

Unpacking the Book

#7 The Period of Judges

I. Title of the book: "Shophatim" – from the Hebrew root, "to judge"

These judges also served as military leaders whom God would raise up to lead his people in times of crises.

II. Historical Overview

- A. The book of Judges covers the time period from the death of Joshua to the beginning of the monarchy under Saul.
- B. Loose confederation of 12 tribes – moving towards a unified kingdom.
- C. While the book of Joshua records victory after victory for the people of God, the book of Judges records a series of stories outlining the apostasy of Israel. (see Judges 2:10-16)

| Joshua | Judges |
|--|--|
| Freedom | Bondage |
| Progress | Decline |
| Conquest through belief | Defeat through disbelief |
| "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods.: (24:16) | "So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God, and serve the Baals and Asherahs." (3:7) |
| Israel served God (24:31) | Israel served self (21:25) |
| Israel knew the person of God and the power of God (224:16-18,31) | Israel knew neither the person of God nor the power of God (2:10) |
| Objective morality | Subjective morality |
| Israel pressing onward | Israel spiraling downward |
| Sin judged | Sin tolerated |
| Faith judged | Lack of both |

Found in *Talk through the Bible*

D. Compare Joshua 24:15 and Judges 2:11-13

E. The loose federation made them more vulnerable to well armed, well organized enemies. It was a time of religious and political turmoil for the Israelites. Primarily, the struggle was with neighboring countries (Moab, the Midianites, Ammon and the Philistines). However there was also struggle against the Canaanites who lived in the land (especially during the time of Deborah). And the Israelites also fought among themselves... Ephraim was “ravaged by Manasseh in chapter 12 and Benjamin was almost annihilated by the other tribes in chapters 20-21” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 3, pg. 376).



- F. As other historical books of the Bible, Judges presents the facts in a selective manner, leaving out some details and emphasizing other stories. The book is a three part “epic” dealing with history as recorded through the lives of some 15 individuals.
- G. Depending on the opinion of the Old Testament scholar, the events in the book cover a range from about 1380 to 1020 B.C. If the period of the Judges extends into the first 30 years of the life of Samuel (I Sam. 1:1-25:1), it covers approximately 365 years. The chronology of this book is extremely difficult to “nail down”. The precise dating is particularly difficult for several reasons. It seems best to view the time frames of the various Judges as overlapping.

For example, Samson and Jephthah may have ruled at the same time, one in the western part of Canaan and the other in the Transjordan region.

III. The theme of the book:

- A. Judges gives a “geographical survey of apostasy”... illustrating a sequence of events that climax in the statement “everyman did that which was right in his own eyes” (See 17:6, 21:25).
- B. The cycle of: rebellion, defeat, repentance and deliverance is repeated seven times in this book. Sin against God, God allows an enemy to oppress the people, the people repent and ask for a deliverer – the redeemed and then fall back into sin. Example Judges 3:7-31, 4:1.

IV. An outline of the book:

Chapter 1:1-3:4: Deterioration (a pattern of failure)

Chapter 3:5-16:31: Deliverance at the hands of regional leaders

Chapter 17:1-21:25 Depravity (an appendix of non-chronological events... describing anarchy under the Levites)

V. Author and date of the book:

The author is not stated. Samuel or one of his prophetic students is the likely author. It is believed that the book was compiled during the time of Samuel’s ministry... after the ark was removed from Shiloh (see Judges 18:31 and I Sam. 4:3-11) and before David conquers the Jebusites (see Judges 1:21 and II Sam. 5:5-9).

VI. The Judges

Assuming you include Eli and Samuel as the last of the Judges, there are a total of 15:

| Judge | Passage | Oppressor | Years of Oppression | Years of Peace |
|-------------------------------|------------|-------------|---------------------|----------------|
| The Southern Campaign: | | | | |
| 1. Othniel | 3:5-11 | Mesopotamia | 8 | 40 |
| 2. Ehud | 3:12-30 | Moab | 18 | 80 |
| 3. Shamgar | 3:31 | Philistines | - | - |
| The Northern Campaign: | | | | |
| 4. Deborah | 4:1-5:31 | Canaanites | 20 | 40 |
| 5. Barak | | | | |
| The Central Campaign: | | | | |
| 6. Gideon | 6:1-8:32 | Midianites | 7 | 40 |
| 7. Tola | 10:1-2 | Abimelech | 3 | 45 |
| 8. Jair | 10:3-5 | | | |
| The Eastern Campaign: | | | | |
| 9. Jephthah | 10:6-12:7 | | | 6 |
| The Second Northern Campaign: | | | | |
| 10. Ibzan | 12:8-10 | Ammonites | 18 | 7 |
| 11. Elon | 12:11-12 | | | 10 |
| 12. Abdon | 12:12-15 | | | 8 |
| The Western Campaign: | | | | |
| 13. Samson | 13:1-16:31 | Philistines | 40 | 20 |
| 14. Eli | | | | |
| 15. Samuel | | Philistines | | |

VII. God's "approval" of the behavior of the Judges

God clearly praises the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah (Heb. 11:32), however, he is not approving the cruelty and killing of some Judges i.e. Ehud assassinates the King of Moab (3:21); Gideon executes two Kings of Midian (7:25); Jephthah may have killed his own daughter (11:39)

Murder is always condemned by Ex. 20:13 and God is not condoning the life style of Samson. God clearly uses flawed vessels (See Ps. 51)

VIII. Key Bible Stories in the Period of Judges

- A. Deborah (4:1-5:31)
- B. Gideon (6:1-7:25)
- C. Samson (13:1-16:31)
- D. Ruth (Ruth)

IX. So what?

God's call is to use unlikely candidates in unusual times...in order that He gets the glory. He is still doing that today. See 1 Cor. 1:27-29.

Discussion Question:

What are the "foolish things" (1 Cor. 1:27-29) of the world? How does God use them? Does He want to use you?