

THE JUDGES

Period of the Judges—ca. 1360–1084 BC

Judges 1:1-29 forms a literary transition from the life of Joshua to the period of the judges. The downward spiral lasted about 280 years. The judges, *shophetim*, were more like leaders or rulers than legal functionaries. The reports of the work of the various judges are not strictly chronological and overlapped frequently, explaining how the elapsed time of 280 years is so much shorter than the aggregate total of 410 years for the 15 judges mentioned.

Interpretation of Judges

Scholars and lay readers tend to read Judges differently. Many scholars interpret the book as a political document, demonstrating the need for a king to resolve the problems of Israel during the transitional period between the conquest of Canaan under Joshua and the establishment of the monarchy, and specifically to support the cause of David in opposition to the household of Saul. Taking their cue from Hebrews 11:32, most laypeople read Judges as a book of heroes who demonstrate strength of character in achieving great feats for God.

However, a close reading of Judges suggests that both interpretations miss the author's point. If we read Judges as a prophetic book, we discover that the focus is not on the judges but on God, on whose behalf they served as the nation's deliverers. Specifically, the book describes the Lord's response to the Canaanization of Israelite society during the period of settlement. As 2:6-10 declares, within a generation after the death of Joshua and those who had participated in the conquest, Israel's spiritual problems surfaced. This nation entered the land of promise triumphantly as the redeemed people of the Lord but became more and more like the people they were charged to displace.

This historical introduction is followed by a heavily theological preamble (2:1–3:6). The fundamental problem is Israel's loss of the memory of the Lord's redemptive work on their behalf (2:1-10). This resulted in the sorry truth expressed in a refrain that is repeated seven times in the book: The Israelites did evil (literally “the evil”) in the sight of the Lord; they served the Baals and abandoned the Lord their Redeemer (2:11-12; cp. 3:7,12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). The following narratives of the individual judges, which take up the bulk of the book (3:7–16:31), describe the consequences of this apostasy. This preamble (2:1–3:6) invites the reader to interpret these accounts not merely as cyclical recurrences of the same problem but as illustrative

of an intensification of the evil in Israel (2:17-19), offering the reader the key to understanding both the people of Israel and the judges who led them.

Because of the theological nature of the narrative and the author's selective use of data, it is difficult to reconstruct the history of Israel during the period of the judges from the accounts in the heart of the book (3:7–16:31). The events are deliberately arranged so that each judge is presented in a worse light than the previous, beginning with Othniel, an exemplary character (3:7-11), and ending with Samson, who embodies all that is wrong with Israel. Each cycle is structured after a literary pattern signaled by a series of recurring formulas:

- (1) "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (2:11; 3:7,12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).
- (2) "The LORD gave/sold the Israelites into the hands of the enemy" (2:14; 6:1; 13:1).
- (3) "The Israelites cried out to the LORD" (3:9,15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10).
- (4) "The LORD raised up a deliverer for Israel to save them" (2:16,18; 3:9,15).
- (5) "And X [the oppressing nation] was made subject to Israel" (8:28; cp. 3:30; 4:23).
- (6) "Then the land was undisturbed for X years" (3:11,30; 5:31; 8:28).
- (7) "Then X [the judge] died" (2:19; 3:11; 4:1b; 8:28; 12:7).

From these formulas it is evident that the Lord is the most important character in the book, and the author's attention is fixed on His response to the Canaanization of His people. In judgment He sends in foreign enemies (as Lev. 26 and Deut. 28 predicted), then in mercy He hears their cry, raises up a deliverer and provides victory over the enemy. But the Israelites do not learn the lesson; on the contrary the spiritual rot goes deeper and deeper into the very soul of the nation so that in the end Gideon acts like an oriental despot (8:18-32). Like the pagans around him, Jephthah tried to win the good will of God by sacrificing his daughter (11:30-40) and Samson's life and death looked more like that of a Philistine than one of the people of the Lord (chaps. 14–16).

