

Judges

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I. Introduction

The Book of Judges is the seventh book of our English Bible. It is the second book of the historical section of the Old Testament. It records some of the events in the history of Israel between the death of Joshua and the judgeship of Eli.

It contains narratives of the actions of Israel and of fourteen judges who ruled Israel after Joshua's death and before the establishment of the kingdom under Saul. There were only twelve legitimate administrations recorded in this book, for Deborah and Barak ruled jointly, and Abimelech was a usurper; therefore, his administration was not legitimate. Four of these judges are included in the list of the heroes of faith (*Hebrews 11*). Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. This does not necessarily mean God ordered or approved everything they did. They were human agents, whose natural abilities, augmented with supernatural aid, God used to save the nation, Israel. They believed in God and His divine power, and God honored their faith. We glean from this: that God deals with people as they are, and some who have very grave faults, may also have some choice virtues.

Actually, its message deals with Israel's repeated disobedience and God's dealing with them. The several cycles proceeded: at the beginning the generation was obedient and godly; their immediate descendants became spiritually indifferent to Jehovah; this was followed by apostasy; as a result: God chastised them for their sin; this chastisement led to national or tribal repentance and a readiness to obey Jehovah, and God out of His mercy and pity provided a deliver (judge) to rescue them from their

distress. Scifield gives this cycle: rebellion, retribution, repentance, and restoration.

The attitude of Israel: "every man did that which was right in his own eyes", characterized the ages of the judges. Instead of trusting God to help them possess the land they continually departed from the worship of Jehovah to worship the gods (idols) of the people around them. Then, Israel in their suffering and distress cried to Jehovah for help, and God had pit on them and raised up a judge to deliver them. As long as each judge lived, the people served Jehovah. When he/she died the people again forsook Jehovah to play the harlot with other gods. Invariably, when they served Jehovah they prospered, but when they served idols they suffered. Israel's troubles were due directly to their disobedience. God had instructed them to exterminate all the inhabitants of the land and they had covenanted with the Lord to obey, but breaking the covenant they did not get rid of all the Canaanites, etc. Instead, they fell under the influence of these ungodly nations and were tempted to serve idols.

No author is named nor is any indication given as to who is responsible for the book as it is in its present form. It seems that the narratives were taken from records that were kept by the various tribes and incorporated in the Book of Judges. The portions which fitted the writer's purpose were brought into harmony and unity by the writer, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That the writer wrote under divine inspiration is evidenced by Paul's use of Judges (*Acts 13:20; & Hebrews 11:32*). Some have thought it was written by Hezekiah; others with equal conviction credit it to Ezra, the Scribe.

According to Jewish tradition, Samuel was the author. Internal evidence seems to confirm that the Book of Judges

in its present form was composed about the time of Samuel. I believe there is enough evidence to warrant the acceptance of Samuel as the writer. There are some phrases in it that give some very good clues that it was compiled in the time of Samuel:

1. Both **18:31** - "***all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh***", and **20:27** - "***the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days***", seem to indicate the writing was after the removal of the ark from Shiloh.
2. The repeated phrase: "***in those days there was no king in Israel***", (**16:6; 18:1; 19:1;21:25**) makes it certain the writing was after the "***Kingdom of Israel***" was formed in the time of Saul.
3. That the Jebusites were dwelling in Jerusalem "***unto this day***", (**1:21**) points out that the writing was before David took the city of Jerusalem.
4. The fact that both ***I Samuel 12:9-11*** and ***II Samuel 11:21*** have reference to and quotations from ***Judges 3; 4; 6; 7; 8; 10:7; & 11*** assures that ***Judges*** was written before those two books were written.

Bible writers do not simply narrate events. What concerns them most is the meaning of the events - an application of them for the good of God's people. The Bible deals with history, but it is not just history alone. It is God's message to mankind, and He uses historical events so they will be beneficial to mankind. We believe this is true with ***Judges***: not so much to preserve a record of Israel's past for her sake and to show the achievements of some of her great leaders, but to use their national experiences of adversity to give warning, instruction, and edification. It was written to show that a disobedient, rebellious, and defiant spirit of forgetfulness of Jehovah brings disastrous results: in their case - divine judgment upon their idolatry and sin.

