Judges
Scripture: Judges
Code: MSB07

Title

The book bears the fitting name “Judges,” which refers to unique leaders God gave to His people for preservation against their enemies (2:16–19). The Hebrew title means “deliverers” or “saviors,” as well as judges (cf. Deut. 16:18; 17:9; 19:17). Twelve such judges arose before Samuel; then Eli and Samuel raised the count to 14. God Himself is the higher Judge (11:27). Judges spans about 350 years from Joshua’s conquest (ca. 1398 B.C.) until Eli and Samuel judged prior to the establishment of the monarchy (ca. 1043B.C.).

Author and Date

No author is named in the book, but the Jewish Talmud identifies Samuel, a key prophet who lived at the time these events took place and could have personally summed up the era (cf. 1 Sam. 10:25). The time was earlier than David’s capture of Jerusalem ca. 1004 B.C. (2 Sam. 5:6, 7) since Jebusites still controlled the site (Judg. 1:21). Also, the writer deals with a time before a king ruled (17:6; 18:1; 21:25). Since Saul began his reign ca. 1043 B.C., a time shortly after his rule began is probably when Judges was written.

Background and Setting

Judges is a tragic sequel to Joshua. In Joshua, the people were obedient to God in conquering the Land. In Judges, they were disobedient, idolatrous, and often defeated. Judges 1:1–3:6 focuses on the closing days of the book of Joshua. Judges 2:6–9 gives a review of Joshua’s death (cf. Josh. 24:28–31). The account describes 7 distinct cycles of Israel’s drifting away from the Lord starting even before Joshua’s death, with a full departure into apostasy afterward. Five basic reasons are evident for these cycles of Israel’s moral and spiritual decline: 1) disobedience in failing to drive the Canaanites out of the Land (Judg. 1:19, 21, 35); 2) idolatry (2:12); 3) intermarriage with wicked Canaanites (3:5, 6); 4) not heeding judges (2:17); and 5) turning away from God after the death of the judges (2:19).

A four-part sequence repeatedly occurred in this phase of Israel’s history: 1) Israel’s departure from God; 2) God’s chastisement in permitting military defeat and subjugation; 3) Israel’s prayer pleading for deliverance; and 4) God raising up “judges,” either civil or sometimes local military champions who

led in shaking off the oppressors. Fourteen judges arose, six of them military judges (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson). Two men were of special significance for contrast in spiritual leadership: 1) Eli, judge and High-Priest (not a good example); and 2) Samuel, judge, priest, and prophet (a good example).

Historical and Theological Themes

Judges is thematic rather than chronological; foremost among its themes is God's power and covenant mercy in graciously delivering the Israelites from the consequences of their failures, which were suffered for sinful compromise (cf. 2:18, 19; 21:25). In 7 periods of sin to salvation (cf. Introduction: Outline), God compassionately delivered His people throughout the different geographical areas of tribal inheritances which He had earlier given through Joshua (Josh. 13–22). The apostasy covered the whole land, as indicated by the fact that each area is specifically identified: southern (3:7–31); northern (4:1–5:31); central (6:1–10:5); eastern (10:6–12:15); and western (13:1–16:31). His power to faithfully rescue shines against the dark backdrop of pitiful human compromise and sometimes bizarre twists of sin, as in the final summary (Judg. 17–21). The last verse (21:25) sums up the account: "In those days *there was* no king in Israel; everyone did *what was* right in his own eyes."

Interpretive Challenges

The most stimulating challenges are: 1) how to view men's violent acts against enemies or fellow countrymen, whether with God's approval or without it; 2) God's use of leaders who at times do His will and at times follow their own sinful impulse (Gideon, Eli, Jephthah, Samson); 3) how to view Jephthah's vow and offering of his daughter (11:30–40); and 4) how to resolve God's sovereign will with His providential working in spite of human sin (cf. 14:4).

The chronology of the various judges in different sectors of the Land raises questions about how much time passed and how the time totals can fit into the entire time span from the Exodus (ca. 1445B.C.) to Solomon's fourth year, ca. 967/966 B.C., which is said to be 480 years (1 Kin. 6:1; see Judg. 11:26 and note). A reasonable explanation is that the deliverances and years of rest under the judges in distinct parts of the Land included overlaps, so that some of them did not run consecutively but rather concurrently during the 480 years. Paul's estimate of "about 450" years in Acts 13:20 is an approximation.

Outline

I. Introduction and Summary—The Disobedience of Israel (1:1–3:6)

A. Incomplete Conquest over the Canaanites (1:1–36)

B. The Decline and Judgment of Israel (2:1–3:6)

II. A Selected History of the Judges—The Deliverance of Israel (3:7–16:31)

A. First Period: Othniel vs. Mesopotamians (3:7–11)

B. Second Period: Ehud and Shamgar vs. Moabites (3:12–31)

C. Third Period: Deborah vs. Canaanites (4:1–5:31)

D. Fourth Period: Gideon vs. Midianites (6:1–8:32)

E. Fifth Period : Tola and Jair vs. Abimelech's Effects (8:33–10:5)

F. Sixth Period: Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon vs. Philistines and Ammonites (10:6–12:15)

G. Seventh Period: Samson vs. Philistines (13:1–16:31)

III. Epilogue—The Dereliction of Israel (17:1–21:25)

A. The Idolatry of Micah and the Danites (17:1–18:31)

B. The Crime at Gibeah and War Against Benjamin (19:1–21:25)

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