

A Historically Grounded Narrative Series

The Altars on Every Hill

How Israel's gradual adoption of surrounding nations' practices slowly transformed covenant faith into cultural compromise.

A biblically faithful retelling rooted in Scripture, historical context, and careful theological clarity.

About this Account

This narrative is drawn directly from the biblical record and presented using widely recognized translations such as the ESV, NIV, NASB, and KJV. Cultural, geographical, and historical insights are included to deepen understanding while remaining faithful to the text.



1. Setup — A Nation Called to Be Different

When the tribes of Israel first settled in the land of **Canaan**, they entered not just a new territory but a new identity. The journey that had begun under **Moses** in the wilderness now continued under **Joshua**, whose leadership brought the people across the **Jordan River** and into the land promised to their ancestors.

According to the **Book of Joshua**, this transition carried both military and spiritual significance. The land they entered was already inhabited by diverse cultures whose religious practices were deeply embedded in daily life. The worship of regional deities was often tied to agriculture, seasonal fertility, and local shrines scattered across hills and valleys.

Before the conquest began, Israel had received repeated instructions about how to live in this environment. In the covenant laws recorded in the **Book of Deuteronomy**, God warned the people not to adopt the religious customs of the surrounding nations. Their identity was meant to remain distinct. The altars and sacred sites dedicated to foreign gods were to be destroyed, and Israel was to worship the Lord alone.

These commands reflected a central covenant principle: Israel's survival as a nation depended on loyalty to the God who had delivered them from **Egypt**.

For a time, the people remained faithful to that calling. Under Joshua's leadership, Israel renewed their commitment to the covenant during a gathering at **Shechem**, where Joshua challenged the nation to choose whom they would serve. His declaration, recorded in Joshua 24:15, captured

the heart of the moment: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

The generation that had witnessed the wilderness miracles and the conquest of the land carried vivid memories of God’s intervention. They had seen cities fall, rivers part, and enemies scattered. Their loyalty to the covenant was not merely tradition, it was rooted in lived experience.

Yet beneath this early faithfulness lay a fragile reality.

The land of Canaan was filled with powerful cultural influences. Religious life in the region is often centered on local shrines, seasonal rituals, and symbolic images representing divine forces believed to control rain, crops, and fertility. These practices were not distant or hidden; they were woven into everyday life in surrounding communities.

(Scholarly interpretation: Archaeological evidence from Late Bronze Age Canaan suggests that many settlements maintained small hilltop shrines and sacred poles associated with fertility worship.)

For Israel, living among these cultures would require constant spiritual vigilance.

The covenant called them to trust the Lord for provision and protection rather than adopting the religious systems of their neighbors. But that trust would soon be tested.

The **Book of Judges** records that once Joshua’s generation passed away, a new generation emerged, one that had not personally witnessed the dramatic acts of deliverance that had defined Israel’s earlier story.

With the memory of those events fading, the nation began to face a quiet but powerful pressure: the temptation to blend their faith with the customs of the land around them.

And in that gradual shift, from remembered miracles to cultural accommodation, the slow drift toward rebellion quietly began.

2. Conflict— When the Culture of the Land Began to Shape the People

After the death of **Joshua**, the stability that had defined Israel during the conquest began to weaken. The generation that had personally witnessed the crossing of the **Jordan River**, the fall of fortified cities, and the covenant renewal at **Shechem** gradually passed away. With them faded the living memory of the dramatic events that had formed Israel's identity.

The opening chapters of the **Book of Judges** describe the quiet but significant shift that followed. Judges 2:10 states that a new generation arose “who did not know the Lord or the work that He had done for Israel.” The phrase does not necessarily mean that they had no knowledge of God, but that the direct experience of His acts, so central to their parents' faith, was no longer shaping their daily lives.

At the same time, Israel was living among the cultures of **Canaan**. The earlier command to remove the religious centers of the land had not been fully carried out. Instead, many of the Canaanite populations remained near the Israelite settlements. Fields, trade routes, and villages were shared spaces where interaction between cultures became inevitable.

