

Book of Judges Explained

Title:

The book bears the fitting name “Judges,” which refers to unique leaders God gave to His people for preservation against their enemies (2:16-19).

The Hebrew title means “deliverers” or “saviors,” as well as judges (compare Deut. 16:18; 17:9; 19:17).

Twelve such judges arose before Samuel; Then Eli and Samuel raised the count to 14.

God Himself is the higher Judge (11:27).

Judges spans about 350 years from Joshua’s conquest (ca. 1398 B.C.) until Eli and Samuel judged prior to the establishment of the monarchy (ca. 1043 B.C.).

The Book of Judges takes its name from the gifted leaders (Hebrew *shopetim*), who guided the fortunes of Israel from the death of Joshua to the days of Samuel, Israel’s last judge.

These leaders were men especially raised up by God not only for their military prowess, but for their administrative abilities and spiritual discernment.

Authorship:

No author is named in the book, but the Jewish Talmud identifies Samuel, a key prophet who lived at the time these events took place and could have personally summed up the era (compare 1 Sam. 10:25).

The time was earlier than David’s capture of Jerusalem (in ca. 1004 B.C.; 2 Sam. 5:6-7), since Jebusites still controlled the site (Judges 1:21).

Also, the writer deals with a time before a king ruled (17:6; 18:1; 21:25).

Since Saul began his reign (in ca. 1043 B.C.), a time shortly after his rule began is probably when Judges was written.

Even though the author of Judges is unknown.

The author has been identified traditionally with Samuel or one of his disciples.

The essential integrity of the book as a trustworthy account of conditions before the rise of the Hebrew monarchy can be seen in the following data.

- (1) The Jebusites are mentioned as still occupying Jerusalem (1:21);

- (2) Gezer was not yet conquered (1:29), a feat that was not accomplished until the days of Solomon (compare 1 Kings 9:16);
- (3) Several portions of the book are linked closely with Joshua's day (e.g. 2:6-10; compare 1:9-13 with Joshua 15:13-17; compare 18:27-29 with Joshua 19:47);
- (4) The Phoenician city of Sidon, not the later Tyre, is still the chief port city of Phoenicia (3:3).

Accordingly, the book must have been composed largely before the time of Israel's monarchy under David and Solomon.

Certain literary phrases point to the fact that the work was originally that of one author (e.g., "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD," "And the land had rest," "The Spirit of the LORD came upon him," and "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes").

However, the remarks (in 18:1 and 19:1), indicated that although the material covered in these passages is early, some editorial revision took place in the early period of the United Monarchy.

Historical Setting:

The Book of Judges covers a period of about three hundred years, stretching from the death of Joshua (in 1367 B.C.), until the time of Samuel (ca. 1064 – 1044 B.C.).

The events of the period of the judges took place in a time when Syro-Palestine formed a ground of contest between the expansionist empires of the Hittites to the north and the Egyptians to the south.

Much of Israel's history in the period is linked to the person of the Egyptian Pharaoh, particularly the strong Pharaohs of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties.

When a strong Egyptian Pharaoh was on the throne of Egypt, he would bring stability to the coastal plains and key areas of Canaan; hence, Israel would enjoy a period of "rest".

At other times, because of Israel's repeated apostasy, God would bring oppressors to them who would afflict the people greatly.

Significantly, no "rest periods" occurred after the middle of the twelfth century B.C.

A condition that reflected not only the unsettled nature of the times and the widespread upheaval of the entire eastern Mediterranean world, but also the growing spiritual and moral degeneracy of the Israelite people.

The notion that any family is just one generation away from decline needs no other example than the children of Israel.

The Exodus generation that rebelled against God at Kadesh had died in the wilderness.

The new generation had been brought to the plains of Moab, where Moses taught them everything he had taught their parents.

Moses passed on the mantle of leadership to Joshua, and the nation seemed poised to inherit the blessings God had promised.

But (Judges 2:11-12) records, “Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD.

They forsook the LORD God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them ... and they provoked the LORD to anger”.

What happened?

Apparently, in the space of a few decades, the Israelites neglected a fundamental precept of spiritual transference: to train their children in the ways of the LORD (Prov. 22:6).

Moses had instructed the parents of Israel to continually teach their children of the story of their redemption, the miracles of God, and the content of God’s covenant (Deut. 6:7-9).

Their history revealed God’s love and provision but so did their current circumstances, living in the land He promised to their forefathers.

