



## Introduction to Israel's Judges

### I. Continuation of Israel's History

After the conquest of Palestine, Israel's second generation as a free nation settled into the Promised Land. The passing of Joshua left a leadership vacuum. Who would lead? No one was designated to succeed Joshua, as he had been designated to succeed Moses. For a while, the people concentrated on settling into their new homeland. Somewhat unsettling, however, were the pockets of Canaanites who remained in their midst and with whom they occasionally clashed.

G. Campbell Morgan says of this difficult period, "It is a story, on the human side, of disobedience and disaster, and on the Divine of direction and deliverance of the people" (The Analyzed Bible).

### II. Date

The Book of Judges continues the history of Israel and covers a period of roughly four-hundred years. (Compare 1 Kings 6:1 with Acts 13:20). Archeologist J. Garstang places the entry into Canaan under Joshua around 1400 B.C. If so, Judges covers a period from 1370-1050 B.C. During this time a cycle developed that would be repeated at least seven times. The people forsook the Lord for the false gods around them, fell into sin, became oppressed by an enemy, and suffered a period of bondage. Then they cried out to God who raised up a deliverer who delivered them from the enemy. This deliverer fulfilled the office of "judge" and led the people for a number of years. Different tribes went through this cycle, although not necessarily at the same time. Thirteen judges are named. The book of Judges describes the stories of eleven of the judges.

### III. Contemporary History

It was the early Iron Age. The smelting of iron had been discovered and was slowly spreading. Thus, the Bronze Age gradually gave way to the Iron Age. An iron bedstead of the giant King Og of Bashan is mentioned in Deuteronomy 3:11 (a cubit was the length of a forearm). The Canaanites had iron chariots but the Israelites had none. The Philistines had a monopoly on iron and used it to intimidate the Israelites.

Egypt was in a period of eclipse following the death of Amenhotep IV (Ikhnaton), the monotheist Pharaoh. (Could he have been influenced by the disastrous events surrounding the Hebrew exodus and the triumph of Moses' one true God over their "divine" Pharaoh and multiple gods?) Amenhotep IV had a beautiful Hittite wife, Nefertiti.

The Hittites took advantage of the power gap in Egypt to build an empire north of Israel. Not long ago, in our time, skeptical scholars vociferously denied the existence of the Hittites. Now the Biblical record of their existence is verified through archeological discoveries. The Bible, once again, was proved true and accurate in one more way.

### IV. Theme and Key Phrases

The key phrase of Judges is a description of the people's condition, *Everyone did what was right in his own eyes* (17:6, 21:25). This phrase paves the way for the Kingdom Era ahead and is accompanied by the phrase, *In those days there was no king in Israel*. Lack of consistent leadership seems to be deliberately emphasized. The "judges" were deliverers (saviors) who then governed for a while. None of the thirteen judges established a permanent government. Man's failure and God's faithfulness are evident.

The little book of Ruth, on the other hand, gives another picture of life during the time of the Judges, and is like a ray of sunshine on a dreary day.

### V. Author

The writer does not identify himself, and is not identified elsewhere, except as The Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16). However, Samuel is most likely the author. He was the last of the judges and as the prophet who anointed the first two kings he introduced the monarchy. Four times we find the phrase, *In those days there was no king in Israel* (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25).

### VI. Purpose of Judges

William R. Newell says, "It is one long story of the persistent departure from God of the people for whom He had done so much and had promised to do so much more. Utterly ignoring their calling as the people of God, and the sure blessings promised to obedience to Him, they wander from Him to the sin they love with a perpetual wandering. Neither warnings, chastenings, nor godly examples avail, and the book ends with two pictures of the iniquity of the times than which there are no darker in the Old Testament" (Old Testament Studies Volume I).

Judges records a time of spiritual and moral failure by the chosen people of God. They had the Law of Moses but had no one to enforce their keeping it: no Holy Spirit within and no authority without. Judges is a sad

book if one expects people to do good just because they should. Most of us do good because we know there is reward for goodness and punishment for wickedness. We behave better if there is a reward, or a policeman, in view.

Judges is a hopeful book in that God is faithful to provide a deliverer every time the people cry out to Him. Each time He delivers them from bondage to freedom.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is God's ultimate Deliverer who came in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4). Isaiah says, *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light* (Isaiah 9:2). In John 8:12, Jesus said *I am the Light of the world*. Matthew 1:21 says He came to save, or deliver, His people from their sins.

The purpose of the Book of Judges is twofold. One purpose is to show man's failure and God's deliverance. In this it is like a replay of mankind's failure and fall (Genesis 3) in the garden of Eden. Another purpose is to prepare the way for the monarchy, and particularly God's king, David, who is the prototype of God's ultimate King, Jesus Christ.

### Outline of the Book of Judges

#### I. Transition after Joshua - Judges 1-2

#### II. The Seven Cycles of Deliverance - Judges 3-16

- A. Delivered from Mesopotamians by Othniel - 3:1-11
- B. Delivered from Moab by Ehud and Shamgar - 3:12-31
- C. Delivered from Canaanites by Deborah - 4:1 - 5:31
- D. Delivered from Midianites by Gideon - 6:1 - 8:35
- E. Delivered from Civil War by Tola and Jair - 9:1-10:2
- F. Delivered from the Ammonites by Jephthah - 11:1-12:15
- G. Delivered from the Philistines by Samson - 13:1-16:31

#### III. Tragedy of Anarchy - Judges 17-21

Judges is particularly applicable to our time and culture which is characterized by individual freedom without corresponding individual responsibility. There is a growing lawlessness and rejection of authority with an accompanying increase in violence, and a fragmentation of peoples into groups without a unifying ethic or common traditions for the whole. According to historian Leo Tolstoy, no nation in history has endured without moral character and religious traditions. For each one to do what is right in his or her own eyes is the antithesis of freedom. It is anarchy and spells national disaster.

### Applications

1. Are you charting your life apart from God and doing what is right in your own eyes regardless of what God says about it in His word? Do you mistakenly think that you will get away with it?
2. Another characteristic of our age is addiction which is being in bondage to a substance, philosophy, or personality. It does not matter so much what or who the "enemy" is, but rather whether people can be free from it and be in control of themselves and their choices. Are you struggling against enemies of your mind and spirit without truly resisting them and getting rid of them? If so, are you in bondage to them, to habits, attitudes, old weaknesses, or areas of vulnerability? Will you cry to God for the deliverance which is already won for you by our Saviour Jesus Christ? Will you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your King and yield to His authority in your heart and life?