In that environment, the influence of surrounding religious practices slowly began to grow.

Judges 2:11–13 records that the Israelites began serving the gods of the peoples around them, particularly **Baal** and **Ashtoreth**. These deities were widely associated with agricultural fertility and seasonal cycles, concerns deeply tied to survival in an agrarian society.

(Scholarly interpretation: Many historians note that Canaanite religious systems often promised prosperity through rituals believed to influence rainfall and crop fertility. Such beliefs could appear practical or even necessary to farming communities.)

For Israel, this created a profound spiritual tension.

The covenant established through **Moses** had taught them to depend on the Lord alone for rain, harvest, and protection. But the surrounding cultures offered visible rituals and local shrines that promised immediate results. Hilltop altars, sacred poles, and seasonal ceremonies were woven into the rhythm of life throughout the region.

The change did not happen all at once.

Israel did not initially abandon the worship of God entirely. Instead, the people gradually allowed other practices to coexist alongside their covenant faith. Small compromises, participating in local festivals, tolerating nearby shrines, adopting familiar symbols, began to reshape the spiritual landscape.

The shift was emotional as much as theological. Without the strong leadership of Joshua and the shared memory of God's

dramatic deliverance, the people faced the everyday pressures of survival in a land filled with competing beliefs.

What began as accommodation soon became participation.

And as the practices of surrounding nations took root among the Israelites, the nation slowly moved from cultural influence toward spiritual rebellion, often without recognizing how far they had drifted from the covenant that once defined them.

3. Turning Point— The Cycle of Rebellion and Deliverance

The quiet accommodation that had begun among the Israelites soon produced visible consequences across the land of **Canaan**. What had started as cultural influence gradually reshaped the spiritual direction of the nation. The **Book of Judges** describes this development not as a single act of rebellion, but as a repeating pattern that unfolded over generations.

Judges 2:14 records the first major turning point. Because the people had abandoned their covenant loyalty, God allowed surrounding nations to gain power over them. Tribes that had once experienced victory now found themselves oppressed by the very cultures whose practices they had adopted.

This shift created a recurring cycle that defines much of Israel's history during the period of the judges.

When the people turned to foreign gods, particularly **Baal** and **Ashtoreth**, their security weakened. In response, neighboring peoples such as the **Midianites**, **Philistines**, and

other regional groups began to dominate parts of Israelite territory.

The suffering that followed eventually drove the Israelites to cry out for help.

Each time this happened, God raised a leader known as a judge, a figure who combined roles of military deliverer, spiritual reformer, and tribal authority. These judges were not kings or permanent rulers, but individuals called for specific moments of crisis.

Among the most notable were **Deborah**, who led Israel to victory over the Canaanite general Sisera; **Gideon**, who defeated the Midianite armies despite overwhelming odds; and **Samson**, whose strength was used to confront the Philistine threat.

Each time a judge delivered the nation, the people returned, at least temporarily, to worship of the Lord. Stability would follow for a generation, often lasting if the judge lived.

Yet the pattern did not hold.

Judges 2:19 offers a sobering summary of what repeatedly happened next. After the judge died, the people would return to their earlier practices, often becoming even more corrupt than before. The altars of foreign gods remained scattered across the hills, and the influence of surrounding cultures continued to reshape Israel's identity.

(Scholarly observation: Many interpreters describe this era as a time of decentralized tribal life, where local influences and the absence of unified leadership made cultural assimilation increasingly likely.)

The turning point in this story is not a single battle or moment of defeat. It is the recognition that the nation had entered a cycle, a pattern of compromise, crisis, repentance, and temporary restoration.

Each generation inherited the consequences of the one before it.

And with every repetition of the cycle, the distance between Israel's covenant calling and their daily practices grew wider.