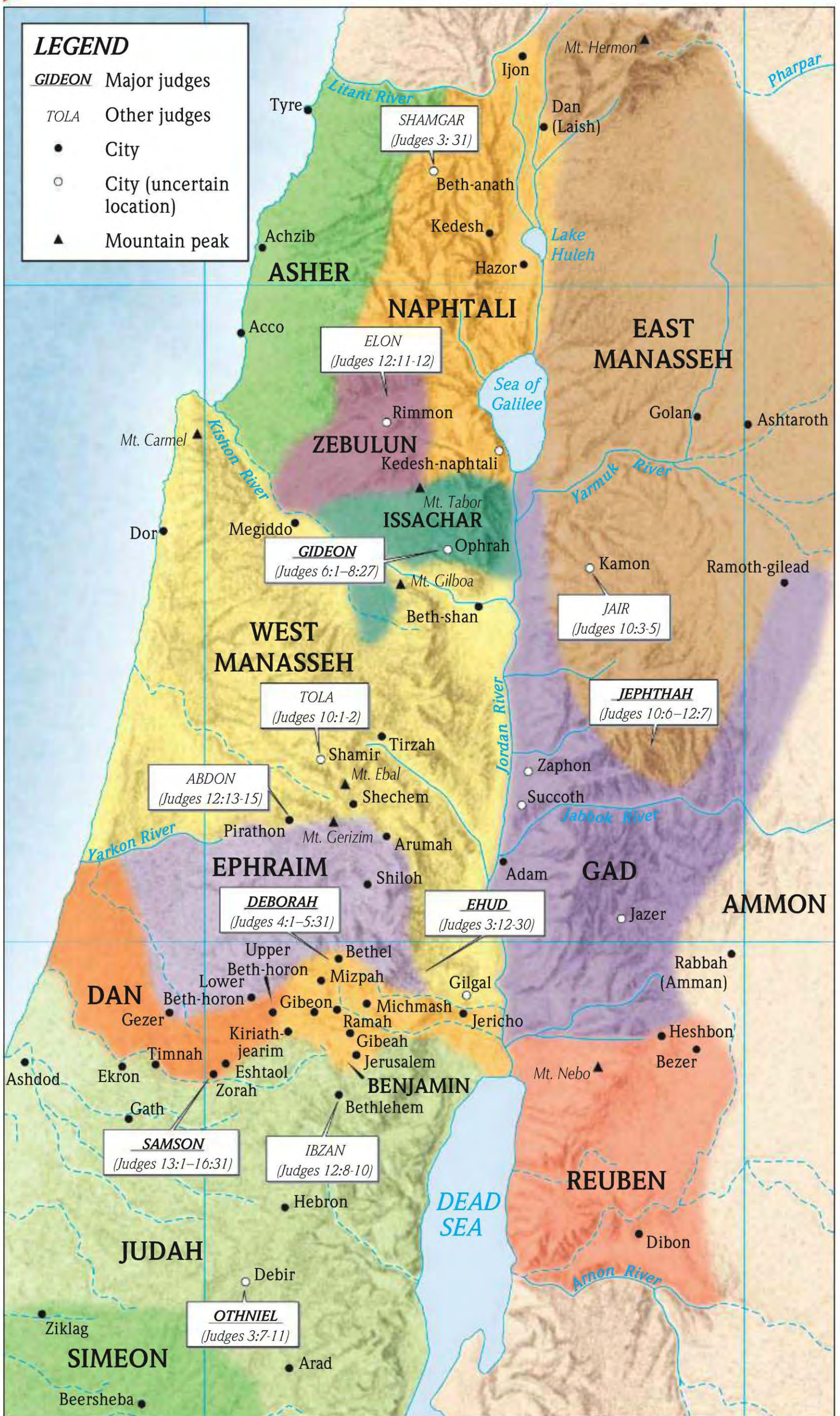
Toward the end of this period, hope emerged in the heroic saga of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, who demonstrate that faithful Israelites remained loyal to their covenant Lord. From this family would come the great King David.

The last of the judges was the greatest: Samuel, a Benjaminite whose mother dedicated him to the service of the Lord. Raised by the priest Eli, Samuel became priest and judge when God excised the family of Eli for its unfaithfulness. Samuel administered the nation wisely and fairly, and stability prevailed during the time of his stewardship. However, the people longed to be like the other nations and asked for a king.

