



The Bible Challenge

A daily guide to reading the Bible in a year

Judges

Chapters 1-21

*In those days there was
no king in Israel.
Everyone did what was
right in his own eyes.
--Judges 21:25*

Purpose

The book of Judges was written to make an apology or defense of the Jewish monarchy. The book divides in to three main sections:

1. Faltering Conquests (1-3:6)
2. Cycles and decline under the Judges (3:7-16:31)
3. Anarchy and depravity (17-21)

The structure of the book illustrates that Israel became increasingly more corrupt because of lack of faithfulness to God's word. While God raised up leaders to save and guide Israel, these provisional leaders proved to be inadequate to the people's needs for governance. Ultimately what Israel needed was a King.

Faltering Conquests (1:1-3:36)

The book of Joshua is generally a positive account of the conquest of the Land of Canaan. However, even Joshua is clear that the Israelites faltered and failed to accomplish all that the Lord had told them.

Chapter one of Judges begins with Judah's initial success in the South contending with the Canaanites. One of the important points is that the tribes worked in partnership, "Judah went with Simeon his brother"(1:17). When the tribes worked together, they succeeded. The text tells us that "the Lord was with Judah" (1:19) In spite of Judah's initial success even they did not fully accomplish the Lord's mission. "They did not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron." (1:19)

The Northern conquest did not go as well. As the writer of Judges lists the various tribes his emphasis is on the fact that "they did not drive out the inhabitants". (1:27-36)

So, these first three chapters of Judges serve as a recap of the faltering conquests of Israel. What seemed insignificant and minor failings at the time will prove to be a "thorn" in Israel's side and a "snare" to entrap them into idolatry. (2:3) The angel of the Lord recounts the faithfulness of YHWH and the rebellion of the people:



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Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, ² and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?" ³ So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you." ⁴ As soon as the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. --Judges 1:1-4

The author of the book of Judges identifies a failure in succession. Joshua and the generation who entered the land were "gathered to their fathers". The generation after them "did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel." (2:10)

Their lack of intimacy with the Lord sets up a reoccurring cycle of idolatry, judgment, distress, deliverance, ignorance back to idolatry.

Chapter 2:11-19 describes the cycle of the judges which the rest of the book will illuminate in greater detail. The provision of the judges serves to illustrate the long-suffering nature YHWH and his compassion toward Israel. Over and over again "the Lord saved them from the hand of their enemies" and was "moved to pity by their groaning" (2:18). Nevertheless, Israel's general trajectory under the judges leadership would prove to be a downward spiral.

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and





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bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

-- Judges 2:19

They did not destroy the peoples, as the LORD commanded them, but they mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did.

They served their idols, which became a snare to them.

They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was polluted with blood.

Thus they became unclean by their acts, and played the whore in their deeds.

Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people, and he abhorred his heritage; he gave them into the hand of the nations, so that those who hated them ruled over them.

--Psalm 106:34-41

Baal Worship

One of the major differences between YHWH and the other "gods" of the region was on the issue of fertility. YHWH "spoke" and the creation and its goodness came into being and brought forth increase.

The Canaanites god Baal was the fertility and storm god. His sexual exploits with his female consort, the goddess Ashtoreth, or Ashtart was the obsession of the Canaanites. Their worship consisted of priming the sexual pump of the gods fertility through temple prostitution and child sacrifice--two things which were utterly abhorrent to Holy, Holy, Holy YHWH.

It was this idolatrous worship and practice which became a snare to the Israelites as they intermarried with the Canaanite women and Israelite women married Canaanite men. Israel was called to be distinct from paganism. Spiritual amnesia produces apostasy, how does this apply to our own day and the culture around the church?

Cycles and decline and salvation under the Judges (3:7-16:31)

The central section of the book of Judges focuses on the cycle of sin and salvation. Israel sins, YHWH disciplines, Israel cries, YHWH delivers. This cycle is typified by the first judges. However, as the story of the judges unfolds, the reader will begin to notice that the judges become completely inadequate to the task of ruling Israel.