4. Resolution— When Everyone Chose Their Own Way

As the period described in the **Book of Judges** ended, the long pattern of compromise had reshaped the spiritual landscape of Israel. What had begun generations earlier as small accommodations to the culture of **Canaan** had gradually become a widespread condition. The altars of foreign gods remained on hills and in villages, and the cycles of repentance and relapse had left the nation spiritually unstable.

The final chapters of Judges portray a society struggling without clear direction. Tribal loyalty often replaced national unity, and moral confusion spread through the land. Several narratives at the end of the book describe internal conflict and disorder, revealing how deeply the earlier compromises had affected the people.

The writer of Judges summarizes the situation with a repeated statement that functions like a refrain throughout the closing chapters:

“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (Judges 21:25)

This statement does more than describe political conditions. It reflects the deeper spiritual reality that Israel’s covenant identity had weakened. Without strong leadership and without consistent commitment to the guidance given through **Moses**, the people increasingly relied on personal judgment rather than divine instruction.

The cultural influence of neighboring nations gradually reshaped how many Israelites understood worship, justice, and authority. Practices once forbidden under the covenant were now present within the land, and the distinction between Israel and surrounding peoples had begun to blur.

Yet the story does not end entirely in despair.

Even during this troubled era, God continued to raise leaders, judges who temporarily restored justice and called the people back to covenant faithfulness. Figures like **Deborah**, **Gideon**, and **Samson** showed that divine guidance had not disappeared. Each deliverer provided a glimpse of what Israel’s life could look like when the people returned to trust in God.

Still, the repeated instability created a growing desire among the tribes for a more permanent form of leadership. That longing eventually set the stage for the events described in the **1 Samuel**, when the people asked **Samuel** to appoint a king so that Israel could be “like all the nations.”

The request for a monarchy revealed how deeply the earlier cultural drift had shaped the nation’s thinking. The desire to

resemble surrounding societies, first in worship, later in governance, had become part of Israel's identity.

The period of the judges therefore ends with both warning and anticipation.

It shows how easily a community called to live differently can gradually absorb the values of the culture around it. But it also prepares the reader for the next chapter in Israel's history, where new leaders would rise and the question of covenant loyalty would continue to shape the nation's future.

Final Reflection— The Quiet Drift Away from Faithfulness

The story of Israel during the time of the **Book of Judges** is not a collapse of faith but a slow and almost unnoticeable drift. When the Israelites first entered **Canaan**, they carried a clear calling: they were to live as a people set apart, loyal to the God who had delivered them through **Moses** and established His covenant with them.

But the greatest danger did not come from invading armies or powerful enemies.

It came from influence.

The surrounding cultures practiced forms of worship centered on deities such as **Baal** and **Ashtoreth**, whose rituals promised fertility, rainfall, and prosperity. For an agricultural society trying to survive in a new land, these practices could appear practical and even reassuring.

The shift did not begin with a conscious rejection of God. Instead, it began with small accommodations, allowing

foreign altars to remain, participating in local customs, blending traditions that once stood in clear opposition.

Over time, what had once been compromise became normal.

The people still lived in the land promised to their ancestors, but the spiritual clarity that once defined them had faded. The phrase repeated at the end of Judges, “everyone did what was right in his own eyes,” captures the emotional reality of the period. Without strong leadership or a shared commitment to the covenant, personal judgment replaced divine instruction.

Yet even within that drift, the story also reveals hope.

Whenever the people cried out, God raised leaders like **Deborah**, **Gideon**, and **Samson** to deliver them. These moments showed that restoration remained possible when the people returned to God.

The deeper lesson of this story is not only about ancient Israel.

It is about how easily spiritual identity can fade when cultural influence quietly reshapes beliefs and practices. Rarely does rebellion begin with open defiance. More often it begins with subtle shifts in loyalty, priorities, and trust.

Reflection Question

If Israel’s drift away from God began with small cultural compromises rather than open rejection, how can we recognize and guard against the quiet influences that slowly reshape our own faith and values?

By: Marc Seffelaar