



A SURVEY AND INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JUDGES

By Reid S. Monaghan

INTRODUCTION

During the long travails of human history there has been an ongoing battle between the dominion of darkness and the Kingdom of God. The human race, fallen from its created purpose, has been in perpetual rebellion against our creator and has seen constant warfare, difficulty and struggle. Into the brokenness of creation, God promises redemption and initiates a relationship with his people. He calls them to faithfulness in his eternal purposes and their own joy in knowing Him. Yet we trust in our own devices and desires and we seek identity, peace and deliverance from a world of earth bound warriors, political powers, money men and kings.

Long ago God's people were delivered from slavery in Egypt into the land of God's promise. They were called to live as a distinct people among a swarm of warring and idolatrous tribes. Welcome home to a world that swirled as a mixture of ISIS and Mad Max. God's people were to be a unique and holy people not giving way to the corruption around them. They were called to secure a victory that would permit peace, human flourishing and the redemptive work of God to advance in all creation. Enter the time of the Judges; the dark and chaotic age before the age of Kings of Israel.

This summer we will look together at the narrative of God's people who are called to faithfulness but find themselves foolishly turning from God, wandering into the subjection and oppression of men. Where their victories and faithfulness was not constant nor final, we see the constancy of the faithful victories of God in providing a Savior for all.

In this essay I hope to introduce you to the Book of Judges, its narrative world and its theological themes and vision. In doing so I pray we prepare our hearts and minds to engage the story of God in a unique way. We must come to Judges in humility and a willingness to have it be a mirror to our lives and even our historical epoch. Without such humility we may just engage the stories as watchers, bystanders or as an academic. If we do that we miss the ride. For in Judges I pray we may engage the coming King as learners and followers.

SOME BASICS OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

What's in a Name?

The stories in the Book of Judges recount the historical period following the conquest of the Promised Land under the Joshua up until the time of the prophet/judge Samuel. The name of the book arises from the Hebrew word “שֹׁפֵט” or *šāpaṭ* which describes a sort of tribal chieftain or ruler in the ancient near eastern world. This title describes the central figures in this collection of stories. The word “judge” is described in context in Judges Chapter 2.

16 Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. 17 Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so.

Judges 2:16, 17

In this passage we see the basic role or function of a “judge” in Israel was *saving* and *ruling*. The English term “judge” might lead us to the idea of person who merely adjudicates in disputes or one who directs legal proceedings. Yet the ancient judge occupied a more holistic role in the community. Old Testament scholar Daniel Block captures the role and function of the ancient “judges”:

Since the judges functioned as princes, rulers, and chieftains over specific territories and clans, the term *šōpēṭîm* is best understood generally to mean “tribal rulers, leaders, governors” rather than “judges,” so the name of the book is better rendered “The Book of Tribal Rulers.”¹

So the ancient judges were tribal rulers who were raised up by God to deliver/save his people and then lead them in faithfulness to God and his covenant. Yet as we see in the verse cited above, God’s people “whored after other gods” in false worship and walked in disobedience to the ways and will of God. This is the tension we find in the pages of Judges.

Dating and Historical Era

The Book of Judges represents a rather dark day in the history of Israel in that it is an era of chaos and instability. The book begins with the death of the conquering hero Joshua (Judges 1:1) who had led the people into the Promised Land after the death of Moses. The period runs up until the time of the emergence of the kings of Israel as the latter chapters of Judges repeatedly echo the phrase “in those days there was no king in Israel” (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Depending on how one estimates the dating of the events in the Book of Exodus², the Judges runs from roughly from the 15th century B.C. to the coronation of Saul as first King of Israel in the last half of the 11th century B.C.

Though the historical period can be roughly inferred from the biblical texts, scholars put the compilation of these stories at a later date. The book seems to be recounting an earlier period of history in order to advocate for a certain political framework that was lacking during the time of the judges. Some see the book as being written down during the time when Saul and David, along with their relative factions, were contending for power in Israel. The late Dr. Alan Groves argued for this sort of date in light of the “anti-

¹ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 25.

