

Judges - Introduction

The Dark Days of Israel



By Isaac Humphrey

Summary

The book of Judges is one of the darkest in the Bible, because God and his people are distanced. It is dark, not because of the actions of God, but because of the rebellion of man and the pursuit of false gods. It is a period that begins with the last days of Joshua and goes through cycles of oppression and deliverance which culminates in anarchy. Hope is renewed at the last with the greatest judge - Samuel.

Introduction - The Days of Joshua

During the days of Joshua, who was Moses' successor as Military Leader/Governor, the Israelites made a glorious start. They defeated king after king and took city after city; towards the end of Joshua's life, however, they ran out of energy and commitment to God's will.

As the tribes settled into their partially conquered territories, they lost their common bond, and their common religion, allowing regionalism to set in.

At the same time, the Israelites began to become fatally interested in the deities of their Canaanite neighbors and subjects. The Israelite tribes started to worship these strange new deities and quite ignore the inconvenient code of the true God. As Israel left the LORD, the LORD left Israel - and the apostate generation found themselves weak and began to be attacked and plundered by the surrounding nations.

During these times of distress, the children of Israel remembered their God, the God who had rescued them out of Egypt, and they turned back to him. God had pity on his people and would choose one of them to partner with to save a tribe or several tribes from their oppressors. During the days of deliverance and the subsequent life of the deliverer who became a leader and a judge, the Israelites would stay faithful to the LORD. The generation afterward would become re-interested in foreign deities and forget about the God who rescued their fathers, thus beginning the cycle all over again.

The Deliverers, or Judges, were not necessarily judges of all Israel but often appear to have rescued and judged one tribe or groups of tribes. Sometimes, the text indicates that their administration reached out to all of Israel even though their deliverance only extended to one area. As time progresses and regionalism seems to triumph, the Judges eventually become regional themselves, and at least one ends up becoming the leader of infighting after his defeat of foreigners.

As each cycle of apostasy and deliverance played out, Israel began to disintegrate morally and politically. Each cycle, and eventually the judges themselves, seemed a little worse as society disintegrated.

Ultimately, Israel as a whole descended into tribal anarchy, providing a dark and depressing close to the end of the book of Judges when “each man did that which was right in his own eyes.”

The period of the Judges continued beyond the book and ended on a bright note with a prophet, priest, and judge named Samuel, who restored Israel to God and began the period of the United Monarchy.

Early Judges

After Joshua’s death, Israel needed a new leader, especially as a foreigner from Mesopotamia was subjugating the land - which was due to Israel’s first wave of apostasy and God’s withdrawal of protection. This new leader was a relative (brother or nephew) of Caleb named Othniel. He was successful in facing and defeating the foreign invader and establishing 40 years of peace for Israel.

On Othniel’s death, the Moabites become the new unwitting punishers of Israel’s apostasy when they took over Jericho with the help of their Ammonite and Amalekite allies. Moabite domination continued for almost two decades until a rough, left-handed Benjamite named Ehud became the deliverer.

Ehud hatched a daring assassination plot that took advantage of his natural left-handedness. This particular assassination aimed at killing the chief figure in the domination of Israel in hopes of raising a successful revolt when their oppressor’s mechanism of state was in chaos. Ehud finagled himself into the position of tribute-bearer for Israel, or at least the area around and including Benjamin. He made a trip to Eglon, who was the big and fat king of Moab. After handing over the taxes, Ehud managed to convince Eglon that he had a ‘message from God’ that he must deliver in private to the Moabite king. Eglon, who appears to have been a bit naive, dismissed the servants and remained alone with Ehud.

The Benjamite had hidden a dagger on the opposite side of his person as would be normal and flashed it out with his left hand making a quick stab at the Moabite king and making a similarly fast get-away. Ehud had the presence of mind to lock the doors on the corpse (which delayed the discovery of the murder until Ehud was well away) and hi-tail it to the Mt. Ephraim area, where he promptly raised a revolt.

He decisively defeated Moab and then judged Israel.

After Ehud’s death, Israel again plunged into trouble. The Canaanites resurfaced and recovered from Israelite domination and quite turned the tables. Under the leadership of King Jabin of Hazor and his 900 iron chariots led by his intrepid general Sisera the Canaanites took over Israel and put them under the yoke of oppression.

