the presence of God, the trajectory of their labor turns downward. Witness the somber note sounded in Judges 2:10-11: “Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.” The subsequent problems of Israel stem from their failure to acknowledge God’s work on their behalf.

We also could ask ourselves whether we are paying attention to God’s work on our behalf. The question here is not whether we are working well for God, but whether we can see him at work for us. At work, most of us find a tension between advancing ourselves and serving others, or between “a very I-centered system of self-interest” and “the welfare of the other side,” as Laura Nash puts it in her excellent exploration of this dynamic.<sup>[4]</sup> Could it be that we are trying too hard to look out for number one because we are afraid no one else cares about us?

What if we made it a practice to keep track of the things God does on our behalf? Many of us keep mementos of our successes at work—awards, plaques, photos, commendations, certificates and the like. What if every time our eyes passed over them we thought, “God has been with me every day here,” rather than “I’ve got what it takes.” Would that free us to care more generously for others, yet still feel more taken care of ourselves? A simple way to start would be to mentally note or even jot down each unexpected good thing that happens during the day, whether it happens to you or to someone else through you. Each of these could become a kind of memorial stone to God, like the stones the Israelites placed in the waters of Jordan to remember how God brought them into the Promised Land. According to the text, this was a very powerful reminder to them “and they are there to this day”

(Joshua 4:1-9).

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## Coordination (Joshua 13-22)

The length of text devoted to land allotment Joshua 13-22 reflects the essential role of the land in shaping Israel's identity, although it can make eyelid-drooping reading if we don't look at the big picture of the action. These chapters detail the work of setting boundaries, assigning cities and towns, and creating procedures to resolve conflicts —the work of organizing and cultivating a society for human flourishing and glorifying God. Joshua took scrupulous measures to ensure the distribution was done fairly (Joshua 14:1). Such passages remind us that productive labor depends in large measure on cooperation and fair play, meaning *organization* and *justice*. The Israelites need to know what belongs to whom, so that they could then organize their communities in a peaceful and productive manner. It takes work (in this case, quite a bit of work) to address the realities of geographical and social organization.

These realities are brought home with special force in Joshua 22, when the Transjordan tribes are accused of separatism after they erect an altar in their territory. As it turns out, the installation of the memorial altar is a shrewd move on the part of those tribes, which serves to maintain their standing within Israel.

If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith toward the Lord, do not spare us today for building an altar to turn away from following the Lord; or if we did so to offer burnt offerings or grain offerings or offerings of well-being on it, may the Lord himself take vengeance. No! We did it from fear that in time to come your children might say to our children, 'What have you to do with the Lord, the God of Israel? For the Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you Reubenites and Gadites; you have no portion in the Lord.' So your children might make our children cease to worship the Lord. Therefore we said, 'Let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you, and between the generations after us, that we do perform the service of the Lord in his presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and offerings of well-being; so that your children may never say to our children in time to come, "You have no portion in the Lord."' (Judges 22:22-27)

We see from all the detail that allotting the land fairly, creating governance structures, resolving conflicts, and maintaining a united mission was a complex process. Joshua was in overall charge, but all the people had roles to play, and even the tussles and crafty positioning were necessary to keep a nation of imperfect individuals working in harmony. This could give us an appreciation for the practice

and science of management today. Building an international supply chain, for example, requires aligning incentives, communicating specifications, sharing ideas, resolving competing-yet-cooperative interests, increasing your own profitability without driving other elements into losses, attracting and motivating skilled contributors, and overcoming unforeseeable obstacles, similarly to what Israel's leaders had to do. The same is true in universities, government agencies, banks, agricultural cooperatives, media companies, and virtually every kind of workplace. Society also depends on those who research and teach management methods and who shape corporate and government policy accordingly.

If God guided Joshua and the other leaders and people of Israel, can we expect him to guide today's managers? We have the resources of Scripture, prayer, worship, group studies, and the counsel of other Christians. How, exactly, can each of us weave these into our own ways of receiving guidance from God about the administration, management, and leadership we exercise?

