

THE JUDGES

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The Plan of the Major Old Testament book studies

These notes are not intended to be textual commentaries of the Old Testament books. They serve as a proposed *outline guide* for the student or teacher in *preparing personal studies, or for teaching and study notes*. The notes are from the Bible Dictionaries and Bible Encyclopedia referenced below in the Bibliography as research references for further study. Much of the information in this lesson is edited from the *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* and my own lecture notes.

Bibliography

Tyndale Bible Dictionary.

Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible.

Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary.

General Introduction

The Tyndale Bible Dictionary

This Bible Dictionary introduces this Old Testament book as follows, “The book reflects a final editing of the material in *the period of the early monarchy*. It may well be a polemic for the righteous rule of David over against the kingship of Saul, which was molded by a secular, Canaanite conception of kingship rather than by the law of God. **The author was almost certainly not Samuel**, as traditionally thought, but a later *compiler* who may have relied on other ancient written materials to document the importance of the many judges in the development of Israel and its monarchy.

Judges is an Old Testament book *named after the prominent leaders raised up by the Lord to deliver his people*. The word “*judge*” in Hebrew also denotes *the activity of governance, including warfare*. Some scholars have argued that there were *two kinds of judges: charismatic deliverers* (or major judges) and *local judicial sages* (minor judges). It is uncertain why some judges receive cursory attention, whereas the exploits of other judges are given in great detail.”¹

Historical Setting

Though the judges succeeded in giving the tribes some rest from the incursions of surrounding enemies, the Israelites were continually harassed over long periods of time. Scholarly opinion differs on the duration of the period of the judges. The dating of the exodus affects the dating of the beginning of the judges. Those who take an early date for the exodus put the beginning around 1370–1360 BC, possibly during Moses’ leadership, ca. 1300 BCE. Others propose a date close to the end of the 13th century BCE. A related issue pertains to the chronology of the judges. Does Judges give a chronological, sequential account of the period, or is the book a representative account of judges from various parts of Canaan and Transjordan who “judged” a region, a tribe, or several tribes simultaneously?”²

Samuel, 1150 BCE, the great seer, priest, prophet, and military leader of Israel following Joshua was also esteemed among the judges of Israel.

¹ *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, p. 757.

² *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, p. 758.

The Literary Characteristics and Framework of Judges

The book of Judges, like Joshua, is not considered among the historical texts of the Jewish canon, but is considered to be one of the *early prophetic* works, the *Nevi'im*.

“There is no doubt that the stories in the book bear the marks of literary creativity. The stories are classics in their own right. The poetry of Deborah’s song (Jgs 5) is very moving, and the fable of Jotham (9:8–15) is a fine example of figurative speech. *The care given to the stories is also reflected in the construction of the book.* There are two introductions: *a political one (Jgs 1:1–2:5) and a socioreligious one (2:6–3:6).*

The **political introduction** connects *Judges* with the story of the Conquest, when the tribes attempted to occupy the land. It prepares the reader for the political and military problems of the era of the judges.

The **socioreligious introduction** explains *why Israel had so many adversities, why the institution of the judges arose, and why the Lord never gave Israel the promised lasting rest from its enemies.*

The main body of the book is the story of the judges (3:7–16:31). References to the minor judges (six in all) are set within the stories of the major judges in increasing frequency. As is evident from the schema, the number of minor judges increased in frequency in proportion to the decrease in number of major judges: two major, one minor; two major, two minor; one major, three minor; one major. There is a total of 12 judges, representative of the 12 tribes of Israel.

The purpose of the *listing of 12 judges*, representative of the various parts of Canaan and Transjordan, is to *demonstrate that all tribes throughout the conquered territories experienced grave difficulties from a variety of enemies: Arameans, Moabites, Ammonites, Amalekites, Canaanites, and Philistines.* Israel was hard pressed on nearly all its frontiers.

The appendixes (chs 17–21), together with the two introductions, form the framework of the book. The political and socioreligious problems (1:1–3:6) are presented by way of several stories in the last chapters. The final editor who gave the book its canonical shape purposefully framed the stories of the judges so as to show lack of movement. *The successes of the previous stages in redemptive history came to a standstill in the ebb and flow of the judges.* Though the Lord delivered his people in many ways, they returned to the problems described in 1:1–3:6. *The appendixes describe Israel’s problems representative of the period of the judges, when “there was no king in Israel,” 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25.”*³

