# *The Background to David Becoming King over Israel*

## *Part 3*

The first 16 chapters of the book of Judges describe Israel's history during the period of the judges who had a measure of authority over the tribes of the nation. This time spans roughly three centuries of cycles of successes and failures, from Othniel to Samson. Chapter 16 concludes the story of Samson, who is the final major judge mentioned in the book. Samson's death marks the end of the 40-year period of Philistine oppression that dominated his era. At that point, the narrative timeline of the nation does not continue into chapter 17. The continuation of that historical timeline is found at 1 Samuel 1, where the narrative introduces the priest Eli and the birth of Samuel.

Meanwhile, the author of Judges in chapters 17-21 engages in a flashback to events from earlier times in the chronology, covering 20-30 years after Joshua died.[1] He hits "pause" on the chronological timeline of Israel's military deliverers in order to describe two vivid, thematic case studies that show how the issue in Israel was not just bad external oppressors or an unusually weak judge. The issue was a systemic, internal rot of the nation's spiritual and moral fabric that began on day one.

In that way, it frames the entire book of Judges not just as a timeline, but as a theological argument for why Israel's experiment with decentralized, autonomous tribal life was a catastrophic failure from the start—directly justifying God's eventual selection of King David to bring structural order and covenant faithfulness to the nation.

The Book of Ruth explicitly states it takes place "in the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1), placing it right in the heart of that 300-year window. While the Bible doesn't name the exact judge ruling at the time, we can pinpoint its chronological relationship to David and the flashback chapters quite closely using Matthew's genealogy (Matthew 1:5-6). How long after the flashback? The horrific event in Judges 19 happened in Bethlehem, leaving it a place of shame and danger. The story of Ruth takes place roughly 150 to 200 years later in that very same town. It shows how God quietly redeemed the spiritual atmosphere of Bethlehem over the generations through faithful people like Boaz. Ruth is King David's great-grandmother. Boaz and Ruth had Obed, Obed had Jesse, and Jesse had David. Historically, the events of the Book of Ruth take place roughly 80 to 100 years before David is born, right around the time the judge Gideon or Jair would have been operating in the nation.

Why this matters: while the macro-history of Israel (Judges 17–21) shows a nation rapidly destroying itself through autonomy, the micro-history (Ruth) shows that God was quietly working in a single village, through a few faithful citizens, to grow the family tree that would eventually save the nation. David's arrival wasn't a sudden rescue plan. Instead, God had been preparing his family line in the background of the dark Judges era for over a century.

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[1] Two textual clues definitively anchor Judges 17–21 to the very beginning of the Judges era:

1. The Identity of the Levite: In Judges 18:30, the wandering Levite hired by Micah in chapter 17 is identified as Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses. This means Moses' actual grandson was the priest running this idolatrous shrine.
2. The High Priest at Shiloh: In Judges 20:28 (during the civil war sparked by the events of chapter 19), the text notes that Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, was the high priest ministering before the Ark of the Covenant. Phinehas is a well-known figure who entered the Promised Land with Joshua (Joshua 22:13).

## Spiritual Rock Bottom and God's Providence (Judges 17-21; Ruth 1–4)

## The Crisis of Spiritual and Civic Authority (Judges 17)

- **Summary:** A man named Micah steals money from his mother, builds a shrine of idols, and hires a wandering Levite to serve as his personal priest.

The narrator introduces a recurring refrain; "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" *(*Judges 17:6; 21:25). This phrase serves as the ultimate diagnosis of Israel's moral and spiritual decay. It is not just a description of lawlessness; it is a profound commentary on human nature. Developing the deeper theological, social, and political implications of this phrase reveals exactly why the transition to King David was an essential part of God's redemptive plan.

To understand how deeply Israel had fallen in Judges, we have to look at what God *intended* for them. The Torah (Law of Moses) was specifically designed to prevent the exact brand of chaotic autonomy where "everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Here is how the Law of Moses was designed to prevent this crisis, and how Israel systematically ignored it:

**1. It established supreme authority.**

The phrase "right in his own eyes" is actually a direct violation of a specific command by God, given through Moses in Deuteronomy 12:8 – "You shall not do at all what we are doing here today, every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes."

The Law was given so that Israel would have a flawless, objective standard of truth established by God, not based on human feelings. It was meant to eliminate moral guesswork. By living according to the Torah, Israel was supposed to show the surrounding nations what absolute wisdom and justice looked like (Deuteronomy 4:6).

**2. It established centralized worship, not localized practices.**

In Judges 17, Micah builds a private shrine, makes his own idols, and hires his own priest. This completely shattered the blueprint laid out by Moses. The Law strictly forbade making idols (Exodus 20:4) and explicitly commanded that Israel could *only* offer sacrifices at the one central place chosen by God—the Tabernacle (Deut. 12:5-6). Furthermore, priests couldn't just be hired by wealthy individuals; they had to be from the line of Aaron and serve the whole community. Centralized worship was designed to keep the nation unified and to prevent religious corruption caused by incorporating localized, pagan practices.

