

Introduction

Background

Name: The title “Judges” is used in both the Hebrew scriptures as well as the Greek and English translations. The term “judge” (Hebrew: shaphat) is used throughout the book to describe a national leader who delivered the nation from foreign invaders, served as an administrative ruler and mediated disputes.

The book of Judges specifically lists twelve men and one woman who served as judges over Israel. In addition, in 1 Samuel both Eli and Samuel are considered to be the last judges of Israel.

Author: The author is anonymous. Some scholars suggest that Samuel was the author. However, given Samuel’s concern about the monarchy (1 Samuel 8:10ff), this seems unlikely given the purpose of the book¹.

Date: In Judges 11:26, Jephthah states it has been 300 years since Israel first entered the Promised Land. In Acts 13:20, Paul indicates a 450 year time frame from Israel’s desert wandering to the time of the monarchy. 1 Kings 6:1 states that it is 480 years from the Exodus to the building of the temple under King Solomon. Most scholars agree that Solomon’s temple was completed around 959 BC, we can deduce that the events of the book took place over a period of four centuries from 1375 to 1043BC². This period is known as “the time of the judges.”

The book itself was probably written after the rise of the monarchy, but before David’s taking of the city of Jerusalem (Joshua 1:21)

Audience: The nation of Israel living in the early days of the monarchy.

Structure

The book is divided into three sections:

- The Prologue (1:1 – 3:6) describes the events leading up to the time of the Judges, including Israel’s conquest of Canaan under Joshua and Joshua’s death.
- The Body of the book (3:7 - 16:31) describes events taking place under six judgeships. The events leading up to the establishment of each of these judges follows a specific pattern, which is outlined in 2:10-2:23. This will be discussed later.

¹ Herbert Wolf. “Judges” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998. Electronic edition, STEP file).

² Gleason L. Archer. “Chronology of the Old Testament.” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998. Electronic edition, STEP file).

- The Appendix (17:1 – 21:25) describes two events which illustrate the depths of Israel's anarchy and moral depravity. The appendix is not chronological. These events likely took place in the early time of the judges.

Prologue	The Cycle of Judges						Appendix: Two Illustrations of Anarchy						
	Othniel		Ehud		Deborah & Barak		Gideon	Jephthah	Samson	Micah's Priest	Annihilation of Benjamin		
1:1	3:6	3:7	3:1 1	3:1 2	3:3 1	4:1	5:3 1	6:1	10:5	10: 12:15 6	13: 16:31 1	17: 18:31 1	19: 21:25 1

Purpose

Judges was primarily written as a justification for the monarchy. This book demonstrates that Israel was unable to govern herself under the kingship of Yahweh (Judges 8:22-23, 1 Samuel 8:6-7), and would now need a human king to administer the reign of God³. The book repeatedly emphasizes that this time of moral decay and foreign oppression took place in the day when “there was no king in Israel” (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25). Under a King, Israel would be united in her defense against foreign aggressors and would return to following the Torah.

Judges also illustrates the consequences of forsaking Yahweh and His covenant (Judges 2:11-15). The nation had violated the Mosaic covenant (Judges 2:20), and as a result God made it difficult for Israel to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan (Judges 2:21-23).

Theme

The theme verse is Judges 21:25:

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

The Prologue (1:1 – 3:6)

The book of Judges begins where the book of Joshua leaves off; that is, with the death of Joshua. Under Joshua Israel had entered the Promised Land and found great success driving out the inhabitants of the land (1:1-26). But the nation did not complete its job of driving out the nations, leaving large sections of land under the control of the Canaanites (1:27-36). Because of their failure to complete the conquest, these nations would “serve as a snare” to Israel, leading them away from obedience to God’s covenant with them and into idolatry (2:1-5).

It appears that under the leadership of Joshua, Israel remained faithful to God and prospered. However, after Joshua’s generation passed away, the nation began to forget God.

All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel. (Judges 2:10)

Israel began worshipping the God’s of their unconquered neighbors (2:11-13) and the nation plunged into a four century period of political and moral chaos. As a result, God would no longer give the nation an easy conquest of those nations (2:20-21) and would instead raise up foreign oppressors.

³ Wolf.