Although possession of the land and governance of the people were of first importance to the nation, the later chapters in this section show us that neither the conquest of the land nor the organization of the nation was fully completed. In chapter after chapter, we hear the troubling refrain, "but they did not drive out" the various Canaanite tribes in their territories (Joshua 15:63, 16:10, 17:12-13). The Lord had commanded Israel to drive out the Canaanites in order to establish a new order not degraded by the previous occupants' abominable practices. The Canaanites' continued presence becomes a major cause of Israel's later faithlessness to God's covenant, although this does not occur during the period covered by the book of Joshua.

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## Covenant (Joshua 23-24)

The renewal of God's covenant with Israel concludes the book of Joshua. The high point occurs in the very last chapter, when Joshua inspires the people with a rousing challenge to their commitment to serve God alone. His speech is a model of communication. First he recounts God's amazing acts on Israel's behalf in Egypt, the wilderness and the Promised Land. Why then, Joshua asks, are they still carrying idols and false gods with them? Using what today we might call reverse psychology, he challenges them, "If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15). This gets their attention. "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods" (Josh. 24:16). But Joshua challenges them further. "You cannot serve the Lord," he tells them, "for he is a holy God" (Josh. 24:19). "If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good" (Josh. 24:20). This brings them to a point of actual decision, and they resolve, "No, we will serve the Lord!" (Josh. 24:21) Let's put it in writing, Joshua says, and he has the people sign and witness their commitment (Josh. 24:15-27). In more recent times, John Wesley published a covenant renewal service that is widely used today, and many churches



have developed their own approaches to renewing the covenant.<sup>[5]</sup>

When people seem to be wavering in their commitment, leaders can be tempted to minimize the task at hand or mislead people into thinking things will be easier than they actually are. Perhaps there are times when this technique can gain compliance for a while. But as Ronald Heifetz argues in *Leadership Without Easy Answers*<sup>[6]</sup>, misleading followers rapidly diminishes a leader's authority. This is not only because followers eventually discover the deception, but because it prevents them from contributing to solving the group's challenges. Unless the leader knows the solution to every challenge—an extremely unlikely possibility—solutions will have to come from the creativity and commitment of group members. But if the leader has misled the people about the nature of the challenges, the people cannot contribute to finding a solution. This all but guarantees that the leader will fail. Instead, leaders who are honest with their followers about the difficulty of the challenges have an opportunity to involve their people in creating solutions. Joshua, through his relationship with God, provides an excellent model for leaders seeking to build commitment toward a difficult course of action through honesty and transparency rather than secrecy and false hope.

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## Chaos (Judges 1-21)

After the death of Joshua, Israel has no permanent national leadership position. Instead, as threats arise—a military attack, for example—men and women are raised to leadership for the duration of each crisis. The English term “judges” does not really capture the role these men and women play in the nation. (The Hebrew word *shopet*, usually translated “judge,” means an arbitrator of conflicts, military commander, and governor of a territory.<sup>[7]</sup>) The judges do settle disputes, but also take responsibility for the military and governmental affairs of the nation in the face of hostile surrounding peoples. While we will maintain the traditional designation of judges, the epithet “deliverers” is a more accurate description of these leaders.

In the book of Judges, we find an altogether more dismal view of Israel's leaders than in the book of Joshua. Bit by bit, the succession of judges diminishes in quality until finally leading Israel into utter chaos. The book concludes with stories of rape, murder, and civil war, with the appropriately grim coda, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Doing right in their own eyes does not refer to virtuous people acting ethically on their own accord, but to the unfettered pursuit of looking out for number one, as we might put it today. It means the failure to obey God's command, through Joshua, that “the book of the law shall not depart from your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it” (Joshua 1:7). The command is to do what is right in God's eyes, not what seems good in our own biased and self-serving vision. The judges failed to lead the people in observing God's law, and thereby failed both to administer justice and to govern the nation.<sup>[8]</sup>

