

THE FIRST JUDGES OF ISRAEL

Summary and Historical Background

The book of Judges continues the history of Israel following the death of Joshua. Whereas the great theme of the book of Joshua was the faith and victory of Israel, the theme of Judges is the disobedience and defeat of Israel. The key verse is 17:6, "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes." The initial success of Judah and Simeon in conquering a large portion of the land allotted to them was later offset by the compromise of all the tribes, including Judah (1:19, 21, 27-36). At the core of the problem was Israel's reluctance to obey the LORD's Law with a perfect heart in the days of Joshua (2:1-10). This caused them much grief.

Therefore, a short time after Joshua died, the new generation rose up and rebelled against the LORD by turning after other gods (2:11-23). The LORD punished Israel's sin of rebellion by allowing other nations to enslave them, causing them much suffering and sorrow. When they had suffered enough for their sins, the LORD sent them a judge, who saved them from their enemies and gave success and rest. Sin, slavery, sorrow, salvation and success completed the full cycle of their experience. This cycle was repeated many times by Israel in the book of Judges.

The author of Judges is not known for certain, but tradition claims Samuel was the writer. Internal evidence indicates it was written after Israel had received a king who brought some order to the nation (cf. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). However, it was written before David had conquered Jerusalem (1:21; cf. 2 Sam 5:6-12). Therefore, it was written near the end of the eleventh century, probably during Saul's reign or in the early part of David's reign.

Judges provides the bridge between Joshua's conquest of the land and Samuel's anointing of two kings (Saul and David), which began Israel's monarchical age. It also provides a repeated example that rebellion brings the LORD's wrath, whereas repentance brings His rest. Judges also exhibits many good qualities of spiritual leadership (and some bad) in the persons of the judges. Finally, it shows the danger of neglecting the LORD's Word and the example of His leaders when every man does that which is right in his own eyes (17:6).

I. Vices of the Nation — 1:1-3:4

A. Failed to Conquer the Land — 1:1-36

1:1 — "Now after the death of Joshua" - Judges begins where the book of Joshua ended.

1:2 — "Judah shall go up" - it is already evident that Judah was a leading tribe in Israel.

1:3 — "Judah...Simeon" - Simeon received its inheritance within the borders of Judah, so it was natural for Judah to ask Simeon to fight together against their enemies.

1:5 — "Adoni-Bezek" - this is the title of the king which means "Lord of Bezek."

1:6 — "Cut off his thumbs and his great toes" - this was commonly done to a king (cf. 1:7), which made it impossible for him to use his weapons anymore. The mutilation also removed all possibility of him ever to return to his throne.

1:7, 8 — "Judah had fought against Jerusalem, and had taken it" - Jerusalem was conquered and burned at the beginning of Judah's and Simeon's conquest of their land, but they soon lost control of it to the Jebusites, who remained there until David conquered them over 300 years later and made Jerusalem his capital city.

1:9 — "In the mountain" - this is the mountain range that runs from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to Hebron, also known as the hill country.

"In the south" — the south ("Negev") is a semi-arid land to the south of Hebron in which Beersheba was located.

"In the valley" — this is the low rolling hills between the hill country and the coastal plains, known as the Shephelah. Many battles were fought "in the valley" including David's famous battle against Goliath.

1:10 — "Hebron" - the account of Hebron's defeat by Caleb is given in Joshua 14:6-15.

1:11-15 — the conquest of Debir by Othniel and the results that followed are also given in Joshua 15:15-19. Othniel later became a judge (3:9-11).

1:13 — "Othniel the son of Kenaz" - he was the half-brother of Caleb, who was the son of Jephunneh (Joshua 14:6). They had the same mother, but a different father.

1:15 — "Upper...nether [lower] springs" - Caleb gave these two cold freshwater springs to his daughter, Achsah, whom he had just given to Othniel as his wife for conquering Debir. Caleb was pleased to grant her request as an indirect gesture of his gratitude to Othniel for his courageous work. He was a brother after his own heart.

1:16 — "The Kenite" - this refers to Jethro, Moses' father-in-law.

"City of palm trees" — this refers to Jericho (Deut 34:3).