The author sets forth the whole truth, however discreditable it is to Israel. There is no extenuation of their sins on one hand nor an exaggeration on the other hand. The author makes it clear that because they did not do as God directed (failed to possess their possessions) they sinned and brought on themselves God's chastisement. Divine government of the world is based upon justice. Disobedience to God's laws, whether physical, moral, or spiritual means suffering. Relief and deliverance come only when those disobedient ones turn to Jehovah. The Book of Judges gives this lofty view of Jehovah in His dealing with the twelve tribes of Israel: the immutability of His wrath against sin, the certainty of sin's punishment, and divine pitifulness and mercy to those with penitent hearts.

The first thing one looks for in history is a careful and accurate chronology. This is entirely wanting in the Book of Judges for a simple reason: it was not written as scientific history, but a collection of narratives having a moral and religious purpose. It gives the evil of idolatry, God's providential government of the world, and His special rule over His chosen race, Israel.

To construct any chronology we need true historical events and their connection with other events whose dates are certain. We do not have any accurate contemporary history for the time of the judges. Then, there are special circumstances which increase the difficulty in the case of the judges. The date of Joshua's death is uncertain. The amount of time occupied by the elders who outlived Joshua before the recorded actions in the book took place (perhaps 10, 25, or 40 years) is not given. We do not know the number of years between Samson and Eli; neither do we have the length of Samuel's and Saul's tenure. The narratives are not the history of one united kingdom or commonwealth, but of

several separate and independent tribes; therefore, the exact duration of the period of the judges is uncertain.

There are several proposals with good defenses as to the length of time the judges occupied in earth's history:

1. Burroughs (Outlines of Bible History) says the time was 1450 B.C. to 1102 B.C. He included Eli and Samuel in this 348 years.
2. Scofield uses the date by Ussher: 1400 B.C. to 1100 B.C. for the Book of Judges, which is 300 years.
3. Many others limit the time of the judges to approximately 300 years. They do not believe the judgeships ran successive, that some were contemporary.

It is very possible that the judges were not successive governors, but occasional deliverers in different parts of the land, their administrations to some extent contemporary and overlapping. It is also very likely that the events are not chronological as they occur in the book. It is generally agreed that the last five chapters should follow **2:11**. I believe the book should begin with **2:6-9** preceding the first chapter, but the chronological arrangement of the book should present no problem when the purpose of the book is understood.

Except on special occasions, as at Joshua's death, etc. the tribes east of the Jordan River had little communications with those on the west side. Even on the west side, Ephraim and the other northern tribes were separated from Judah, Simeon, and Dan in the south. Judah is not mentioned among those who fought Barak or Gideon. Hence: the narratives could well not be consecutive, but rather contemporary. Wars may have been going on in one tribe and peace in another at the same time. It is evident we cannot be accurate when we add all the servitude's, judgeships, and rests to determine the

total years; neither can we be accurate by compressing the events, making them overlap in some instances. But when we interpret the writer's words in a natural sense we get the impression that the judges were not just local, because the writer constantly uses "judge over Israel", or some similar phrase.

It is very likely the judges are not listed in chronological order. The geography of the judges reveals there were three districts under the judges. The order of the narratives go around these three districts (north, east, and southwest) in regular order four times; therefore, a chronological order may have not been in the mind of the writer.

In the Book of Judges the years assigned to the oppressions, the years of judgeships, and the years of rest when taken to run consecutively total 410 years. Jephthah (**11:26**) said there had been 300 years of such ruler ship up to his time. If Samson came after hi, (I doubt that he did). ninety-one years followed to the death of Samson. This would be close to the total of 410 years.

This is inconsistent with **1 Kings 6:1** (480 years from the Exodus to the fourth year of Solomon's reign - the building of the Temple). To determine the number of years the Book of Judges covered we would need to subtract: 40 years of wilderness wandering, 40 years for Eli's judgeship, 40 years for David's rule, 4 years into Solomon's rule, the unspecified time of Samuel's judgeship, and the unspecified time of Saul's rule. This would leave 275 years for the time covered by the Book of Judges if 40 years were assigned to each: Samuel and Saul.