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## Failing the Driving (Out) Test (Judges 1-2)

Judges 1-2 picks up where Joshua 13-22 left off, with the failure of Israel to drive out the Canaanite nations in the land. “When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not in fact drive them out” (Joshua 17:13). There is a certain irony in the newly liberated Israelites becoming slave owners at the first opportunity. But the chief reason Israel was supposed to drive out the Canaanites was to prevent their idolatry from infecting Israel. Like the snake in the Garden, the idolatry of the Canaanites will test the Israelites’ loyalty to God and his covenant. Israel fares no better than Adam or Eve did. Failing to remove the temptation of the Canaanites, they soon began “serving” the Canaanite gods, Baal and Astarte (Judges 2:11-13, 10:6, etc.) (The NRSV translates the Hebrew as “worshipping,” but virtually every other English translation more accurately reads “serving.”) This is not merely a question of occasionally bowing before an image or uttering a prayer to a foreign god. Instead, Israel’s life *and their labor* are spent in futile service to idols, as Israel comes to believe that their success in labor depends on assuaging the local Canaanite deities.<sup>[9]</sup>

Most of our work today is dedicated to serving someone or something other than the God of Israel. Businesses serve customers and shareholders. Governments serve citizens. Schools serve students. Unlike worshipping the Canaanite gods, serving these objects is not evil in itself. In fact, serving other people is one of the ways we serve God. But if serving customers, shareholders, citizens, students, and the like becomes *more* important to us than serving God, or if it becomes simply a means of enlarging ourselves, we are following the ancient Israelites into worshipping false gods. Tim Keller observes that idols are not an obsolete relic of ancient religiosity, but a sophisticated, though false, spirituality we encounter every day.

What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or saving “face” and social standing. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, or even success in the Christian ministry.<sup>[10]</sup>

For example, an elected official rightly desires to serve the public. In order to do that, he or she must continue to have a public to serve, that is, to stay in office and keep winning elections. If serving the public becomes his or her *ultimate* goal, then anything necessary to win an election becomes justifiable, including pandering, deception, intimidation, false accusations, and even vote-rigging. An unlimited

desire to serve the public—combined with an unshakable belief that he was the only person who could lead them effectively—seems to be exactly what motivated US President Richard Nixon in the 1972 election. It seems that an unlimited desire to serve the public is what caused him to pursue winning the election at all costs, including spying on the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate Hotel. This in turn led to his impeachment, loss of office and disgrace. Serving an idol always ends in disaster.

People in every occupation—even the family occupations of spouse, parent and child—face the temptation to elevate some intermediate good above serving God. When serving any good becomes an ultimate goal, rather than an expression of service to God, idolatry creeps in. For more on the dangers of idolizing work, see the sections on the first and second commandments at Exodus and Work (“You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3); “You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Exodus 20:4)) and Deuteronomy and Work (“You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut 5:7; Ex 20:3); “You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Deut 5:8; Ex 20:4)) at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).

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## The Judges (Judges 3-16)

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### Deborah (Judges 4-5)

The best of the judges is Deborah. The people recognize her wisdom and come to her for counsel and conflict resolution (Judges 4:5). The military hierarchy recognizes her as supreme commander and in fact will only go to war on her personal command (Judg. 4:9). Her governance is so good that “the land had rest for forty years” (Judg. 5:31), a rare occurrence at any point in Israel’s history.

Some today may find it surprising that a woman, not the widow or daughter of a male ruler, could arise as the national chief of a pre-modern nation. But the book of Judges regards her as equal—in her own right—to the greatest leaders of Israel. Alone among the judges, she is called a prophet or prophetess (Judg. 4:4), indicating how closely she resembles Moses and Joshua, to whom God also spoke directly. Neither women, including the undercover agent Jael, nor men, including the commanding general Barak, exhibit any concern about having a female leader. Deborah’s service as a prophetess-judge of Israel suggests that God does not regard women’s political, judicial, or military leadership as problematic. It is also evident that her husband Lappidoth and her immediate family had no trouble structuring the work of the household so that she had time to “sit under the palm of Deborah” to fulfill her duties when “the Israelites came up to her for judgment” (Judg. 4:5).

