

INTRODUCTION TO 7TH BIBLEBOOK

JUDGES (1032-1012 B.C.)

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A. THE ORIGIN OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES.

1. The name of the book.

The name *Judges* very adequately describes the name of the book, because the book is mainly devoted to the description of the actions of the men who were known as *judges* (Hebrew: *shoftim*)(Greek: *kritai*)(2:16) in Israel during the period between Joshua and the kings.

2. The writer, the date and the place of writing.

How was the book written?

Although the book of Judges does not tell how it was written, we know that it came into existence through the work of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit did not exclude the labour of the writer or the work of those people who contributed to all the information in this book. It was the Holy Spirit who enlightened and inspired the writer from beginning to end, and who led him infallibly into the truth God wanted him to communicate.

Because the book of Judges *covers a period of about 327 years*, the writer must have made use of other written material, even if they are not mentioned. He is certainly acquainted with the book of Joshua. The writer, who *lived in the beginning of the period of the kings*, wanted to record the history of the period of the judges in such a way, that its lessons would serve *as instruction for the period of the kings!* He must have gathered as much as possible written materials as well as oral traditions concerning the history of the twelve different tribes and the actions of the judges. After that he must have arranged the materials according to his purpose. The central sanctuary of Shiloh was most likely the place where most records were produced and kept. The priests, who met and spoke to the people coming to worship at Shiloh, kept a record of the history of every tribe. According to Joshua 24:26, the book of the law was kept at Shiloh. It is also very probable that the book of Joshua was produced at Shiloh and very probable that at least in the beginning period of the judges, such records were produced and kept at Shiloh.

When was the book written?

Judges 1:29 refers to the Canaanites still living in Gezer among the tribe of Ephraim. According to 1 Kings 9:16, these Canaanites were exterminated by Pharaoh during the reign of king Solomon. Therefore, the book was written not later than the beginning of Solomon's reign. Judges 1:21 refers to the Jebusites still living in their city Jerusalem among the tribe of Benjamin "to this day". And according to Judges 19:10-12, Jerusalem remained a dangerous city for the Benjaminites until king David conquered Jerusalem. Therefore, the book was written not later than the beginning of David's reign. Judges 17:6 and several other verses say, "In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did as he saw fit"¹. This shows that the writer of Judges lived in the period of the kings and rejoiced in the order during that period in comparison to the disorder, disunity and insecurity during the period of the judges, especially in the periods between two judges. This is best explained, when the writer wrote during the beginning of the reign of king Saul, when his reign was still viewed very positively. During that time, Saul restored the unity of Israel², made Israel into a strong army which defeated its enemies³ and was still regarded by Samuel as "the Lord's anointed"⁴. Judges 18:31 assumes the end of Shiloh as the religious centre of Israel. That happened when the Philistines captured the ark, Eli died⁵ and much of the city was probably destroyed⁶. Thus, we conclude that the book of Judges could have been *written in the first half of the reign of king Saul*, who reigned from 1032-1012 B.C.

[Judges 18:30 speaks of "the time of the captivity of the land". Because this is a reference to the deportation of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BC, it must be an insertion by a later copier of the book.]

¹ Judges 18:1; 19:1; 21:25

² 1 Samuel 11:6-15

³ 1 Samuel 14:47-48,52

⁴ 1 Samuel 15:1

⁵ 1 Samuel 4

⁶ Psalm 78:60-64; Jeremiah 7:12-14; 26:6

Who wrote the book?

The Bible does not say who wrote the book, but Jewish tradition ascribes the books of Judges and Ruth to the prophet Samuel. This is most probably true. Although the book covers a period of about 300 years, that is from the death of Joshua in 1387 B.C. to the end of Samson's life in about 1085 B.C., its composition (structure) shows it is the work of one person. The book has certainly been written in the spirit of Samuel. The writer's sober and serious way of describing events, his strong condemnation of idolatry, his religious view of history and his holding on to the ideal of Israel being one nation, reminds one of Samuel.