The Cycle of the Judges

Cycle Outlined	Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, (2:11)	The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of... He sold them into the hands of their enemies....(2:14)	Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them... so that they were severely distressed. (2:15)	God Raises a Judge to Deliver (2:16)	The Judge Delivers (2:16-18)	The Land Rests Until the Judge Dies (2:19)
Othniel (3:7 – 3:11)	The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD (3:7)	Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; (3:8)	When the sons of Israel cried to the LORD (3:9a)	The LORD raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. (3:9b)	When he went out to war, the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand (3:10)	Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died. (3:11)
Ehud (3:12 – 3:31)	Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. (3:12a)	So the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel,. (3:12b)	But when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD (3:15a)	the LORD raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man (3:15b)	So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. (3:30)	And the land was undisturbed for eighty years. (3:31)
Deborah & Barak (4:1 – 5:31)	Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. (4:1)	And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan... and the commander of his army was Sisera. (4:2)	The sons of Israel cried to the LORD; (4:3)	Now Deborah, a prophetess... was judging Israel at that time...Now she sent and summoned Barak (4:4-6)	So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the sons of Israel. (4:23)	And the land was undisturbed for forty years. (5:31)
Gideon (6:1 – 10:5)	Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD (6:1a)	and the LORD gave them into the hands of Midian seven years. (6:1b)	So Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried to the LORD. (6:6)	The LORD looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?" (6:14)	So Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not lift up their heads anymore. (8:28)	And the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon. (8:28)
Jephthah (10:6 – 12:15)	Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD (10:6)	The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the sons of Ammon. (10:7)	Then the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD... (10:10)	The elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah...and they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our chief that we may fight against the sons of Ammon." (11:5-6)	So the sons of Ammon were subdued before the sons of Israel. (11:33)	Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died.... (12:7)
Samson (13:1 – 16:31)	Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD (Judges 13:1a)	so that the LORD gave them into the hands of the Philistines forty years. (13:1b)		"For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son... and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines." (13:5)	So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life. (16:30)	Thus he had judged Israel twenty years. (16:31)

The Cycle of the Judges (3:7 – 16:31)

The Cycles Outlined

The body of the book of Judges falls into a predicable cyclical pattern. This cycle is outlined in the chapter 2.

1. The sons of Israel do evil in the sight of the Lord (2:11-13).
2. The anger of the Lord is kindled. The Lord sells them to their enemies (2:14).
3. Israel is distressed & cries out to the Lord (2:15).
4. God raises a judge to deliver (2:16).
5. The judge delivers (2:16-18).
6. The land rests until the judge dies (2:19).

The book uses this pattern to highlight the rule of six specific judges. There are two trends as this pattern is repeated. First, the narratives get progressively longer. The story of Othniel is 5 verses long. The story of Samson is several chapters long. Secondly, the judges become more corrupt and farther from God.

These cycles are actually more of a downward spiral. The early judges, Othniel and Ehud are faithful leaders. However, Gideon and Jephthah are seriously flawed and inconsistent in their worship of the Lord. By the time we get to the last judge, Samson, we see the cycle break-down completely as he fails to deliver Israel from the Philistines and ends up actually killing more Philistines in his death than when he was alive.

Othniel (3:7 – 3:11)

The Cycle Begins

The cycle begins within a generation after the death of Joshua. The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and began worshipping Baal and Asheroth, the Canaanite fertility god and goddess. The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and so He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia. Israel cried out to the Lord, so God sent them the first judge to deliver them.

Character of Othniel

The first judge is Othniel, who is the nephew of Caleb. Over 40 years prior to this, right after Israel had escaped from slavery in Egypt, Caleb was one of 12 spies sent by Moses to assess the situation in the Promised Land. As recounted in Numbers 13, only Caleb and Joshua trusted in the promises of the Lord and said that Israel could take the land. The rest of the spies doubted that Israel had the military might to conquer the land. This lack of belief led to 40 more years of wandering in the wilderness before the nation entered and began conquering the Promised Land.

God had promised Israel that he would drive out the inhabitants if Israel would only be willing to capture it. Those who believed this and trusted in this promise were very successful in taking the land. But many of the Israelite tribes only captured some of the land they were allotted due to their lack of trust. Othniel, however, was not one such man.

Othniel had the same faith as his uncle/father-in-law. Caleb promised that anyone who captured the city of Kiriath-sepher would be given his daughter in marriage. Othniel took up the challenge and thus married Caleb's daughter (Joshua 15:16-17, Judges 1:12-13). Othniel trusted in the promises of the Lord and was rewarded for it.