**3. It established an objective standard, not the subjectivity of truth.**

Without an objective standard, morality becomes entirely subjective and highly fluid. Judges 17 begins with a relatively "minor" sin—a son stealing from his mother and creating an idol shrine. However, because truth had become subjective, this compromise rapidly snowballed in succeeding chapters. The Torah addresses the subjectivity of truth by positioning God's voice and character as the absolute, unchanging standard for reality. In a world where human feelings change, the Torah presents truth as an objective anchor outside of human opinion. The Law of Moses systematically dismantles the idea of "personal truth" through four distinct boundaries:

- **The commandment against moral self-determination.**

  The Torah explicitly forbids Israel from acting as their own moral compass. Human eyes are described as deceitful and prone to wandering (Num. 15:39). The Torah shifts the

standard of truth from internal human intuition (*"What feels right to me?"*) to external divine revelation (*"What has God spoken?"*).

- **A concrete standard of evidence and verification.**

  Subjectivity thrives on personal perception, rumors, and emotional responses. The Torah counteracts this by requiring strict, verifiable, and objective legal evidence in matters of justice (Deut. 19:15). Truth could not be decided by one person's opinion or emotional grievance. By mandating multiple eyewitnesses and rigorous cross-examination by judges (Deut. 19:18), the Torah protected society from subjective, weaponized accusations.

- **The unchanging nature of the written word.**

  In the ancient world, laws were often subject to the whim of a ruler. Moses commands the people in Deuteronomy 4:2: "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God." By writing the Law down permanently and placing it inside or beside the Ark of the Covenant, truth became public, permanent, and accessible. A poor person and a wealthy elder were subject to the exact same text. Truth was not fluid; it was fixed in stone and on parchment.

- **Continuous national education.**

  Subjectivity often takes over simply because people forget what is objectively true. The Torah built a rigorous system of repetition to keep the truth at the forefront of the cultural consciousness (Deut. 6:6–7). Every seven years, the entire Law was to be read out loud to the nation (Deut. 31:10-13) so that foreigners, children, and citizens all shared the exact same moral vocabulary.

## The connection to David

The Torah actually anticipated that Israel would one day want a king. In Deuteronomy 17:14–20, Moses laid out the "Law of the King," which was unique in the Ancient Near East: he was not allowed to accumulate massive wealth, horses, or wives, and he was required to write out his own personal copy of the Law of Moses and read it every single day.

The king was never meant to be a dictator who made up his own rules. Instead, the king was meant to be the primary enforcer of the Law of Moses. When David took the throne, his greatness didn't come from inventing a new system; it came from his deep devotion to restoring the exact covenantal boundaries that Moses had written centuries before, finally bringing order to the chaos of the Judges.

When Judges 17–21 states that everyone did what was right in their own eyes, it means Israel stopped maintaining all four of the boundaries established in the Torah. They didn't teach their kids (Judges 2:10), they ignored the written word, they let tribal biases replace objective courts of law, and they allowed their own desires to dictate reality. David's task as the coming king was to enforce these four boundaries once again, pointing a broken nation back to the objective reality of God's Word.

## The Degradation of Bethlehem (Judges 19)

- **The immediate context:** A Levite travels to Bethlehem to retrieve his unfaithful concubine. On their journey home, they stop in Gibeah (a town of Benjamin). An old man, then, graciously shows them hospitality and brings them into his home.

The intent and the outcome of this passage is abundantly clear. The mob of "worthless men" (literally *sons of Belial* or wicked men) who surrounded the house intended to gang-rape the male guest (v. 22 – *yada,* "know" is an explicit Hebrew euphemism for sexual relations). The host stepped outside to negotiate and begged them not to violate the man.

In the Ancient Near East, the duty of a host to protect a guest was absolute. Once a guest ate under your roof, your own life was pledged to protect theirs. However, the host's attempt to fulfill this cultural duty led to a horrific compromise. In an effort to protect his male guest and maintain his honor as a host, the old man offered a shocking trade: his own virgin daughter and the guest's concubine. When the host says, "do with them what seems good to you," this is the exact same Hebrew phrasing as "what is right in their own eyes." The host, while trying to prevent one sin (the violation of hospitality and homosexual rape), committed another monstrous sin by offering up vulnerable women to be brutally abused. In this lawless society, the safety of men is bought with the bodies of women.

The mob refused the host's offer, still desiring the male guest. At this moment of impasse, the Levite himself stepped in and contributed his own sin. To save himself, the Levite grabs his concubine and shoves her out the door into the hands of the mob, slamming the door behind her. And that tragically leads to a continuous, brutal, gang rape that lasted until daybreak. When they were finished using her, they abandoned her, bleeding and eventually dying, on the doorstep.

The Levite then dismembers the corpse of his concubine into twelve pieces that are then sent to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. He does this to instigate national outrage: As the story continues in chapter 20, the tribes mobilize a massive army of 400,000 soldiers to demand justice from the tribe of Benjamin. When they refuse to hand over the rapists of Gibeah, it triggers a catastrophic civil war that nearly causes the extinction of the Benjaminite tribe, leaving only 600 men alive. Realizing they have rashly vowed never to give their daughters to the men of Benjamin, the remaining tribes spiral into further chaotic compromises—slaughtering fellow Israelites in Jabesh-gilead to seize their virgins and ambushing young women at a religious festival in Shiloh to provide wives for the survivors.

