

JUDGES

INTRODUCTION

In the Book of Joshua, the survival and the success of the nation of Israel during the years of conquest are the dominant themes. The Book of Judges emphasizes the religious and military struggles of this nation during the period of settlement in the land.

The principal theme of the Book of Judges is “Failure through Compromise” which is in contrast to the main theme of the Book of Joshua which is “Victory through Faith.”

The Book of Judges is a commentary on the nature and characteristics of spiritual apostasy. The key verse of the Book of Judges is 17:6 that reads, “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”

In the day of Joshua Divine rebuke met with a spirit of repentance resulting in service to God. After the death of Joshua and the elders that followed him, a new generation arose that had been exposed to Canaanite culture from birth.

Their parents did not exercise a very strong Godly influence on that generation for it had turned aside to the worship of Baalism. Baal was the fertility god who rode upon clouds and was responsible for the rains that brought life to the parched soil of Canaan.

Judges did not have the power to make laws for God gave the laws. They did not have the power to explain the laws for that was the task of the priests.

Joshua’s closure is dated about 1375 B. C. The Book of Samuel is dated at 1075-1025 B. C. The period covered by the Book of Judges is about 300 years. Samuel is believed to be the author of the Book of Judges. Hebrew tradition says Samuel wrote both Judges and Ruth.

The Book of Judges tells us that rebellion against God brings punishment but repentance brings restoration. These Judges purged Israel of idolatries, avenged

Israel of her enemies, and championed the cause of righteousness. During the period of the Judges God was in a special way Israel's king.

CHAPTER 1

Judah begins the task of completing the conquest of the land. It was necessary to drive out the Canaanites who had filtered back into the fortified cities. The tribes of Israel wanted to follow God's leading, so they asked who should go first and Judah was selected.

God gave the Canaanites into Judah's hand and in verses 6 and 7 we read that the thumbs and big toes were removed from Adoni-bezek and seventy of his kings. A man maimed was not good for fighting. He could not hold a spear or sword effectively. Nor could he run swiftly and was unable to jump obstacles put in his way.

In verses 22 and 23 we read that Israel was anxious to possess Bethel. It was here that God appeared to Jacob. As far as the northern tribes were concerned Bethel attained the same importance as Jerusalem had to the southern tribes.

Bethel means "house of God."

A large part of chapter 1 is a record of the failures of Israel to drive out the Canaanites. The failure was not in God's ability to help, but it was on account of the sin of the people. (Isaiah 59:1-2) God had warned them that those who remained would be thorns in their sides and their gods a snare.

The Amorites forced Dan up into the mountains. They dwelt in the very heart of the territory occupied by the Philistines. The Philistines were perennial enemies of Israel and waged war that was unusually fierce. Ephraim and Dan later prevailed against the Amorites and they were made to do various tasks.

CHAPTER 2

The Angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to meet the Israelites at Bochim and He rebuked them for their wicked ways. The Israelites wept bitterly as their sins were brought to their attention. God said that because Israel failed to obey Him He would not drive out the nations before them.

These people in their worship brought the downfall of Israel. (Judges 2:10) The younger generation did not know the Lord because they chose not to follow in the footsteps of their fathers.

Israel rebelled against God turning from worshiping the one true and living God to a worship of Canaanite gods. The Canaanite gods included Dagon, Baal-berith, Baal-zebub and others.

Baal was a sun god. He was the vehicle and source of physical life and the generative and reproductive power of nature.

Astarte was a moon-goddess. She was the female deity of the Canaanites, worshiped as the feminine principal of nature embodied in the pale moonlight and its influence upon terrestrial life. God's anger burned against Israel and they were given into the hands of plunderers and sold them into the hands of their enemies.

Verse 16 says God raised up judges; men who when they witnessed the depressed state of their country, they achieved deliverance. These men continued in office as defenders of religion and avengers of crimes.

Verse 17 says in general these people were still rebellious. They did not listen to their judges. As soon as the judge died verse 19 says they turned back and acted more corruptly than their fathers. (Judges 2:19)

CHAPTER 3

Relapse, retribution, repentance, and rescue by a judge were God's means of getting the people's attention.

Chapter 3 opens with a list of remaining Canaanites. The generation following Joshua had forgotten that God had promised Joshua that if the whole nation would adhere to the law of God, He would defeat the Canaanites for them. Consequently, they did not understand how to make war. (Joshua 3:1-2)

To impress this truth upon them God left the Canaanites in the land. Necessity teaches a man to pray. The Philistines were the greatest enemy of the Israelites. The Philistines were all descendants of Ham, the son of Noah. (Joshua

3:4) Many of the pagan gods of the Canaanites were set up in groves of trees on high places. To these spots the Canaanites invited the Israelites to worship.

