

Judges

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Judges is the 7th book in the Old Testament, and follows on from the book of Joshua. The Children of Israel are now in the Promised Land of Canaan and God raises up a number of prominent leaders (judges) to care for them.

The Hebrew word for 'judge' is *shaphat*. It means one who executes judgment by avenging, condemning, contending, defending, or governing. Judges in this period of Israel's history were quite different to the judges we have in our legal system today. They were primarily concerned with the leading of God's people in His ways, rather than making decisions about disputes.

In Judges a regular pattern emerges as God's people settle in their new land. They choose to *do evil in the eyes of the Lord* by turning to idols; God punishes them as they are taken over by their enemies; they repent and cry out to the Lord for help; and God sends a judge to save them. Judges shows us that only God can give us victory over sin and evil, and that we will receive His help in this only when we serve Him, and Him alone.

The book of Judges is followed by 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. These books describe how the leadership of judges was replaced by leadership through kings.

Author The book was compiled by an unknown author (or authors) using ancient written materials. Traditionally the author was thought to be Samuel, but this is now thought to be unlikely.

Date The events in the book of Judges take place after the death of Joshua (around 1375 BC). Added together the periods listed for all of the judges add up to 390 years, but it is likely that the book only covers a period of about 200 years. That's because of overlaps between the reigns of different judges, and because, in this type of writing, exact times and orders of events are much less important than in modern historical writings.

Type History, but much of the book is presented in story form.

Purposes

- To describe what happened as the Israelites began to occupy the land of Canaan.
- To explain why the tribes didn't occupy all of the land that was promised to the patriarchs.
- To show the effects of God's people doing *what was right in their own eyes*.
- To show God's patience in the light of Israelite's repeated disobedience.
- To describe the need for judges, and their roles.
- To prepare the way for kings, and show that a shepherd type of king was needed.

Overview The book of Judges starts with two introductions. The first gives the political situation as the tribes attempted to displace the Canaanites and take over the land. The second gives the social and religious conditions they were facing and is used to explain why judges were needed.

Most of the book is taken up with descriptions of the judges' activities. There were 12 judges in all, representative of the number of tribes:

- Othniel (from the tribe of Judah) won a victory against Cushan-rishathaim.
- Ehub (from the tribe of Benjamin) won a victory against Eglon of Moab.
- Shamgar won a victory against the Philistines.
- Deborah (from the tribe of Ephraim) and Barak (from the tribe of Naphtali) won a victory over Jabin and Sisera.

- Gideon (from the tribe of Manasseh) defeated the Midianites and Amalekites.
- Tola (from the tribe of Issachar).
- Jair (from Gilead).
- Jephthah (from Gilead) defeated the Ammonites.
- Ibzan (from Bethlehem).
- Elon from the tribe of Zebulun)
- Abdon from the tribe of Ephraim).
- Samson (from the tribe of Dan), won against the Philistines.

Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon are classified as 'Minor judges' with little description of their activities. Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson are classified as 'Major judges' with extensive descriptions of their activities.

Key verses

Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord's anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. They quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors, who had been obedient to the Lord's commands. Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, He was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel. Judges 2:11-20.

Outline

Political introduction: fighting with the remaining Canaanites. (1:1–2:5)

As they entered the Promised Land the Israelites had the law of the Lord (Joshua 23:6; 24:26); the promise from God to have the land forever (Genesis 17:8); a challenge to obey the Lord (Joshua 24:14-27), and the promise of God's presence and help in subduing the Canaanites (Joshua 23:5,10).

After Joshua died the Israelites asked the Lord, *Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?* The answer was Judah, so this tribe (along with Simeon) began to attack the Canaanites and they soon subdued the Canaanites and Perizzites, Jerusalem, the Negev and western foothills, parts of the Hebron valley, Zephath, Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron. They experienced pockets of resistance but were able to conquer most of the places they attempted.

Other tribes also tried to take over parts of the land, but with mixed success. Jerusalem was on the border Judah and Benjamin, but Benjamin was too weak to subdue the Jebusites there. Ephraim and Manasseh were two half tribes called the *house of Joseph*. Ephraim took Bethel but Manasseh couldn't take the fortified cities of Beth Shan, Taanach, Dor, Ibleam, and Megiddo. in the valley of Jezreel. As a result the Israelites couldn't control the roads through to the coast, controlled by Gezer. Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan were also unsuccessful in fully driving out the Canaanites.

