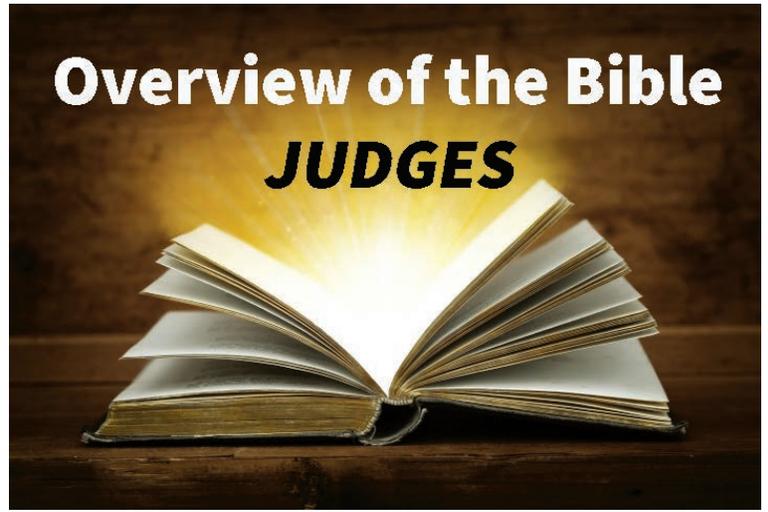


Overview of the Bible

JUDGES



JUDGES: *Judges 1-3* *Lesson 42*

Wednesday, May 12, 2021

The second book of the Former Prophets and third in the Deuteronomistic History, Judges centers on Israel's life in Canaan after the death of Joshua and before the rise of Samuel, who anoints Saul ca. 1020 B.C. as a first step toward establishing the Israelite monarchy. In the absence of a single, central leader for Israel during the bulk of these last two centuries of the 2nd millennium, God raises up "judges" who exercise judicial authority and/or provide military leadership to rid Israel of foreign oppression. The book's repeated phrase, "there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes," attests to the political and religious diversity that characterized this time in Israel's history.

Content

A two-part introduction and two-part epilogue frame the book's main body (3:7–16:31), which demonstrates the fulfillment of Joshua's prophecy that the Israelites would not be able to resist the temptation to worship foreign deities instead of serving God alone (Josh. 24:19–27; cf. God's own foretelling in Deut. 31:16–18). The cycle of Israel's losing faith, divinely sanctioned foreign oppression (= the covenantal curse), the nation's cry for help, God's deliverance, and "rest" for the land repeats itself, with some variation, in a manner that recalls Israel's recurring grumbling and disobedience answered by God's faithfulness and grace during the period of the wilderness wanderings. Israel's failure to keep God's covenant gives the reason for their failure to conquer the promised land in the kind of comprehensive way that accords with the promises given to the patriarchs and with the overall picture of the conquest portrayed in Joshua (Josh. 23:1–5; cf. Gen. 15:18–21; 28:10–15). Yet Judges picks up the Bible's overarching theme of God's continued initiative in redeeming sinful humanity.

Background

Twelve judges appear in this book, most hailing from Canaan's central hill country. Deborah's military colleague Barak, the Kenite heroine Jael, and Gideon's son Abimelech also figure prominently, but they do not serve as judges. Five "minor" judges receive only brief biographical information. The careers of the remaining seven "major" judges appear varied in character. Deborah renders judicial decisions, Jephthah leads a tribal military coalition, and Samson carries out personal vendettas. Most of the major judges display serious moral flaws evidenced in behavior such as sexual promiscuity (Samson) and idolatry (Gideon). The shortcomings of these divinely appointed leaders highlight more intensely God's work of pure grace and mercy in delivering the entire nation of undeserving Israelites from the curses they have called on themselves as a result of their covenantal disobedience. Indeed, only once in Judges do we see the Israelites repent of their sins (10:10–16). Hebrews 11:32 singles out Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah for their commendable faith regardless of their moral imperfections.