The Theological Introduction (2:6–3:6) The theological introduction begins where Joshua left off (Jos 24:28–31). The generation of Joshua was characterized by loyalty, but their loyalty to the Lord did not last long after the excitement of the Conquest and the demonstration of God’s presence (Jgs 2:10). Israel served Canaanite gods (Baal and Astarte) instead. Baal was the storm god, symbolic of rain and fertility, and Astarte was his cohort. The plural (Baals and Ashtaroth, 2:11–13) signifies the many local ways in which the Canaanite gods were worshiped. The religious unity was broken up into a great diversity. Thus Israel angered the Lord (vv 12–14), who sent them enemies and plunderers. Israel was unsuccessful in dealing with them, as Moses and Joshua had forewarned (Dt 28:25, 33; Jos 23:13, 16). The cycle of apostasy, judgment, cry for mercy, and deliverance is found throughout Judges. The people were rooted in the apostasy of their forefathers, even though the previous generation had been sensitive to God. Israel did not submit to the leadership of the judges, except to free itself from the oppressors. In fulfillment of the curses of the covenant, God swore not to give his people rest but to test them and to train them for warfare (Jgs 3:1–4), so that they might learn to respond to the challenges of a real world.⁴

³ Tyndale Bible Dictionary, p. 758.

⁴ Tyndale Bible Dictionary, p. 759.

Purpose and Theological Teaching

“The cycle of apostasy, judgment, cry for deliverance, and God’s raising up of a judge reflects a Deuteronomic perspective with its warnings concerning disobedience and judgment. The repetitiveness of the cycle supports the contention of the anonymous narrator that *Israel remained unchanged by the grace of God*. However, in spite of the moral, religious, and political anarchy as well as the civil wars, the last chapter shows that the tribes are still concerned with each other’s welfare. Though the unity of God’s people has been gravely challenged, the situation is not hopeless. *The book ends on a note of hope—hope for a king who may deliver Israel.*

There are several purpose points in the book:

- (1) to demonstrate the meaninglessness of this stage in Israel’s development;
- (2) to explain why the tribes did not occupy all the land promised to the patriarchs;
- (3) to justify the way of *God, who was gracious and patient with Israel’s repeated acts of disobedience*;
- (4) to set forth the legitimacy of a “shepherd” king in contrast to a despotic form of kingship; and
- (5) to explain the urgent need for a new momentum, lest Israel succumb to the Philistines and intertribal warfare.”⁵

The Twelve Judges of Israel (3:7–16:31)

Othniel. 3:7–11. Othniel is a transitional figure, linking the Conquest and the judges. He had involved himself in the conquest of Kiriath-sepher and was related to Caleb as his cousin and son-in-law (1:13). He repelled the Arameans led by Cushan-rishathaim, so that the land enjoyed peace for some 40 years.

Ehud. 3:12–30. The Moabites, allied with the Ammonites and Amalekites, came against Israel from the east and oppressed them for 18 years under the leadership of Eglon. Ehud led the mission to bring tribute to Eglon at his palace, located probably by Jericho (the City of Palms). Ehud was uniquely qualified for this mission; being left-handed, he was able to use his double-edged sword in an unsuspecting manner to stab the king. Ehud’s success was the result of careful plotting and the element of surprise. He paid the tribute and left, only to return with a supposed oracle from the gods. The king fell for the deception and was murdered. The delay at the Moabite court gave the Israelites an opportunity to bring their forces together at the fords of the Jordan. Ehud’s success was complete; no Moabite escaped, and Israel enjoyed peace for 80 years.

Shamgar. 3:31. Shamgar’s exploits were against the Philistines in the coastal plains. He had a non-Israelite name but was probably an Israelite by birth. Like Samson he fought the Philistines with an unconventional weapon (an ox goad). His name is also mentioned in the song of Deborah (5:6).

Deborah and Barak. 4:1–5:31. The narrative now turns to the Canaanite aggressors in the north under the leadership of *Jabin, king of Hazor, and Sisera*, of Harosheth-haggoyim (4:1–3). The ruins of Hazor (Jos 11:13) had been rebuilt, and another Jabin (cf. v 1) ruled over the region. He had regained his military power, as he had as many as 900 chariots of iron. He oppressed Israel for 20 years (Jgs 4:3).

God had a prophetess in Israel who led his people during this dark time (4:4). *She rendered judgments under a palm tree in southern Ephraim near Benjamin* (v 5). *She called on Barak to muster the armies of Naphtali and Zebulun, the tribes affected by the Canaanite raids, and to engage Sisera in a surprise attack by the Kishon River* (vv 6–7). **Barak’s** hesitancy led him to request **Deborah’s** presence, which resulted in his forfeiture of the honor of killing Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite forces (vv 8–10). The Lord gave success to the surprise attack from Mt Tabor, so that the Canaanites were routed, unable to use their heavy chariots, which were mired down in the swamps of the Jezreel Valley (5:20–22). *The Canaanites were routed, and Sisera was killed by Jael, the wife of Heber, a Kenite who had separated from the Kenites around Arad* (4:17–18; cf. 1:16). *She offered him hospitality, as her family*

had friendly relations with the Canaanites, but heroically put him to death with a tent peg (4:18–21; 5:26–27). In successive campaigns the Israelites gained freedom from Jabin, until they destroyed his power (4:24).