² See discussion of the dating of Exodus in Tremper Longman, Raymond B. Dillard, and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006), 65-69.

Benjamite" (Saul being of the tribe of Benjamin) and "pro-Judahite" (David being of the tribe of Judah) nature of overall narrative of Judges.³ I find this argument compelling.

Redemptive Historical Context

The narrative arc of the Scriptures takes us through many varied parts of the work of God in redeeming the world. The Bible begins with a good creation, humans in relationship with God and one another as his vice-regents, sin and the curse coming in and God initiating his plans and promises to redeem. There are always two important "wheres" we should ask in relationship to events in the Bible. *Where* did it happen on earth and "where" in the larger redemptive story of Scripture did this take place. The first is geographical, the second temporal. With Judges, we enter into an important time in redemptive history. God's people have been freed from bondage in Egypt and freed by God to be his worshippers. He's broken the chains that held them fast and bound them to himself through his covenant in law. The promise of the security and provision of the land is before the people. What will they do? Who will they follow? Who will they worship and in whom will they place their trust?

During the narrative of the Judges we find that the mantle of leadership has landed upon the tribe of Judah, prefiguring the coming of King David. This King, would be God's chosen leader who according to 1 Kings 15:5 "had done what was right in the eyes of the Lord." David himself would receive an additional facet of God's covenant in that he receives the promise that his offspring will forever occupy his throne, ruling the people of God (2 Samuel 7). Judah's leadership in Judges will point us forward to the rule of David, David's leadership in 1 and 2 Samuel will point forward to Jesus the eternal leader of God's people. Yes Jesus...the root of David, the great lion of the tribe of Judah. (Revelation 5:5)

Situated in this time and place of redemptive history, we find the book of Judges to be marked by a certain theology and vision of God's dealings with humanity. Judges is marked by *Deuteronomic theology* that has the Torah and the covenant at Sinai, as its backdrop. As such, the theology of Judges shows God's relationship to people being covenantal, worship to be centered in Jerusalem and idolatry as central sin in breaking faithfulness to YHWH. Furthermore, the fear of the Lord and following him is the key to the blessings of God and disobedience and unfaithfulness leads only to judgment and calamity.⁴

Not Rated G

As we enter a reading of the Book of Judges this summer I want to give a heads up that it does not read like a happy ending Pixar movie. It is gritty, real and reflective of the violent nature of the human race. It reflects a time when the people of Israel crossed into a land that was full of warring tribes and idolatrous practices; it was a blood thirsty and brutal time. It should be noted that the inhabitants in the ancient land of Canaan were not cub scouts who were wanting to simply pass the peace pipe when Israel arrived to the land. They were anything but innocent bystanders and the situation would be more akin to Israel rolling in to an ISIS war camp than arriving at a friendly backyard barbeque.⁵

We must also realize that the Bible does not show God's people as the good guys and everyone else as the bad guys. There is enough sin to go around for all and not everything the Bible records is said to be a good thing. In fact, the only sinless figure in the Bible is Jesus the Messiah, who was God incarnate. God – he's

³ See Alan Groves "Judges" in Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 413.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For a discussion of the warfare and conflict in taking the promised land, see Appendix: The Issue of Holy War in Keller, Timothy Keller, *Judges for You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 211-215. and Matthew Flannagan and Paul Copan, "Does the Bible condone Genocide" in Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder, *In Defense of the Bible : A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2013), 301-303.

the good guy. All others, the Judges of Israel included, were very flawed human beings. Dr. Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York describes what we find in the Book of Judges quite well:

And so Judges can be described as "despicable people doing deplorable things" and as "trashy tales about dysfunctional characters." As the history unfold even the "heroes," the judges, become increasingly flawed and failing. They do many appalling things, and their efforts have less and less redemptive effect. It is a dismal story – and it is all history. So the reader will be led to ask, again and again: what in the world is this doing in the Bible? The answer is an important one – it is the gospel!⁶

In Judges we are going to see some shocking and awful things go down. It's not pretty. It's not meant to be. And there is a message to hear in this.