During the 20 years that Jabin ruled, resistance developed in Central Israel (perhaps this was the region where Jabin's rule was the strongest, or even confined to the area). The revolt began with a prophetess named Deborah, who judged and counseled Israel from beneath the shade of an Ephraimite Palm tree. As king Jabin had his general Sisera, so to did Judge Deborah have a general named Barak. Jabin and Sisera were proud and haughty; Deborah was calm and confident - but Barak needed some encouragement. Barak was from Naphtali, a tribe north of Ephraim and closer to Hazor. Barak was intimidated by Sisera's impressive forces and refused to take a stand without Deborah by his side.

Deborah saw the upcoming battle with the eyes of faith and prophecy. She gave Barak the encouragement he needed but let him know that the battle would be to God's credit and the killing of the enemy general to a woman. Though most of the northern tribes were summoned, only a few showed up to the battle.

The rebels clashed with Sisera and his iron chariots at Mt. Tabor on the northeast side of the valley of Jezreel. God brought a victory to the Israelite rebels, and the Canaanite army broke up. Sisera struck out on foot, stopping at a friendly tent a good distance to the northeast of Tabor. A woman named Jael was present (her husband was on friendly terms with Jabin).

Seeing that victory was not with Sisera this time, she decided not to risk anything for a lone enemy general. Jael waited till Sisera was asleep and then promptly murdered him. The victory was due to God and the death of the enemy leader to a woman, so what credit does Barak get? He deserves credit for showing up because not everybody did. Zebulun, Naphtali, Benjamin, Ephraim, Issachar, and part of Manasseh sent volunteers, but Ruben, Dan, Asher, and East Manasseh did not. We cannot be sure if Judah and Simeon were called or ignored.

This decisive victory ended the Canaanite domination and brought 40 years of peace to Israel.

The Gideon Era

There was a new oppressor in Israel, a hoard of adventurers from Midian. They filled the land: devastating Israelite croplands and commerce, eating up Israel's store like a plague of grasshoppers.

Israel cried out to God, and God told them that they were disobedient - serving the deities of the Amorites and other surrounding nations. But the LORD has mercy on them and decides to deliver them. God also chooses a man to partner with in this enterprise. The individual was an unsuspecting pauper named Gideon, whose goal in life was to scrape together some food that the Midianites wouldn't find; he was probably as surprised at his appointment as Israel was.

It was an Angel of the LORD that gave Gideon his commission, and even this was bare-

ly enough to assure Gideon that God was really going to help him accomplish Israel's deliverance. His first instructions were to purify his own village from the idol desecrating it - the root cause of Israel's present troubles. Gideon quailed a bit but went ahead and did the deed at night. Though this deed was not popular in his home village, Gideon's tribe and a few other northern ones were willing to follow his lead when a Midianite invasion threatened. Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali were all summoned, and the other tribes were ignored.

Even when Gideon was assured of the support of his countrymen, he was still unsure of God's support. He required a couple of miracles to restore his confidence.

Gideon probably thought that his army of 32,000, assembled from the tribes who responded to his call, was a bit too small compared to the gigantic Midianite host. God thought it was too large. First, about two-thirds were sent home because they were too afraid, and then when Gideon was really stepping out on faith with only 10,000 men, God sent most of those home as well, and only 300 were left.

It turns out that God's plan is not to use the 300 to do any superhero stunts: but rather to initiate a surprise night attack with trumpets, smashing pottery, and a great shout. God throws the Midianite army into massive confusion, and in sudden panic, they attack each other.

As the Midianite army is routed, Israelites come pouring out to help speed the retreat and gather the plunder. The Ephraimites were very offended that Gideon had not invited them to the initial muster and adopted a threatening attitude. Nor was tribal jealousy the only factor that threatened to divide Israel on the day of victory. A couple of cities (Succoth and Penuel) in the path of the route refused to provision Gideon's force or help him in any way as they thought his success only temporary and feared a Midianite resurgence and reprisal. Gideon told them he'd teach them a lesson and pressed on after the fleeing Midianites. The Ephraimites captured a couple of Midianite princes, and Gideon pressed on after two kings. These he killed and then returned to wreak vengeance on the disloyal cities of Succoth and Penuel.

At the close of this spectacular deliverance, the grateful Israelites turned to Gideon as their deliverer and begged him to be their king. Gideon refused the title and pointed Israel towards God as their king.

