

Getting Started with Judges

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Introduction to Judges

The title “The Book of Judges” is derived from the Latin Vulgate *Liber Iudicum* which matches the Greek Septuagint’s (LXX) *Kritai* (Judges); both of which are a literal derivation from the Hebrew *Shophetim*. One must understand that the Hebrew designation for “Judge” as a judicial official making court decisions is suited to Deborah who held court under a palm tree but few else (4:4-5; cf. Deut 16:18-20).

The Hebrew term *shophetim* is much broader. The best functional definition of “judges” is found in the book of Judges itself (2:16-18): “The Lord raised up judges [*shophetim*], who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. ... Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived.” They were charismatic deliverers who were raised up to lead, rescue, rule, and save Israel from regional oppressors (10:12-13). This can be seen clearly with the first judge Othniel where the terms “judge” [translated “deliverer” NIV] and “saving” are juxtaposed along with the recognition of Othniel’s being endowed by the Spirit of the Lord to defeat Cushan-Rishathaim (Cushan, the doubly wicked; 3:9f.). Ehud, Barak, and Gideon are not called as judges but are described using the term “savior” (3:15) or “saving” (6:14-15; 8:22 cf. 3:31; 10:1; 12:2-3; 13:5). Indeed, God himself is seen as the ultimate “savior” (6:36; 7:2). Perhaps a better title for the book would be “Book of Tribal Saviors/Deliverers/Liberators” (Block).

The period of Judges is a well-known period of Israel’s history. It lies between the idyllic conquest of the land by Joshua and the first king Saul, who is anointed by the last judge, Samuel who oversees the shift from theocracy--where God is king--to the monarchy where Saul is anointed king (8:23; 1 Sam 8:7). This heroic period is referred to in 1 Samuel (1 Sam 12:9-11), Ruth (1:1), Psalms (83:9ff; 106:40ff), Isaiah (9:4), Kings (2 Kgs 23:22), and Nehemiah (9:27). A classic synopsis is given in the Hebrews 11 hall of faith: “I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised...” (Heb 11:32f.).

Theme, Structures, Chronology and Social Fabric of Judges

The major theme of Judges is frequently repeated in the final chapters of the book (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” It was a period of chaos and of individual and corporate apostasy. While this summary statement reflects a time when Israel had a king, the

portrayal of the kingship is not naïve but tainted by Gideon's son Abimelech's treacherous attempts at making himself king by the slaughtering of his siblings (9:5) and the burning of the residents of Shechem (9:49). Judges seems to be realistic about the nature and problems of kingship (vid. 1 Sam 8:11-18).

The structure of the book of Judges has both cyclical and linear elements to it. The cyclical nature can be seen in the cycle introduced in Judges 2:6-3:6 which is echoed in the six major deliverers that follow. The complete cycle can be seen with Othniel of Judah, the first judge.

- Rebellion: Israel does evil in the eyes of the Lord (3:7)
- Yahweh sells them into the hands of their oppressors (3:8)
- Repentance/Cry of distress: Israel cries to the Lord (3:9)
- God raises up a deliverer/judge (3:9)
- Military victory of the deliverer who is endowed by the Spirit (3:10)
- The land has rest for a number of years (3:11)

These cycles are not always complete as neither the Jephthah nor Samson cycles have the final stage of Israel's rest (Younger, cf. Satterthwaite, *IVP Dict.*, 583).

There are six cyclical or major judges and six non-cyclical or minor judges. The stories of the six non-cyclical judges are usually short with a succession statement, home location, years as judge, and death notice. They seem to occur in a 1, 2, 3 pattern: 1) Shamgar (3:13); 2) Tola (10:1) and Jair (10:3); and 3) Ibzan (12:8), Elon (12:11), and Abdon (12:13, Younger). The six cyclical or major judges are: Othniel, Ehud, Deborah/Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. There are twelve judges in all. The heroic sagas seem to increase in length from Othniel, the shortest, to Samson, the longest. There also seems to be a movement from Judah (ch. 3) in the south to Dan in the north (ch. 19) from the east (Ehud; Moab) to west (Samson; Philistine) intersecting the moral decline of the nation.

The major section of judge cycles (3:7-16:31) is framed by a double introduction and a double conclusion. There is a chiasmic ABBA literary framework between the doubled introduction and the doubled conclusion (Younger, 31-33).

- A Foreign wars of subjugation (1:1-2:5)
- B Difficulties with foreign religious idols (2:6-3:6)
- B' Difficulties with Israelites' religious idols (17:1-18:31)
- A' Israelite inter-tribal warfare (19:1-21:25)

The chronology of Judges cannot be reconstructed accurately based on the historical notices in the text describing: 1) the number of years of the various oppressions (3:14; 4:3; 6:1; 10:8; 13:1); and 2) the years of rest as a result of the deliverances (3:30;

5:31; 8:28; 15:20). These total 410 years. This number is too large for those holding an early date of the exodus (ca. 1445 B.C.) and is especially troubling for the late date of the exodus (ca. 1260 B.C.- 40 years in the wilderness) which allows for less than 150 years for this period before Samuel (ca. 1100 B.C.) and Saul (1050 B.C.).