But each generation would need to be reminded over and over, lest awareness of God’s faithfulness would fade from the nation’s collective conscience.

Tragically, that is exactly what happened.

The nation served Yahweh in Joshua and Caleb’s generation and in the generation of the elders who led the nation after Joshua died.

Then “another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel” (2:7-10), the inevitable result was a series of sin.

Cycles of sin, judgment, cries for help and deliverance.

Whenever they were oppressed by enemies, the Israelites repented and cried out to God, who would faithfully raise up a judge, or defender, to defeat their oppressors and restore peace.

Then the enticements of their pagan neighbors grew too strong, and the conviction of their fading memories drew too weak and they sinned again.

These cycles of sin-oppression-repentance-deliverance formed a downward spiral in which the Israelites become increasingly corrupt and more like the Canaanites.

The worst long-term consequence of the people failing to teach and transfer their covenant history is that they failed to cleanse Canaan of its pagan tribes.

The author of Judges (perhaps Samuel, the first of the prophets in Israel), declares that fact (in chapter 1).

Over and over, the various tribes of Israel failed to drive the inhabitants out of their respective parts of Canaan as God had commanded them.

Instead, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labor.

In time, the Israelites began to worship the gods of Canaan, subjecting themselves to the covenant curses warned about (in Leviticus 26:14-45 and Deut. 28:15-68).

In short, “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6; 21:25).

Background and Setting:

The Book of Judges is an action-packed account of the failure of the children of Israel to maintain the high spiritual standards laid down by Moses and Joshua.

They not only failed to conquer the land of Canaan as God had challenged them to do (compare 2:1-3; 20-23), but they also fell into the idolatry and sinful practices of the Canaanites (compare 3:7).

Their growing disobedience and spiritual apostasy brought on a progressive moral degeneration, seen repeatedly in the various accounts of their oppression and in the historical appendixes that make up the closing portion of the book (chapters 17 to 21).

God would teach His people through this period that “rest” was fully available and provided for by Himself, but must be entered into by an obedient people.

Judges is a tragic sequel to Joshua.

In Joshua, the people were obedient to God in conquering the Land.

In Judges, they were disobedient, idolatrous, and often defeated.

(Judges 1:1 – 3:6), focuses on the closing days of the book of Joshua.

(Judges 2:6-9), gives a review of Joshua’s death (compare Joshua 24:28-31).

The account describes 7 distinct cycles of Israel’s drifting away from the LORD starting even before Joshua’s death, with a full departure into apostasy afterward.

Five basic reasons are evident for these cycles of Israel's moral and spiritual decline:

- (1) Disobedience in failing to drive the Canaanites out of the land (Judges 1:19, 21, and 35);
- (2) Idolatry (2:12);
- (3) Intermarriage with wicked Canaanites (3:5-6);
- (4) Not heeding judges (2:17); and
- (5) Turning away from God after the death of the judges (2:19).

A four part sequence repeatedly occurred in this phase of Israel's history:

- (1) Israel's departure from God;
- (2) God's chastisement in permitting military defeat and subjugation;
- (3) Israel's prayer pleading for deliverance; and
- (4) God raising up "judges", either civil or sometimes local military champions who led in shaking off the oppressors.

Fourteen judges arose, six of them military judges (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson).

Two men were of special significance for contrast in spiritual leadership: (1) Eli, judge and High-Priest (not a good example); and (2) Samuel, judge, priest and prophet (a good example).

Historical and Theological Themes:

Judges is thematic rather than chronological; foremost among its themes is God's power and covenant mercy in graciously delivering the Israelites from the consequences of their failures, which were suffered for sinful compromise (compare 2:18-19; 21; 25).

In 7 periods of sin to salvation, God compassionately delivered His people throughout the different geographical areas of tribal inheritances which He had earlier given through Joshua (Joshua chapters 13 to 22).

The apostasy covered the whole land, as indicated by the fact that each area is specifically identified: southern (3:7-31); northern (4:1 – 5:31); central (6:1 – 10:5); eastern (10:6 – 12:15); and western (13:1 – 16:31).

His power to faithfully rescue shines against the dark backdrop of pitiful human compromise and sometimes bizarre twists of sin, as in the final summary (Judges Chapters 17 to 21).

The last verse (21:25) sums up the account: "In those days [there was] no king in Israel: every man did [that which was] right in his own eyes".