Today, in some societies, in many sectors of work, in certain organizations, women’s leadership has become as un-controversial as Deborah’s was. But in many other contemporary cultures, sectors, and organizations, women are not accepted as leaders or are subject to constraints not imposed on men. Could reflecting on Deborah’s leadership of ancient Israel help Christians today clarify our

understanding of God’s intent in these situations? Could we serve our organizations and societies by helping demolish improper obstacles to women’s leadership? Would we personally benefit from seeking women as bosses, mentors, and role models in our work?

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## The Economic Effects of War (Judges 6:1-11)

After Deborah, the quality of the judges begins to decline. Judges 6:1-11 illustrates what was likely a common feature of Israelite life at this time - economic hardship stemming from war.

The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. The hand of Midian prevailed over Israel; and because of Midian the Israelites provided for themselves hiding places in the mountains, caves and strongholds. For whenever the Israelites put in seed, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up against them. They would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the land, as far as the neighborhood of Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they and their livestock would come up, and they would even bring their tents, as thick as locusts; neither they nor their camels could be counted; so they wasted the land as they came in. Thus Israel was greatly impoverished because of Midian; and the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help.

The effects of war on work are felt throughout many parts of the world today. In addition to the damage done by direct strikes against economic targets, the instability brought about by armed conflict can devastate people’s livelihood. Farmers in war-torn areas are reluctant to plant crops when they are likely to be dislocated before the harvest comes. Investors judge war-torn countries a poor risk and are unlikely to funnel resources to improving infrastructure. With little hope of economic development, people may be drawn into armed factions fighting over whatever resources may be left to exploit. So the dismal cycle of war and destitution continues. Peace precedes plenty.

Israel’s economic situation was so precarious under the Midianites that we find the future judge Gideon “beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites” (Judg. 6:11). Daniel Block shows the rationale for his behavior.

In the absence of modern technology, grain was threshed by first beating the heads of the cut stalks with a flail, discarding the straw, and then tossing the mixture of chaff and grain in the air, allowing the wind to blow away the chaff while the heavier kernels of grain fell to the floor. In the present critical circumstances this obviously would have been unwise. Threshing activity on the hilltops would only have aroused the attention of the

marauding Midianites. Therefore Gideon resorts to beating the grain in a sheltered vat used for pressing grapes. Generally wine presses involved two excavated depressions in the rock, one above the other. The grapes would be gathered and trampled in the upper, while a conduit would drain the juices to the lower.[\[11\]](#)

Today Christians and non-Christians alike overwhelmingly agree that it is immoral to conduct business in ways that perpetuate armed conflict. The international ban on “conflict diamonds” is a current example.[\[12\]](#) Are Christians taking a lead in such endeavors? Are we the ones who track down whether the businesses, governments, universities, and other institutions where we work are unwittingly participating in violence? Do we take the risk to raise such questions when our superiors might prefer to ignore the situation? Or do we hide, like Gideon, behind the excuse of just doing our jobs?

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## Gideon’s Ambivalent Leadership (Judges 6:12 – 8:35)

Gideon is a prime example of the paradoxical character of Israel’s judges and the ambivalent lessons they offer for leadership in the workplace and elsewhere. Gideon’s name literally means “hacker”,[\[13\]](#) and it seems to point in a positive direction when he hacks up his father’s idols in Judges 6:25-7. (The fact that he does this at night, out of fear, is a disturbing detail.)[\[14\]](#) Despite the fact that God has promised to be with him, however, Gideon is forever seeking signs, most notably in the incident of the fleece in Judges 6:36-40. God does condescend to assure Gideon in this instance, but it is hardly an example for others to follow as many modern Christians argue in relation to guidance and specifically vocational guidance. It is instead a sign of the wavering commitment that will come to ultimately collapse into idolatry at the end of the story.[\[15\]](#) See *Decision Making by the Book*[\[16\]](#) and *Decision Making and the Will of God*[\[17\]](#) for in-depth analysis of Gideon’s discernment methods.