Now as the first recorded judge, Othniel again goes to war and after eight years of oppression by the king of Mesopotamia, he drives out the foreign invader. Othniel continues as judge for 40 years, and the land rests under his rule.

The Spirit of the Lord

Othniel, while being a courageous and faithful man, also had the Spirit of the Lord come upon him (Judges 3:10). This is a common thing for the judges, and it illustrates a significant difference between Old Testament and New Testament saints. Throughout the Old Testament we see that the Spirit comes upon only certain people for the accomplishment of certain tasks. Most of the judges, the prophets and even some of the kings of Israel receive the Spirit at least for a time. However, in the New Testament, beginning in Acts 2, we see the Holy Spirit come upon all believers. In the Old Testament, the Spirit comes on only select individuals and only temporarily. In the New Testament, the Spirit indwells and guides all believers (Romans 8:9).

This means that the same Spirit of God who leads Othniel, the other judges, King David and the other prophets, is the Spirit inside all believers today. That same courage, power, authority and faith is available for believers. However, like so many of the tribes of Israel, we are willing to settle for less and we don't have the courage to take all that God has promised us. Let us instead be like Othniel, who under the Spirit of God took the city, drove out the King of Mesopotamia and ruled over a peaceful nation for 40 years.

Ehud (3:12 – 3:31)

The Cycle Repeats

After the death of Othniel, the cycle repeats again. Israel again does what is evil in the sight of the Lord. This time the Lord gives the nation over to Eglon, the king of Moab. After 18 years of oppression, Israel cries out to the Lord. God raises a left handed Benjamite named Ehud to deliver the nation.

The Death of Eglon

Israel had been paying tribute to Eglon for 18 years. Ehud brought the tribute to the king and told the king he had a message for him from God. As he got close to the king, he took out a concealed sword and plunged it into Eglon's belly. But Eglon was so obese that sword was completely swallowed up in his fat.

Eglon escaped the king's throne room and then led all of Israel against the Moabite army, killing 10,000 men. The land remained at rest for 80 years under Ehud's leadership.

Shamgar

The book of Judges then tells us of another judge, Shamgar, who defeated 600 Philistines and also saved Israel. From the text it is difficult to tell if Shamgar was a judge ruling either at the same time as Ehud or after Ehud. The term translated "after him," could also be translated "following after him," meaning that Shamgar was a disciple of Ehud⁴. So Shamgar may have been a "lieutenant-judge," thus explaining why so little is discussed about him. Or, Shamgar was a full-fledged judge, but his rule wasn't characterized by the same cycle, and therefore help the author develop his overall purpose.

⁴ Wolf.

Deborah & Barak (4:1 – 5:31)

The Cycle Repeats

After the death of Ehud, the cycle repeats. Israel does evil in the sight of the Lord. The Lord sells them into the hand of the Canaanite king, Jabin, and his general, Sisera. After 20 years of oppression at by Jabin's 900 iron chariots, Israel cries out to the Lord.

The judge who will deliver Israel this time, however, is a woman named Deborah. Deborah was already a judge (4:5), settling disputes among the Israelites. But Deborah was also a prophetess of God. Deborah is one of about a half a dozen women called "prophetess" in the Bible. She spoke on behalf of the Lord to the nation of Israel. Deborah had a great reputation among the people and is even called the Mother of Israel (5:7).

The Character of Barak

One such message was to a man named Barak. Deborah tells Barak that the Lord was commanding him to take the army to fight Sisera and that God had promised him victory.

Throughout judges and the Old Testament we see that God commands people directly to do things. But like Barak, most of these times when God directly commanded someone, it comes through the voice of a prophet of God. The prophets served as the word of God to Israel at a time when there was no scripture. This will be more fully developed in our study of the book of Samuel.

Barak, however, does not fully believe the promise of God. In fact, his faith does not seem to be as much in the Lord as it is in Deborah herself. He says he will only go out to fight if Deborah goes with him.

The Death of Sisera

Barak's failure to believe in the promise of God costs him the glory of victory. Sisera is not defeated by Barak in battle, but is killed in his sleep by a woman named Jael who drives a tent stake into his head.

Barak is a man who won't go to battle without a woman leading the way. As a result, the final glorious blow is delivered not by Barak, but by another woman Jael. Barak is a man who is used by God to throw off the oppression of the Canaanites. But because of his lack of faith he is stripped of the glory that might have been his.