The song of Deborah (ch 5) celebrates, in poetic fashion, the victory over Jabin. It is one of the oldest poems in the Bible. It praises the God of Israel as the King who comes to protect his covenant people, and before whom the mountains move (5:2–3). He is the God of Mt Sinai (Jgs 5:4–5; cf. Dt 33:2; Ps 68:7–8; Hb 3:3–4). Though the oppressors had despoiled Israel and had made the roads unsafe for travel, and Israel was unable to defend itself (Jgs 5:6–8), the Lord raised up Deborah and Barak to lead the nobles to war (vv 9–13). They came from Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali (vv 14–15a, 18), but the Transjordan tribes and Asher did not want to get involved (vv 15b–17). The song then moves to the battle scene, where torrential rains bogged the chariots down (vv 19–23). Jael is celebrated as “most blessed of women,” who used her simple way of life to bring an end to Sisera (vv 24–27). She stands in contrast to Sisera’s mother, who is portrayed with all her culture waiting in vain for Sisera’s return with all of his spoils (vv 28–30). The Lord has used the simple to confound the powerful. The conclusion is a prayer for God’s judgment on all of Israel’s enemies (Jgs 5:31a; cf. Ps 68:1–3).

Gideon. 6:1–8:35. Israel’s rest for 40 years (Jgs 5:31b) was disturbed by the invasion of Midianites and Amalekites from the East (6:1–3). They destroyed the economy by invading the country at harvesttime (vv 4–6). In response to Israel’s cry, God sent a prophet with a message similar to that of the angel of the Lord (2:1–5). Then *an angel appeared to Gideon* and called him to lead the people in battle (6:11–14). The Lord assured him of his presence (v 16) by a sign (vv 17–22). Gideon knew that he had been visited by the Lord and built an altar called “The Lord Is Peace” in Ophrah (v 24). He responded by destroying the cultic site dedicated to Baal and Asherah at Ophrah (vv 25–28) and by initiating worship at the new altar (v 28). Baal did not protect his own altar (vv 29–32), even when challenged by Gideon’s father (v 31). Consequently, Gideon was known as Jerubbaal (meaning, “let Baal contend with him,” v 32).

Next, Gideon mustered an army of 32,000 men from Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali (6:35; cf. 7:3b). In order to assure himself of the Lord’s presence, he asked for another sign: the sign of the fleece (6:36–40). It must be kept in mind that Gideon lived in an area in which the wonders of God had been scarce (v 13) and that he, like Moses, needed reassurance that God was with him. God responded to his growing faith. Gideon went forth with a greatly reduced army of 300 against the enemy. Of his original army, 22,000 had left because they were afraid (7:2–3; cf. Dt 20:8). Another 9,700 were sent home, though they were valiant men (7:4–8). After assuring Gideon by a dream of an enemy soldier, God used the 300 in a marvelous way to confound the Midianites (vv 9–15). God gave Israel victory over the Midianite leaders Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah, and Zalmunna (7:16–8:21). Gideon wisely avoided a possible military confrontation with Ephraim (8:1–3), pursued the enemy deep into the Transjordan, and punished the leaders of Succoth and Penuel, who did not assist him (vv 4–9, 13–16).

This glorious victory created a new wave of interest in the idea of kingship. The men of Israel wished to establish the family of Gideon as their royal dynasty (8:22). Gideon refused, and instead wrongly set up an ephod, cast from the gold taken in battle (vv 23–27). The ephod was probably used for cultic practices, possibly divination (cf. 17:5).

Gideon’s era also came to an end. He was God’s instrument, giving Israel rest for 40 years. He fathered 70 sons and died in old age. God had richly blessed him, even though he had led Israel astray with his ephod. Thereafter, Israel returned to Baal worship (8:33–35).

In the wake of Gideon’s era, his son Abimelech attempted to establish dynastic continuity by having himself installed as king at Shechem (9:1–6). With the support of his relatives at Shechem, Abimelech had all his brothers killed except Jotham (vv 4–5). After Abimelech’s coronation, Jotham set forth his opposition to his brother in a proverbial manner (vv 7–20), and went into hiding. Three years later Abimelech’s evil schemes entrapped him when the citizens of Shechem rebelled. He furiously attacked

the city and destroyed it. A short time later, however, he was wounded at Thebez by a millstone dropped by a woman from the tower in which she had sought refuge from him. His servant put him out of his misery as per his request. This episode demonstrates how bad a despotic king may be. Again, God's justice prevailed.

Tola. 10:1–2. Tola was a minor judge from Issachar who judged Israel for 23 years.