When the children of Israel cried to God for help He sent Othniel to be their judge. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel giving him the power to accomplish his task, courage and strength that surpassed the natural man. The judge not only attacked the enemy courageously and with success but he also judged the nation. As soon as Othniel's reign of forty years was over Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord.

God then raised up Ehud as their judge in response to their cries for help. Ehud was left-handed. Eglon the oppressive king of Moab was a very fat man. Ehud made himself a sword and bound it on his right side. Ehud told Eglon that he had a message from God. As Eglon reached for the message Ehud thrust the sword into Eglon's stomach. The bible says he was so fat that the fat enclosed even the handle of the sword. Eglon's oppression lasted eighteen years until Ehud slew him. Eighty years of peace prevailed after Eglon's death and Israel's defeat of the Moabites.

Next God raised up Shamgar to deliver Israel from Philistine oppression. His judgeship would have been in part of the eighty years just mentioned. Shamgar killed six hundred Philistines using an ox goad as his weapon. An "ox goad" was an instrument of wood about eight feet long with an iron spike in one end and an iron scraper at the other. It was used to goad oxen and clean the plowshare.

This probably occurred during the spring, as kings did not go to battle in the wintertime. Wintertime brought many rains and it was not a time for living in the fields. This is all we know about Shamgar except for Deborah's song in Judges 5:6.

CHAPTER 4

The Israelites continued to worship idols and intermarry among the pagan people. They also relaxed their efforts to subdue the Canaanites. As a result God gave them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan.

Deborah was an Ephraimite woman who rose to a place of leadership and respect among the people of Israel. It appears there was a lack of men to take

the leadership. Even Barak was willing to lead only when Deborah summoned him and challenged by her to take immediate action.

When men fail to lead in the cause of righteousness, women are within their rights to stand fast in their convictions and to challenge others to join them. Deborah's court was a palm tree about ten miles north of Jerusalem. Here the Israelites sought out her wisdom.

Barak's name means "lightning." Kishon means "the river of slaughter." This name probably arose from the slaying of the priests of Baal in the days of Elijah and from the battle fought here in the days of Deborah. In verse 15, it appears that the chariots bogged down in the marshy land and so they fled on foot.

Sisera, captain of the Canaanite army fled on foot to the tent of Jael. Offering Sisera a bottle of milk was a very gracious act of hospitality. While he slept from exhaustion, she drove a tent peg through his temple into the ground and he died.

CHAPTER 5

Chapter 5 is a song of Deborah and Barak in which Deborah rehearses the history of Israel after they came to Canaan.

CHAPTER 6

This chapter deals with the fourth oppression—the oppression of the Midianites. The Midianites were the descendants of Abraham and Keturah. It was the Midianites who bought Joseph from his wicked brothers and sold him to Potiphar in Egypt. (Genesis 37:25ff)

The Midianites were so numerous and their flocks and herds so large that they devastated the land. The Israelites were forced to hide in dens and caves, and strongholds. The Midianites were described as "grasshoppers without number" in the time of Gideon.

When God came to Gideon he was reluctant to lead the people of Israel. He was hiding grain from the enemy by putting it in the winepress. Gideon wanted some assurance of God's Divine call. The Angel of the Lord came to him and

instructed him to pull down his father's Baal. He was also told to cut down the Asherah.

When the men of the city saw their altar destroyed they immediately accused Gideon. Such action indicates their recognition of him as a righteous man who did not worship at the altar.

Joash, Gideon's father, realized that Baal was no god at all because he had not struck Gideon dead when he destroyed the altar. Still needing assurance, Gideon asks for two more signs: water on the fleece and then to leave the fleece dry.

CHAPTER 7

Gideon started out with thirty-two thousand men in his army. Ten thousand fearful men were allowed to return home leaving twenty-two thousand. God said it was still too large an army so He devised a test whereby only those who lapped water were kept in the army. The size of the army was now three hundred men.

Gideon and his servant hear what the enemy is saying and as a result God said you would be strengthened.

The interpretation of a soldier's dream was of a very unusual nature. A barley cake rolled down a hill through the enemy camp and flattened a soldier's tent. The soldier knew it meant that God was going to defeat the Midianites at the hands of Gideon.