The Song of Deborah and Barak

The narrative ends with a hymn of victory. In this song, Deborah leads the nation in praising God for the victory. The song praises those in Israel who joined the battle and condemns those who stayed at home. Then gives details of the battle not included in the narrative section.

The song then ends with a contrast of two women. One woman is Jael, who killed Sisera. The other woman is Sisera's mother who is waiting for him to return with his plunder. But, of course, Sisera does not return.

After the song is complete we learn that Israel rested for 40 years.

Gideon (6:1 – 10:5)

The Cycle Repeats

After this rest of 40 years, Israel does evil again in the site of the Lord. This time the Lord hands Israel over to the oppression of Midian. After 7 years of oppression Israel finally cries out to the Lord for deliverance. In response, God sends a prophet to declare to them why they are under this oppression. But God also sends Gideon as their judge.

The Call of Gideon

The Altar of Baal Destroyed

The call of Gideon is very detailed, involving a visit from the angel of the Lord. As part of God's call, Gideon is asked to destroy an altar to the god Baal which had been established by his father. God was calling Gideon not just to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Midianites, but to address the real issue: Israel's idolatry.

Gideon obeyed the angel of the Lord, but he did it at night because he was afraid of his father's household. When it was discovered that Gideon had destroyed the altar, Gideon did not defend his actions and call people back to the Lord. It was his father who defended him. Nonetheless, Gideon earned his nickname from this incident: Jerubbaal, or one who contends with Baal.

The Fleece

After this, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Gideon and directs him to battle with the Midianites. However, Gideon is not sure of God's call. So, just to be sure, he lays out a fleece of wool at night and asks God to confirm his calling by making the fleece wet with dew while leaving the ground dry. God obliges. But Gideon is still not convinced, so he repeats the test, this time asking God to make the fleece dry while the ground is wet.

Many Christians have taken Gideon's behavior here as an example to follow. The term "laying out a fleece" has come to mean any test which we give God to determine His will for our lives. But Gideon here is serving as a negative example. His laying out of the fleece is a demonstration of his lack of faith. Too often we know God's will for us, and rather than obey God we lay out fleeces hoping to get some other answer so we don't have to do what we know God wants us to do. We can know God's will for us confidently. It is found in His Word. If we want to know God's will for our lives, we don't need to lay out fleeces. We need to study and then obey the Word of God as revealed in the bible.

The Conquest of Midian

The Reduction of Gideon's Army

Gideon's army totals 32,000 men. But this is too many for God's plan. If they proceed with this large of an army the people will not credit God for the victory. So Gideon tells all those who are afraid to go home, thereby reducing his army down to 10,000 men.

Then the Lord has Gideon further reduce his army. He leads them to water, and those who lap the water like a dog are sent home, while those who cup it in their hands are allowed to remain. This reduces the army to 300 men. This must have concerned Gideon. His army less than 1/100th the size it was when he began his campaign. But God assures Gideon through a dream that the battle will be his.

The Enemy Confused

Gideon leads his army at night to surround the Midianites. Each man is given a torch covered by an empty pitcher and a trumpet. Upon Gideon's signal, the men all blow their trumpets, break their pitchers hiding the light from the torch, and yell out "for the Lord and for Gideon." This confuses the

Midianite army and in the confusion they began battling each other. God had delivered Israel from their oppressors.

The Character of Gideon

After Gideon's victory, two incidents are recorded which show the dichotomy of Gideon's character.

In verse 22, the nation of Israel is ready to make Gideon their king. They say, "rule over us, both you, and your son, and your son's son." Because of Gideon's victory over Midian, the nation wanted to establish the house of Gideon as their royal family and monarchy. However, Gideon refuses this, for he knows that Israel already has a king: Yahweh. He replies to the nation:

I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you. (Judges 8:23)

In his humility, Gideon recognizes that it was God who delivered Israel from Midian. The ideal for Israel is that they see God as their king and their deliverer, not man.

However, on the heels of this great demonstration of humility, Gideon makes a very poor choice which leads both him and the nation into idolatry. In a move reminiscent of Aaron in Exodus 32, he asks Israel to bring him gold earrings obtained from the spoils of the battle. He collected 1,700 shekels of gold (between 35 and 75 pounds depending upon the weight of a shekel at the time⁵), which he then melted down and turned into an ephod.

An ephod is an apron like garment usually worn by the priest. The ephod included lots which were cast to determine the will of God. In making the ephod, Gideon was assuming the role of the priesthood.