Though the book portrays the judges as arising in sequence over some 400 years, their careers probably overlapped, and the time designations for the periods of "rest" between their tenures most likely represent numbers of generations (one generation = "40 years") rather than precise numbers of years.

Authorship

Jewish tradition views Samuel as the author of Judges, but most modern scholars see the present form of the book as an editorial compilation of material from a variety of sources (possibly including Samuel) from a wide range of periods. Sections probably composed closest to the actual time of the events include the opening chapter, the Song of Deborah (ch. 5), and the concluding stories spanning chs. 17–21. Most scholars believe that the Deuteronomistic Historian who edited Judges did his work either in the 7th century during the reign of Judah's king Josiah or in the 6th century during the Babylonian exile.

1 The State of the Conquest

From the very start, Judges paints a less complete picture of the Israelites' initial possession of Canaan than does Joshua (Josh. 23:1–13). Judges 1:1 reveals that the previous allotment of the land merely represented a preliminary step in the tribes' taking possession of their assigned territories, for many non-Israelite ethnic groups living in Canaan (Canaanites, Amorites, and Perizzites) remain unconquered after Joshua's death.

God chooses Judah, from whose line David and eventually Jesus would come, to take the initiative in continuing the effort. Judah enlists the aid of Simeon, and the two tribes realize great success in capturing their allotted territories in the southern hill country. They render the king of Bezek useless in battle by cutting off his thumbs and big toes to prevent him from grasping a sword and moving agilely (v. 6). Verse 8 even asserts that Judah captured Jerusalem, on Judah's northern border with Benjamin (but contrast Josh. 15:63 and the Benjamites' failure in Jerusalem, v. 21). In fact, Israel did not take decided control of Jerusalem until the time of David (2 Sam. 5:1–10). Neither could the Judahites conquer their inheritance in the southwestern plains, supposedly because of the Canaanites' superior military machinery (iron chariots, v. 19; but see the theological reason given in 2:20–3:4). The assertion in v. 18 that Judah conquered Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron—three of the five cities of the Philistine pentapolis located in Canaan's southwestern plains—seems unlikely in view of v. 19, for the Philistines exercised exclusive control over the iron industry in Canaan at the beginning of the Iron Age (cf. 3:1–3). (The Greek Septuagint reads “not” in v. 18 and reverses the result of Judah's efforts against the three cities.)

Verse 10 records the Judahites' attack against Hebron, but both verse 20 and Joshua credit the city's actual capture to Caleb (Josh. 15:14), to whom Joshua awarded the city as an inheritance (Josh. 14:6–15). Caleb's shrewd daughter, whom he obligates by a wedding gift of land to live in the dry, infertile Negev (“south”), wisely secures water rights from her father (vv. 12–15). The descendants of Moses' father-in-law Hobab leave the oasis of Jericho (“the city of palms”) for an undoubtedly nomadic life in the barren Judean wilderness (v. 16).

After mentioning the Benjamites' failure at Jerusalem (v. 21), the text continues its northbound progression on the map of allotted tribal territories by touching on the success of the “house of Joseph” (Ephraim and Manasseh) in the Ephraimite hill country at Bethel (“house of God,” vv. 22–25). The Hittites in v. 26 are one of the peoples that make up the Canaanites. Past this verse, ch. 1 records only the northern tribes' failure to drive out specific cities' Canaanite inhabitants, though several tribes gain enough power to reduce these peoples to vassalage (Zebulun, Naphtali, and Ephraim [“the house of Joseph,” v. 35]). Dan (v. 34) originally settled in the southern hill country but later migrated to Canaan's northern extreme, for which reason the text mentions this tribe last in its geographical journey from south to north (cf. ch. 18).