Using three hundred men with three hundred torches and three hundred trumpets, it appeared to the Midianites that a large army surrounded them. They were so surprised and bewildered that they attacked and killed each other thinking they were Israelites.

God granted Israel a complete victory.

CHAPTER 8

The men of Ephraim spoke sharply to Gideon because he had not called them to help attack the Midianites. Gideon called Ephraim to help guard the fords of

the Jordan. He told them that their assistance was of even greater importance than the work he had done. This seemed to satisfy those who chided him.

The men of Ephraim evidently felt they were an important tribe.

Israel wanted Gideon to rule over them since he was a man in whom the Spirit of God dwelt. It is also possible they feared recurring attacks from the surrounding peoples, and thus felt they needed a king.

Gideon refused to be their king for if they had one who sat on a throne and he symbolized the highest power among them they would be more likely to forget that God was their ruler.

Verses 29-35 are a summary of Gideon's life. He had seventy sons and many wives and also a concubine in Shechem who bore him Abimelech. After Gideon's death the Israelites turned their back on God and made Baal-berith their chief god. When men turn their back on righteousness their lives are out of harmony both with God and with man.

CHAPTER 9

Gideon had refused the office when the people of Israel came and offered to make him their king. In this chapter, we learn that Abimelech, born of Gideon's concubine, accepted the opportunity to usurp the role of leadership in Israel. He killed the sons of Gideon except for Jotham the youngest who hid himself. After this the men of Shechem and Beth-millo made Abimelech king. (verse 6)

Beginning in verse 7, Jotham tells a story in the form of a fable, which illustrated the folly of the people making Abimelech their king. After his pronouncement he went away and hid while Abimelech ruled for three years. God then sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. Gaal declared war against Abimelech and was defeated by Abimelech's army.

While trying to capture the city of Thebez a woman threw an upper millstone off the top of the tower and struck Abimelech on the head, wounding him. Wounded, he called for his armor bearer to kill him so that it would not be recorded that a woman killed him.

CHAPTER 10

After Abimelech's death, Tola became judge and judged Israel for twenty-three years. After Tola's death, Jair judged for twenty-two years. He had thirty sons who rode upon thirty donkeys and their jurisdiction was over thirty cities.

Jair was the first judge to have a residence east of the Jordan River. After his death Israel again turned to doing evil in the sight of God. God then delivered them into the hands of the Philistines.

The children of Israel cried out to God for deliverance but God refused, telling them to let their false gods deliver them. After putting away their idols and changing their ways God relented and forgave them. They assembled to fight the Ammonites but realized they did not have a leader by which they could make a unified stand against their enemy.

CHAPTER 11

Jephthah was a mighty warrior but he was an outcast from his family since he was born of a harlot. The elders of Gilead went to the land of Tob to find Jephthah when they needed someone to go to war on their behalf.

Jephthah, in verse 9, did not ask to be their captain; he asked to be their "head" if he was successful in battle. He wanted to be their ruler, the man in authority.

Jephthah did not want to attack the Ammonites because the children of Israel had been instructed not to attack Moab or Ammon. (Deuteronomy 2:9, 19) God had said that the land possessed by the Ammonites and Moabites was not part of the Promised Land. These people had lived more or less in peace for three hundred years. So Jephthah asked Ammon why they wanted to attack Israel and they answered they were attacking Israel because Israel had taken away their land. This was the territory assigned to the tribes of Reuben and Gad by Moses.

Jephthah had a good knowledge of Israel's history and explained to the Ammonite king that they had blocked Israel's path to the Promised Land and as a result were attacked. But the land that Israel possessed was not in possession of the Ammonites when Israel came into the area.

Verse 29 says that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah indicating that he was God's man for the time in Israel even though he was not blameless in character. Jephthah made a vow with God that if God would give him a victory over the Ammonites he would sacrifice the first to come out of his house to greet him on his return.

The Bible does not say that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter but only that he did to her according to his vow. It would be possible to offer his daughter in perpetual service to God and that would be essentially the same as making a burnt offering.

Jephthah drove the Ammonites out of all the land across the Jordan River.

Another view to Jephthah's vow

Jephthah vowed to offer up his daughter as a burnt offering. (*Ola*, which always was burned) He did not devote her to a life of celibacy (unknown until Rabbi Kimchi). There is no record that female attendants in the tabernacle had to be virgins. Anna in Luke 2:36 was married. (Leviticus 27:28-29) Jephthah came from a background of human sacrifices and at a time when the Law of Moses was little unknown or practiced.

