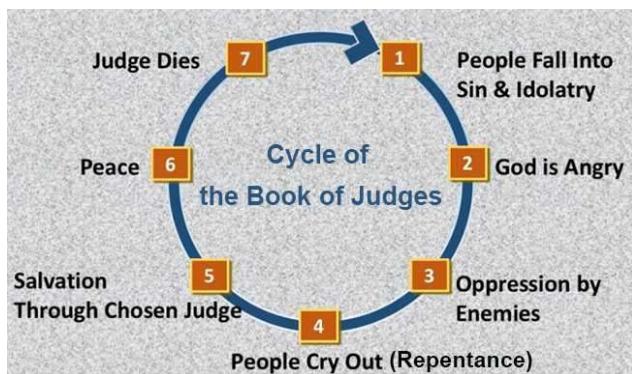


JUDGES

The Period of the Judges

The book of Judges, compiled by an anonymous editor between 1020 to 1000 B.C., tells Israel's history from the death of Joshua up to the birth of the Prophet Samuel. This period differs greatly from the centralized and disciplined picture in the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. For with the death of Joshua, everything changes. Just before Joshua dies and is buried in Shechem, he leads the people to renew their covenant with Yahweh: "**The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey**" (Joshua 24:24). But when Joshua dies, this sense of national unity that once held the twelve tribes together gives way to chaos and infidelity. Thus begins the familiar cycle: disobedience, punishment, repentance, and eventual restoration: "**And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and serve the Baals; and they forsook the Lord and the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were round about them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger**" (Judges 2:11-12).



Each time, after a time of peace and plenty, the people would forget God, fall back into disobedience, and repeat the cycle all over again. Clearly during this time, without such leaders as Moses or Joshua, there was need for leadership. Israel needed a "judge" who, sometimes chosen directly by God and sometimes by the people, would protect Israel from attacks by its enemies and defend their territories: "**Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the power of those who plundered them**" (2:16). Once peace was restored, the judge would minister justice. "**And yet they did not listen to the judges; for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed down to them; they soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so**" (2:17). In most cases the authority of the judges did not extend to all of Israel but only to one tribe or a group of tribes. This is the reason there is no chronological line of succession in the Book of Judges; sometimes there are a number of judges contemporary with each other. Despite their failings, in large part these were charismatic individuals of heroic faith who, with bravery, physical prowess and passion, delivered Israel from her many enemies. Still, though some of the judges brought success and prosperity to Israel, on the whole this period was one of the darkest in the entire Old Testament. So much so that by the end of the Book of Judges, one can understand why the people called out for a king. For a monarchy, despite its dangers, was seen as preferable to the kind of moral and political anarchy that often prevailed during the time of the judges. Essentially, the author of Judges is preparing the reader to understand and accept the kingship which will be established with Saul, and reach its zenith with David.

THE TWELVE MAJOR AND MINOR JUDGES OF ISRAEL

The Book of Judges 3:6-16:31

1. OTHNIEL – (major) is the only major judge who comes from Israel’s royal lineage, i.e., from the tribe of Judah (from which will come King David). Othniel is also nephew of the celebrated hero Caleb (Judges 3:7-11). Under Othniel’s leadership, Israel enjoyed “rest” in the land for forty years.

2. EHUD – (minor) from the tribe of Benjamin, delivers Israel from the obese Eglon, king of Moab. Ehud was left-handed, which was usually considered negatively (Ecclesiastes 10:2), but for Ehud it was an advantage. At that time, weapons were usually strapped on the left thigh to facilitate a quick withdraw with the right hand. Ehud’s dagger was on his right side, and so he slipped past King Eglon’s security guards who would not have noticed it. Ehud strikes when the king is in a vulnerable moment and kills him. The military victory brings eighty years of peace to Israel.

3. SHAMGAR – (minor) So little is known about Shamgar that the next judge mentioned (Deborah) refers back to Ehud, not Shamgar. While Judges tells us in 3:31 that Shamgar “saved Israel,” it does not tell us that he established a period of peace.

4. DEBORAH – (major) the only female judge, was a prophetess who calls on the military commander, Barak, to launch an attack against Israel’s northern oppressor, Jabin, King of Hazor (Galilee). Barak however turns out to be weak and requires Deborah to accompany him to strengthen his courage. As a result, Deborah rightly prophesies that the victory will go to the hand of a woman. Indeed that is what happened. King Jabin’s commander, Sisera, fled after his army suffered a catastrophic defeat by the Israelites and accepted refuge from a woman, Jael, who hid him in her tent under a blanket. As he slept Jael drove a tent peg through his head. After the victory and the fulfillment of her prophecy, Deborah wrote a song celebrating God’s mighty power and in honor of the Israelites who played a role in defeating the Canaanites.

