

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Judges

June 2, 2013

At the end of Joshua, the tribes of Israel were in the land Yahweh had promised to the patriarchs. They had subdued some of the enemies, but not all. Ultimately they would become a nation with a king, but not for two hundred years or more. The interval, when the tribes were learning to live together and to meet the problems of living with Canaanite cities in their midst and hostile nations on their borders, is known as “the period of the Judges.” The story is told in the book of Judges.

When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of all the land. And the people served the lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work which the Lord had done for Israel... And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them, who did not know the Lord or the work which he had done for Israel. And the people of Israel... forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers...; they went after other gods, from among the gods of the people who were round about them.... (2:6, 12)

At this point a definite concept of history was developing in the Old Testament. According to this concept, the things that happened to Israel were all inter related and specifically related to the acts of Yahweh.

Yahweh had brought his people from Egypt to fulfill the covenant he had made with them. Part of this covenant is expressed by the “angel of the Lord” at Bochim: “You shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars” (2:2); but Israel had disobeyed the Lord. Many cities were not conquered, and many altars were left standing. So the angel of the Lord continues: “I will not drive them out before you” (v. 3), and later: “Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them...” (3:1). In other words, the disobedience of the Israelites would become the means whereby God would bring them to a deeper understanding of the election purpose and a deeper understanding of his relationship to Israel. The testing will demonstrate clearly the twofold truth that Yahweh is faithful to the covenant even though his people are not, and that when they call upon him he will save them.

What is a “Judge”? The book gets its name from the eleven or twelve persons in its pages who “judged” Israel. The term “Judge” is apt to be misleading, for these persons, except on rare occasions, are not at all like the modern concept of the judge. Normally they did not hold court, nor was their main task to hear complaints or make legal decisions. The elders or family heads usually did so in the social sphere, while priests were the final interpreters of religious law. The “Judges” here were military leaders or deliverers.

Chapter 3 furnished a useful paradigm for understanding succeeding accounts of the Judges. Here Israel dwells among the other peoples of the land, intermarries, and serves the pagan gods (vv. 5f.). This intermingling is evil in Yahweh’s eyes, and his anger is kindled against them. He brings against them Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia, who oppresses them (or they serve him) for eight years (vv. 7f.). Then the Israelites cry to Yahweh, who raises up for them a “deliverer,” Othniel, brother of Caleb. “The Spirit of the Lord came upon him and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand” (vv. 9f.). Then the land “had rest” (v. 11). The pattern established here and followed in the stories of other judges is this:

The people “do evil” by serving other gods.
Yahweh sends a nation to oppress them.
The people cry to Yahweh.
He raises up a deliverer.
The oppressor is defeated.
The people have rest.

Not all parts are mentioned each time, but in general the pattern is the same (cf. vv. 12-30; 4:1-24; 5:31b).

The “Judge,” then, was a charismatic leader, raised up by Yahweh, on whom his Spirit came to empower the “Judge” to deal with a certain situation. He was not a king and did not establish a dynasty or ruling family. The Judge was the person – man or woman (for Deborah, too, was one) – selected by Yahweh to drive out the oppressor and give the land rest.

Chronology of Judges. The book of Judges contains numerous references to periods of time. For example, after the deliverance from Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia (3:10), the land had “rest” for 40 years (v. 11). Then the people sinned again and were delivered into the hand of Eglon, king of Moab, for 18 years (v. 14). The Israelites cried to the Lord, who delivered them by sending Ehud and

the land had rest for 80 years (v. 30). Added together, the time references in Judges total 410 years.

There are serious obstacles to accepting these dates. If the entrance into Canaan took place *ca.* 1250, what is to be done with the figures in Judges? Two different approaches have been attempted. In one, the figures are taken as “round numbers,” since 40, 80, and 20 occur several times. Interspersed with them, however, are others – 18, 8, 7, 3, 6 – and it would be questionable exegesis to ignore these. Moreover, even “round” numbers must mean something; 410 hardly can be reduced to about 200 and the numbers still be taken seriously.

A second approach is to look upon the various periods of oppression and the corresponding judgeships as local and overlapping. Since Israel was composed of twelve tribes, however, no one of them was able to get all the people to follow his or her leadership. At this time, the tribe was more important than the people as a whole. There was little, if any, national unity. It was not until the monarchy of David that tribal feeling began to take second place to national feeling. Even then, tribal feelings were not completely dead.

