

SESSION TWENTY-FIVE

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Judges 1:1–3:6

I. INTRODUCTION

The book of Judges reflects that period in Israel’s history when God utilized “judges” to provide leadership at crucial moments for the nation before the time of the kings. The judges were not political rulers (strictly speaking), nor were they moral guides. Unlike the kings who came later, the “judges” could not tax people or keep a standing army. Furthermore, they did not pass on their authority to their descendants.¹ Their primary purpose was not even to settle civil disputes, although at times they may have done just that. Primarily, these were men (and even women!) who were raised up at unique times to effect deliverance for some or all of the tribes. One thing we must be clear about: their role was not related to their moral or spiritual qualification. They were merely a vessel for God to sovereignly use in His oversight of the nation. We cannot even be sure that there was a continuity of “judges” for the nation, for they were particularly raised up in times of oppression by foreign enemies.

The period of the “judges” is broader than the book by that name, for Samuel is spoken of as a “judge” for the nation (1 Sam 7:15). Although Samuel attempted to appoint his own sons as *judges* (1 Sam 8:1), he was in effect the last of the judges, since his sons were corrupt and thus rejected by the elders of the nation. The book of Ruth also has its setting in this period of the judges. Other references attest that this was a distinctive period in Israel’s history (cf. Jud 2:16-19; Ruth 1:1; 2 Sam 7:11; 1 Chr 17:10; and 2 Kgs 23:22).

There may be a temptation upon first reading to see the book of Judges as a collection of individual stories or an account of the nation’s history during this period. Both of these views are incorrect. Far from being individual stories with little connection, these are carefully written accounts that are highly dependent upon one another and very closely connected. Furthermore, this is not a mere historical record of the period, but a *theological history* of the period based upon carefully chosen accounts. These accounts are compiled to make a noteworthy theological point. This will be brought out and analyzed in my article on the Gideon narrative.

II. THE HISTORICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING

The dating of Judges is dependent upon one’s conclusion for the date of the Exodus. Some scholars would date the Exodus late (ca. 1270 BC), and thus see a rather short span for the judges period, while others prefer an early date (1446 BC).² In light of my own personal studies (and in agreement with most conservative

¹ Take note of Abimelech's botched attempt to pass on his authority to his sons in Jud 9–10, as well as Samuel's vain attempt to do so in 1 Sam 8:1-5.

²For a survey of approaches, see J. H. John Peet, “The Chronology of the Judges—Some Thoughts,” *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 9 (1982-83): 161-81.

scholars), I would date the Exodus at 1446 BC.³ This view takes a literal reading of 1 Kings 6:1. If the 1446 date is correct, then the initial conquest of the land would be 1406-1399 BC.⁴ Allowing time for the demise of “Joshua’s generation,” we could possibly date the beginning of Israel’s apostasy and worship of Baal at 1360-1350 BC.⁵

The book of Judges does provide other significant chronological clues. A primary factor would be the mention in Jud 11:26 of Israel’s occupation of the Transjordan territory for 300 years. Given the initial conquest of the Transjordan territory in 1406 BC, this would lead to a date of 1106 BC for Jephthah’s claim of 300 years. We also know that the Ammonite oppression had gone on for 18 years prior to 1106 (see Jud 10:8). Hence, the Ammonite oppression began in 1124 BC and lasted until 1106 BC.

If Judges 10:7-8 implies that the Ammonite and Philistine oppressions began at the same time (so Merrill), then the Philistine oppression also began in 1124 BC. According to Jud 13:1, this lasted for 40 years, and hence the Philistine oppression is dated 1124-1084 BC. We know that Samson “judged” Israel for 20 years within this period (Jud 15:20; presumably the latter part). 1084 BC would also mark the date of the battle of Mizpah in which Samuel led the nation to victory over the Philistines (1 Sam 7:11-14).

Based on other chronological considerations, we can safely date the division of the kingdom in 931 BC.⁶ Saul, David and Solomon each had reigns of 40 years. Hence 120 added to 931 yields a date of 1051 BC for the coronation of Saul as the first king. Hence, the period of the judges is roughly 1360 to 1051 BC, a period of about 310 years.⁷

III. THE OPENING CHAPTERS

A great deal of controversy has arisen from the initial chapters of the book. There is a puzzling repetition of Joshua’s death in Jud 1:1 and 2:8, each followed by accounts of conquest and apostasy. The typical critical approach has been to cite this as evidence of conflicting traditions which have been unsuccessfully redacted. In response, I would argue that this conclusion stems from a failure to understand the author’s intention for the compilation of the book. Though the book may contain two references to Joshua’s death, this need not lead to the conclusion that conflicting accounts have been redacted. A better solution is to be found in the recognition of a two-fold introduction, corresponding to the two-fold epilogue at the end of the book. Each introduction serves a different purpose.