This meant that the Israelites had not completely subdued the land, but worse, they had also begun to intermarry with the Canaanites and take on some of their idolatrous practices. (See Exodus 23:33; 34:12-16; Numbers 33:55; Deuteronomy 7:2-5,16; Joshua 23:7,12). The *angel of the Lord* appeared to the Israelites at Bokim reminding them that God would never break His covenant with them, but because of their disobedience they would not be able to drive out the Canaanites completely, and the Canaanites would be *thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you*.

The theological introduction: rebellion against the Lord. (2:6–3:6)

The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua but within a generation of his death they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them . They provoked the Lord to anger. In response to this the Lord raised up judges to save His people. Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them He was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. When the judge died the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers.

This greatly angered the Lord and He decided to use the remaining Canaanite nations to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the Lord as their forefathers did. As a result, the Israelites had to live among the Canaanite nations and had much trouble with them from that time on.

Israel's judges (3:7–16:31)

Othniel (3:7-11)

Othniel was Caleb's younger brother. When the Israelites *did evil in the eyes of the Lord* God gave them over to the king of Aram. When they cried out to the Lord He raised up Othniel as their deliverer and *the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war.* Othniel repelled the Arameans and *the land had peace for forty years.*

Ehud (3:12-30)

Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. This time the Lord gave them over to the Moabites, Ammonites and Amalekites and they were in subjection for eighteen years. Again, the Israelites *cried out to the Lord* and He gave them Ehud as their judge and deliverer. Ehud visited Eglon, the King of Moab and stabbed him in an unsuspecting manner using his left hand and a double edged sword. This enabled the Israelites to gather their forces and defeat the Moabites and *the land had peace for eighty years.*

Shamgar (3:31)

Shamgar struck down six hundred Philistines with an ox goad. He too saved Israel.

Deborah (4:1–5:31)

Deborah was the only female judge, and has been a source of inspiration to women down through the ages. She was a prophetess, and the wife of the leader of Israel at the time, Lappidoth.

When the Israelites *once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord* they lived for twenty years under the oppression of Jabin, king of Canaan, and the commander of his army, Sisera. Deborah was the judge at the time and held court beneath a palm tree in the land of Ephraim. Deborah asked Barak, the captain of her army to go into battle against Sisera but he said he would only do it if she went with him. Deborah agreed but said it would mean that the honour of victory would go to a woman. The Lord enabled the Israelite force of ten thousand to win a total victory over Sisera's force of nine hundred iron chariots. Sisera fled and sought refuge in the tent of a woman named Jael, but she killed him. *On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king* and there was peace for forty years.



The song of Deborah in chapter 5 celebrates the victory over Jabin and is one of the oldest poems in the Bible. It praises God as the One who came to protect His people in the battle. The oppressors had taken over Israel; had made the roads unsafe for travel, and Israel was unable to defend herself. Some of the tribes supported Deborah and Barak (Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali); but others didn't (Reuben, Dan, Asher). Yet the Israelites won the battle and Jael, the *most blessed of women* had killed Sisera. The Lord had used the simple to defeat the powerful. *So may Your enemies perish, O Lord! But may they who love You be like the sun when it rises in its strength.*

Gideon (6:1–8:35)

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. This time it resulted in seven awful years of oppression by the Midianites. When the Israelites cried to the Lord He sent them the prophet Gideon as their judge.

Initially Gideon was unsure of his call but the Lord reassured him through an angel saying *I will be with you*. Gideon wanted even more confirmation and asked that the angel not go away until he had made a sacrifice. When Gideon got the sacrifice ready fire from the Lord consumed it, and then the angel disappeared. Gideon then knew the Lord was with him and exclaimed *Ah Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face*. Gideon built an altar there called *The Lord is peace*. (Jehovah shalom). He also tore down his father's altar to Baal and Asherah pole and used the wood on his altar. The local people wanted to put him to death for this but his father said the Baal could defend himself and Gideon became known as Jerub-Baal – meaning *let Baal contend with him*.



When confronted by the Midianites, Amalekites and other enemies *the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon* and he called the Israelites to arms. Gideon put a fleece out overnight asking God to make it wet with dew while the surrounding ground was dry. Then he would know that God would save Israel as He had promised. God did as Gideon asked but this was still not enough! Gideon asked God to make the fleece dry when the ground around was wet with dew. Once again the Lord obliged. Finally, Gideon knew that the Lord was with Him (as the Lord had already told him a number of times!).

Fleeces

Putting out fleeces before the Lord has become a popular way of trying to find God's will. We tell the Lord to do something and when (or if) He does what we want we know that He is in it.