Samuel's work of reformation was directed to completely exterminate idolatry, to enhance the unity of Israel in a political and religious sense and to familiarise the Israelites to an orderly life according to the Lord's commands⁷. According to 1 Samuel 12:6-11, it was Samuel's passion that Israel would not forget what happened in their history, especially during the time of the judges! Samuel would have been the best man to write the book of Judges, because he himself stood at the end of all the judges. He was raised in Shiloh, where the ark of the covenant was kept and to which people came to sacrifice from all parts of the country. After the end of the sacrificial worship at Shiloh, Samuel occupied the central position in Israel. Every year he travelled and stayed in several parts of the country to judge Israel in all these places⁸. In this way he could have gathered all the materials needed to write the general history of the judges. The description of the history of Samson in Judges chapter 13-16, gives the impression that it was written by someone who stood very close to those events. Samuel's predecessor, Eli, was a contemporary of Jephthah and Samson. If Samuel was the writer, it would also explain why the book of Judges ended the period of Judges with Samson. Another writer would also have included Eli and Samuel within the period of the judges. Samuel left the description of his life, which was so closely linked to that of Eli's life, to another writer. We conclude that the book of Judges was compiled by either Samuel himself or by a person tutored by Samuel during the beginning of the period of the kings, between 1032-1012 BC.

B. THE DIVISION AND MAIN CONTENTS OF JUDGES.

The theme of the book of Judges: "**God struggles to keep Israel from religious and moral destruction by compromising with heathenism.**" The book of Judges may be divided into three parts as follows:

1. Judges 1:1 to 3:4. Israel's attitude towards the Canaanite nations and their idols and therefore towards the Lord.

This part consists of two introductions, which form the historic, psychological and theocratic foundation for the actions of the judges.

One introduction consists of 1:1 to 2:5.

It describes the military operations of some tribes of Israel and how they failed to drive out the Canaanite (Amorite) nations. God's punishment for Israel's disobedience consisted of two things: He would use these Canaanite nations to oppress Israel again and again. And the idolatry of the Canaanite nations would again and again become thorns in Israel's sides and their gods would become a snare to Israel (2:3).

Another introduction consists of 2:6 to 3:4.

It describes how God views Israel's history from the time of Joshua to the time of the kings. It describes how the generations after Joshua again and again did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord and how the Lord again and again handed them over to be punished by their enemies living around them. *Instead of exterminating the Canaanite nations, the Israelites continued to live among them, inter-married with them and adopted their idolatry.* Because Israel violated the covenant the Lord had made with their forefathers, he used the Canaanite nations to test Israel to see whether Israel would keep the covenant or not. It also describes how the Lord again and again sent judges to deliver Israel and restore Israel to their service of the Lord.

2. Judges 3:5 to 16:31. The oppression by other nations and the deliverance and restoration by judges.

This part describes in more or less details the history of the 12 judges and the events which led to their actions. The 13th and 14th judges are described in the books of Samuel.

1. Othniel (3:7-11) ('God is my strength' or 'God has helped me'), a nephew of Caleb, was the first of the 12 biblical judges. He delivered Israel after serving the Arameans for 8 years. He judged Israel for 40 years.

2. Ehud (3:12-30), a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a left-handed man. He delivered Israel after serving the Moabites for 18 years. Then the land had peace for 80 years.

3. Shamgar (3:31), lived in Bet-Anath in Naphtali (1:33). He delivered Israel by slaughtering 600 Philistines with an ox goad.

⁷ 1 Samuel 7:3-6,12; 12:9-11,14,20-25

⁸ 1 Samuel 7:15-17

4. Deborah (4:1 – 5:31), a prophetess in Israel, the only female judge mentioned in the Bible. She held court under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim (4:5). King Jabin and his commander Sisera had 900 iron chariots. Deborah inspired Barak with 10,000 men to route Sisera. Jael the Kenite drove a tent peg through Sisera's temple as he lay asleep. She delivered Israel from oppression by the Canaanites for 20 years.