5. GIDEON – (major) By this time the Israelites had abandoned their faith and were worshipping Baal. Meanwhile the Midianites were swooping in each year to kill the settlers, burn their homes down, steal the harvests and livestock, and burn whatever was left. This went on for seven years until God chose an unlikely savior, Gideon, of the tribe of Manasseh. Gideon hardly welcomes the calling and protests that his clan is the “weakest in (the tribe of) Manasseh,” and that he is the “least in my family” (6:15). Still God intends to have His way and His glory, and especially through the very weaknesses that Gideon admits. Under God’s instruction, thirty thousand soldiers who were gathered for battle were reduced to only three hundred. The reduction is arbitrary, that is, the choice of the three hundred determined solely by separating those who drank from the stream by lifting their hands to their mouths, or who got down on their knees to drink like a dog—a posture of vulnerability. The soldiers who remained upright to drink were seen as watchful and prepared for any emergency. These were the chosen soldiers. The three hundred were then divided into three groups of one hundred each. When the enemy had retired and the night watch was changing, like cattle rustlers before a stampede and with torches concealed in their clay pitchers, Gideon’s forces broke the pitchers to reveal the flaming torches and, with trumpets blaring, the ensuing “attack” threw the enemy’s camp into confusion. The sleeping Midianites, now panic-stricken, fled. Most importantly, a victory with only three hundred men against thirty thousand enabled Israel to claim it was not her strength that brought victory but the grace of God. Eventually Gideon and his army, helped by the people of Ephraim whose land the fleeing Midianites tried to cross, vanquished the Midianites. Although the people wanted to crown Gideon king, he refused and insisted, “God will rule over you”(8:23). However Gideon wants to mark the victory and sets up a shrine in his hometown of Ophrah. He has an ephod made for him, which is an ornamental breastplate representative of his responsibility toward the people, which also serves as a reminder of the great victory. At the time it was common to reward your

commander and leader after a successful military victory with such a sign. However golden garments were also used to clothe the statues of the gods. Though Gideon certainly did not “worship” his ephod but likely hung it on a stand or on a wall when not in use, others would have seen it differently. In fact, the golden garment became an idol; and Gideon and his family actually profited from this new object of worship for pilgrim worshippers. In the end and to his credit, Gideon’s leadership as a judge kept Israel strong enough that they were not troubled by invaders during his lifetime.

6. TOLA – (minor) is from the tribe of Issachar. After the death of Abimelech, Tola is called to take on the responsibility of judge for the northern part of Canaan. Nothing more is known except that he governed for twenty-three years (10:1-2).

7. JAIR – (minor) of the tribe of Manasseh, ruled for twenty-two years and had thirty sons, who ruled over thirty cities in Gilead, i.e., all the territory east of the River Jordan (10:3-5).

***ABIMELECH** – is actually an “anti-judge,” a son of Gideon by a concubine from Shechem. Abimelech persuades the people to make him king (8:33-9:57). Abimelech slaughters the remaining sons of Gideon, with the exception of Jotham, who escapes. In the end a civil war breaks out which takes the lives of both Abimelech and the treacherous leaders of Shechem.

8. JEPHTHAH – (major) the son of the Manassah chief Gilead and a prostitute is called upon to lead the Transjordanian Israelites to victory over their enemy, the Ammonites (10:6-12:7). After his victory, Jephthah vows to offer to the Lord whoever comes forth from his house to greet him when he returns victorious, but tragically it turns out to be his only daughter (11:29-40). It is not clear exactly what he does, but a straightforward reading of the text suggests he did indeed offer his daughter as a human sacrifice. However, since human sacrifice was forbidden in the law of Moses, it is argued that instead he consecrated her service to the sanctuary—the Tent of Meeting (1 Samuel 2:22).

9. IZBAN – (minor) is from Bethlehem and led Israel for seven years. While the Scriptures tells us Ibzan “judged” Israel, it gives no record of any battles he fought or enemies he overthrew; nor does it say he “saved” Israel (12:8-10).

10. ELON – (minor) is of the tribe of Zebulun and is perhaps the least well known. Elon led Israel for ten years (12:11-12).

11. ABDON – (minor) is another obscure “minor judge” who led Israel for eight years (12:14-15).

12. SAMSON – (major) as the last judge from the tribe of Dan, Samson receives the most attention of all the judges (13:11-16:31). Samson does not exercise civil or juridical leadership over Israel, but is a kind of maverick who happens to be blessed with supernatural strength. Samson fiercely battles the Philistines, but has a weakness for their women. Samson’s affair with the Philistine woman, Delilah, leads to his downfall. What was the significance of his famous hair? Samson was to be raised as a layperson specially consecrated to the Lord by a vow, which included not cutting his hair. Samson’s foolish affair with Delilah and his promiscuity in general serves to warn the Israelite readers that such behavior will lead to the destruction of their civil and religious identity. Although in death Samson wins a great victory over the Philistines, his lack of self-control prevented him from achieving any lasting success as a leader of God’s people.

JUDGES OF ISRAEL

Gideon

Major Judges

Tola

Minor Judges

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