53 JUDGES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

NAME	REFERENCE	IDENTIFICATION
Othniel	Judg. 1:12-13; 3:7-11	Conquered a Canaanite city
Ehud	Judg. 3:12-30	Killed Eglon, king of Moab, and defeated Moabites
Shamgar	Judg. 3:31	Killed 600 Philistines with an oxgoad
Deborah	Judg. 4-5	Convinced Barak to lead an army to victory against Sisera's troops
Gideon	Judg. 6-8	Led 300 men to victory against 135,000 Midianites
Tola	Judg. 10:1-2	Judged for 23 years
Jair	Judg. 10:3-5	Judged for 22 years
Jephthah	Judg. 11:1-12:7	Defeated the Ammonites after making a promise to the Lord
Ibzan	Judg. 12:8-10	Judged for 7 years
Elon	Judg. 12:11-12	Judged for 10 years
Abdon	Judg. 12:13-15	Judged for 8 years
Samson	Judg. 13-16	Killed 1,000 Philistines with a donkey's jawbone; was deceived by Delilah; destroyed a Philistine temple; judged 20 years
Samuel	1 and 2 Sam.	Was the last of the judges and the first of the prophets

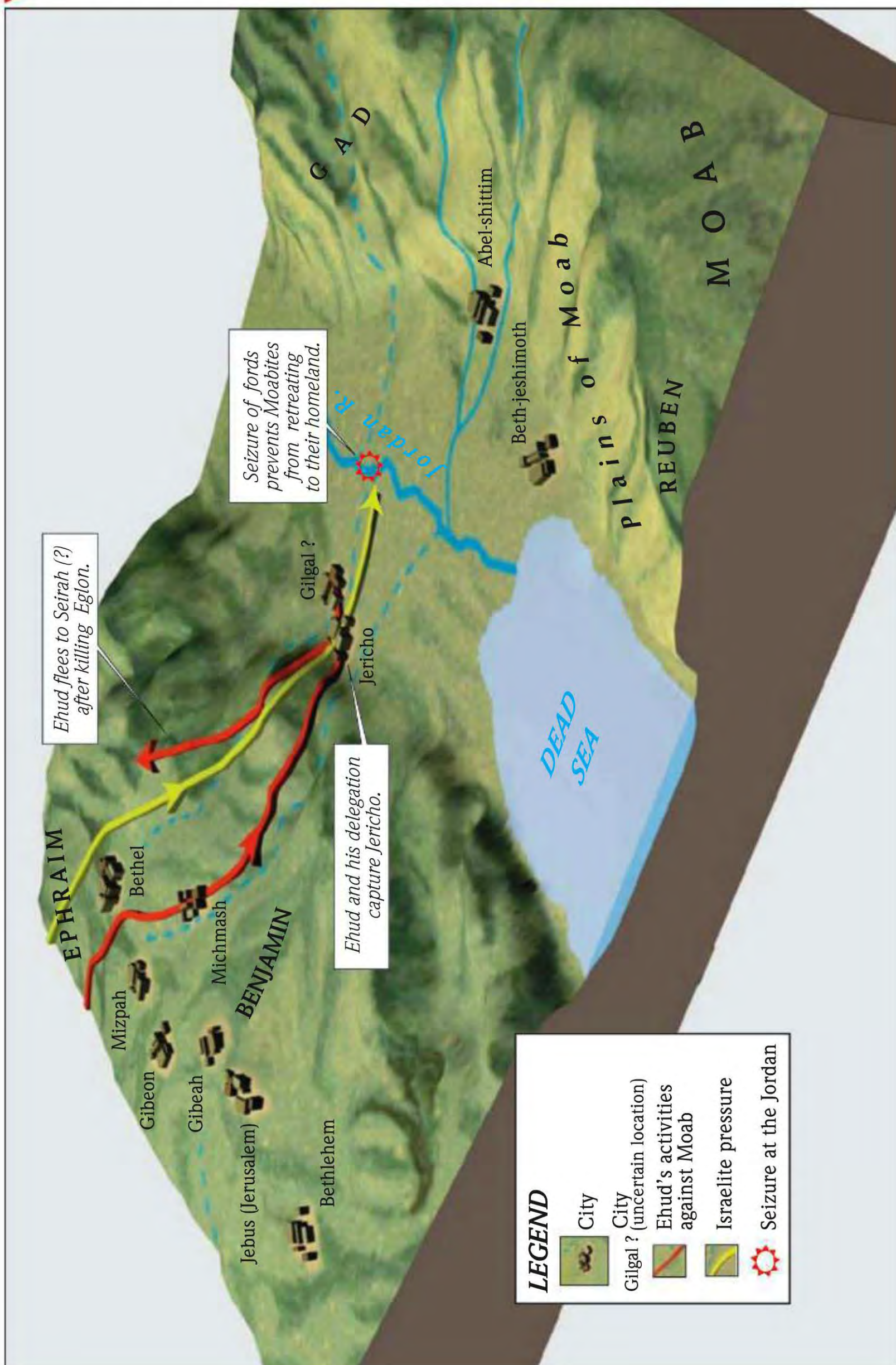
54 THE JUDGES OF ISRAEL



Judges 21:25

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever he wanted.