With some confidence we can look backward from the time of David and reckon to some extent the period of the judges, but not the actual years of judgeships. I believe it is safe to

say that the age in which these incidents took place was somewhere between the years 1500 B.C. and 1000 B.C. and not be concerned whether the Book of Judges covered 276 years or 410 years.

This period of time was marked by the same peculiarities in different parts of the world. This time was the dawn of recorded history. It was the time of much movement over the known earth; the time of the birth of legendary heroic characters and the early formation of nations destined to be foremost among nations in the earth. The mythologies of Greece tell of the exploits of their heroes which implies unsettled and disturbed times; the clashing of race with race; fierce struggles for the possession of land, and terrible conflicts for dominion and existence. These mythologies have some shreds of historical truth and reflect something of the character of the people of that period. They are in accordance with the picture contained in the Book of Judges and the times were more or less contemporary.

The features which are common to the Greek mythologies and Hebrew history such as: the wars of new settlers with old inhabitants; the recklessness of human life; the fierce cruelty under excitement; the heroic deeds and wild adventures of a few great leaders; the taste for riddles; the habit of making vows; the interference of gods and angels in human affairs, and the frequent consultation with oracles are the product of the same general conditions of human society in the same epoch of world history.

The difference between the two is: the Greek traditions have passed through countless poets and storytellers, who added to, embellished, confused, distorted, and invented according to their own fertile fancy and their own creative imaginations, while the Hebrew records, by the special

providence of God, have been preserved some 3000 years and upward uncorrupted and unchanged.

Summary of Judges

I. Introduction: 1:1-3:4

The conditions were not all good for Israel when Joshua died. He had broken the strength of the Canaanite nations, and had divided the land according to the allotment from God, but there were still enemies in the territory of each tribe's possession that must be destroyed before they would have actual possession of what God had given them. God had promised each tribe to help them, but they were slow in obeying. There were also enemies outside the land: Moabites, Midianites, Ammonites, and Philistines.

The spiritual condition of Israel was far from being ideal. They should have been in a high state spiritually, but this was far from being so. God had been good to them. He had exercised His mighty power in their behalf by defeating the stronger enemies in the land; the "reproach of Egypt" had been taken away at Gilgal; the covenant had been renewed between them and Jehovah, and their task clearly stated. The years of Egyptian influence with their many gods had left them susceptible to the heathen environment of the Canaanite religion with their many gods. Jehovah's revelation of Himself was a new thing to these steeped in heathen traditions, and it was difficult for them to overcome; in fact, it was too much for some of them. The majority did not see the spiritual significance of the Mosaic faith. To many of them, the religious actions under the Mosaic law was little different from the worship of idols. This fact is seen in the images of *Micah* (17 & 18) and a Levite he hired to be his priest to worship Jehovah through his idols. Even Gideon made an ephod which the people worshipped (8:24-27).

There were some who grasped the spiritual truths of the Mosaic system. They kept the worship of Jehovah at Shiloh without idols in spite of the fact some in the priesthood were evil, like the sons of Eli. There were leaders like Deborah and Samuel who had the Spirit of God to lead them, and there were probably many families like Elimelech and Naomi, Boaz and Ruth, and Elkanah and Hannah who worshipped the true and living God of their fathers.

After their first successes in Canaan (this may have been during the time of Joshua), there came a weakness and reluctance to continue the warfare against the Canaanites. Each tribe failed to take that which God had given them. I am sure we know very little of all the struggles that took place during the time of the judges, but what is recorded shows "dark ages" for Israel - all because they did not obey Jehovah.

The condition in the Promised Land was quite different during the time of the judges than during the days of Joshua. Although there were times of right relationship with Jehovah when they experienced His blessings, the whole period was much different. They went from: victory to defeat; freedom to servitude; faith to unbelief; fidelity to Jehovah to apostasy from Him; joy to sorrow; strength to weakness; a sense of unity to divisions and anarchy, and sin judged to sin lightly regarded.