Over time this ephod became an idol which the nation would come to worship. Remarkably, even Gideon himself was caught up with the ephod, for:

It became a snare to Gideon and his household (Judges 8:27)

This could mean that Gideon and his family worshipped the ephod as an idol the same as the nation. Or, it could mean the Gideon allowed or encouraged Israel to worship the ephod and saw that as worship of himself. If the latter is the case, then over time, the humility which allowed Gideon to see that God had been the one to rescue Israel diminished, and now by accepting the nation's worship, Gideon was taking credit for his accomplishments.

The Conspiracy of Abimelech

While Gideon had refused to establish a monarchy, his son Abimelech did. In fact, the very name Abimelech means "father of the king." Abimelech conspires with the men of Shechem to slaughter his brothers and to become king. Abimelech ruled as king for 3 years before God created division between Shechem and the king, so that the king took his army out to recapture the city. However while attacking the citadel in the city, a woman threw down a millstone and crushed Abimelech's head. Thus God punished both Abimelech and Shechem for the slaughter of Gideon's sons.

Tola & Jair

After the reign of Abimelech, there were two more judges. Tola ruled for 23 years, and Jair for 22 years.

⁵ Wolf.

Jephthah (10:6 – 12:15)

The Cycle Repeats

After Tola and Jair, Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and God delivered them over to the Philistines and to Ammon. The nation cried out to the Lord for deliverance and repented of their idolatry. This time, however, the people call on Jephthah to come and deliver them from their oppression. Jephthah was from Gilead, a hilly region east of the Jordan. However Jephthah was the son of a harlot and so was not allowed his father's inheritance and had to flee from Gilead. But Jephthah was a brave warrior and so he was called by the people to lead the army against Ammon.

Jephthah's Vow

After the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Jephthah, he traveled from Gilead to Ammon to fight against the Ammonites. As the battle is to begin he makes a vow unto the Lord that if God gives him victory, he would offer as a burnt sacrifice the first thing that comes out of the door of his house.

God indeed grants victory to Jephthah, delivering Israel from the oppression of the Ammonites. But when Jephthah returns home, his daughter, who is an only child, runs out the door of his house with tambourines and dancing to celebrate the victory. This grieves Jephthah, for he must fulfill his vow to the Lord and now offer her as a burnt sacrifice.

God obviously does not accept human sacrifices (Deut. 12:31). Many commentators have stated that this was not a true burnt sacrifice, but Jephthah's daughter merely was to be committed to serving God and would never be married. However, there is little in the text to support this theory. If we are troubled by the idea that this judge, indwelt by the Spirit of God, would kill his daughter by burning her as a sacrifice to the Lord, then I think we get the point of the author. This story serves to illustrate the failure of the judges and the depths of evil to which Israel has fallen.

While the judges are God's appointed military and judicial leaders for Israel, the time of the judges is one of corruption and failure. As we move through the six cycles of the judges, we see each judge become more and more perverted from the ideal that God would have. By the time we get to Jephthah, we have a judge who has so little understanding of the Lord and his law, that he thinks God would actually desire a human sacrifice.

Ephraim and the Shibboleth

The decay of Israel is further illustrated after the battle of Ammon. Ephraim, one of the larger tribes of Israel, was offended by Jephthah, for he had not invited them to the battle, and therefore kept them from the spoils of war. So Ephraim became angry and set out to raid and pillage Gilead.

Ephraim was located on the west side of the Jordan, while Gilead was in the hill country in the northeastern part of Israel. So Ephraim crossed the Jordan River and made their way to the highlands to attack Gilead. But Jephthah was ready for the attack and soundly defeated the Ephraim raiders. As Ephraim retreated they had to cross back over the Jordan River to get back home. But Jephthah had blocked their escape route, capturing and holding the fords of the river.

But how would the soldiers holding the fords know if someone trying to cross was from the Ephraimite army, or was someone from Gilead? How would they discern the friend from the foe? To solve this dilemma, the Gileadites would ask the man, "Are you an Ephraimite?" and if they said no, they would say, "Say the word, 'Shibboleth.'" The Ephraimites had a regional accent, and they could not say, Shibboleth, but instead said Sibboleth. So when they could not correctly pronounce this word, they would take the fugitive and kill him.

And so Jephthah and his army destroyed 42 divisions of the Ephraimite army. As if the oppression of the foreign armies was not enough, Israel was now fighting inter-tribal wars over such trivial matters as dividing the spoils of war.