55 EHUD AND THE OPPRESSION OF THE MOABITES



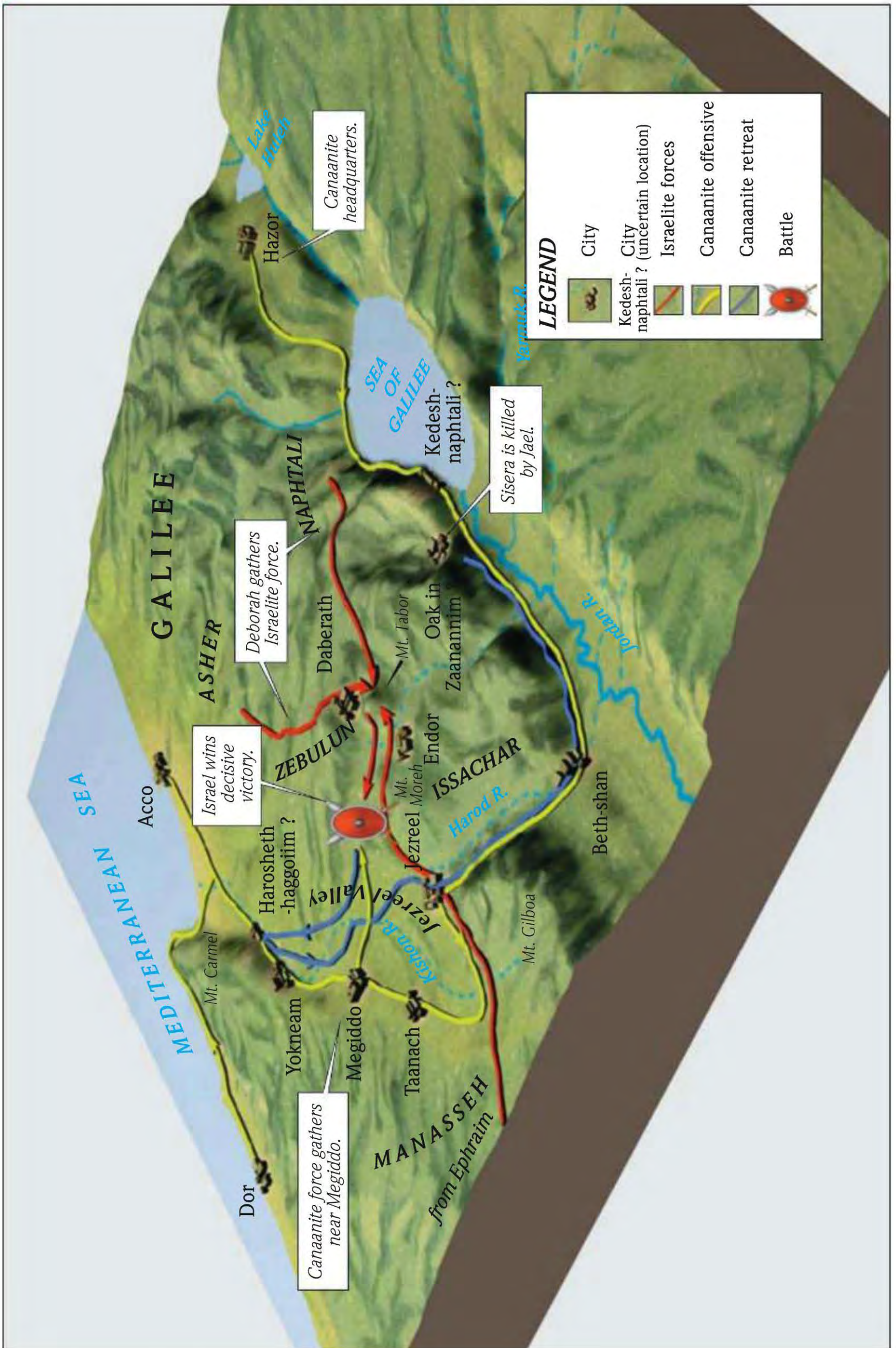
Judges 3:14-16

The Israelites served Eglon king of Moab 18 years.

Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and He raised up Ehud son of Gera, a left-handed Benjaminite, as a deliverer for them. The Israelites sent him to Eglon king of Moab with tribute ^{money}.