There are two factors that impact the chronology of Judges. First, the judges were regional saviors, hence the length of oppressions and rests may overlap. Second, some of the numbers may be rounded off as symbolic as Ehud has 80 years, Deborah 40 years and Gideon 40 years. One should also note Jephthah's unchallenged statement that in his day Israel had occupied Heshbon for 300 years (11:26).

While traditionally the authorship of the book has been assigned to Samuel (ca. 1050 B.C.), statements in 18:30-31 may well indicate a pre-Zion perspective (i.e. pre-David capturing Jerusalem) as the house of God is described as firmly seated at Shiloh, not Jerusalem. Yet the statement concerning the tribe of Dan having set up idols "until the time of the captivity of the land" (18:30) seems to indicate an editorial insertion from the time of the Assyrian captivity (722 B.C.). The referencing of archaic site locations also shows the final form of the book is distant from the events recorded (e.g. Debir = Kirath Sepher [1:11]; Jebus = Jerusalem [19:10]; Block). David had apparently not captured Jerusalem yet as "to this day the Jebusites live there" (1:21). This is a complex document with several editorial layers reflected in its final text.

The social fabric of the time also seems to reflect an early period with the bottom level being the "house of the father" or family which would combine to form a "clan" which, in turn, would combine to form a "tribe" which, in turn, joined to form the nation of Israel (cf. Josh 7:14). Other social factors are the Levites who function as priests (17:7ff) and the elders of Succoth written down by a boy for Gideon (8:14). The lack of centralization of worship and many non-priests offering sacrifices (6:18ff; 11:31; 13:23) is indicative of a pre-monarchic origin with later editorial insertions.

Summary of Contents

The book opens with the first introduction (1:1-2:5) echoing themes and phrases from Joshua continuing the conquest of the land with Judah and the Simeonites attacking Adoni-Bezek. Judah captures Jerusalem, Caleb takes Hebron, and his daughter Acsah is given to Othniel for taking Debir/Kiriath Sepher. While the men of Judah were largely successful, the other tribes of Manasseh, Benjamin, and others were not able to drive out the Canaanites (ch. 1).

The second introduction (2:6-3:6) is a description of why the Canaanites were not driven from the land. While Joshua's generation served the Lord the ones that followed forsook the Lord, violated the covenant, and served Baal and Ashtoreths. The Lord left the Canaanites in the land to test Israel and to teach the next generation the art of warfare

(3:1f.).

Othniel, the first major judge, has the full literary cycle (3:7-11). While he gets a short description, he is Caleb's younger brother from the tribe of Judah who battles Cushan-Rishathaim from Aram.

Ehud, the left hander from the tribe of Benjamin (son of my right hand), takes tribute to the obese oppressor Eglon king of Moab who had taken the City of Palms (Jericho; 3:12-30). Ehud requests a secret audience with Eglon to present a message from God. After the servants are dismissed, Ehud draws his dagger and plunges it into Eglon. While the servants decide whether to open the locked restroom palace doors, Ehud has time to escape down the latrine (3:23; NLT) and rally the Ephraimites who defeat and throw off the oppressive yoke of the Moabites.

Deborah and Barak confront the 900 iron chariots of Jabin, king of Canaan who reigned in Hazor (4:1-5:31). Apparently Jabin is a dynastic name as Joshua had killed Jabin king of Hazor previously (Josh 11:1-10). Deborah is described as the wife of Lappidoth, a prophetess and judge "who was leading Israel at the time in the hill country of Ephraim" (4:4-5). She orders a timid Barak to prepare for battle. Barak lacks courage and so God announces that Sisera, Jabin's general, will be handed over to a woman. The battle takes place in the Jezreel or Armageddon Valley. The Kishon River floods, resulting in the muddied iron chariots being incapacitated. Sisera flees and Jael, a Kenite woman, offers Sisera milk and a cozy nap at which time she takes a tent peg and hammer and kills him, thereby finalizing the victory. The poetic song of Deborah celebrates the victory (cf. Exod 15).

The Gideon narrative is seen as the center of the major judges. There is an extended treatment of Gideon's call as he clandestinely tries to winnow wheat in a winepress (6:1-9:56). He objects asking for a sign which is granted as fire flares from a rock and consumes the meat of his sacrifice (cf. Moses). He tears down his father's altar to Baal and the Asherah pole resulting in him being named "Jeru-baal" meaning "Let Baal defend himself" (6:32). He demands a sign confirming his call to arms by putting out a fleece and requesting it to be wet and the ground dry. Gideon then musters 32,000 men and God eliminates all but 300 who lapped water from their hands at the spring of Harod. Gideon defeats the Midianites at night with lamps and trumpets blasting.