But is this a valid way of discerning God's will? No! God is supposed to be telling us what to do (He is Lord, after all!), not us telling Him what to do!

God had already told Gideon what to do, so he should have simply obeyed. When Gideon put out the fleeces, he was not acting in obedience or in faith. He was motivated by doubt and fear.

Gideon knew he was not doing things in the right way because on the second occasion he said to God *Do not be angry with me*. Just because God was gracious and did what Gideon asked doesn't mean we should usurp God's authority and tell Him what to do. Much better is to wait on the Lord to hear what He wants us to do, and then do it!

Gideon had an army of 32,000 men from Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, but the Lord said that was *too many*. Anyone who was fearful could go home, so 22,000 left. That was still too many! As they drank at the river only 300 lapped with their hands and kept watch for the enemy. That was enough for the Lord! He said *With the 300 men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands*.

That night the Midianites were camping in a valley and Gideon went amongst them and heard a Midianite telling of a dream in which their camp was destroyed. Gideon knew the Lord had given the Midianite camp into his hands. He surrounded the camp with his 300 men and lit torches, blew loudly on trumpets and shouted *A sword for the Lord and for Gideon*. The Midianites panicked and *turned on each other with their swords*.



Through Gideon, God won an amazing victory, and all with just 300 men!

Gideon and his men pursued the fleeing Midianites defeating Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah, and Zalmunna and taking over Succoth and Peniel when they didn't help him.

This wonderful victory created interest in the idea of Israel having a king. The Israelites said to Gideon *Rule over us – you, your son and your grandson – because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian*. Gideon would not rule over them because the Lord was the One who should rule over them. All he wanted was a share of the plunder – many gold rings, which he made into an ephod. True to form, the Israelites started to worship the ephod and *it became a snare to Gideon and his family*. There was peace for 40 years but after Gideon (Jerub-Baal) died the Israelites went right back to worshipping the Baals.

Later on the Israelites demanded that they have a king – rather than having the Lord as their King, and Saul was anointed as King. This began yet another dark period in Israel's history. See 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles). God should always be our King. Jesus Christ is Lord! That's what the Kingdom of God is all about – the central message of the whole Bible.

Gideon's son Abimelech wanted to set himself up as king to carry on the family dynasty and murdered all of his 70 brothers, except for Jotham. Jotham then told a parable (the parable of the trees) to show how the selfishness of any kind of king would harm the people, and then went into hiding. Abimelech reigned for three years then *God sent an evil spirit* between him and the citizens of Shechem, so that the crime he committed against his brothers would be avenged. Abimelech attacked and destroyed Shechem but was wounded at Thebez when a woman dropped a millstone onto him. His awful dynasty ended when he ordered his armour-bearer to kill him.

Abimelech's brief reign shows what can happen to a nation with an evil king, (and proves the wisdom of the parable of the trees). Ultimately *God repaid the wickedness* that Abimelech and those who had supported him had done.

Tola (10:1-2)

Tola was a minor judge from Issachar. He judged Israel for 23 years.

Jair (10:3-5)

Jair was a minor judge from Gilead. He judged Israel for 22 years.

Jephthah (10:6–12:7)

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and God became angry when they served other gods. This time they were oppressed by the Philistines and Amorites for 18 years. When they finally repented God initially said *I will no longer save you*, but when they got rid of the foreign gods and served Him, God could *bear Israel's misery no longer* and raised up Jephthah, a *mighty warrior* from Gilead. The elders of Gilead asked Jephthah to lead them against the Ammonites and he agreed to help them on the condition that he remain their leader after the fighting. When he *became head over all who live in Gilead*, Jephthah asked the Ammonite king why he was attacking Israel. The king said that Israel had taken his land as they were passing through the area on their way to the Promised Land. Jephthah tried to show that it was the Lord who had granted them the land, and that the Lord should be the one who would *decide the dispute between the Israelites and the Ammonites*. The Ammonite king paid no attention to this and the Spirit of Lord came upon Jephthah.



Jephthah made an unwise vow to the Lord, that if the Lord would give victory he would sacrifice whoever came out of his house to meet him. He was victorious in the battle and returned home in triumph. His daughter was the first to welcome him but it is unclear if he offered her up as a human sacrifice or whether she just gave up her right to marriage.

Later the Ephraimites, one of the tribes of Israel, attacked Jephthah because they considered the Gileadites were *renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh*. 42,000 Ephraimites were killed in this civil war. They were identified by their accent, because the Ephraimites pronounced the word *shibboleth* as *sibboleth*. Jephthah only ruled for six years after this. He is mentioned in Hebrews 11:32 as a man of faith.