One of Gideon's many sons did not have such scruples and set about to make himself king on his father's death. He began by killing all but one of his brothers to prevent possible rivals.

This son, named Abimelech, convinced his relatives in the Central Israelite city of Shechem in Manasseh to set him up as king. He chose Shechem as his capital and fancied himself the ruler of the whole of Israel, though his sway appears only to be over

Shechem and its neighborhood.

Abimelech and Shechem did not stay on good terms, and God used them both to punish each other for their ungrateful and cruel treatment of Gideon's sons.

The Shechemites decide that they hold the keys to power and can rebel from Abimelech if they want to. So they ally with an ambitious ruffian named Gaal, who comes to town with his 'brethren' and decided to lead the rebellion against Abimelech and Shechem's governor and Abimelech's agent Zebul.

Gaal is one of those rabble-rousing, ego-busting, rebel leaders who throw a party first and think about battle second - issuing boastful challenges to his enemy and careless in his preparations. The despised Zebul is more on top of things. He is a faithful lieutenant of Abimelech and passes on the intelligence of Gaal's doings as well as an action plan to his master. Abimelech follows this scheme and ambushes the city. Gaal does not see this ambush until the army is almost on the city and then rushes out to fight in his careless fashion.

He loses the battle to Abimelech, who promptly destroys Shechem and levels it to the ground, burning down its stronghold with the remaining defenders. The spirit of rebellion spread further than Shechem, and Abimelech attacks another city called Thebez and its principal tower/stronghold.

In this siege, Abimelech gets what is coming to him; he is mortally wounded by a stone thrown on him by a woman in the tower and begs his armor-bearer to finish him off so his death will not be so disgraceful.

Thus perished the first king in Israel - whose career did not attract any perpetrators; no other adventurer we know of tried to usurp monarchical authority.

The Wild Judges

As the cycle of the judges continued (apostasy, oppression, deliverance, repeating), Israel seems to have steadily declined, each cycle worse than the one before it, until even the judges themselves are ignorant of God's laws and are compromised by sin.

There are two other judges after the days of Gideon and Abimelech, but nothing is recorded about them except their names and a few peculiarities.

In this period, after the two obscure judges, we are introduced to a nation that will be Israel's arch-enemies until the days of the united monarchy when they were subdued - the Philistines. The Philistines were the iron-working, sea-going, strong-fighting western neighbors of Israel.

While the Philistines were becoming a growing threat, Israel still had to deal with its eastern neighbors. The Ammonites invaded central Israel east of the Jordan - the land of Gilead. The Gileadites repudiated their idols and turned to God for mercy and assistance. It is not recorded that they turned to God to choose a leader; since no respect-

able member of the community volunteered to lead Gilead against their oppressors, the elders turned to an unlikely character. His name was Jephthah, and he was an outlaw and an outcast; he was the captain of a band of wilderness robbers. On being asked to be the leader of Gilead, Jephthah naturally retorted that they were the ones who had driven him out. Why come begging to him now that they were in trouble? The elders do not answer but promise Jephthah they will make him their ruler if he assists them.

God decides to work through Jephthah. Jephthah reached out to God with a vow¹, and God aided him. The Ammonites were defeated and subdued.

Jephthah was a rough man, not the same caliber as the judges before him. He is not as fully cognizant of God's laws and principles as he should have been; he does not set up a judgeship over the land. His story - especially the war with Ephraim, and his rash vow, is indicative of how far Israel had fallen and drifted from God's law.

As soon as this great deliverance is granted through Jephthah, strife breaks out. The tribe of Ephraim, ever jealous of preeminence and deeds of military valor, took great offense at Jephthah's failure to call them to the battle. They had not a second thought about beginning a civil war right after the deliverance of a brother tribe from foreign oppression.

Jephthah turned his forces to battle the aggressive Ephraimites and seized the fords of Jordan. A clever test was employed to catch any Ephraimites who were passing through. Taking advantage of regional dialects, a Gileadite border guard demanded of the passing traveler: "Say Shibboleth" if the traveler was an Ephraimite, they invariably pronounced it "Sibboleth," and the unfortunate man would be drug off and killed. Thus, during the judgeship of Jephthah, we see Israel beginning to infight and break apart.