Ibzan, Elon & Abdon

Jephthah judges for 6 years. Following him there are a series of judges mentioned in chapter 12. Ibzan of Bethlehem judged for 7 years, Elon the Zebulunite judged for 10 years, and Abdon judged for 8 years.

Samson (13:1 – 16:31)

The Cycle Repeats

The final cycle begins in chapter 13 as Israel does evil in the sight of the Lord. The Lord gives them over to the Philistines for 40 years of oppression. However, here the cycle breaks down in a number of ways. First we don't see the nation cry out to the Lord. Secondly, this judge does not actually ever deliver Israel from her oppressors.

The Call of Samson

This judge is called by God before he is even born. The angel of the Lord appears to a barren Danite woman and tells her that she is about to give birth to a son. This son is to fulfill the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:2-6), where a person would refrain from touching dead things, alcohol and cutting of the hair so as to be especially clean for service unto the Lord. The son was born as predicted and was named Samson. The child grew, God blessed him and placed His Spirit in him.

Samson's Marriage

While Samson had the Spirit of God within him, Samson turns out to have very little regard for the Law of God. Samson falls in love with Timnah, a Philistine girl and desires to marry her. The Law strictly forbids marriage with foreigners. To make matters worse, the Philistines are the very people Samson should be defeating to deliver Israel. But Samson does not seem at all interested in his call as a deliverer for the nation. All his decisions seem to be to satisfy his own desires. Furthermore, Samson seems to have very little regard for his Nazirite vow. He touches the carcass of a dead lion and a dead donkey.

Samson's Deliverance

It's not that Samson likes the Philistines. Indeed, he regularly slaughters them. He kills 30 of them when they won't pay out on a bet they lost. He burns down their fields and slaughters 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey when his father-in-law refuses to let his daughter see him. But none of this was motivated by a nationalistic fervor, but as revenge for his own personal offenses.

In chapter 16, Samson falls in love with another Philistine woman named Delilah. The Philistines decide to use Delilah to extract revenge against Samson, and they ask her to trick him into giving away the secret of his tremendous strength. After several attempts, she finally entices him to give away that it is his long hair, grown out as part of the Nazirite vow, which gives him strength.

The Philistines, of course, cut his hair and are able to subdue Samson. They gouge out his eyes and put him on public display at a feast, chaining him to two pillars. For the first time we see Samson acknowledge the Lord, and while standing there chained to the pillars, he asks God for the strength to avenge the Philistines for gouging out his eyes. Again, his motivation is not to deliver Israel, but personal revenge.

God gives Samson the strength, and he pulls the pillars down killing himself and all the Philistines within the building. The narrative ends with an ironic statement illustrating Samson's failure as a judge:

So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life. (Judges 16:30b)

Appendix (17:1 – 21:15)

Following the 6 cycles of the Judges are two stories which further illustrate the terrible moral and civil decline taking place in Israel during this time. These chapters do not take place after Samson, but instead probably take place early in the period of the judges. However, as one commentator puts it, they are added to the appendix as a “fitting epitaph to a degenerate time⁶.”

Tale of Micah’s Priest (17:1 – 18:31)

Micah’s Idolatry

The first narrative in the appendix tells of an Ephraimite named Micah. Evidently Micah had recovered 1,100 silver pieces which had been lost by his mother. As a sign of his dedication, Micah dedicated the silver to Yahweh, and used it to make an idol, in violation of the second commandment (Exodus 20:4).

One day a Levite priest from Bethlehem visits Micah. Micah retains this Levite as his own personal priest. Micah’s corruption might be understandable due ignorance. But the Levite should have known better. Sacrifices to God were to take place only in the tabernacle and the worship of God was not to include graven images of Him.

The travesty of Micah is not that he is worshipping a god other than Yahweh. Instead, he has corrupted the worship of Yahweh by first making an idol which represents God, and then retaining his own priest to offer sacrifices away from the tabernacle. Micah’s sin is that he has reduced God to something he can control and thus ensure that Yahweh will cause him to prosper (17:13). To Micah, Yahweh is someone to manipulate and control for his own benefit.

The Danite’s Outrage

At that time, the tribe of Dan lived in the coastal plain of Israel. However, Dan struggled to defeat the native populations in that location, so they head up to the hill country north of Ephraim. On the way the Danites stay with Micah and his priest, inquiring of the priest if the Lord will give them victory. The Levite says indeed that Yahweh will be with them.