Ibzan (12:8-10)

Ibzan was a minor judge from Bethlehem. He ruled Israel for seven years.

Elon (12:11)

Elon was a minor judge from Zebulun. He ruled Israel for ten years.

Abdon (12:13-15)

Abdon was a minor judge from Pirathon. He ruled for eight years.

Samson (13:1–16:31)

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for 40 years.

This time God's deliverer was to be Samson, a Nazirite – one who is *set apart to God from birth*. Nazirites did not drink alcohol, eat ceremonially unclean food, or have their hair cut. Numbers 6:1-6.

Manoah and his wife couldn't have children but an angel revealed to them that they would have a son who would be the deliverer of Israel, and that he was to be a Nazirite. The angel's name was 'wonderful', and *beyond understanding*. They asked him how they should bring up the child after he was born. He told them to offer a sacrifice to the Lord and when they did so the angel blazed up from the altar towards heaven. They thought they had seen God, and would die, but then realized it was God who was speaking to them. *The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the Lord blessed him, and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir in him.*

Samson had a weakness for Philistine women. He went to Timnah and saw a Philistine woman there who he wanted to marry. His parents asked why he couldn't marry a an Israelite (without realizing that the Lord was wanting to use this situation to confront the Philistines). On their way to Timnah the Spirit of the Lord came on Samson in power and he killed a lion with his bare hands, then later he found honey in its carcass. During the wedding feast Samson told a riddle *Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong something sweet* (referring to the honey coming out of the lion) and made a wager that the Philistines couldn't solve the riddle. They tried to get Samson's wife to find the meaning of the riddle and threatened to burn her house down. When Samson found this out he killed 30 Philistines to pay for the wager. When Samson went home, his father-in-law gave Samson's wife to his best man.



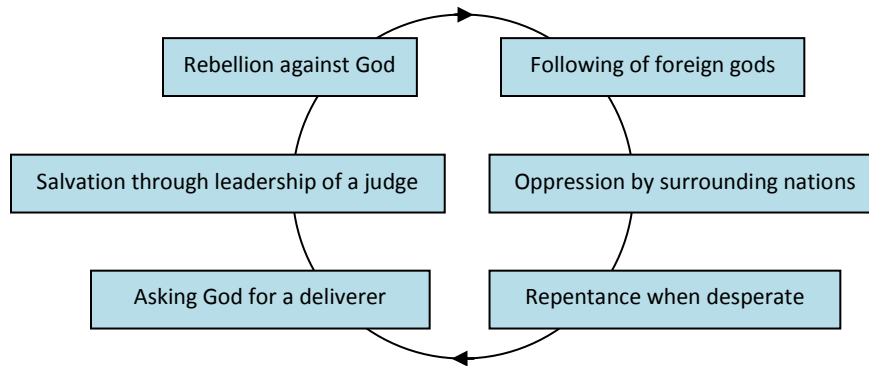
When Samson came back to visit his wife, he found she had been given to his friend. He tied 300 foxes together in pairs, set them alight and let them loose in the Philistine's corn fields and olive groves. In retaliation, the Philistines burned his wife and her father to death so Samson took revenge by slaughtering many of them. 3000 men from Judah tried to stop Samson further annoying the Philistines and bound him up with new ropes. When they arrived at the Philistine camp, *the Spirit of the Lord came on him in power* and he killed 1000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey

Samson's weakness for Philistine women continued to cause trouble for both him and the Philistines. When he visited a prostitute in Gaza the men of the city plotted to kill him at dawn, but he escaped by tearing loose the city gates! When he fell in love with Delilah the Philistines tried to get her to *lure him into showing the secret of his great strength*. He told her he would be *weak as any other man* if he was bound with seven fresh bowstrings so she bound him and cried, *The Philistines are upon you*. He easily broke free from the bowstrings so she kept trying to find the secret of his strength and he kept lying to her. Finally she nagged him so much he was *tired to death* of it and he told her the truth. *If my head were shaved my strength would leave me and I would become as weak as any other man*. Delilah called the Philistines and while Samson slept had his hair shaved off. *His strength left him*. This time when she cried, *The Philistines are upon you*, he *did not know the Lord had left him* till the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes. They took him to Gaza and made him grind at a mill while bound with bronze fetters, but gradually his hair began to grow again. At a festival to celebrate the Philistine god, Dagon, Samson was brought out to be mocked by 3000 people. They wanted him to show his great strength so Samson asked to be placed between two enormous pillars supporting the temple. He then asked the Lord for strength and pushed the pillars aside so the whole temple collapsed and Samson died with the Philistines. He had killed many more Philistines when he died than when he lived.