MAJOR THEMES

Although the book of Judges has many varied themes, I want to highlight just a few of them for us as we begin our journey through its pages. These themes will go with us as we travel into and through the Book of Judges in the weeks and months ahead.

Cyclical Structure

Judges is a very repetitive book. It is structured with an introduction to the incomplete conquest of Canaan, a middle section with stories of the various judges/deliverers and then a few chapters of crazy to wrap up. In the middle section there are six longer stories and six short stories about various judges/rulers. As we read we won't even need to think "did we just read something like this earlier?" The repetition is glaring and we must embrace it. The cycle we see over and over is itself a literary message. As human beings we are prone to wander and forget and need some wake up calls to bring us back to repentance, faith, hope and love. The cycle of judges is a very familiar; you may have experienced it yourself in your own journey in life. Dr. Tim Keller puts this cycle in a helpful graphical form as follows:

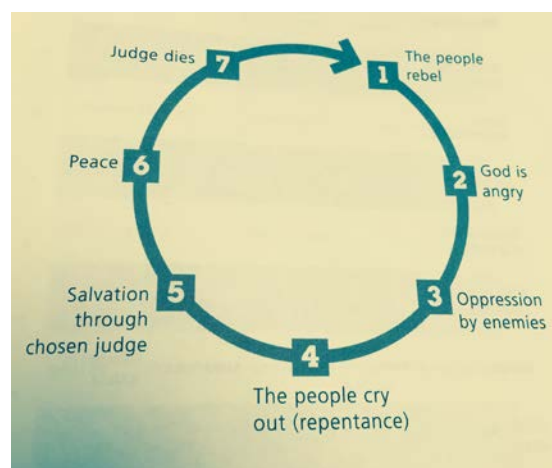


FIGURE 1 – THE CYCLE OF THE JUDGES⁷

⁶ Keller, 9.

⁷ Ibid., 207.

The victories of the Judges, however grand in scope, are what we are calling “partial” for they prove only temporary and incomplete. Even the victories of the Judges are not sufficient to fully change the hearts of God’s people. So the cycle repeats itself ever fueled by the unfaithfulness and idolatry of men.

Key Phrases

Two of the three major sections of the book are marked out for us with two memorable, repeated and striking phrases. The first marks the repeated cycle in the book and shows us the repeated folly of God’s people in her pursuits of joy apart from Him and his covenant. It is found in Judges 2:11, 3:7, 3:12, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6 and 13:1: *“And the people of Israel did what is evil in the sight of the Lord”*

The second phrase marks the chaotic final portion of Judges where the lack of a King and lack of divine guidance is put wildly on display. This phrase, coupled with the first really tells us, with some precision, what the book of Judges is all about. It appears in Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25: *“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”*

This phrase reflects an aspect of Judges brought which is highlighted by a keen observation by the Reverend Michael Wilcock. In the time of the Judges, the people could no longer blame Moses or blame their King for their problems. They had to learn to judge with right judgment themselves and make responsible decisions before God. Judges shows “how helpless man is in trying to live by such judgments, and how faithful God is in preserving his people in spite of that...”⁸ Even though they did what was right in their own eyes, resulting in failure, God did not forsake or give up on his people. Grace wins.