The age of the judges is characterized by the messenger (angel of God) coming up from Gilgal (the place of circumcision where "the reproach of Egypt" was removed) to Bochim (the place of weepers) and the message he bore (**2:1-6**).

The Accounts of the Judges 3:5 - 16 :31

A. Othniel - 3:5-11

They were under the servitude of Mesopotamia 8 years (North). It was caused by intermarriage with the idolaters of Baal and Asherah. He was from Judah and he ruled 40 years. He was the son-in-law of Caleb. His name means: "the lion of God."

B. Ehud - 3:12-20

They were under the servitude of the Moabites (descendants of Lot), the Ammonites (descendants of Esau), and the Amelekites (East of the Dead Sea) for 18 years. He was left-handed, and from the tribe of Benjamin. There was peace 80 years.

C. Shamgar - 3:31

The Philistines (wanderers) oppressed them. This was in the southwest. He was not called a judge. He killed 600 Philistines with an ox-goad. Probably an account of a great feat.

D. Deborah and Barak - 4:4 - 5:31

A Canaanite king of Hazor (Jabin) from the north oppressed them. This is the same name of a king and city Joshua had overthrown. The killing of Sierea by a woman shows the rough morality of the times. A song of praises to God for deliverance.

E. Gideon - 6:1 - 8:35

They had been oppressed by Midianites, Amalekites, and "children of the east" for 7 years. He was from the tribe of Manasseh and was called "Zerubbaal" (contender against Baal). He reduced his army from 32,000 to 300 by the command of the Lord. His great victory earned him an offer of ruler ship, which he

refused. To the jealous Ephramites: he told them since they were so energetic and zealous for the Lord they should go possess some of the mountains inhabited by the enemy.

F. Abimelech - 9:1-57

He was a son of Gideon by a Canaanite concubine. He put himself in as king, securing the throne by killing all his brothers except one, Jotham. Abimelech was called the "bramble king" from a parable by Jotham. He ruled 3 years, and was killed by a stone thrown by a woman.

G. Tola - 10:1,2

He was from the tribe of Issachar and he ruled 23 years. There is no record of any achievements, but the real work of God can often be described in few words. His name meant "worm".

H. Jair - 10:3-5

He was a Gileadite and could have been from Judah, Manasseh, or Gad. He ruled 22 years and he had sons who ruled. There is no record of his achievements. If he was the Jair of *Numbers 32:41* and *Deuteronomy 3:14*, he could have been earlier; although, the writer says, "after him" (Tola).

I. Jephthah - 10:6 - 12:7

He was from Gad or Manasseh and was an illegitimate son of Gilead. Israel had been under the Philistines and Ammonites for 18 years and they asked him to help them. He promised he would help if they would make him their ruler. They agreed; he was victorious and ruled 6 years. He killed 42,000 Ephramites when they became jealous of his victory. He accused them of not helping when they were asked. Some think he sacrificed his daughter to keep a vow he had made, but

I believe, by a close examination of the text, he devoted his daughter to a life of celibacy.

J. Ibzan 12:8-10

He was from Bethlehem out of Zebulun, He ruled 7 years, and no military exploits are given. He is called one of the minor judges. His name means "purity". He had 30 sons and 30 daughters.

K. Elon -12:11, 12

He was from the tribe of Zebulun and he ruled 10 years. He is called one of the minor judges. There are no military exploits given about him. His name means "strong".

L. Abdon - 12:13-15

He was from Ephraim and he ruled 8 years. There is no military exploits of him, and he was called a minor judge.

M. Samson - 13:1 - 16:31

He was from Dan before Dan migrated north (*chapter 18*); so he must have been an early judge. He was appointed of God before his birth to be a judge; also to be a Nazarite, but he broke those vows. He had superhuman strength of which his hair was a sign. There were 40 years of Philistine servitude and he ruled as a judge for 20 years. These may have overlapped because he died in servitude to them. He had a very sensual nature which got him into trouble more than once. His relations with Delilah led to his downfall.