Next, we are presented with a few obscure judges before coming to the last of the 'wild judges.' As troubled as he was, Jephthah consistently enjoyed at least the cooperation of his own tribe; the next judge, Sampson, did not even have that. He was a loner. At least there was one tribe in Israel that appreciated Jephthah's deliverance of them from a foreign oppressor, but Sampson's work was done alone, and his own tribe viewed him as a threat and betrayed him to their oppressors - Israel's new seafaring oppressors the Philistines.

The judges usually seem to be called later in life, but God marked Sampson for a special role from his birth. He was to live the life of a Nazarite² - abstinence from wine, abstinence from shaving of the head, and avoidance of dead bodies. Sampson was supposed to live a life holy and dedicated to God.

But, as he came of age, such was not the life he led. His first act on record was to marry a Philistine woman, stopping on his way to the wedding to mess with a dead lion. Yet

God was working through these actions to defeat the Philistines. Sampson's Philistine wife became a source of trouble between him and them. Sampson attacked them in revenge for manipulating his wife, then giving his wife to someone else, and finally for killing her (a failed attempt on their part to appease Sampson and revenge themselves on what they viewed as the source of their trouble).

Sampson's story is unique from the other judges who called Israel to battle and won a decisive victory. Sampson's story is that of a lone hero - a 'superman' - who performs great and miraculous deeds of individual valor.

Sampson was a loner - his own tribe of Judah rejected him and tried to hand him over to their Philistine overlords.

Sampson's relations with the Philistines were literally 'love-hate.' He loved their women but hated their nation when they messed with him. Sampson's weakness for enemy women was, not unnaturally, the cause of his departure from God and his downfall in the end.

When he fell in love with a Philistine named Delilah, and as soon as she and Sampson started getting together, the Philistine Lords got involved. They ordered and bribed Delilah to find out how Sampson could perform his miraculous stunts and attacks on them; Delilah agreed.

Even when it became abundantly obvious what his new girlfriend was trying to do, Sampson still hung around. He kept visiting Delilah even though each visit involved her prying at his secrets and ended with her attempting to hand him over to the Philistines. In each case, Sampson fed her false information about what would magically weaken him, and in each case, he busted right out of her traps with his full strength undiminished.

But at last, Sampson told Delilah that the secret of his strength was a dedication to God expressed in the one unbroken part of his Nazarite vows - his unshaven head. Delilah promptly shaved him, and he fell into the hands of the vengeful Philistines. But while in Prison, Sampson's hair was left alone, and when it began to grow again, he had strength for one final attack on the Philistines in which he killed them but was killed himself as well.

Sampson is the last of the judges before Israel entered a period of anarchy and internal dissension. Sampson is the segway to that period. He was a bit of an unruly individual himself; his shocking moral lapses, wild nature, lone profile, and coming and going between friend and foe are unlike previous judges' conduct. He seems to typify the people of his age, demonstrating the low character of Israel at that time.

Anarchy

There comes a period in Israel's history where "each man did what was right in his own

eyes,” and individual, community, and tribal anarchy reigned. There were a few memories of the law of Moses and still a basic sense of decency in at least a few communities. This period is the darkest period of the ‘judges’ era and one in which selfishness, strife, and evil have a heyday. It is hard to know the exact dating of this period, as we are only given a series of vignettes to demonstrate the state of Israel.

The first scene is a story from the life of an Israelite named Micah. We don’t know much about him or why his story is included; it does appear he was probably somewhat rich. Micah decided it was time for him to get religious. Perhaps he was feeling guilty about stealing a bunch of silver from his Mom or afraid of the curses she had called down on the thief. Micah confessed his crime, and his mother was very forgiving, saying that she had meant the money for him all along. Mom had dedicated the silver to God for her son, and so they decided to take some of it and do something pious. So, they built an idol and a shrine.

Though seemingly ignorant of the ten commandments (or at least the first one), Micah remembers that you should have a Levite as a priest. So when a wandering Levite comes along, Micah engages him to run the idol shrine and goes to bed that night with a light heart. “Then Micah said, ‘Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because I have a Levite as a priest.’” Judges 17:13 NASB.

Well, as it turns out, gods of silver and priests are not safe when anarchy is afoot, and Micah wakes up one morning to find that the whole tribe of Dan came rampaging through in search of territory and taking his idol and priest along with them. Micah’s Levite is happy because the Danites promised him this would be a promotion (priest for one family to priest for a whole tribe!). When Micah confronts them about the theft, they reply in the spirit of the times: “Do not let your voice be heard among us, or else fierce men will attack you, and you will lose your life and the lives of your household.” Judges 18:25.