5. Gideon (6:1 – 8:35) (also named 'Jerub-Baal'), a member of the tribe of Manasseh, a military leader, judge and prophet. He delivered Israel with 300 brave men from oppression by the Midianites, Amalekites and other Eastern people for 7 years. Then the land had peace for 40 years. Gideon made an idol from golden earrings and placed it in his town Ophrah and all Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it. It became a snare to everyone (8:22-27).

Abimelech (9:1-57) ('my father is king', claiming the inherited right to rule), a son of Gideon, but not a judge. He ruled in Shechem for 3 years as an unprincipled, ambitious ruler, often engaged in war with his own subjects. He murdered 70 of his brothers. Finally, he asked his armourbearer to kill him so that people would not say that a woman had killed him.

6. Tola (10:1-2), lived in the hill country of Ephraim. He judged Israel for 23 years. The least is written about him in Judges.

7. Jair (10:3-5), a member from the tribe of Manasseh east of the River Jordan (Gilead). He had 30 sons who rode on 30 donkeys and controlled 30 towns in Gilead. He judged Israel for 22 years.

8. Jephthah (10:6 – 12:7), lived in Gilead. He delivered Israel from the oppression by the Philistines and Ammonites for 18 years. In exchange for defeating the Ammonites, he made a vow to sacrifice whatever would come out of the door of his house first. His daughter was the first to come out of the house and he regretfully sacrificed her. He judged Israel for 6 years.

9. Ibzan (12:8-10) ('illustrious'), lived in Bethlehem, had 30 sons and 30 daughters who all married outside their clan. He judged Israel for 7 years.

10. Elon (12:11-12) ('oak'), a member from the tribe of Zebulun. He judged Israel for 10 years.

11. Abdon (12:13-15) ('service'), a member of the tribe of Ephraim, had 40 sons and 30 grandsons who rode on 70 donkeys. He judged Israel for 8 years.

12. Samson (13:1 – 16:31) ('man of the sun'), a member from the tribe of Dan, the last of the judges before the institution of the monarchy. He was a Nazirite, was given immense strength to aid him against his enemies and allow him to perform superhuman feats, including slaying a lion with his bare hands and massacring an entire army of Philistines using only the jawbone of a donkey. Samson was betrayed by his lover Delilah, who, sent by the Philistines officials to entice him to break his vow, ordered a servant to cut his hair while he was sleeping and turned him over to his Philistine enemies. They gouged out his eyes and forced him to grind grain in a mill at Gaza. While there, his hair began to regrow. When the Philistines took him into their temple of Dagon, he asked to rest against one of the support pillars. After being granted permission, he prayed to God and miraculously recovered his strength, allowing him to bring down the columns, collapsing the temple and killing himself as well as all of the Philistines. He delivered Israel from the oppression by the Philistines for 40 years. He judged Israel for 20 years.

(13) Eli.

(14) Samuel.

3. Judges 17 to 21. Two historical events that show the need for kings in Israel.

The degeneration of Israel's religious and social life shows the need for a powerful central government. *This part is an addendum and complements the book by telling two historical events that show the need for kings in Israel. The period of the judges was characterised by the writer's repeated comment, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."*⁹

The first historical event consists of chapters 17 and 18. It relates *an event probably from the beginning period of Judges, showing the wickedness of the tribe of Dan in the north* and how idolatry was introduced in Israel. Micah, who lived in the hill country of Ephraim, made idols, erected a shrine in his house and appointed a Levite as priest.

The tribe of Dan, who had not yet come into their inheritance among the tribes of Israel, took his idols from him. After they had conquered a city in the far north, they rebuilt it and named it *Dan*. They set up Micah's idols in their city and this idolatry continued all the time the house of God was in Shiloh.