The high point of the tale is, of course, Gideon’s astonishing triumph over the Midianites (Judges 7). Less well known are his subsequent failures of leadership (Judges 8). The inhabitants of Succoth and Penuel refuse to help his men after the battle, and his brutal destruction of those cities might strike some as disproportionate to the offense. Gideon is again living up to his name, but now he is hacking down anyone who crosses him.[\[18\]](#) Despite his protestations that he does not want to be king, he becomes a despot in all but name (Judg. 8:22-26). Even more troubling is his subsequent fall into idolatry. The ephod he makes becomes a “snare” for his people, and “all Israel prostituted themselves to it there” (Judg. 8:27). How the mighty are fallen!

A lesson for us today may be finding gratitude for the gifts of great people without idolizing them. Like Gideon, a general today may lead us to victory in war, yet prove a tyrant in peace. A genius may bring us sublime insight in music or film, yet lead us astray in parenting or politics. A business leader may rescue a business in crisis, only to destroy it in times of ease. We may even find the same

discontinuities within ourselves. Perhaps we rise in the ranks at work while sinking into discord at home, or vice versa. Maybe we prove capable as individual performers but fail as managers. Most likely of all, perhaps, we accomplish much good when, unsure of ourselves, we depend on God, but wreak havoc when success leads us to self-reliance.<sup>[19]</sup> Like the judges, we are people of contradiction and frailty. Our only hope, or else despair, is the forgiveness and transformation made possible for us in Christ.

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## The Judges' Failure of Leadership (Judges 9-16)

Gideon's failures are intensified in the judges who follow. Gideon's son Abimelech unites the people around him, but only by killing his seventy brothers standing in his way (Judges 9). Jephthah starts as a brigand, goes on to deliver the people from the Ammonites, but destroys his own family and future with a dreadful vow that leads to the death of his daughter (Judg. 11). The most famous of the judges, Samson, wreaks havoc amongst the Philistines, but infamously succumbs to the seductions of the pagan Delilah to his own ruin (Judg. 13-16).

What are we to make of all this for our work in today's world? First of all, the stories of the judges affirm the truth that God works through broken people. This is surely true, for a number of the judges—Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah—are praised in the New Testament, along with Rahab (Hebrews 11:31-34). The book of Judges does not hesitate to point out that the Spirit of God empowered them to bring about mighty acts of deliverance in the face of overwhelming odds (Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6-9; 15:14). Furthermore they were more than instruments in God's hand. They responded positively towards God's call to deliver the nation, and through them God delivered his people again and again.

Yet the overall tenor of Judges does not encourage us to make these men into role models. The burden of the book is that the nation is a mess, awash in compromise, and its leaders are a disappointment in their disobedience of God's covenant. A more appropriate lesson to draw might be that success—*even God-given success*—is not necessarily a pronouncement of God's favor. When our efforts in the workplace are blessed, especially in the face of adverse circumstances, it is tempting to reason, "Well, God obviously has his hand in this, so he must be rewarding me for being a good person." But the history of the judges shows that God works when he wishes, and how he wishes, and through whom he wishes. He acts according to his plans, not according to our merit or lack thereof. We cannot take credit as if we deserved the blessings of success. Likewise, we cannot judge those whom we deem less deserving of God's favor, as Paul reminds us in Romans 2:1.

