

JUDGES: The Dark Ages of Israel

The recurring cycle of sin

Judges gives us a picture of the dark ages in Hebrew history after the death of Joshua. There was no strong central government in Israel after his death. There was however, the unifying force of their faith in Yahweh. It was a theocracy form of government with the LORD God their king.

The only problem with a theocracy is that when the people do not take their commitment seriously they keep falling into idolatry and apostasy. Civil war and anarchy divided and weakened the nation. The surrounding countries were used of God to bring chastisement upon Israel. The nation did not become great until King David united the people. Israel failed to conquer the land because of lack of faith and obedience to Yahweh (2:1-3).

The refrain for three hundred years was every man did his own thing until God raised up a leader, but as soon as he died the people went back to what was right in their own eyes. It was a constant vacillation between obedience and apostasy. They never learned from their history. Israel's trouble during this time was due to their disobedience. God still loved His people even though they sunk into the depths of depravity. Except for God's grace and mercy Israel would have been exterminated.

TITLE: The name of the book "Judges" (*shophetim*) is taken from the outstanding characters and prominent figures in the book (2:16). The Judges were actually "Deliverers," "Saviors" or Liberators who led the people during the turbulent years in Israel's history. They first delivered the people from oppression and then ruled the people. R. K. Harrison says the word "judge" in Hebrew denotes "the activity of governance, including warfare." The word judge is not used like our modern concept of holding court, or hearing complaints and rendering legal decisions. The elders and priests were the final interpreters of religious law. God raised up these deliverers at a time when the fires on the altar of God were dead and the skies of man's hope were shrouded in a pall of gloom. Yahweh empowered these judges with His Spirit to deal with certain situations in the land. These judges were not kings and did not establish a dynasty or ruling family. The judge was a man or a woman selected by Yahweh to drive out the opposition and give the land rest.

Russell Bradley Jones writes, "In most instances they were not men of ideal character. They served for the most part in local areas. At times there probably was no judge; at other times there may have been two operating in different areas. They may or may not be presented in order of their succession. During the entire period, government was largely local and of a very elementary order. There may have been a representative assembly known as 'the whole congregation of Israel'" (*Survey of the Old and New Testaments*, p. 113).

The Spirit of the LORD clothed Himself with a few individuals to do a specific work. The Spirit took hold of them and used them as His own instrument to accomplish His task. This was the exception, however, not the rule of the day.

AUTHOR: of Judges is unknown, although the Talmud suggests Samuel who may have written portions of the book. Judges was written after the death of Samuel and the coronation of King Saul, but before the conquest of Jerusalem by David c. 900 BC. The author probably lived during the days of the United Kingdom (Judges 19:1; 21:25). Judges 1:21 dates the book before the reign of David.

DATE: “Now it came about after the death of Joshua” (1:1; 2:8-9). 1 Samuel 4:3-11 could indicate that Judges was written after the Ark of the Covenant was moved from Shiloh, and after the commencement of the monarchy (Jud. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). However, the Jebusites were dwelling in Jerusalem (1:21) so it was written before David conquered the city (2 Sam. 5:5-9).

The time covered is about 350 years from 1370-1050 BC. “It is hardly likely that the various judges ruled consecutively Apparently several of the judges were in authority over only a part of Israel and ruled simultaneously with others,” writes Clyde T. Francisco. The author also uses round numbers—20, 30, 40, 80, etc. Forty years is probably a round number denoting one-generation.

There is abundance of archaeological evidence that proves the Biblical account of this period to be trustworthy.

PURPOSE: of Judges is to describe God’s dealings with people when “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6; 21:25). It is a study of a permissive society and the author draws from history lessons concerning righteousness, faithfulness and lovingkindness of Yahweh in contrast to the undisciplined society. It also serves as a link between the conquest of the Promised Land and the monarchy.

Oswald T. Allis says, “In some respect Judges is a pivotal book in the Old Testament . . . The younger generation was forsaking the LORD God of their fathers, and going to polytheism, idolatry and lawlessness. The departure is referred to repeatedly”

During the reign of the judges the Tabernacle was located at Shiloh. The people of Israel had adopted the pagan practices of the Canaanites. The true believers in Yahweh were few in numbers. “The book seems to have been written, not to give an orderly history of the period, but to reveal the unfaithfulness of the people over against the faithfulness and mercy of God” (Jones).

J. W. Watts says, “Its purpose is the same exalted one running through Joshua; i.e., to draw from the history lessons concerning the righteousness, faithfulness and lovingkindness of Yahweh that will help hold His people true to their covenant with Him. The sin, the shame, the punishment and the repentance of God’s people are described over and over as to bring out these great lessons about their God” (*A Survey of Old Testament Teaching, Vol. 1, p. 238*).

THEME: of Judges is a recurring cycle seen over and over again throughout the book. The cycles repeat apostasy, oppression, penitence and deliverance. Another way of stating the cycle is sin, servitude, supplication and salvation.

The overall message of Judges is “righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.”

Jones explains:

As often as the people degenerated into sin, God sold them into slavery; then when they cried to Him for help He sent a deliverer. A cycle, including four stages, was constantly repeating itself in this period: (1) the people going into sin. (2) God sending an enemy nation to conquer and chastise them. (3) The people praying for deliverance. (4) God answering their prayers by raising up a deliverer to free them and give them peace. These deliverers are known as ‘judges’ (p. 112).

The book is organized around themes rather than chronology of the events. It was at time of instability, civil war, moral depravity and idolatry when every one did his own thing.

APPLICATIONS: The saddest words in Judges are “He did not know that the LORD had departed from him.” Apostasy always begins in our thought life, the imagination, and the things we tolerate that are out of harmony with the holiness of God. “As a man thinks in his heart so is he.” The people admired the tolerated

beliefs and behaviors of their pagan neighbors until their admiration became their conformity and worship.

Why couldn't Israel drive out the inhabitants of the land? She failed to appropriate the promises of the LORD God to take the land He provided.

Israel rejected theocracy (God's rule) and "every man did what was right in his own eyes" (21:25). This resulted in the dark ages of Hebrew history. The Tabernacle, the priesthood and sacrifices were neglected. Everyone did his own thing. They had done away with all absolutes and justified their own behavior. If it feels good do it.

Yahweh is seen in Judges watching and waiting in mercy to hear His people the moment they cry out to Him. He responds with grace and mercy immediately and delivers His people. With grace there also comes responsibility. God is forever moving toward His goals in history and He never loses sight of them. His methods are still the same. He still uses war, catastrophe and peace to accomplish His eternal purposes of redemption.

Our times do not produce God's men. God does. "Let's be careful," says G. Campbell Morgan, "lest we stone him when he comes, for he will not appear where we are looking, but from some unexpected quarter."

[Chart Outline of Judges](#)

Title: Introduction to Judges

Series: A Look at the Book

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