At the end of his life things fall apart as he makes a idolatrous golden ephod and his son Abimelech, after Gideon's death, declares himself king at Shechem by slaying Gideon's seventy sons. Jotham tells a satirical fable about the trees anointing the bramble bush as king (ch. 9). Abimelech is eventually killed by a woman who cracks his skull by dropping a millstone from a tower on him.

Jephthah of Gilead confronts the Ammonites in Transjordan (10:6-12:7). While

he was a mighty warrior, his mother was a prostitute so he was originally driven out of his family. Later they recall him seeking to employ his skills against the Ammonites. After reviewing Israel's history, Jephthah makes a vow to sacrifice whatever comes out the door of his house if he returns victorious. His only child, a daughter, comes out to greet him upon his return and "he did to her as he had vowed." Most think he sacrificed her but some think he may have dedicated her to the Lord through celibacy. The tribe of Ephraim was offended that they were not invited to the war so they attack Jephthah of Gilead who identifies who the Ephraimites are by a dialectical difference whether they could say "shibboleth" instead of "sibboleth" (ear of grain).

Samson, from the tribe of Dan, was called to be a Nazirite from birth and was destined to confront the Philistines (chs. 13-16). The birth narrative has an angel informing his sterile mother and Manoah, his father, that no razor should come on his head (ch. 13). Samson's entanglements with the Philistines come through three women. The first is his wife from Timnah. At his wedding he gives a riddle based on his taking honey from the carcass of a lion he had previously killed. His wedding guests force his wife to tell them the answer by threatening her parents. Samson slays thirty Philistines to acquire the thirty changes of clothes to close the bet. Second, he goes in to a prostitute at Gaza where he walks off with the posts of the city gate. Third, he falls in love with Delilah. The Philistines bribe her into finding out the secret of Samson's strength. She cuts his hair and he is captured, blinded, and returned to Gaza. He prays for revenge and knocks down the pillars of the Philistine temple killing more in his death than in his tragic life.

The book of Judges then ends with a double conclusion or the tales of two Levites. The first Levite contracts with Micah in Ephraim to serve as a priest for Micah's family idol. The tribe of Dan recruits him as they migrate north to capture the city of Laish, later named Dan, where the Levite sets up an idolatrous worship center.

The second Levite has a concubine who flees to her family in Bethlehem. He goes to retrieve her and then upon returning stays in Gibeah in the tribal region of Benjamin. The men of Gibeah rape and kill his concubine. He cuts her up and sends her body parts to the twelve tribes of Israel. The tribes muster, attack, and almost destroy the tribe of Benjamin except for 600 men. They seize wives for the Benjaminites from Jabesh Gilead and from dancers at a Shiloh festival thereby reconstituting the tribe of Benjamin. This story sets the background to Saul the first king of Israel who is from the tribe of Benjamin.

The book ends with the major theme lamenting: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

Theology

God the ultimate deliverer

With all the extraordinary feats and foibles of the various judges, something that must not be missed is that God himself was the one who delivered Israel into the hands of the oppressors and it was God who graciously listened to their cries of distress and raised up each judge. Indeed, God was viewed as the one ruling Israel during this time; Israel's ultimate deliverer (8:23). The Spirit of God was a catalyst in endowing these various judges with gifts needed to fulfill their roles (6:34; 11:29; 14:6, 19; 15:14).

The People of God Struggle with Syncretism

While Israel had conquered the land of Canaan, it remained for Judges to determine whether Israel would be conquered by Canaan culture and religion. Israel's tendency was to forget the Lord and to serve the Baals and Asherahs (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1), resulting in their inability to drive out the Canaanites. This was a fulfillment of the Mosaic warnings in Deuteronomy (7:4; 20:18). Syncretism resulted in Israel sliding into the abhorrent and immoral practices of Canaanite idolatry. One wonders whether this warning about syncretism and assimilation should be heeded by the post-modern church.

The Role of Women in Judges

The women in Judges run the gamut from heroic (Deborah, Jael), to pious (daughter of Jephthah), to the feisty (Acsah, 1:15), to the unnamed woman who cracks Abimelech's skull with a millstone. Samson's betrayal by Delilah and the helpless nameless Levite's concubine are significant in this chaotic time in Israel's history (Younger, 37).

Questions

1. What similarities can be seen in comparing Judges 1 and the book of Joshua?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the narrative account of Deborah's victory (ch. 4) and the poetic account (ch. 5)?
3. What parallels are seen between Gideon and Moses?
4. What role do women play in the book of Judges?
5. How are the various tribes portrayed?
6. What traces of later editorial comments are found throughout the book?
7. What role does the Spirit of God play in Judges?
8. How did the various judges determine God's direction and will (esp. Gideon)?
9. How does Judges set up the coming institution of kingship in Israel?