The nations that oppressed Israel were situated on various sides or in various parts of Canaan. Jabin “king of Canaan” ruled Hazor in the north; the conflict was in the Plain of Esraelon (4:2, 4) and only a few northern tribes were involved (vv. 6, 10). The Midianite attacks came from the east (6:3), and, although their raiding extended to Gaza (v. 4), the conflict took place in the valley of Jezreel (Esdraelon) and involved northern tribes (vv. 34f.). The Ammonite oppression was in Gilead in Transjordan; it then extended into central Palestine (10:8f.), but Jephthah was from Gilead (11:1), and the conflict was in Transjordan (vv. 29-33). The oppression of the Philistines, when Samson was Judge, was localized in the southwest. Thus no compelling reason exists to reject the view that the Judges were raised up to meet more or less regional situations; if so, the period of “rest” in one region could have overlapped the “oppression” in another.

Author. Nowhere does the book give any indication of the author. According to Jewish tradition, it was written by Samuel, but few scholars are willing to accept this.

Who Are the Judges?

Othniel (Judges 3:7-11)

Ehud, the Left-Handed Benjaminite (Judges 3:12-30)

Shamgar, the Man with the Goad (Judges 3:31)

The oppressors were the Philistines. Shamgar is said to have used an ox-goad, a sharpened stick used to prod the oxen as they plowed the fields, to kill 600 Philistines.

Deborah and Barak: Women's Liberation in the Twelfth Century B.C.E. (Judges 4:1-5:31)

Deborah's role was to rally the people to fight against the enemy. Barak served as her general, but he refused to go unless she went with him. She agreed, but she told him that a woman would get the glory for winning the battle (4:6-10).

Gideon: The Master of the Surprise Attack (Judges 6:1-8:35)

More stories are told about Gideon than about any other judge except Samson.

Abimelech: A Nobody Who Thought He Was Somebody (Judges 9:1-25)

Jephthah: A Man Who Made a Foolish Vow and Kept It (Judges 10:6-12:7)

Jephthah rallied the people around him and prepared for war. Before he began the battle, he vowed that if he were successful, he would sacrifice to the Lord the first thing he saw when he returned from the battle. He was successful. When he returned, the first thing he saw was his daughter. He kept his vow, thus giving the only clear example in the Old Testament of an Israelite practicing human sacrifice to the Lord (11:29-40). Such a practice was strongly denounced by all the great prophets of Israel.

Three other minor judges – *Ibzan* (12:8-10), *Elon* (12:11-12), and *Abdon* (12:13-15) – are mentioned before Samson is introduced.

Samson: A Brilliant Failure (Judges 13:1-16:31)

The story of Samson has been told and retold. What is to be made of a man who cavorted with Philistine women and finally let the woman who had betrayed him three times know the secret of his strength (ch. 16)?

The story of Samson's birth is somewhat similar to that of Samuel (1 Samuel 1). It comes as the result of the prayer and faith of his parents. At birth he is dedicated as a Nazirite (cf. Numbers 6), specifically bound to the instruction that "no razor shall come upon his head" (Judges 13:5; 16:17). Yahweh blesses the child, and the Spirit is in him (13:24f.). Samson demands that his father arrange a marriage with a Philistine girl. ("His father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord; for he was seeking an occasion against the Philistines" [14:4].) Before the ceremony is over, the wedding gives way to the first of his personal campaigns against the Philistines (vv 10-20). Following several other exploits, the story of Samson and Delilah presents the tragic end of Samson. By Delilah's deceit and collusion with the Philistine "lords" and by Samson's folly or stupidity, the secret of his great strength is discovered, and his hair is cut while he sleeps. His strength gone, the Philistines are able to bind him, put out his eyes, and imprison him. But they unwisely let his hair grow, and, in a final burst of strength accompanied by a cry to Yahweh, Samson collapses a Philistine temple by pulling away the pillars that support the roof, killing a large number of Philistines (16:18-31).

Central Truth. The lesson from each of the Judges is, above all, that those who are dedicated to Yahweh can be used by Yahweh. Elements in their lives may not be in keeping with the Lord's will. Their methods may not stand up as exemplary. But these matters can be resolved by later revelation of what Yahweh is like and what he desires of his people.

God Is the Savior. Though the Judges are called "Savior," obviously in the mind of the author God is the Savior. He hears the cry of his people, and on each occasion raises up a Judge whom he endows with his Spirit.

View of History. The book includes a series of reminders of the constant loyalty of God in the face of the Canaanite testings, which basically form an internal problem of God's people.

Summary of the Book of Judges. The Book of Judges is summarized quite well by its final verse: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

Lasor, William S., David A. Hubbard, and Frederic W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982)

John H. Tullock, *The Old Testament Story* (Prentice Hall, Inc., 2000)