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## Israel Falls Apart (Judges 17-21)

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## The prosperity gospel unmasked in early form (Judges 17)

If the central section of Judges offers us flawed heroes caught in a depressing cycle of oppression and deliverance, the final chapters portray a fallen people seemingly beyond the hope of redemption. Judges 17 opens with almost a parody of idolatry. A man named Micah has lots of money, his mother uses the money to make an idol, and Micah hires a free-lancing Levite as his personal priest. It is not surprising that Micah's tawdry home-grown cult features an equally abysmal theology. "Micah said, 'Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because the Levite has become my priest'" (Judges 17:13). In other words, by getting a religious authority to bless his idolatrous enterprise, Micah believes that he can co-opt God into churning out the goods he craves. Human creativity is here wasted in the worst possible way, in the manufacture of make-believe gods as a cover for greed and arrogance.

The impulse to turn God into a prosperity machine has never died away. A notorious form of it today is the so-called "prosperity gospel" or "gospel of success" which claims that those who profess faith in Christ will necessarily be rewarded with wealth, health, and happiness. With respect to work, this leads some to neglect their work and descend into licentiousness while waiting for God to shower them with riches. It leads others—who expect God to deliver prosperity *though* their work—to neglect family and community, to abuse co-workers, and to do business unethically, certain that God's favor exempts them from ordinary morality.

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## Human depravity and the complicity of religious authorities unveiled (Judges 18-21)

The final episode in Judges is the most appalling event in Israel's long slide into depravity, idolatry, and anarchy. Some men from the tribe of Dan make off with Micah's whole religious enterprise, including the Levite and the idol (Judges 18:1-31). The Levite takes a concubine from a distant village (Bethlehem, as it happens), but after a domestic quarrel, she returns to her father's house. The Levite goes to Bethlehem to retrieve her. After a five-day drinking binge with her father, the Levite foolishly begins the journey back home not long before sunset. They find themselves alone at night in the town square of a village in the tribe of Benjamin. No one will take them in until at last one old man offers the hospitality of a place to stay the night.

That night the men of the city surround the house and demand that the old man bring out the stranger so they can rape him (Judg. 19:22). The old man tries to protect the stranger, but his idea of protecting visitors is stomach-turning, to put it mildly. In order to spare the Levite, the man offers his young daughter and the Levite's concubine for the men to rape instead. The Levite himself casts the concubine out the door, in perhaps the earliest recorded instance of religious authorities' complicity in



sexual abuse. Then “they wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning” (Judg. 19:25). Her body is subsequently dismembered and dispersed to the tribes of Israel, who almost exterminate the tribe of Benjamin in reprisal (Judg. 20-21). The Canaanization of the Israelites is complete. [20]

The concluding line of the book sums up things succinctly. “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 21:25). In case it’s not obvious, this means that without leadership that led the people to serve the Lord, people followed their own evil devices and desires, not that people’s inherent moral compasses led them to do right without needing supervision.

In our spheres of work today, threats against the powerless— including abuse of women and foreigners—remain shockingly common. Individually, we have to choose whether to stand with those who face injustice—undoubtedly at risk to ourselves—or lie low until the damage is past.

Organizationally and societally, we have to decide whether to work for systems and structures that restrain the evils of human behavior, or whether to stand aside while everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Even our passivity can contribute to abuses in our places of work, especially if we are not in positions of authority. But anytime others perceive you as having power—say because you are older, or have worked there longer, or are better dressed, or are seen often talking with the boss, or belong to a privileged ethnic or language group, or have more education, or are better at expressing yourself—and you fail to stick up for those being abused, you are contributing to the system of abuse. For example, if people tend to come to you for help that means you have a significant amount of perceived power. If then, you stand idly by when a derogatory joke is told or a new employee is bullied, you are adding your weight to the victim’s burden, and you are helping pave the way for the next abuse.

Reading the horrible events in the last chapters of Judges may make us grateful that we do not live in those days. But if we are truly aware, we can see that simply going to work is as freighted with moral significance as was the work of any leader or person in ancient Israel.