All the tribes have something said about them unless it is Simeon. He may have shared in some of the narratives with Judah and Dan. If it was the writers intention to write about

all the tribes as much as possible, this could account for some overlapping in history.

The system of government during the time of the judges was "theocratic". This system means that God was the direct ruler of a loosely knit brotherhood consisting of 12 tribes through a religious constitution with a common sanctuary. This should have been an ideal government for them, but it failed - not in God's purpose - but in bringing God glory and blessings to them. The fault did not lie in the type of government, but in the weakness of the people within the system. They were indifferent to Jehovah and His unifying force, not submitting to His ruler ship. They neglected the guidance from the common sanctuary, either from the weakness of the priesthood, from their own neglect, or both. Sometime between Phinehas (in the line of Eleazar) and Eli (in the line of Ithamar) a change had been made in the priesthood,

The Appendix; Confusion in Israel - 17:1 - 21:25

A. The development of idolatry - 17:1 - 18:31 **The episodes of Micah, the Levites, and the Danites**

Here is shown the root from which the fruit (idolatry) came. Idolatry was introduced among them as a system of Jehovah worship. It began as described in these two chapters. The episodes recorded here must have happened either during or after the time of Samson because he was born and lived in the territory allotted to the tribe of Dan. He fought the Philistines that kept Dan from Possessing their land. If this be true, Samson was one of the earlier judges instead of the later ones. You will remember that I stated earlier that the purpose of the writer was not, necessarily, to give a chronological history.

This kind of apostasy was not against everything that was in the name of Jehovah. It was not the outside enemy obliterating every trace of Jehovah. It was done by the Israelites, themselves, who, while devoutly using the name Jehovah, brought in a system of their own, linking it to Jehovah worship. This kind of idolatry is much more subtle and is much more dangerous because of its subtlety. Many so-called Baptists are promoting this kind of apostasy today. That which passes as God's will when it is not His will is far more dangerous than the names of blasphemy on the forehead. This kind of worship shows the spiritual state of much of Israel during this period. This spiritual state made idolatry possible and powerful in Israel during her "Dark Ages."

This narrative describes a son who had robbed his mother and the mother had cursed the son not knowing it was her

son who had stolen from her. He, through the fear of the curse, restored it, and as a result she blessed him in the name of Jehovah, not because of her son's repentance, for he had none, but because she had her money restored. The money he had stolen had been dedicated to make a graven image to Jehovah, so she gave part of the returned money to make the image and she gave the image to her son (Micah) for his house of gods. It is strange that a person with his name ("who is like Jehovah") would be an idolater, or that one from the tribe of Ephraim (which means "fruitfulness") would make idols to assist in the worship of Jehovah. The tabernacle was in Shiloh in Ephraim's territory, a tribe that represented the walk and activities of divine life. Mary and Martha illustrate these two features of divine life. Mary answers to Judah as she sits at the feet of Jesus to learn divine truth; Martha answers to Ephraim as she serves Christ. Jesus did not criticize Martha for her service; Mary had chosen the better part. Martha did act like Ephraim's jealousy.

Where divine truth and praise are missing a life of activity can easily turn into idolatry. Many Christians (?) put Christian activity above love for truth. As a result such Christians (?) get farther and farther from the Lord.

Since Micah had an image, he must have a house in which to put it, priestly garments (ephod), and a priest to preside. He made one of his sons a priest until the Levite came from Bethlehem-judah looking for better conditions than at Bethlehem-judah. The root of idolatry is self-will-making a god to suit self. Many, who profess to be Christians worship God after their own will rather than the God of the Bible.

Idolatry began to spread: this time into the tribe of Dan. Dan had failed to obey God. They had not destroyed the Canaanites; instead, Philistines had entered the land and had driven Dan into the hills. They were looking for a territory

that would not be so hard to take. They passed by the house of Micah's gods as they went north to look for land. They made a deal with Micah's Levite priest to become their priest. The Levite, seeing an opportunity for advancement, accepted their offer and went with them. He and his sons (descendants) served as priests in Dan until the Assyrian captivity.