This passage represents the absolute moral rock bottom of the era of the Judges. It mirrors the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), showing that Israel had become indistinguishable from the pagan nations God told them to drive out. This theological point is devastating: Gibeah has become Sodom. The chosen people of God, living in the Promised Land, are now acting exactly like the wicked Gentiles who were wiped out by fire and brimstone.

### <u>The connection to David</u>

This horrific event cements the ultimate thesis of the flashback chapters: Israel cannot survive without a unified, godly leader. While the Levite's graphic message successfully gathered the tribes for war, it did not change their hearts. The resulting war in chapter 20 is fought with the same chaotic, vengeful, and subjective mindset that caused the crime in the first place.

The author leaves the reader with a profound sense of desperation. The stage is completely empty, waiting for a righteous leader—King David—who will not use violence to tear the body of Israel apart, but will instead use his shepherd's heart and God's Law to bind the twelve fractured tribes back together into a single, unified kingdom.

The names of the cities involved in this story are not coincidental. Gibeah is the hometown and future capital of King Saul (1 Sam. 10:26). By highlighting the absolute, demonic depravity of Gibeah at the start of the Judges era, the author is subtly dropping a historical breadcrumb. The spiritual corruption of Saul's home territory contrasts sharply with Bethlehem (the concubine's home), which would later produce David—the king who would finally establish a stronghold of true justice. This moral failure sets the stage for God to bypass Saul's line and to choose David, a shepherd from Bethlehem, to redeem the reputation of his hometown and lead with true justice.

In the wake of the Gibeah atrocity, the Book of Judges concludes on this tragic, cyclical note of moral anarchy and institutional failure, reinforcing the final reminder that because Israel had no king, and everyone did whatever was right in their own eyes. But, in the midst of this horrific failure, God begins the restoration process in a story told in the book of Ruth.

## Faithfulness Amid National Darkness (Ruth 1-3)

- **The immediate context:** During the bleak era of the Judges, a famine forces an Israelite family from Bethlehem to migrate to Moab, where the sons marry Moabite women. After Elimelech, her husband and her sons die, the widow Naomi decides to return to the land of her birth in Judah.
- **Summary:** Despite being a foreigner, Ruth demonstrates genuine covenant faithfulness (*chesed*) to Naomi and Israel's God, Adonai, by accompanying her Jewish mother-in-law to Bethlehem in the season of the barely harvest (at the time of Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks). The key to her success is by remaining faithful to her pledge that: "your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (1:16). Upon arrival, while gleaning the fields of a righteous man named Boaz, she finds his favor.

In chapter 3, Boaz assumes the role of the kinsman-redeemer (*goel* in Hebrew) for Naomi and Ruth. That concept is a provision in the Torah (Lev. 25; Deut. 25) designed to protect vulnerable families by requiring a close male relative to step in during times of crisis to buy back enslaved kin, reclaim lost family land, or marry a childless widow to carry on the deceased husband's lineage.

Because Naomi had lost her husband and sons and was forced to sell her family's land, her line faced absolute extinction. Boaz, recognizing Ruth's radical loyalty and covenant faithfulness, buys back the land for Naomi, and marries Ruth. This acts as both a literal rescue from poverty and a profound theological picture of redemption, as their union preserves the family line that ultimately yields King David.

### <u>The connection to David</u>

Ruth and Boaz represent the exact opposite of the chaotic wickedness seen in Judges 17–21. They prove that even in Israel's darkest spiritual eras, God was quietly preserving a remnant of righteousness. David did not come from a vacuum; his character and heart for God were deeply rooted in the generational faithfulness of his great-grandparents.

## The Sovereign Preparation of the Royal Line (Ruth 4)

- **Summary:** Boaz fulfills the purpose of the kinsman-redeemer, first by marrying Ruth to preserve the family line of Elimelech by fathering a child through Ruth. This action specifically fulfilled the principles of Levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5–10) embedded within the broader duties of the kinsman-redeemer. When Elimelech and his sons died in Moab, their ancestral land in Bethlehem was at risk of being permanently lost to outsiders, and their family name faced total extinction. So, when Boaz stepped in and became the kinsman-redeemer, the inheritance of Elimelech was preserved (Ruth 4:5). When Boaz and Ruth married and had their son, Obed, the local women of Bethlehem declared that a son had been born "to Naomi" (Ruth 4:17). Thus, legally and culturally, Obed was recognized as the heir to Elimelech's estate and lineage.

  The Book of Ruth concludes with a genealogy tracing Obed directly to Boaz (Ruth 4:21), showing that while the boy legally carried on Elimelech's inheritance and redeemed his family name, he biologically carried Boaz's righteous line forward to yield King David. In this chronology, Obed fathers Jesse, and Jesse fathers David.

### <u>The connection to David</u>

The genealogy proves that David's rise to the throne was not an accidental political shift, but a long-standing, providential plan of God. While Israel was spiraling into chaos in Judges, God was intentionally orchestrating a lineage of redemption through Ruth to bring forth the king "after His own heart."