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Structure²⁵:

The Salvation of YHWH	Judges	3:7-16:31
The Paradigm of YHWH's salvation	Othniel	3:7-11
The excitement of YHWH's salvation	Ehud and Deborah	3:12-5:31
The Weakness of YHWH's Salvation	Gideon	6:1-8:32
The Antithesis of YHWH's salvation	Abimelech	8:33-9:57
The Strangeness of YHWH's Salvation	Jephthah and Sampson	10:1-16:31

Commentator Carl Armerding provides a helpful summary of the central section:

“The first five judges, all of whom, including the mysterious Shamgar, were deliverer figures., represent a time when the land enjoyed rest from conflict...(see 3:11, 30;5:31; 8:29) In contrast, the latter period is characterized by minor judges...together with the rather unorthodox deliverers Jephthah and Sampson. The land is never said to have rest and the picture is one of increasing moral, political and military decline leading to the shameful climax of events in the epilogue (chs. 17-21) The lesson is clear: a people which fails to give wholehearted obedience to the Lord can only sink lower and lower.”²⁶

A Paradigm of YHWH's Salvation: Othniel (3:7-11)

They don't get much better than Othniel of Kenaz, brother of Caleb. He defeated the Arameans and the "Spirit of the Lord was on him"(3:10). His story serves as the positive paradigm of the salvation of YHWH in cycle of the judges.

²⁵ Dale Ralph Davis, *Such a Great Salvation*, Expositions of the Book of Judges, (Baker:Grand Rapids, 1990) p. 47.

²⁶ Carl Armerding, “Judges” *The New Laymen’s Bible Commentary* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), p. 345.



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The Excitement of YHWH's Salvation

Ehud (3:12-30)

The story of Ehud is meant to entertain. As a left-handed judge Ehud kills the obese oppressor of Israel, King Eglon the King of Moab by trickery. Shamgar (3:31, 5:6) is a minor Judge who fought against the Philistines with an ox goad!

Deborah (4-5)

Deborah stands as an example of female leadership in the Bible. She is a woman tribal leader who manifests both military and legal competence. She successfully campaigned against Sisera, Canaanite general under Jabin, the King of Hazor. Barak was military leader under Deborah. But in this section it is the females that get the glory of military victory as Jael, a Kenite woman, killed Sisera by dispatching him with a tent peg through the temple! (4:21)

The encouragement in the song of Deborah is to greater intimacy with YHWH. God desires to deliver his people and destroy her enemies:

"So may all your enemies perish, O LORD! But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might." And the land had rest for forty years.
--Judges 5:31

The Weakness of YHWH's Salvation

Gideon (6-8)

Gideon came from a family of Baal worshippers. The emphasis in the story is on his fear. He is portrayed as an untrusting coward. Nevertheless God uses this weak fearful man from a small tribe to manifest his strength as a savior. In spite of Gideon's weakness and lack of faith, YHWH delivers .



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God gave Gideon a plan to defeat the Midianites. YHWH would display power in a weak force of 300 men who lap water like a dog! (7:4).

The words of Gideon are an ironic warning to Israel about the weakness of human rulers and kings:

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian." Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." --Judges 8:22-23

The sad story ended up with Israel seeking to make Gideon King over them and him and all of Israel whoring after Baal. Gideon's weak rule was the last time Israel is said to have 40 years of rest in the land. (8:28)

The Antithesis of YHWH's salvation

Abimelech (9)

The words of Gideon serve as an interpretive commentary on his son Abimelech. He was not a judge raised up by YHWH and yet he attempted to make himself king but failed. He murdered all but one of his 70 brothers. His brother offers a condemning parable about people and kingship.

It is the thorn bush that accepts rule and people accept it. They say to the bramble: "You come and reign over us." (9:15) In accepting inappropriate leadership the cedars of Lebanon have set themselves up to be burned! (9:15)

Indeed, that is precisely what happens--judgment! (9:56-57)

The lesson is for Israel (and us) is leadership selection--YHWH is king, and human leadership is lacking.



