Judges

ORIENTING DATA FOR JUDGES

- **Content:** the cyclical narrative of the time of the judges, with emphasis on Israel's repeated lack of covenant loyalty

- **Historical coverage:** from the death of Joshua to the beginning of the monarchy

- **Emphases:** the tenuous results of the conquest; God's constant rescue of his people, despite their habitual failure to keep covenant with him; the desperate conditions and overall downward spiral during this period; the need for a good king

OVERVIEW OF JUDGES

The book of Judges, which tells the story of Israel between Joshua and the beginning of the kingship (1 Samuel), is a carefully composed narrative in three essential parts:

1:1–3:6   Introduction: An "overture" setting forth the main themes

3:7–16:31   Main Narrative Cycle: A series of "variations" on the themes

17:1–21:25   Epilogue: A "coda" illustrating the primary theme

As you read, be looking for the ways these various parts interplay with each other so that the whole narrative presents a vivid picture of the times, concluding with the repeated refrain that much of this is related to Israel's not having a king.

The introduction is in two parts. Part 1 (1:1–2:5), which picks up and enhances some of the conquest narrative from Joshua, has two emphases, both found in the conclusion (2:1–5)—(1) that God did not break covenant with Israel, but that they broke covenant with him by not driving out the Canaanites (1:21, 27–36), and (2) that God will no longer come to their aid in this cause; instead, the Canaanites "will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you" (2:3). Thus this part gives the basic reason for what follows.

Part 2 (2:6–3:6) rehearses in summary form how the narrative will unfold. Here the basic Deuteronomic cycle is introduced:

1. Israel does evil in the eyes of Yahweh by serving the Canaanite Baals (2:11–13).
2. They experience Yahweh's anger in the form of failure in battle and oppression by their enemies (vv. 14–15).

3. The people cry out in their distress, and God rescues them by sending a judge-deliverer (vv. 16, 18).
4. When the judge dies, the cycle begins all over again (vv. 17, 19–23).

You will notice that the epilogue is also in two parts, giving in gruesome detail case studies of Israel's syncretism and failure to keep covenant with their God.

Between these two framing sections lies the main narrative itself, in which the cycle is repeated again and again, but with the emphasis on the stories of deliverance. Common to these stories is that God stands behind all deliverance, even though the deliverers themselves are seldom shining examples of devotion to Yahweh!

This central series appears to be carefully constructed, presenting twelve "judges" corresponding to the number of Israelite tribes. It begins with Othniel, whose story is told only in summary and as a pattern for the rest. This is followed by the exploits of five judges (Ehud, Deborah/Barak, Gideon/Abimelech, Jephthah, and Samson), interspersed with what amounts to a list of other such judge-deliverers (Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon). This series is framed by accounts of two loners (Ehud, a Benjamite; Samson, a Danite). In the inner frame of stories (Deborah/Barak, Jephthah) deliverance is dependent on a woman and an outcast/outlaw. At the center is the account of Gideon and his son Abimelech (whose name means "father of the king"), and here surface the two central issues in the narrative: Who is the true God? Who is Israel's king? The narratives of Samuel and Kings pick it up from there.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING JUDGES

So that you keep focused as you read Judges, you need to know three things in advance. First, the word traditionally translated "judges" (*shophetim*) does not in this book refer primarily to judicial officials (although the word does carry that sense; see, e.g., Exod 18:13). Rather they were military leaders and clan chieftains whom God used to deliver Israel from enemies who threatened parts of Israel over a long period of time. Hence the NIV compromises by translating the noun in the traditional way, but uses "lead/led" for the verb.

Second, even though such terms as "led Israel" and "the Israelites" regularly appear, you should not imagine that each (or any) of these judges was the leader of all Israel in the same sense that Moses and Joshua were. In fact, as the stories unfold, you will recognize that part of the concern of the narrator is that precisely the opposite is true—that one or several tribes are oppressed and call on other tribes for help, which sometimes comes and sometimes doesn't, often resulting in intertribal strife. The irony of the narrative is that only at the end, in a case of intertribal disciplinary warfare, are all twelve tribes "united," as it were. Note, for example, the stinging words in Deborah's song about Reuben (5:15–16), who in a time of crisis and after "much searching of heart" stayed home "to hear the whistling for the flocks."

Third, and related to this, is the matter of overall chronology. You will note that chronological language is frequently employed ("after the time of …" and "the land had peace for … years") and that the overall scheme reflects the history of the times, beginning with sporadic oppression (Moab in the east) and concluding with Philistine oppression, which is where the Samuel narrative picks up. Even so, you should not think of all of this as happening in chronological order. Peace in one place does not mean peace in another. And the parenthetical

note in 20:27–28 sets that story very early on in the period (the priest at Bethel is Aaron's grandson). The point is that the narrator is not as interested in a time line as such, as in the overall picture of the times he is portraying.

But the one chronological matter that is crucial to his narrative is the gradual but unrelenting deterioration of things in Israel down to the time of Samuel. This is portrayed first of all by the structure itself, with its concluding stories in chapters 17–21. It is also reflected in the portrayal of the six major judges. The portrayals of Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah are basically positive, despite some subterfuge on the part of Ehud and Jael (4:18–21). But beginning with Gideon, things begin to tilt. The Gideon story begins well, but turns out badly in the form of an idolatrous ephod (8:24–27) and a murderous son, Abimelech (ch. 9). The Jephthah and Samson stories paint a picture of God's Spirit using less than exemplary leaders. Another way this theme is carried through is the use of "in the eyes of." Watch how each of the cycle stories begins: "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." At the end we are told what this means: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (17:6; 21:25 [NRSV]). The hinge point of this theme is an idiom that is usually expressed differently in English translation, where Samson rebelliously desires a young Philistine as his wife because (literally) "she is right in my eyes" (14:3, 7).

Yet despite all this, God's care for his people holds the story together. This is especially discernible in the repeated notice that "the Spirit of the Lord [Yahweh]"—mentioned in the opening Othniel story but absent in the Ehud and Deborah episodes—does come upon Gideon (6:34), Jephthah (11:29), and Samson (13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14). Even so, what is noticeably absent from Judges is any mention of, or even any sense of, the presence of the Lord in the midst of his people. The Tent of Meeting that Joshua set up at Shiloh (Josh 18:1) reappears there in 1 Samuel 2:22. In Judges we are told that the idolatry of the tribe of Dan continues "all the time the house of God was in Shiloh" (18:31), but Israel never consults with Yahweh there to hear from him. Israel is a people who have lost their way and their primary identity, and only God in mercy can bring order to this chaos.[1]

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[1] Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 70–73.