Samson's family buried him in the tomb of his father, Manoah. *He had led Israel for twenty years.*

God remained faithful to His people throughout the period of the judges, but their behaviour followed a consistent cycle:



Modern nations are just as much at risk of following this cycle as were the Children of Israel, long ago!

The last few chapters of Judges describe the state of the nation as *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.*

Micah and the Danites (17–18)

Micah was an Ephraimite. He established a shrine and placed an idol and an image made by his mother from silver coins. He installed his son and then a Levite from Bethlehem to serve as priests in the shrine. Men from the Tribe of Dan (Danites) came by the shrine, searching for land as their inheritance. They asked the priest to enquire of God whether they would be successful and he said their journey had the Lord's approval. They wanted to establish themselves at Laish at the foot of Mt Hermon and took the idols from Micah's shrine so they could set up the city of Dan, in the ruins of Laish. From this an idolatrous city was established; more evidence of how far God's people fell when they rejected the Lord.

A Levite and his concubine. (19)

This chapter tells a rather horrible story of a Levite from Ephraim who had a concubine who was unfaithful to him. When she went to her father's place in Bethlehem he followed her there and the father prevailed on him to stay longer than he wanted to. On their way home the Levite and his concubine stopped in Gibeah, a Benjamite city, and were invited to stay the night with an old man. Some wicked men from the city wanted to sexually abuse the Levite and he was persuaded to give his concubine to them. She was raped and died the next day. When he got home the Levite cut his concubine into 12 parts and sent them to all the areas of Israel so they would *Think about it! Consider it!*

Civil War (20–21)

All of the Israelites assembled *as one* against the Benjamites and the Levite explained to them what had happened. The Israelites decided to attack the Benjamites at Gibeah to *purge the evil from Israel*. On the first day of battle 22,000 Israelites died and the next day another 18,000 Israelites died. Each day they asked the Lord whether they should continue to fight against *our brothers* the Benjamites, and He said they should. On the third day Israel set an ambush around Gibeah and 25,100 Benjamites died. Gibeah was set alight and the Benjamites *saw that they were beaten*. They fled into the desert but were followed and their numbers decimated. All of the towns in Benjamin were destroyed.

The Israelites took an oath that *not one of us will give his daughter in marriage to a Benjamite* but they soon realized that one of their own tribes was missing from the family and they *grieved for Benjamin because the Lord had made a gap in the tribes of Israel*. They devised a plan to prevent the extinction of the tribe of Benjamin by allowing the Benjamites to take Israelite virgins who were dancing in the festival at Shiloh. This enabled the Benjamites to have an inheritance and they *rebuilt their towns and settled in them*.

Judges finishes with the lament that *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.*

The first 200 years in the Promised Land were thus a very sorry period in Israel's history, characterized by rebellion against the Lord. The Israelites *did evil in the eyes of the Lord*, and paid the price for this rebellion. They wouldn't allow the Lord to be their king, so He had to allow human kings to rule them, but this wasn't much better than being ruled by judges! And that's the story of 1 and 2 Samuel; 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

Discussion questions

What is a judge? How were the judges in this period of Israel's history different from judges today?

Why were judges needed?

Describe the cycle of behavior that the Israelites followed during the period of the judges. What were the consequences of this cycle for the nation? Give examples of similar cycles in later history, and in our modern world? How at risk is our country of following this kind of cycle? What should our national leaders do to prevent this?

Does God deal with nations and communities today or just with individuals? How do nations, communities or individuals today *do evil in the eyes of the Lord*? What are the effects of this on a nation or community and its people? What is needed for a nation, community or individual to turn around and follow the Lord?

What do you learn about leadership from the judges Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson? What were their most admirable character traits? What were their weaknesses? What leadership skills did they demonstrate? Were they wise in exercising their leadership? How does this inform your own leadership or that of others in your Church?

The book of Judges laments that *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit* and soon God allowed the nation to have a king. Do nations need to have kings? What would it mean for the Lord to be king of a nation? How does this relate to the *Kingdom of God* that Jesus introduced? How will this kingdom be expressed in eternity? See Revelation 11:15.

What have you learned from your study of the Book of Judges? How will you apply this in your life?