Sure enough, the Danites are successful in taking the hill country. Then they came and stole Micah’s idol and asked Micah’s personal priest to be the priest for the whole tribe. Micah, of course, is outraged, but he can’t do anything about it for the Danites are much stronger.

The narrative ends with the condemnation of the whole incident:

So they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh. (Judges 18:31)

The Annihilation of Benjamin

The second narrative of the appendix begins with the reminder that these events take place “when there is no king in Israel.”

The Levite’s Concubine Raped

The second narrative tells of a Levite from Bethlehem who was living in the hill country of Ephraim. While not explicitly telling us, this is most likely the same Levite whom Micah retained as his own personal priest. This Levite had taken a young woman as his concubine, but she left him and “played the harlot against him,” and returned to Bethlehem. The Levite went to Bethlehem to win her back.

⁶ “Judges.” *The Nelson Study Bible*. Earl D. Radmacher, ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Electronic Edition STEP File, 1999).

After several days of trying to leave with his concubine, he finally headed north back to Ephraim with his concubine. On the way, he spent the night in a city of the tribe of Benjamin. While there some Benjamite men attack the house in which he is staying asking the host to deliver the Levite to them so they can sodomize him. The host offers a compromise and suggest that instead they take his own virgin daughter and the man's concubine. The men aren't happy with this, but nonetheless they take the concubine and rape her all night long.

Israel Slaughters Benjamin in Revenge

The Levite was, of course, outraged, and he cut her into twelve pieces and sent her body throughout Israel to tell all of the terrible events that these men of Benjamin had done. The whole nation raised up an army and sought to punish the entire tribe of Benjamin. This small tribe, however, was at first able to defend themselves, killing 30,000 men. But finally Israel was successful and they killed 25,000 Benjamite warriors and burned their cities and slaughtering the women of the tribe.

Israel Provides Wives for Benjamin

However, having killed off so many people, there was now concern that the tribe faced extinction. So the rest of the tribes of Israel got together and sought a plan to ensure the survival of Benjamin. None of those in the conference were willing to give their daughters as wives to the surviving Benjamite men. But there was no one at the conference from Jabesh-gilead, so it was decided to send an army of 12,000 men to Jabesh-gilead and kidnap their virgin daughters. In so doing, they captured 400 virgins and gave them to the surviving men of Benjamin. But this was not enough, so they allowed the men of Benjamin to kidnap women who were dancing in a festival to the Lord in Shiloh. In so doing, the tribe would survive.

The difficult part of this narrative is that there is no one to root for. All the parties involved are corrupt. The Levite was part of a heretical cult in Ephraim, and he cut up his own concubine to enrage the tribes. The Levites host was willing to protect his guest by offering his own daughter to his attackers. Of course, the men of Benjamin's rape was terrible. But the rest of Israel in seeking revenge committed genocide. Then, as if to make up for their genocide, they advocated kidnapping. Israel had fallen so far into moral chaos that everyone in the story was guilty of terrible sins.

Conclusion

Judges is the story of the death of an ideal. After the nation of Israel had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, God established a covenant with them. That covenant was what we would consider today the constitution for Israel, setting down a system of government and laws for the nation. Under this constitution, Israel was to be a theocracy. That is, God himself was to rule the nation as their king.

However, by the end of the time of the judges, direct theocracy had failed. The people rebelled against their King and began worshipping other gods and committing horrible moral outrages. The Lord intervened and repeatedly disciplined and restored His people. But this cycle got worse and worse over time.

A new form of government was required to stop the cycle. The people needed a king they could see. In 1st Samuel, God will establish the monarchy. This was anticipated by God, for when he established the covenant, provision was made for a king (Deuteronomy 17:14ff). But even then, God would still be the king, and the human truly was to serve only as God's vice regent.

Israel had a unique privilege. God ruled them directly without intermediary. But because of their lack of faith, they had to settle for a lesser form of government; a form of government which in the end would oppress them.

Today, as Christians we have Jesus is our king. We are ruled in our lives by God directly without intermediary. That King directs and guides us daily through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That

same Spirit who provided the direction and power to the judges of Israel is there as our direct connection to our King.

But too often, through our lack of faith, we want to give up our unique religion and become like the religions around us. Because of our lack of faith, we settle for a lesser form of religion where we are ruled by regulations and rituals rather than by God. In the end this sort of religion ends up oppressing us.

May we all come to understand truly what it means to have Jesus as our King.

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