³J. Paul Tanner, “Dating the Exodus Event: A Survey and Evaluation of the Arguments For the Major Views” (unpublished paper for OAL 372, Bible and History, The University of Texas at Austin, 1987).

⁴ See Num 10:11; Deut 1:3; and Josh 14:7-10. Note that Caleb was 40 in 1444 BC and 85 in 1399 BC at the end of the conquest.

⁵See Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 147-48.

⁶See Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 51-52.

⁷There are certainly complications to be considered. For instance, if we add all the figures in Judges, we come up with 407 years. Furthermore, there is possible tension with Acts 13:19-20 and a textual problem at 1 Sam 13:1. For these issues, see Merrill, 150-51. Cf. Eugene E. Merrill, “Paul’s Use of ‘About 450 Years’ in Acts 13:20,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138:551 (Jul-Sep 1981): 246-57.

The first introduction is found in Jud 1:1–2:5. The Book of Joshua had ended with still much land remaining to be possessed and many inhabitants yet to be driven out. In 1:1-7, we have a purging of Canaanite pockets of resistance by the tribes of Judah and Simeon (eventually to be the southern kingdom). This leads to the capture of Adoni-Bezek who is brought to Jerusalem. Hence, the next section (1:8-15) recounts an early conquest of Jerusalem (which needs to be explained), and goes on to point out the capture of the hill country which climaxes in the allocation of Hebron and Debir to Caleb. It is important, however, to recognize that 1:8-15 is a *flashback*, recollecting events that happened before Joshua's death! Then, in Jud 1:16, the narrative resumes, showing the continuing conquests of Judah and Simeon (and a mention of Benjamin) in 1:16-21. Jud 1:22-36 briefly shows the conquest attempts of what would become the *northern tribes*, which were mostly unsuccessful. The key observation to this whole section is this: why are the Israelites only *partially successful* in their conquest attempts? A hasty conclusion might be that they were simply outclassed, for we read in Jud 1:19, "*Now the LORD was with Judah, and they took possession of the hill country; but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley because they had iron chariots.*" No doubt, this was a great obstacle, but this is only the view from the human perspective. Certainly the iron chariots were an advantage for the enemy, but the numerous incidents of divine intervention by Yahweh in Israel's history should prompt us to look deeper. In fact, we do not have to look far at all, for the final episode to the "first introduction" provides the real answer (from the divine perspective). In the final episode (Jud 2:1-5), the people are gathered to Bochim and rebuked for their failure to purge the land of idolatry.

“. . . and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you, and as for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars. But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have done?' Therefore I also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you'" (Jud 2:1-3).

Hence, the purpose of this first introduction becomes clear: this is an explanation as to why the post-conquest occupation was only partially successful.

Now that the author has established why the post-conquest occupation was only partially successful, a "second introduction" to the book is given, namely Jud 2:6–3:6. Since this section has a slightly different purpose, the author is going to back up again to Joshua. Hence, we read in Jud 2:6, "*When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land.*" This statement is highly reminiscent of Joshua 24:28: "*Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his inheritance.*" Thus, the intention of Jud 2:6ff. is to draw us back to that covenant renewal at Shechem as recorded in Joshua 24. That incident was a high point for the nation, and a time of affirming their loyalty to Yahweh. Hence, we read in Josh 24:31, "*And Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the LORD which He had done for Israel.*" The author of Judges wants to remind us that this affirmation of loyalty had recently been made at Shechem, because there is a rising departure now taking place after Joshua's time: "*And 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*" (Jud 2:10). By the way, this explains why the Lord had put so much stress upon the guidance and transmission of the faith from the parent to the child (cf. Ex 13 and Deut 6).

Having pointed out the defection of the subsequent generation, the remainder of the section (2:11–3:6) is not going to itemize the victories and defeats (as we saw in the first introduction). Rather, it is going to set forth the principles by which the LORD is going to deal with His people who have refused to rid themselves

of idolatry. The Israelites disobeyed by tolerating the Canaanite altars and by formulating covenants with the inhabitants of the land. Thus, God reciprocated by making it impossible for Israel to remove the Canaanites. Even though Yahweh originally had willed the nation to exterminate the Canaanites, now He changes His will because of the disobedience of His people. Rather than exterminating the Canaanites, He will cause them to remain, and use them to discipline His people. This sets the stage for the whole book: the Israelites will become influenced by the remaining Canaanites, forget Yahweh, and drift away in apostasy. Despite numerous “new beginnings” the same thing will happen over and over again.

During this period, there will be repeated instances in which the land will be overrun by foreign invaders, and “judges” are raised up to counter these threats. Most of the book (3:7–15:20) will record a series of invasions and raising up of judges. But the “second introduction” will elaborate principles that will operate during this time. Verses 2:11-19 reveal the *general pattern* that will repeatedly occur throughout these episodes:

- 1) The nation does evil and forsakes Yahweh;
- 2) Yahweh sends “spoilers” who invade the land and devastate it;
- 3) The people are brought to despair and cry out for deliverance;
- 4) Yahweh has compassion and raises up a judge to deliver the nation (who sometimes maintains the rule of justice for the period of his life);
- 5) The nation would turn back and act more corruptly than before.