The Micah episode is but an introduction to the depravity and anarchy of the period. The next vignette is of the ‘Benjamite War,’ which began with the rape and murder of a traveling woman by some depraved Benjamites. Her husband dissects the body and sends it to the other tribes in hopes of getting justice. This starts a bloody fight between the other tribes of Israel and Benjamin, in which the latter tribe is almost annihilated. The rest of Israel then feels sorry for Benjamin and realizes that the remaining Benjamites need wives. They decide the best solution is to massacre an Israelite city that did not participate in this latest war and spare a few women for wives for the Benjamites. When this does not satisfy the need, then they concoct a kidnapping scheme to finish the job.

Thus the book of judges ends at the bottom of anarchy and spiritual depression.

The period of the Judges does contain episodes of peace and is not all ‘blood and

gore.'

We have a touching story of a woman who becomes the ancestor of Israel's future king David.

Her name was Ruth, and her story takes place during a period of peace in Bethlehem in the tribe of Judah. We do not know at what time or under what Judge Ruth's life story took place, but since she was David's great-grandmother, she could probably have lived under one of the later judges.

Her life began in the land of Moab as a native Moabitess. She marries a sojourning Jew whose mother is named Naomi. When her husband dies, and her mother-in-law decides to return home, Ruth follows her mother-in-law and refuses to leave her.

Bethlehem is a quiet community, and Ruth settles down to the life of a poor widow, gleaning grain in harvests and taking care of her mother-in-law as best she can. During one of her gleanings, she met the owner of the field, Boaz, who happened to be a relative of Naomi's.

Boaz eventually marries Ruth, and their great-grandson becomes the second king of Israel. Boaz was very careful to observe the laws regarding marriage to a widow, which shows that knowledge of the Mosaic law was not dead during the time of the judges, even though it was not carefully observed for most of the period.

The Last Great Judge

During the lifetime of Ruth's grandson Jesse, Israel achieves unity and revival under its last great judge - Samuel. This last of the judges was the greatest because it was he who, because of his close walk with God, effected a spiritual and national revival that had not been since the days of Joshua. He restored Israel to a pure worship of God, begun Israel's liberation from the Philistines, and set up the first monarchy.

Samuel had been dedicated to God from his birth. Like Sampson before him, he was a life-long Nazarite, but unlike Sampson, he was a man of blameless life and reputation. He grew up in the corrupt household of the chief priest Eli. He was a prophet from a young age and grew to be a priest and a judge. This prophet, priest, and judge confronted all Israel about their idolatry and brought about a thorough religious restoration which was followed by a national victory over the oppressive Philistines. After this, the land settled down to a peaceful existence under Samuel's upright administration. Samuel held a circuit court in the principal cities of central Israel, but his influence was felt throughout the whole land.

But as Samuel grew older, he tried to pass the 'judgeship' down to his sons. Samuel's sons had turned out corrupt - similar to the corrupt sons of Eli that Samuel had grown

up with. Perhaps it was because Samuel's father figure was Eli, and perhaps Eli's parenting style influenced that of Samuel. Or it could be that Samuel's sons had just rebelled. Whatever the case, Israel did not want a continuation of the period of the judges and wanted something stable and relevant. No more spontaneous appointment of a judge; it is a monarchy that predictably passes from father to son that Israel wants. They saw that their neighbors had monarchies and wanted to be relevant. Obviously, Samuel's dynasty would not do, so they asked him to pick another family to rule them. Samuel went to God with this request, and God granted Israel a king. Samuel anointed Israel's first king - a man named Saul - and continued as his mentor for a time. Samuel also anointed Israel's second king, a boy named David, when Saul failed to be obedient to God.

Thus with Samuel's life ends the period of the judges, and a new and brighter chapter of Israel's history begins.

Footnotes:

¹ Footnote on the vow: the actions of a wild outlaw on the borders of Israel who was doubtless more acquainted with the customs of the Canaanites than the law of the Lord ought not to be construed as the ideas or wishes of God. God is clear throughout the Old Testament of his view of human sacrifice, but he is also clear throughout the Old Testament that his people did not always obey him.

² There were two Nazarite judges - Sampson and Samuel - what a contrast!