

AUTONOMOUS

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Understanding the social structure of Israel and her economics during the initial years of her possession of the land of Palestine helps us to interpret the book of Judges. It helps us to understand why the tribes came to the point in their history when they went to war even with one another.

When the Israelites settled in the land, they became an agricultural nation with families living independently on farms throughout the territory of Palestine. Each tribe settled in a particular allotted territory where they farmed the land and grew into a clan of families.

There were 46 cities given to the Levites, and thus at least these cities were places to which the people were to go for instruction in the law of God. The people took their offerings to these cities for the Levites, and thus these cities were not centers of trade, but centers for offerings. Neither were these cities business centers as we would conceive them to be after the modern-day cities in which we live today. The cities of the Levites were actually small towns or villages that could be fed by the produce of nearby farms, and those who brought their offerings to the Levites.

Those Israelites who lived in the rural area of Palestine had to live independently, and thus they sought to sell their produce to any nearby people. The Israelites, therefore, lived in the country, farming the land, and making periodic visits to the cities of the Levites. The tribes settled throughout their allotted territories. The families developed into clans as sons and daughters stayed in close proximity to one another and the patriarch family of the clan. In this way the Israelites grew to populate the land that was initially given to the families after the conclusion of the national wars of Israel with the Canaanites.

As each tribe developed within their allotted territories, they became somewhat autonomous from one another as independent farmers, and to some extent anonymous from one another. This spirit of autonomy eventually led to a sense of nationhood within each particular tribal group. Since each tribe failed in their responsibility to drive out the remaining Canaanites within their allotted territory after the conclusion of the national wars that were led by Joshua, their autonomy became an opportunity that led to oppression and raids from nations surrounding each tribal territory. Because of their spirit of autonomy, the Israelites be-

gan to associate and trade with the remaining Canaanites in their particular territories. With the trade came social contact and intermarriage. The Canaanites eventually took advantage of this by economically subjecting the Israelite farmers to supply their needs by demanding tribute. Those farmers who did not subject themselves were raided by nearby foreign powers as the Midianites. In their autonomy, and often anonymous relationship with one another, the Israelites were easy victims to the oppression of the Canaanites and raids by neighboring foreigners.

The tribes' socioeconomic relationship with the Canaanites led to the Israelites acceptance of the religious beliefs of those with whom they traded and intermarried. The Israelites did not reject their belief in the one true God, they only added to their religious beliefs the gods of the Canaanites. Their compromise of beliefs, thus led them to compromise their values, and subsequently their behavior. In this spiritual adultery they were led away from the will of God.

The lesson is that God's people should never become so autonomous from one another that they cannot stay together. In a world that has so great an influence over the behavior of our children, the church needs every edge it can get to preserve the next generation of the church. Several African leaders have said to me that the doctrine of division was sowed in them from the day the first missionary stepped on the continent. They have told me that they were crippled from the beginning because they were taught that that could not work together in order to accomplish works and to survive a hostile environment where the nations around them were so strong.