In light of this pattern, we could say that the middle portion of the book is *cyclical*, because this general pattern is repeated over and over. This seems to serve a point: the nation never learns . . . they continue to fail and only become more persistent in their disobedience. On the other hand, we must be careful in the use of the word “cyclical,” because we do not simply have a repetition of the cycle in the very same manner each time. There is degeneration taking place as we go along, and there is a corresponding *measure of severity* in the way in which God approaches each cycle. In Jud 2:19 we read,

“But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways.”

Hence, the *second introduction* has a distinctive purpose in comparison to the first: this introduction will set forth the pattern by which the Lord will deal with the nation in the future.

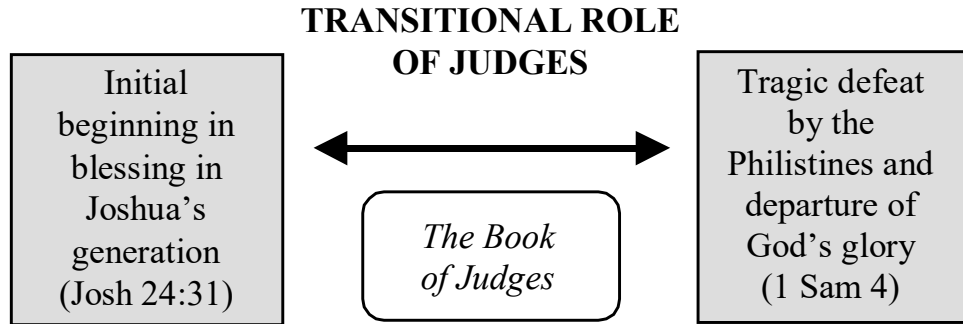
Other reasons are also given as to why Israel could not expel all her enemies: (1) they remained to provide a test of Israel’s loyalty to Yahweh (Jud 2:21-23; 3:4); and (2) they remained as instruments whereby Yahweh could discipline the nation (2:14-15).

In conclusion, the book of Judges is not a poorly redacted version based on conflicting historical accounts in which two notices of Joshua’s death have been included. Rather, we have two distinct introductions, each with its own purpose:

- Intro I (1:1–2:5) Explains why the post-conquest occupation was only partially successful (the people refused to purge the land of idolatry)
- Intro II (2:6–3:6) Explains how the Lord will deal with the nation in the future (by using foreign powers to test their loyalty and discipline them)

IV. THE BROAD PERSPECTIVE

As previously mentioned, the book of Judges is not simply an account of the history of this period. This is evident by observing the biblical setting of the book:



As we observe the Book of Judges from the broader perspective, we are forced to ask: what went wrong? Was the Lord unable to safeguard His people? Obviously the problem was not with the Lord. The Book of Judges is meant to be a bridge from Deuteronomy until the coronation of a king in 1 Samuel. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we are given the principles by which the Lord will deal with the covenant nation who are *under the Mosaic Law* (see Deut 28–30). He will bless them when they obey, and He will curse (discipline) them when they disobey. Part of His discipline will be the use of foreign powers to invade the land. The Book of Judges evidences Israel’s failure to live up to the covenant terms for over 300 years. Things do not improve; they only get worse.

Their failure is all the more inexcusable in light of the Shechem ceremony at the close of Joshua. The people had declared, “*We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God*” (Josh 24:18). Even then Joshua warned them,

“He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgression or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you after He has done good to you” (Josh 24:19-20).

Joshua’s warning was indeed prophetic, because the people failed miserably throughout the period of the judges. As we get to the end of the book, we realize that a radical change is needed, and that change will be the introduction of “kingship” (a monarchical arrangement). Even though Israel is going to request a “king” (1 Sam 8) and their request is based on impure motives, the whole book of Judges is meant to pave the way to the bringing in of the kings. Hence, we have the repeated comments in the epilogue to the book, “*In those days, there was no king in Israel*” (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25). Judges serves to evidence Israel’s failure to live up to the covenant terms whereby God could rule and bless them under the arrangement of a theocracy, and hence sets the stage for the attempt at a monarchy.

Unfortunately, a human king (being a sinner himself) cannot ultimately be the cure for the real problem of the people. Their real need is for a “new heart” (which the *New Covenant* will give). But in God’s grand design, He will eventually bring in an “ideal king” (cf. 2 Sam 7) who will give the people a new heart by way of a New Covenant. Hence, it is inevitable that the *story* had to move in the direction of having a king, because that will ultimately be the means by which God accomplishes His purposes with the nation of Israel and fulfills His promise of using Israel to bless all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). Because the

people fail under the judges, they are driven on to having a king so that one day they will have the ultimate king . . . the Lord Jesus Christ.