Jair. 10:3–5. Jair was a minor judge from Gilead who judged Israel for 22 years.

Jephthah. 10:6–12:7. A recapitulation (10:6–16) of the cycle (idolatry, enemies, cry for help, momentary repentance) sets the introduction to the Jephthah narrative. Under attack from the Ammonites, the elders of Gilead requested help from Jephthah (10:17–11:8), who promised to help them on the condition that he remain their leader even after the war (vv 9–10). At a solemn ceremony he becomes their “head” at Mizpah (v 11). Jephthah opened up correspondence with the Ammonite king, in which he argued for Israel's rights on the basis of the Israelites' historic claim to the land as granted to them by the Lord (vv 12–27). Instead of going out immediately to war, he hoped that “the Lord, the Judge” would settle the dispute (v 27); but the Ammonite king was unimpressed. When the Spirit of God came over him, Jephthah led Israel into battle, but only after making a rash vow. He was victorious but found out that his vow to sacrifice whatever came first out of his house required him to sacrifice his daughter. Debate continues as to whether he offered her up as a human sacrifice or whether she sacrificed marriage (see discussion under Jephthah).

The Ephraimites seemed to have had an insatiable desire for war. Earlier they had complained to Gideon, who successfully defused their threats (8:1–3). Jephthah fought them, however, because the Israelites living in Transjordan had been reviled as “renegades” (12:1–4). Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed by the fords of the Jordan in this civil war. Thereafter, Jephthah ruled for only six years.

Ibzan. 12:8–10. Ibzan was a minor judge from Bethlehem who ruled Israel for seven years.

Elon. 12:11. A minor judge from Zebulun, Elon ruled Israel for ten years.

Abdon. 12:13–15. Abdon was a minor judge from Pirathon, the location of which is uncertain. He ruled for eight years.

Samson. 13:1–16:31. Samson's greatness in the history of redemption is due to his miraculous birth (13:1–24), his service as a Nazirite (13:7; cf. Nm 6:1–21), the repeated overpowering by the Spirit of the Lord (Jgs 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14), the single-handed exploits against the Philistines (Ashkelon, 14:19; the fields, 15:1–6; Ramath Etam, 15:7–17; Gaza, 16:1–3, 23–30), and his occasional dependence on the Lord (15:18–19; 16:28–30). However, his personal life was flawed because of his weakness for Philistine women (chs 14, 16). Having been seduced by Delilah, he was imprisoned at Gaza. He died in the collapse of Dagon's temple, praying that the Lord would permit him to get revenge (16:28–30). He was buried in his father's tomb in the territory of Dan (16:31).⁶

Epilogue to Judges, chapters 17–21

The cyclical nature of Israel's existence was without movement. *Rest from enemies was always temporary.* Israel was not yet ready for dynastic kingship, and whatever one may say of the three years of Abimelech, it was a kingship of the worst sort. Israel vacillated between idolatry and belief in the true Lord. The period of the judges was unstable, marked by petty individualism and provincialism. Yet God remained sovereign in the affairs of his people. The epilogue contains two stories: the story of Micah and the Danite migration (chs 17–18) and the civil war (chs 19–21). The epilogue is bound together by the phrase “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25, niv). The symmetric recurrence (two times in each narrative) emphasizes the anarchy and inability of the tribes to unite together to serve God as a covenant people.

⁶ Tyndale Bible Dictionary, pp. 759–761.

Micah and the Danites. 17–18. Micah was an Ephraimite who established a shrine and hired one of his own sons, and then a Levite from Bethlehem, to serve as its priests (ch 17). Unable to keep their patrimony, the Danites left to establish themselves at the foot of Mt Hermon. They took the idols and the Levite from Micah's shrine and set up a cultic city at the newly established city of Dan, built on the ruins of Laish (ch 18). Thus, they set up a cultic center that rivaled the tabernacle at Shiloh (18:31).

The Civil War. 19–21. The people of Gibeah, which belonged to Benjamin, sexually abused the concubine of a Levite so that she died. Like the Levite of chapters 17 and 18, she was from Bethlehem (19:1). Dramatically, the Levite sent pieces of her corpse to all the tribes, which assembled against the Benjamites because they protected the criminals of Gibeah (19:29–20:19). In the ensuing battle the population of Benjamin was decimated (20:20–48).

In a cultural procedure strange to modern western cultures the other 11 tribes gave the Benjaminite's 400 virgins taken in a civil war against Jabesh-gilead (21:6–15). These were not enough to reverse the threat of the extinction of Benjamin so the Israelites devised a plan by which the Benjamites could take Israelite virgins from the festival at Shiloh. Benjamin was thus able to rebuild its population, towns, and settlements."⁷

⁷ *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, p. 761.