The Importance of Leadership

The Book of Judges reflects an absence far too often found in our world. A lack of leadership. We can see this in families, in political realms, in business and in civic and recreationally oriented organizations. When there is no leadership, clear voice or present direction people tend to wander around lost. To use Jesus’ terminology, people are like sheep without a shepherd. God has never despised leadership in either the Old or New Testaments. In fact, the sending of godly leaders is a sign of his grace and care for humanity. The Scriptures call parents (with a specific calling to fathers – see Psalm 78, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Ephesians 6:1-4) to teach the things of God to their children. The Bible call leaders to lead with wisdom and humility for the good of their people and the glory of God (1 Kings 3). Leaders who do well shepherd the people with both the skilled hand and a pure heart (Psalm 78:70-72). When the ways of God are not passed on to the next generation and when leadership becomes foolish and ungodly, the only thing that lies ahead is disaster. (See 1 Kings 12). The importance of leadership and generational following of God is on display in Judges where the people forget, sin greatly, are given leaders, who in turn point to the greatest leader of all.

The Spirit of the Lord

If you read Judges without pause and without careful observation you may miss one of the key actors on the scene in the age of the Judges. In 3:10, 6:34, 11:29, 13:25, 14:6, 14:9 and 15:14 we see another repeated phrase in various forms. Over and over again we find “the Spirit of the Lord” being the one who moves upon, rushes upon and clothes the Judges for action and their saving work. Though the unambiguous dwelling of God’s Spirit would not be given to believers until Pentecost (see Acts 2) the Spirit comes upon individuals in the Old Testament and we see this prominently on display in Judges.⁹ Though Israel lacked leadership, the Spirit of the Lord imparts the authority of God to the judges thereby showing that the




⁸ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Judges : Grace Abounding*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Ill., U.S.A.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 16.

⁹ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2009), 244.

victory came from God and not the people.¹⁰ In our day, when the Spirit has been given to all who believe, we would be wise to yield to his leading and empowerment in life and in mission for all things. Going forth into the battles of our day, relying only on our own strengths, talents and abilities, is a fool's errand indeed.


Strong, Bold, faithful women

A unique feature in the narrative of Judges is the prominent place that strong women occupy in the story. This should be noticed and is a striking feature found in this ancient writing. In the modern world communities were fragmented by people "going off to work" and others "working at home." In the ancient world people, families and clans worked together to farm, defend and raise families. Everyone certainly had a role to play and there was much work to be done just to survive each season and year of life. Yes, there were roles to households where fathers and mothers worked together and the patriarch was the leader of the clan. Men also rightly took the lead in the military. Yet there were also times when God used strong women even in the arenas of battle and the Book of Judges records such occasions. Interestingly, some have conjectured that the use of women to win victories and kill major opposing military leaders is a sign of shame upon a fearful and cowardly leadership of men in the stories.¹¹ Others clearly acknowledge the story as simply highlighting the bold and gifted leadership of the women urging the men to follow God's call.¹² I tend to simply marvel at how God uses a diverse crew in Judges and he certainly uses some strong, bold women to deliver his people. This was also true in the life of Jesus on the earth. His earliest followers included women who funded his mission (Luke 8:1-3) and first announced the good news of the empty tomb which marked the dawn of a new age (See Luke 23-24 for the resurrection narrative). The following bold women had a prominent place in the book of Judges and they exhibited courage and skill in the face of great opposition.

-  *Deborah* – A prophetess and political leader who commanded and unified Israel in its battle against a daunting foe of superior military force. She gives courage to the commander Barak to move forward with his military responsibilities before God and the people.
-  *Jael* – is the one who kills the powerful opposing general Sisera in the narrative of Deborah/Barak. She is the one God uses to take out the commander and the glory for the event is remembered around her and not Barak (Judges 4:9)
-  *The Rocker* – The final woman is unnamed so I'm simply calling her "the rocker" because she rocks with bold courage. I'm also calling her that because she drops a big stone on the head of a bad guy named Abimelech. (Judges 9)

The Point of This?

As the Book of Judges proceeds from recounting the conquest of the land to the end of the book the story actually goes from bad to worse. As a unit the Book of Judges is pretty depressing and crazy stuff. There is some great evil in there and some sad tales of depravity. As we look at the stories we may be scratching our heads wondering, "What's the point of this story!?" A few things to remember as we go along.