CHAPTER 12

The men of Ephraim again found fault with Israel's leader for not giving them a special call. Fighting actually broke out between Jephthah and Ephraim. As a result, forty-two thousand Ephraimites lost their lives. Jephthah judged Israel six years and then he died.

Ibzan was the ninth judge of Israel. During this period nothing worthy of notice was recorded. Prosperity was apparent. Ibzan was blessed with thirty sons and thirty daughters. After judging Israel for seven years he died.

Elon became the tenth judge of Israel and he reigned ten years. Nothing worthy of mention was recorded about Elon's reign.

Abdon was the eleventh judge of Israel and reigned eight years. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys. All was peaceful during his reign.

CHAPTER 13

Israel turned away from God again. An Angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah's wife and told her she would bear a son who was to be a Nazarite from birth.

Manoah asked the Angel of the Lord to appear to him that he might be assured of the truth of his wife's message. Samson was born to them and later became Israel's twelfth judge.

Samson was set aside for service to God as a Nazarite.

The vows of a Nazarite included:

1. Could not drink any vinegar of wine or vinegar of strong drink.
2. Not allowed to drink any juice of grapes nor eat fresh or dried grapes.
3. No razor to cut his hair and was to let his hair grow long.
4. Not to come near a dead body.

Some Nazarite vows were for a specific period of time but Samson's vow was for a lifetime.

CHAPTER 14

Samson saw a woman in Timnath, a Philistine, and he asked his father and mother to arrange for marriage. When the dowry had been arranged, an engagement is announced. After considerable time, a wedding feast is held and the marriage is then completed.

Samson's parents try to discourage this marriage because they looked upon the people as "uncircumcised Philistines." Samson was an instrument in God's hand and the Philistines who were descendants of Ham were not part of the nation of Israel.

Samson met a lion on his way to Philistia. Wild animals were not numerous in the Promised Land but God had said that He would send wild animals among the Israelites as one of the curses. (Leviticus 26:22) Samson did not tell his

parents about killing the lion because part of the Nazarite vow was to touch no dead animal.

Another part of the Nazarite vow was not to eat any unclean food. Since the honey was in the carcass of the dead lion, the honey would be unclean. Whether as an honor or to watch him, the Philistines gave Samson thirty young men to be with him.

During the course of the wedding feast, the company began to compose riddles. Samson challenged them to give him the answer to his riddle and if they did he would give them thirty linen wraps and thirty changes of clothes.

Samson's wife entreated him for the answer to his riddle and on the seventh day he finally gave her the answer. She immediately gave the answer to those enticing her. Samson said they would never have learned the answer if they "had not plowed with my heifer."

To keep his promise Samson killed thirty men of Ashkelon and gave their garments to his companions. Samson's wife was given to his companion who had become his friend. This angered Samson.

CHAPTER 15

Samson was shocked to learn that he was no longer welcome in his father-in-law's house as the husband of his older daughter. This enraged Samson so he caught three hundred fox, turned them tail-to-tail, put a torch between their tails and turned them loose in the grain fields. The fires raged so harshly that destruction was even brought to the vineyards and the olive groves.

The Philistines were so angry they burned his father-in-law's house to the ground with Samson's wife and father in it. Samson then struck the Philistines ruthlessly. It was a cruel, merciless slaughter. As a result, the Philistines gathered their army against Judah but Samson not wanting to fight with the members of one of the tribes of Israel, asked to be delivered to the Philistines.

As Samson was being delivered to the Philistines the Spirit of the Lord came upon him and he slew a thousand of them with the jawbone of a donkey. Samson judged Israel for twenty years while the Philistines oppressed Israel.

CHAPTER 16

When the Gazites learned that Samson was in their city they plotted to capture him. But Samson tore the gates from their mountings and carried them on his shoulders to the top of the mountain.

Samson loved Delilah but their love proved to be the undoing of this last of the judges. It is not stated that Samson married Delilah only that he married the woman of Timnath. The love he felt for her was not returned for she entered into an agreement with the Philistines to capture him. Each time she told Samson's secret of strength to the Philistines he was able to escape because he had falsely told her where his strength lied.

Delilah became more insistent about learning his strength until he told her the truth. When he allowed his hair to be cut he broke the Nazarite vow and God was no longer with him.

Verse 20 is a sad verse, "But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him." And so, the Philistines captured Samson. They put out his eyes and then bound him with fetters. He was made to serve in the prison house as a beast of burden. The hair of Samson began to grow back. The Philistines were rejoicing and praising their god, Dagon, for giving Samson into their hands.