Ehud made himself a double-edged sword 18 inches long. He strapped it to his right thigh under his clothes.

56 DEBORAH'S VICTORY OVER THE CANAANITES

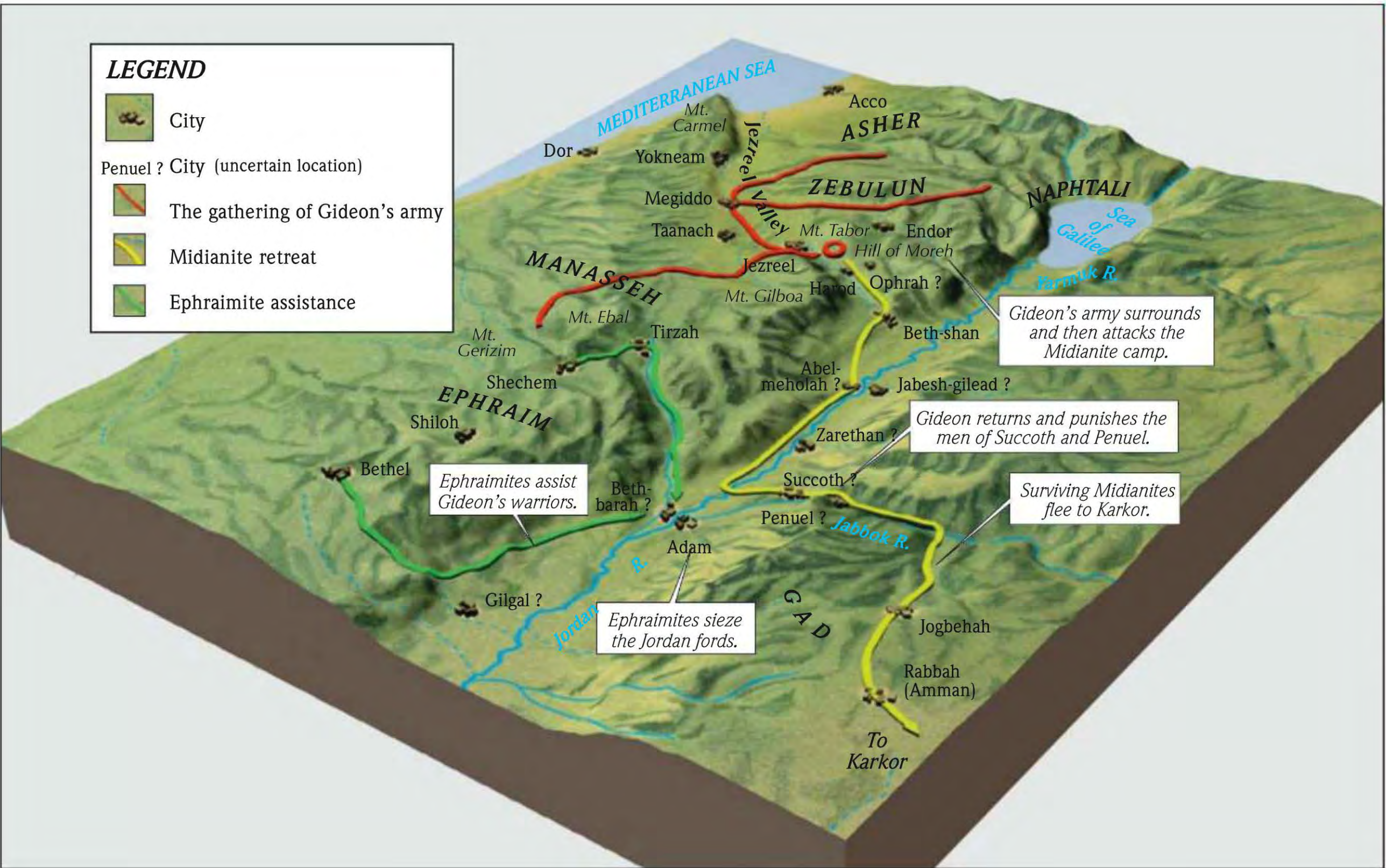


Judges 4:8-9

Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go. But if you will not go with me, I will not go."

"I will go with you," she said, "but you will receive no honor on the road you are about to take, because the LORD will sell Sisera into a woman's hand." So Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kadesh.

GIDEON'S BATTLES WITH THE AMALEKITES



Judges 8:28

So Midian was subdued before the Israelites, and they were no longer a threat. The land was peaceful 40 years during the days of Gideon.