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Minor Judges: Tola and Jair (10:1-5)

While Tola and Jair are not given much ink in the bible, we see two things from their brief mention: YHWH's salvation and man's corruption. Tola was raised up to "save Israel" from the chaos and corruption of Abimelech's reign. Jair represents human tendency to expand kingdom through multiple wives and sons—the human failing of Gideon that led to Abimelech. Notice in contrast to the earlier judges there is no description of "rest" in the land under the rule of the latter judges.

Jephthah (10:6-12:7)

Jephthah was an illegitimate child and an outcast. He was the son of a prostitute and banished from his family. His family cries out to him for salvation in their time of need.

Jephthah admirably fought against the Ammonite king. The Ammonite King made issue with the tribal settlements east of the Jordan. Jephthah's recounted of the history of the relationship between the Ammonites and Moabites:

I therefore have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war on me. The LORD, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon.
--Judges 11:27

The Lord gave them into Jephthah's hand and the Ammonites were "subdued" Unfortunately, such a victory came at a great cost in two ways:

Jephthah had made a rash vow to the Lord in asking for victory and second the pride of the Ephriamite tribe led to an internal war between tribes. These faltering on the part of this judge and the tribes reveal that the salvation under judges is imperfect and inadequate.

Minor Judges: Ibzan, Elon, Abdon (12:8-15)

The reign of the these judges are minor, and seemingly insignificant. It is noteworthy that their rules were relatively short and there was not any "rest" given to Israel under their rule.



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Samson (13-16)

Under the rule of Sampson the Israelites had become complacent in their exile. No longer did they cry out in distress to YHWH as they had in prior cycles. Indeed they were content to be ruled by the Philistines. (15:11). Nevertheless, God raised up Sampson as a symbol of the salvation that comes with a godly vow.

He is born to a barren woman by promise of her vow that he would be dedicated to the Lord. Unfortunately the faithfulness of his parents was not matched by his own. Though he was a Nazarite, he broke his vows in the end because he was a womanizer and a drunk. The spirit filled Sampson is granted divine strength, the self sufficient Sampson dies a tragic death.

God helped him bring relief from the Philistines, but his fatal attraction to Delilah marked the end of the reign of the judges.

Judges are not the answer to Israel's need for rule and administration.

Anarchy and depravity (17-21)

The key to understanding the final section of the Book of Judges is this line: "In those days there was no king in Israel. everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (17:6) This will be a steady refrain in the last several chapters which make explicit Israel's need for a monarchy of YHWH's appointment.

Micah the Idolater (17-18)

The first example of total breakdown of the Israel is the crazy story of Micah. Even though his Mother says "Blessed be my son by YHWH." He sets up a household of idols and ordains his own priesthood to service his idolatry. He celebrates when a Levite is sent to him to service his own personal temple shrine--ironically thinking that it is a sigh that YHWH is prospering him! (17:13) Instead, the tribe of Dan covets Micah's little kingdom to himself and robs him of it, and his life.



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*If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few
survivors, we should
have been like Sodom,
and become like
Gomorrah. --Isaiah 1:9*

The Levite and his Concubine (19)

The next scene again demonstrates anarchy without kingly rule. The story is to be compared to the account of Sodom and Gomorrah with its violent rape and murder. The point is to illustrate just how depraved the Levites and particular tribes had become without YHWH's kingly rule:

And all who saw it said, "Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day; consider it, take counsel, and speak." --Judges 19:30

Self-Destruction and Self-Provision (20-21)

The entire assembly of the tribes comes together to to "take counsel" and determine what should be done about the evils and depravity in their midst. Instead of fighting against a common enemy. Israel now turns against itself. Israel unites to fight itself. Its own "men of valor" are falling to Israel's sword.

The tribe of Benjamin was decimated as a consequence of their anarchy. So the tribes inquire of themselves how to provide wives for the tribe of Benjamin so it would not be entirely blotted out from the twelve tribes.

The main point of this final section and the entire book of Judges is simple:

*In those days there was no king in Israel.
Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
--Judges 21:25*

Israel needs a king so that it can do what is right in YHWH's eyes!