-  *These stories are part of a bigger story.* Even though Judges goes from bad to worse, "The Story" of Scripture goes from bad in Judges to awesome in Jesus. The Story of God moves from brokenness to full healing, from darkness to light, from death to life, from chaos to a Kingdom of love and beauty. To understand the sinfulness of sin and the hardness of the human heart we need to get real sometimes.

¹⁰ Ibid., 245.

¹¹ See B. Lindars, "Deborah's Song" Women in the Old Testament" cited in K. Lawson Younger, *Judges and Ruth*, The Niv Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 141.

¹² J.D. Greear, "The Church Needs More Deborahs," in *J.D. Greear - Pastor, Author, Theologian* (2015).

Many times we have to be roused from our beds of ignorance and sin before we cry out for deliverance. The answer to the pain of Judges is the love of Christ Jesus.

 *Onward to the Saving King.* The cycle of Judges points us to our deep need for a full and final victory over idolatry and sin. We need a leader who can help us break free from the cycle of the Judges. Such a leader would lead God's people in keeping covenant and worshipping YHWH for it's by his might, his Spirit and his faithfulness that we are rescued and see our enemies defeated. It is longing for Judah's king, David and the one who would finally sit upon his throne forever that is provoked in reading these tales. Alan Groves said this so well:

According to judges, they need a King – from Judah. By providing mixed accounts of the judges – faith and failure – with the repeated refrain in the closing chapters "in those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit "(17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) – judges is arguing that a king is a better kind of leader. Not just any King would accomplish this, of course. It is essential that he be a God-fearing, covenant-keeping King, who would help the people themselves keep covenant.¹³

Friends, meet King Jesus, the one we all really need.

CONCLUSION

Just prior to the time of the Judges, the Book of Joshua ended with a promise from the people of God that they would never forsake their Lord and would be always faithful. Let's just say that Joshua was a bit skeptical (Joshua 24:16-20).¹⁴ Though their cry was *Semper Fi*,¹⁵ the history that followed them was anything but faithful. Yet today we have the wonderful privilege of looking at the years of the Judges so that we might understand the Gospel and its depth. Whereas the people in those days did what was right in their own eyes and were lost like sheep without a shepherd, we have the privilege of following the King of Kings. Furthermore, he has placed his Spirit within us to allow us to follow faithfully in his name. When looking at stories of unfaithfulness in the Old Testament, or at the stories on the news today, we must be reminded of what the apostle Paul told a community of early Christians long ago:

11 Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. 12 Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. 13 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

1 Corinthians 10:11-13

It is our hope that we learn together from our reading of Judges to faithfully follow Jesus. Our own world has many troubles, dangers, trials and temptations. We would do well to walk in both repentance and faith as the truest deliverer and judge has already set us free. *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1*

Standing firm with you,

¹³ Groves in Vanhoozer et al., 413.

¹⁴ Hill and Walton, 236.

¹⁵ From the Latin *Semper Fidelis* – always faithful. Our marine corp friends can teach us more.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. S. Monaghan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Reid" and last name "Monaghan" clearly distinguishable.

Pastor Reid S. Monaghan

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Block, Daniel Isaac. *Judges, Ruth* The New American Commentary. Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999.

Cowan, Steven B. and Terry L. Wilder. *In Defense of the Bible : A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2013.

Greear, J.D. "The Church Needs More Deborahs." In *J.D. Greear - Pastor, Author, Theologian*, 2015, 2015.

Hill, Andrew E. and John H. Walton. *A Survey of the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2009.

Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*: The Good Book Company, 2013.

Longman, Tremper, Raymond B. Dillard and Raymond B. Dillard. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J., Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier and N. T. Wright. *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005.

Wilcock, Michael. *The Message of Judges : Grace Abounding* The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Ill., U.S.A.: InterVarsity Press, 1992.

Younger, K. Lawson. *Judges and Ruth* The Niv Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002.