Who was this Levite? Chapter 18:39 tells us it was Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh. The R.V. says, "Moses" for "Manasseh". This is correct because Moses had a son named Gershom and Manasseh did not. Yes, a descendant of Moses, the Lawgiver, helped spread idolatry in Israel. Isn't this repeated in our time?

B. Wickedness, near destruction, and survival of Benjamin 19:1-21:25

Chapters 17 and 18 are about Israel ignoring God's claim upon them. These three chapters show Israel ignoring man's claim upon them. This fruit can be expected from ignoring God's rightful place. Chapter one of Romans gives a vivid and horrible picture of those who refuse to obey God: "He gives them up" to their own corrupt hearts.

The evil done in Gibeah is so atrocious that all of Israel rises up in anger. All they can think of is the wickedness done by some men in the tribe of Benjamin. They forgot it could have been men from their tribes as well as from Benjamin's. We are no different. We forget that the capabilities that lie in other men are in us too. Our Lord explained this when He said that one who looks upon or thinks in his heart commits the crime also. We must thank God for delivering us from the bondage/power of sin as well as from the condemnation/penalty.

This evil involved a Levite. It took place in the territory of Benjamin. The Levite's concubine had returned to her father's house in Bethlehem-judah. He had gone there to get her and as they returned to his home in Ephraim night came upon them and they needed a place to spend the night. He would not stop at Jebus (Jerusalem) for they were not of the children of Israel. He found lodging in Gibeah. Some of the men of Gibeah abused his concubine until she died. He cut up her body in twelve pieces and sent a piece to each tribe telling of the violence done to her.

All Israel, when they heard of this crime, united themselves to avenge this crime. It is strange that some evil would unite them when they were not united before. They could have united themselves at Shiloh to worship Jehovah. To them: evil had been committed and it must be avenged. Did they avenge it according to the law? NO! They avenged it according to their passions. Instead of going to the people in the tribe of Benjamin and doing it according to the law, they said, "Deliver these men that we may punish!" They were following the attitude of that age: "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

Benjamin's tribal pride would not permit some other tribe dictate to them in this matter, though they probably did not like what was done. There was war! There was 400,000 against Benjamin's 26,700. There were 22,000 killed from the eleven tribes at first. They inquired of the Lord and went again. 18,000 were killed. They inquired and went again, and this time killed all but 600 men in Benjamin, including women and children. All of this was done in the name of Jehovah.

After the near destruction of Benjamin, national pride realized there would be only eleven tribes instead of twelve.

Pride told them, "Something must be done!" to preserve Benjamin whom they had almost destroyed. They killed all the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead except the virgins and gave them to the men left in Benjamin, but they were short 200. They made a feast unto Jehovah and told the men of Benjamin to steal their daughters for wives when they went to the vineyard to dance. They had made a vow not to give their daughters to the Benjaminites. This was a way of getting around their vow. This incident must have taken place soon after Joshua's death because Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron was High Priest.

It does not take much thought to see that the same kind of thing is going on among God's people (?) today. We do not get our swords and guns to destroy our brothers, but our attitude toward them is about the same. We are ready to judge and destroy him, rather than help him get rid of sin in Him the Bible way: church discipline.

C. Conclusion - 21:25

"In those days there was no king in Israel, every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

These same words are the beginning of this section (17:6). What a terrible confusion from "every man doing his own thing." Why? There was no king! Really, God was their King, but they had refused His rulership. They were not in subjection to Him.

The only hope for our churches is that we will submit to our King Who alone can get us right. Will there be another Pentecost? Will the scattered fragments in Christendom come together in a harmonious whole to be subject to the Word of God and for the glory of Christ? No! We will never see it! We must wait for Christ, the Son of David, to set up

the Kingdom of Heaven. He, alone, can bring peace and holiness. As only David, God's chosen king, could unite Israel as one nation, so can only Jesus Christ, God's King, bring in righteousness. While we wait for His coming may we learn to judge ourselves and walk in obedience of the faith of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.