Judges of Israel

Othniel
Shamgar
Gideon
Jair
Ibzan
Abdon

Ehud
Deborah
Tola
Jephthah
Elon
Samson

2:1–19 The Reason for Israel’s Military Failures

God’s angel (“messenger”) travels from Gilgal, site of Israel’s first camp in Canaan, to Bochim (undetermined location) to announce why the Israelites have failed to conquer the promised land: they have transgressed the covenant and have thereby invoked the covenantal curses (v. 2; cf. Joshua 9). The Israelites try to make amends by expressing sorrow and offering sacrifices. Verses 1–5 thus set the stage for the judges’ activities of deliverance throughout the rest of the book.

Verses 6–9 recap the Israelites’ religious posture at the end of Joshua (Josh. 24:28–31), and v. 10 begins to explain the spiritual regression of the nation after the death of Joshua and his righteous contemporaries. Evidently, the early Israelites did not adequately teach their children the Law (cf. Deut. 6:7, 20–25)—for at the heart of this generation’s sin lies their forsaking the worship of Israel’s God for service to Canaan’s fertility gods Baal and Astarte. The nation’s punishment consists not only in God’s withholding his blessing but also in his actively distressing the Israelites (vv. 14–15).

Verses 16–19 preview the cycle of Israel’s deliverance from her divinely appointed oppressors as an act of God’s mercy, followed eventually by the nation’s further spiritual decline and resulting divinely ordained oppression—a cycle that will characterize the stories surrounding the 12 judges.

2:20–3:7 God Tests His People

God’s purpose in allowing Canaanite people to remain in the promised land now becomes a test to the transgression-prone Israelites’ devotion to him and to teach coming generations how to conquer and defend their land (2:20–3:4). But the Israelites set themselves up for failure: living among the inhabitants of Canaan leads to intermarriage (forbidden in Deut. 7:3), which in turn leads to spiritual decay (vv. 5–7).

3:8–11 Othniel’s Victory

These verses record the first specific punishment God inflicts on his disobedient people—subjection to Mesopotamia (the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers; some scholars emend the text to refer to Edom, east of the Dead Sea, since a southern military confrontation with far-flung Mesopotamia seems unlikely). In time, God delivers the Israelites from their affliction through the judge Othniel—a Judahite relative of Caleb who proved his military prowess in 1:12–13. As with the coming champions Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, God’s spirit specially equips Othniel for the job (v. 10). This judge’s victory over his nation’s oppressors brings a generation of relief for Israel (“40 years,” often a symbolic number in the Old Testament).

3:12–30 Ehud vs. Eglon

The Israelites slide back into faithlessness after Othniel’s death, and now the Transjordanian king Eglon of Moab and his coalition of Ammonites (to his north) and Amalekites (from the desert) subdue the chosen people. They even capture Jericho (“the city of palms,” v. 13), where Israel had realized its first victory in Canaan (Joshua 6). Israel’s cries to the Lord result in God’s raising up a second deliverer—the left-handed Benjamite Ehud, who clouds his purpose to assassinate Eglon under the guise of offering tribute and, upon returning to the king alone, employs the element of surprise by strapping a concealed weapon on his unsuspected right thigh (on the left-handed Benjamite sureshots, see 20:16). Having accomplished his deadly deed in a private encounter with the indisposed Eglon, Ehud escapes the scene of the crime to lead his countrymen in defeating the kingless Moabites (descendants of Abraham’s nephew Lot) at the fords of the Jordan. The victory initiates an 80-year period (two generation) of national rest from foreign oppression.

3:31 Shamgar vs. the Philistines

Tough Shamgar’s saving of Israel by slaying 600 Philistines (probably an organized fighting force) receives only brief notice (v. 31), this judge’s reputation must have endured, for his name appears again in 5:6. Shamgar’s make-do fighting method of using a long, metal-tipped pole (an ox goad) as a weapon brings to mind Samson’s use of a donkey jawbone to kill nearly twice as many Philistines (15:15). Shamgar’s identification as “the son of Anath” may reflect a military title rather than a genealogical note, since Anath is the Canaanite goddess of war.¹

Works Cited

¹Gordon D. Fee and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., eds., *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 183–187.