

INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES

The Hebrew name for the book of Judges is *Shophetim*, a Hebrew word meaning judges. When the Old Testament was translated into the Greek language in the second century before Christ, the book was called *Kritai*, a Greek word meaning judges. One is not surprised then to learn that when Jerome translated the Old Testament into Latin he called the book *Liber Judicum*, Latin words meaning Book of Judges. Thus, this book has always borne a name which signified that its theme was the life and times of the judges of Israel.

The Judges of Israel, as a peculiar group of leaders, were God's vice-regents. God, Himself, was the supreme ruler; and the government of their era has well been called a theocracy, a government in which God was the real power. When these men were elevated to their office, they ruled for their lifetimes. As a group, they led Israel in rather unbroken succession from the time of Joshua through the time of Samuel. Individuals prompted by the inward, irresistible impulse of God's Holy Spirit were roused to achieve deliverance for His people. Usually, their rise to power was accompanied by a special call. The people, seeing them endowed with extraordinary courage or strength, accepted them and submitted to their rule. These men, unlike the kings in the surrounding territories and in Israel at a later period, were without pomp, equipage, or emoluments of office. As Jamieson, Fausset and Brown say in their *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, they did not have the power to make laws, for the laws were given by God. They did not have power to explain the laws for that was the task of the priests. On the other hand, they were upholders of the law. They were avengers of all crimes, particularly of idolatry and its attendant vices. They were, generally speaking, great military lead-

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ers; and in them the people of Israel began to find a visible expression of unity which later culminated in their asking for a king,

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The opening verse of the book makes reference to the death of Joshua, and the contents of the book are accurately dated from a period shortly after the death of Joshua through the time of Samson, the end of whose career is described in chapter sixteen. Chapters seventeen through twenty-one form an appendix and do not carry the reader into any later period of Israel's history. Samson may have been contemporary with Eli; that is, Samson's activity centered in the Philistine plain; and at the same time, Eli may have functioned as a judge in Shiloh while being the high priest.

We have dated the close of Joshua at 1375 B.C. are also reasonably sure of the dating of Samuel at 1075-1025 B.C. Thus, the period covered by the book of Judges would be something like 300 years.

There are many chronological notes in the book of Judges. All of these added together total 410 years. It is clear even to the superficial reader of Bible history, however, that the book of Judges does not cover this long a period of time. The reference in I Kings 6:1 states that it was only 480 years from the time of the Exodus to the building of the temple. The Israelite children wandered for forty years. Joshua's leadership lasted for at least twenty-five years. After the period of the Judges, Saul reigned for forty years. David ruled a similar length of time. All these eras total at least one hundred forty-five years which must be subtracted from the four hundred eighty years which elapsed between the time of the Exodus and the time of the building of the temple in the fourth year of Solomon's reign.

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If the periods described as times when the land had rest are totaled together along with the number of years during which the judges judged, a total of two hundred ninety-nine years is the result. This includes three years during which Abimelech made an abortive effort to be king. Such a length of time for the period of Judges is also indicated by Jephthah's statement when he chided the Ammonites for making no objection to Israel occupying their territory for three hundred years prior to his time, thus indicating Israel had been in the Promised Land about this long. We, thus, feel *we are* reasonably accurate in describing the era of the Judges as a three-hundred-year period between 1375 B.C. and 1075 B.C.

Such a chronological conclusion presupposes the judges ruled in a rather continuous succession. Those who do not allow for the judges to rule successively telescope the time by assuming the judges ruled simultaneously. They say that Samson may have been leading the Israelites in his area around the territory of the tribe of Dan while Jephthah was holding the leadership of the tribes in Gilead. Such a position does not take into consideration the oft-repeated statement that these men "judged Israel" (e.g. 12:7, 12:8, 12:11, 12:13, 16:31).

The idea that the Israelites were a quarreling and divided hodgepodge of twelve individual tribes is part and parcel of the idea of an evolutionary development of the nation of Israel and does not take into account any supernatural blessing of Israel which molded them into a unified whole as early as the time of Moses. It seems better, therefore, to hold that the judges ruled successively in a rather orderly fashion.

THE AUTHOR

Within the book itself no author is named. Liberal critics deny that the book was the work of a single author.

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For example, A. S. Geden, in an article on the book of Judges in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* speaks of the traditional narrative, the moral commentary, and the chronological framework as being separate sources but woven together by a compiler or a reviser who completed the book in the form in which it now exists. With the indefiniteness which is typical of the radical scholar, he concludes very little can be determined concerning the dates at which these processes took place. In other words, there is no positive suggestion made as to the author or the date of writing.

The book of Judges must have been written before David's time, for the author of Judges says Jerusalem was still in the possession of the Jebusites (Judges 1:21). David captured Jerusalem early in his reign as is recorded in II Samuel 5:6 ff., and he made it his capital city. Passages such as 17:6, 18:1, and 21:25 imply a time in the early monarchy when its blessings were fresh in mind.