Image courtesy of [Inknow](#).

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## Conclusions from Joshua and Judges

The journey through Joshua and Judges is a sobering one. We begin with the inspiring example of Joshua, in whom were combined skill, wisdom, and godly virtue. The Lord himself guides the people of Israel into the land of promise, and they promise to follow him with all their lives. God grants them a society unencumbered by tyranny, with a fresh start free of corruption, domination and institutionalized injustice. At the point of need he raises up leaders who deliver the nation from every



successive threat, exemplified by Joshua and Deborah—wise, courageous and universally acclaimed.

We see Israel's early leaders and people constructing the structures they need for peace and prosperity in the land. They allocate resources fairly and productively. They pursue a unifying mission while maintaining a diverse and flexible culture. They distribute power while at the same time maintaining mutual accountability and learning how to resolve conflicts productively and creatively. They prosper and have peace.

But soon after, we see Israel degenerate from a well-governed, smartly organized, secure, covenant nation into a violent and fractious mob. Every aspect of their lives, including their work, becomes corrupted by their abandonment of God's precepts and presence. God has given them a bountiful land primed for productive labor, but they forget his work on their behalf and squander their resources on idols. They open themselves up to war and consequent economic deprivation, and in short order they begin to fully embrace the evils of the surrounding peoples. At the end, they have become their own worst enemy.

The chief lesson for us, then, is the same one with which John ended his first letter centuries later, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). When we work in faithfulness to God, obeying his covenant and seeking his guidance, our work brings unimaginable good for ourselves and our societies. But when we break covenant with the God who works on our behalf and when we begin to practice the injustices that we so easily learn from the culture around us, we find that our labors are as empty as the idols we've fallen into serving.

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## ENDNOTES

- [1] For a helpful overview of the key themes of Joshua, see David M. Howard, Jr. *Joshua*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), pp. 56-64.
- [2] For more on the conquest, see C. S. Cowles, Eugene Merrill, Daniel L. Gard, and Tremper Longman III, Stanley N. Gundry, ed., *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).
- [3] See J. Gordon McConville and Stephen N. Williams, *Joshua* in *Two Horizons OT Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), pp.113-4.
- [4] Laura Nash, *Believers in Business* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1994), 96.
- [5] John Wesley, *Covenant Renewal Service* (1781). The text, along with modern adaptations, may be

found at

<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/covenant-service-directions-for-renewing-our-covenant-with-god/>.

- [6] Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, 1 edition (Harvard University Press), 1994.
- [7] Temba L. J. Mafico, "Judge, Judging," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1105.
- [8] D. I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol.6 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 83-4.
- [9] John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* in the *New Century Bible* (London: Nelson, 1967), 256.
- [10] Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton Adult, 2009), xvii-xviii.
- [11] D. I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol.6 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 258-259.
- [12] <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/business-and-human-rights/oil-gas-and-mining-industries/conflict-diamonds>, accessed December 14, 2013.
- [13] Robert G. Boling, "Gideon (Person)," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1013.
- [14] D.I. Block and J. Clinton McCann, *Judges in Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 61.
- [15] See, e.g., McCann's comment on the fleece incident (p.66): "In short, Gideon is beginning to look at least a little ridiculous. Instead of growing more faithful, he seems to be growing more faithless and more fearful."
- [16] Haddon W Robinson, *Decision-Making by the Book* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1991).
- [17] Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making & the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980).
- [18] Cf. D.I. Block, Vol. 6: *Judges, Ruth*. *The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 287: "Gideon, the fearful young man, has become a brutal aggressor."

- [19] Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, "Less-Confident People are More Successful," *Harvard Business Review*, July 6, 2012, accessed at <http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/07/less-confident-people-are-more-su/> on May 23, 2014.
- [20] Note that Block makes the Canaanization of the people the central theme of his commentary on Judges. See Block, D. I. (1999). *Vol. 6: Judges, Ruth*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.