In their rejoicing the Philistines summoned Samson to come and entertain them. Standing between two pillars he asked the boy who was holding his hand to let him feel the pillars on which the house rested. God had strengthened Samson for one great final victory over the Philistines. With all his might he pushed on the pillars and the building collapsed killing more than he had killed during his life.

Even through Samson's death the Lord worked a victory for Israel in Philistia.

CHAPTER 17

This Micah is not the Micah who wrote one of the books of the Minor Prophets. Micah had stolen eleven hundred pieces of silver from his mother. It appears that she had asked God to curse whoever had stolen her money. Micah realized that he could be smitten of God for taking his mother's money and this frightened him into making a confession of his thievery.

Micah's mother after receiving the stolen money asked God to bless her son. She then asked her son to make a graven image and a molten image from the silver.

In the Hebrew language (*pesel*) is used for an idolatrous image made either of metal or wood. The Hebrew word (*massecah*) means something poured or cast. When used in the singular, it most often refers to the calf cast by Aaron or Jeroboam.

Micah set up his house of gods which was a shrine erected on his property. Teraphim were small household gods. Micah also consecrated one of his sons to become his priest.

Verse 6

Micah also consecrated a Levite to be his priest believing that God would now prosper him. Because Micah had an image, a sanctuary in which to worship, robes for his priest, and a priest who was related to the true priests of Israel, he felt that he had everything any religious man could hope to have. He was like many who follow false religions today.

CHAPTER 18

The men of Dan were seeking additional territory in which to settle and they get caught up with Micah's false worship. The men of Dan had selected some men to spy out an area where they might expand and settle.

These spies inquired of Micah's priest as to the success of their mission and they were given a favorable response. The five spies brought back a glowing report of the possibilities of settling the land around Laish.

Six hundred men set out to take possession of the territory around Laish on the northern border of Canaan. The five spies stole Micah's idols and also his Levite priest and the people who lived around the house of Micah.

Micah overtook the Danites but the Danites told him to go home before some of them lost their self-control and turned upon him. Micah turned back empty-handed and sick of heart.

CHAPTER 19

Chapters 17 and 18 tell the story of the establishment of the idolatrous worship set up by the man from Dan.

Chapters 19, 20, and 21 tell the story of the death of the Levite's concubine and the civil war which followed. Concubines did not have the ties of family devotion and were easily led into sin. The concubines of the Levite played the harlot against him.

The Levite tried to persuade her to return with him to the land of Ephraim. The Levite refused to stay at his father-in-law's home because the inhabitants were not Israelites. Little did he dream of the trouble he would find in a city belonging to one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Settling in Gibeah (a city of the Benjaminites) for the night, he was forced to sleep in the streets. But an old man coming in from the field offered to take care of his needs for the night.

Some worthless men of the city pounded on the man's door and demanded that he release the Levite to them so that they might have homosexual relations with him. The old man refused but gave them his daughter and the Levites' concubine.

The wicked men abused the concubine all night. The next morning, she was found dead with her hands on the threshold of the door. The Levite cut his concubine into twelve pieces and sent a piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel hoping they would come and punish the wicked men of Gibeah who had killed his concubine.

The reaction was quick. Such a wicked deed could not be allowed to go without punishment.

CHAPTER 20

All Israel was aroused together as one unit to punish the wicked men of Gibeah. The Israelites demanded that the people of Benjamin either punish the men of Gibeah or they would. Benjamin refused to punish the wicked men and

a battle took place. In the first two battles the men of Benjamin were victorious killing 40,000 men of Israel.

In the final battle Benjamin was nearly annihilated. All but 600 men of Benjamin fell in the final battle. 25,000 men of Benjamin were killed. In the first two battles the Israelites had gone into battle on their own self-confidence but when they finally trusted God completely, God gave them victory.

CHAPTER 21

The men of Israel did not want to associate with the wicked men in Benjamin. They vowed not to give their daughters to the men of Benjamin.

The tribe was in danger of extinction. When the Israelites found a city, Jabesh-Gilead, whose inhabitants had not helped to punish the crime, they destroyed the inhabitants except for 400 young women who were spared and given to the men of Benjamin as wives.

The 400 young women were not enough so it was decided that the men of Benjamin could take wives from the daughters of Shiloh as they came to dance their yearly dances in connection with the tabernacle services.

The daughters of Shiloh were probably the daughters of the Levites. In this way the vow made by the children of Israel to not give the Benjaminites their daughters in marriage did not apply.