The reference to the "captivity of the land" (18:30) causes some to believe it was written at the time of the Babylonian Captivity, but a variant reading of this passage indicates it was the captivity of the Ark which was in mind and not the captivity of the land. The Ark was displaced from the time it was captured in the days of Eli until it was brought back to Jerusalem by David (II Samuel 6). It would hardly be possible for the image worship of the Danites to continue through the reigns of David and Solomon. Neither would Jeroboam have allowed the worship of the Danites to continue in Dan after he set up his golden calf in the same place. Surely the "captivity of the land" was a reference to the time when the Philistines held dominion over the Israelites and so subjugated them that "there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel" (I Samuel 13:19). The Philistines so held the land of Israel in captivity that the Israelites

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were weaponless and were without artisans who could forge spears and swords for them. This condition prevailed through much of the era of the judges and was true especially when Saul began to reign.

Edward J. Young in his *Introduction to the Old Testament* wrote that this leads us to the conclusion that the book was written during the early days of the monarchy. He suggests that it might have been written in the reign of Saul or the early days of David. He further commented that the remarkable unity of the book rules out any special scheme of compilation as proposed by divisive criticism.

M. F. Unger in his *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament* proposed that Samuel may have been the author and compiler. He lists the following reasons for this position:

1. The book exhibits the unity of a single author
2. The author was not in a large measure a compiler.
(He mentions such evidence as the fact that the author includes Deborah's song and other material which would be a part of Israel's literary heritage)
3. The book shows evidence of coming from the age of Saul (e.g. 1:21)
4. Hebrew tradition holds that Samuel was the author
(see the Talmud, *Baba Bathra* 14b)

The Hebrew tradition to which Unger makes reference is a statement to the effect that Samuel wrote the book bearing his name, the book of Judges, and the book of Ruth. There is certainly no reason why Samuel could not have written the book of Judges. In the face of the statement to this effect which shows the belief of the Jews of the time and in the absence of any serious objections to his having written it, it seems best to hold that Samuel was the author of these twenty-one chapters.

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PURPOSE

The purpose of the book is many-sided. In the first place, it certainly fills the need for carrying forward Israel's history. Without it, we would have very little knowledge of what transpired between the time of Joshua and the time of Samuel. As a result of its being in the canon, we have a continuation of the history of the people after they were settled in the land until the time when the need for a king became paramount in their considerations. When a Christian reads the book, he is impressed with the way in which it underlines the truth that rebellion against God brings punishment, but repentance brings restoration.

OUTLINE

On the basis of the plan which is evident in the book, the following outline is most often given:

- I. General Introduction 1:1-3:6
- II. Period of the judges 3:7-16:31
- III. Double appendix 17-21
 - A. Idolatry of Dan 17, 18
 - B. Crime at Gibeah 19-21

An alternate outline which gives more detail but presents only a slight variation is as follows:

Introduction: General Introduction to the Period of the Judges, 1:1-2:5

- I. The Period of the Judges 2:6-16:31
 - A. General Religious Characterization of the Period 2:6-3:6
 - B. List of the Judges 3 : 7-16 : 31
 - 1. Othniel of Judah (3 :8-11)
 - 2. Ehud of Benjamin (3:12-30)
 - 3. Shamgar (3 : 31)
 - 4. Deborah of Ephraim and Barak of

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Naphtali (4:1-5:31)

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5. Gideon of Manasseh and Abimelech (6:1 – 9:57)
 6. Tola of Issachar (10:1, 2)
 7. Jair of Gilead (10:3-5)
 8. Jephthah of Gilead (10:6-12 :7)
 9. Ibzan of Zebulun (12:8-10)
 10. Elon of Zebulun (12:11, 12)
 11. Abdon of Ephraim (12:13-15)
 12. Samson of Dan (13:1-16:31)
- II. Double Appendix 17:1-21:25
- A. The Idolatry of Dan (17:1-18:31)
 - B. The Crime at Gibeah and Its Punishment (19:1-21:25)

Even those who do not hold to the authorship of Samuel and in general are of critical background say that Judges is one of the most valuable documents of Hebrew history (e.g. C. H. Brannon, *Introduction to the Bible*, page 43) . It is that, and more also. It is an integral part of the precious Word of God. It is an account of some of the greatest heroes of God's dealings with men. Some of the men do not appear as great or as good as one might expect them to be since, as a people, they were guided by God's laws and enriched by His great promises.

Although there are those among them who were drawn away to idolatry, yet the Tabernacle service according to the Law of Moses was kept in existence; and there were many who adhered to it. The judgment passed on the crimes which are recorded is in keeping with the action of a people who were motivated by a high and holy calling.

Some of the men wielded great influence on their contemporaries. For example, in the case of Ehud, it is said that after his victory the land rested eighty years. After Barak's victory, it is said in similar fashion that the land had rest for forty years. It is not certain that these

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men lived this long, much less that they governed that long; but they and others were raised up and animated by the spirit of God to render a particular service when there was an occasion. As a result, the influence of their leadership was felt for the specified length of time.

In the course of their careers, these leaders purged Israel of idolatries. They avenged Israel of her enemies. They championed the cause of righteousness. Therefore, it is clear that during the government of the judges God was in a special manner Israel's king. Those who wish to know God's will for their own lives will do well to study closely the careers of these men. Four of them were of such great stature that they were mentioned in Hebrews 11:32 as being worthy of notice in the roll call of the saints. May each one who fears God live such an exemplary life that his name will be inscribed in the Lamb's Book of Life.