⁹ Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25

The second historical event consists of chapters 19 to 21. It relates another event *probably from the beginning period of Judges, showing the wickedness of the tribe of Benjamin in the south.* A Levite from the hill country of Ephraim travelled to bring his unfaithful concubine back from Judah. In Gibeah (city in Benjamin), wicked men threatened to have sex with him, so he sent his concubine out to them. They raped and abused her throughout the night. In the morning the Levite found her dead, took her home, and cut her in 12 pieces and sent them to all the areas of Israel.

The Israelites demanded that Gibeah surrender those wicked men to be put to death, but the Benjaminites refused. After heavy losses on both sides, the Israelites almost wiped out the tribe of Benjamin. Later the Israelites allowed the Benjaminites to take wives from other places so that they might continue as a tribe in Israel.

C. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES.

1. The book of Judges teaches the peculiar task of the judges.

In the Old Testament there were two kinds of judges. Deuteronomy 16:18-20 speaks about the permanent institution of *legal judges*. They had to be appointed in every town with the task to judge the cases between people.

The book of Judges speaks *governing judges*. They were not a permanent institution in Israel. They were called by God to restore and maintain the rights and the rule of the LORD in Israel, not so much by speaking justice as by acts of deliverance from their enemies.

2. The book of Judges teaches the ideal of pure theocracy.

A pure theocracy without human rulers.

Moses had led Israel out of Egypt to Canaan and Joshua had led Israel to occupy the Promised Land. Israel now lived in freedom and in prosperity in the land that the Lord had promised to them. God's covenant with Israel was: "Trust and obey me. Then I will be your God and you will be my people"¹⁰. This was *the period of Moses and Joshua, a period of trusting and obeying the LORD*.

At this point, a new period began in Israel's history: *the period of judges*. Israel, as the second party in God's covenant with them, had to live as God's chosen nation and express their gratefulness by their faith and grateful obedience to the Lord. According to Judges 2:22, *the period of judges was a period of testing their faith and grateful obedience to the LORD*. During this period, the Lord left Israel to itself, as it were, so that Israel might show its spiritual maturity by living consciously and steadfastly according to the covenant.

Israel possessed everything necessary to do that. They possessed the great promises of the Almighty God, that God would protect, help, guide and bless them. They possessed the law and knew the will of God. They knew how they should live and behave towards the other nations in the world. Israel possessed all the privileges and advantages needed to fulfil their part of the covenant with the Lord. The only thing they lacked was a visible head or leader, a human king. But that was exactly what the Lord had intended. *The Lord himself was the King of Israel* and the ark was the visible symbol of his presence in Israel¹¹. This was the unique privilege of Israel, that they were *governed directly by the Lord, without the means of humans*, like Moses or Joshua or kings. *God intended the period after Joshua to be a pure theocracy!* This was exactly what God expressed to Samuel in 1 Samuel 8:7, "It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their King!" This intention became clear to Israel when God did not appoint a new leader after Joshua! Again and again when the Israelites departed from the Lord, the Lord did not give them kings, but only temporary judges to bring them back to their only King, the LORD himself! Gideon's words in Judges 8:22-23 makes clear that Israel understood and accepted the fact that the judges were not hereditary kings. "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you." If Israel would have directed their lives according to what Gideon had said, then there would not have been any need to send another judge.

This proves that the institution of judges was incidental: God gave to Israel a judge, humanly speaking in the hope that this judge would be the last judge and that Israel would acknowledge the Lord as their only King!

A theocracy through human kings.

Only after it became very clear and repeatedly evident that Israel was not spiritually enough to live under a pure theocracy, God allowed Israel to institute a theocracy through hereditary kings.

This does not mean that Israel frustrated the eternal hidden purposes or plan of God. But in the measure Israel failed to accept God's gracious gifts and failed to fulfil God's calling, to that measure God changed, not his eternal purpose or plan, but his revelation of that plan. It is as if God allowed his actions to be determined by

¹⁰ Leviticus 26:3,12

¹¹ 1 Chronicles 13:6

people, but in such a way, that his actions led to a new revelation of his gracious and eternal plan, namely, his New Testament people, who would be a pure theocracy without human rulers.

Thus, at the beginning of the period of the judges, Israel stood at a turning-point in its history. The question was whether Israel would make the right use of all its privileges or slip from the great height where God had placed her. The last happened! Again and again the Lord had been very patient and gave Israel a new chance to turn towards the right road. But again and again Israel succumbed to the ways of the evil nations around her. The characteristic of the book of Judges was this continuous succession of faithfulness and unfaithfulness to the Lord of the covenant, their rising out of and then falling back into religious and moral idolatry.

Samson was the typical representative of the period of the judges. His untamed power went together with his weak indulgence. But also his deep fall was followed by his upright repentance. Nevertheless, in the end, the forces of evil had the upper hand and Israel stood at the point of spiritual and national bankruptcy. At the very end of this process of degeneration the figure of the great reformer, the prophet Samuel, emerged.

3. The book of Judges teaches the process of spiritual and moral degeneration.

The first step of the process of spiritual and moral degeneration began with disobedience to God.

God had commanded Israel to exterminate the remaining Canaanite nations, *because of their terrible idolatry and gross immorality*. Israel failed to carry out Joshua's great testament, written in Joshua chapter 23. Instead, partly due to misplaced generosity and partly due to fear and ease, Israel spared its most bitter enemies.

The second step of the process of spiritual and moral degeneration was compromise.

The idolatrous and immoral Canaanite nations continued to live among the Israelites. In some places, the Canaanite nations were only tolerated and made into slaves. But in other places the Israelites inter-married with them, fraternised with them and finally succumbed to their evil influence. *The Israelites adopted much of the Canaanite religion and culture and thus became more and more heathen themselves. In the end, the friendship with the Canaanites proved to be a far greater danger than their enmity.*

The third step of the process of spiritual and moral degeneration was idolatry.

Under the influence of the Canaanite idolatry, Israel gradually lost its realisation that the Lord is the only, true God¹² and that his service is a holy, spiritual service. The religious practices of Gideon and Jephthah show that they no more followed a pure religion. Gideon made a golden idol and placed it in his town and all Israel worshipped it (8:27). Jephthah made an ungodly vow that he would sacrifice a human being in return for victory and then he sacrificed his own daughter (11:31).

The fourth step of the process of spiritual and moral degeneration was disunity.

According to Judges 19 - 21, the unity among the tribes in Israel was still strong. But the national identity of Israel weakened more and more. Gideon and Jephthah experienced opposition from Ephraim. And Samson was even delivered up to his enemies by his own people, Israel. Jealousy and selfish interests divided the nation of Israel.

4. The book of Judges teaches the unshaken faithfulness of God.

The period of the judges served to convince Israel of its inward weakness. *Israel had to realise and acknowledge that it was not able to fulfil its divine calling without the help of the kings*. It also served to teach Israel that friendship with unbelievers and making compromises with them could only lead to Israel's spiritual and moral degeneration and downfall.

Finally, it served to reveal the unshaken faithfulness of the Lord. Every time Israel fell into idolatry and immorality, and stubbornly chose to follow the forbidden roads, God nevertheless answered their prayers for help and delivered them again and again from their oppressors. *And in spite of the decline and fall of Israel, there was always a remnant of people who did not bow their knees to Baal*. Some of them were Gideon's father, Samson's parents, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz from the book of Ruth, and Elkanah and Hannah and Samuel from the book of Samuel. All these people lived during the period of the judges. But the Lord also made it very clear that Israel did not deserve this deliverance. It was only because of the Lord's unmerited grace that he delivered them.

In the other books of the Bible, the Lord revealed that he delivered Israel because of his covenant with Abraham. Because the Lord is the God of the covenant, he would not let go of his (chosen, believing) people. He still had a higher purpose with his Old Testament people and he would not change his eternal plan.

¹² Isaiah 43:10-11