1:18 — "Gaza. . . Askalon. . . Ekron" - three coastal cities of the Philistines which Judah conquered.

1:19 — "Could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley" - Judah and Simeon did conquer the people of the mountains (hill country), but their faith in the LORD wavered at the sight of the iron chariots of the people in the valley (Shephelah).

1:21 — "Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites" - Jerusalem was on the border of Judah and Benjamin where the Jebusites lived. Judah had conquered Jerusalem for a short time, but the Jebusites recaptured it. Benjamin was primarily responsible to conquer the Jebusites again, but they failed.

1:22-25 — "Bethel" - Manasseh and Ephraim are the "house of Joseph," his sons. They were successful in conquering Bethel, located in the central highlands of Israel.

1:27 — "Manasseh" - this tribe failed to drive out the enemy from the powerful cities by the fruitful plain of Esdraelon.

1:28 — "Tribute" - means forced labor. Manasseh forced them to labor and let them stay in the land. Their labor was more important to them than their obedience to the LORD.

1:29-36 — "Ephraim...Zebulun...Asher...Naphtali...Dan" - all of these tribes failed to drive out the enemy from the land allotted to them.

B. Failed to Consider the Law — 2:1-10

2:1 — "An angel of the LORD" - this Angel, no doubt, is divine as seen from the authority of His message (cf. Ex 23:20-23). He also is the "Captain of the host of the LORD" (Josh 5:14).

"From Gilgal to Bochim" — Gilgal was the first headquarters of Israel in Canaan; it was there the Israelites dedicated themselves anew (5:2-10); and it was there the tabernacle was located until it was moved to Shiloh. Bochim means "weepers" and was so named because the stern message of the Angel made the Israelites weep (2:4, 5). Since the Angel went from Gilgal to Bochim to meet with Israel there is some

reason to believe that the tabernacle was now removed from Gilgal to Shiloh (at or near Bochim).

2:2 — "You have not obeyed My voice" - reference to the Law given at Sinai.

2:3 — "I will not drive them out...but they shall be as thorns" - as long as Israel obeyed the LORD in keeping themselves separate from the wicked inhabitants of Canaan, the LORD gave them power to drive their enemies out; but when they made leagues with them, the LORD used these nations to punish Israel and to reprove Israel (2:21-22).

2:5 — "Bochim...they sacrificed there unto the LORD" - another reason for believing Bochim became the new site for the tabernacle, better known as Shiloh, was due to the sacrifices made there.

2:10 — "There arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD" - circumcision could make Israelites out of the new generation, but it could not make them children of God. Each generation is responsible to teach the Word and evangelize the next generation (Deut 6:4 ff). It does not happen by rites and ceremonies.

C. Failed to Cleave to the LORD — 2:11-3:4

2:13 — "They forsook the LORD and served Baal and Ashtaroth" - the Israelites believed the Canaanites when they said that Baal (the rain-god who controlled the fertility of the soil) and Ashtaroth (the moon-goddess who controlled the fertility of sex) were the true gods of prosperity in Canaan. These gods replaced the true God in Israel.

2:14 — "The anger of the LORD was hot against Israel" - the LORD is holy and will not tolerate sin. The worship of Baal and Ashtaroth was associated with sensual love (male and female prostitution), illicit dances, orgies of drunkenness, animal sacrifices and even human sacrifices. (Deut 12:30, 31). As a result the LORD delivered the Israelites over to their enemies to punish them for their sin. How could He bless them if they did the same things that caused the downfall of the Canaanites?

2:16 — "The LORD raised up judges" - these judges were saviors who delivered Israel from her enemies. They were Spirit-empowered men (and one woman), who tried to lead Israel back to the LORD. Some were more successful than others. They were military leaders and spiritual defenders in Israel and oftentimes they became the governors of Israel after leading Israel to a great military victory.

2:17, 20 — "Whoring after other gods" - Israel returned to idol worship after the judge died who had delivered them from their enemy. Their infatuation with Baal and Ashtaroth was spiritual adultery. They were unfaithful to the LORD with whom they had entered into a solemn covenant.

2:18-19 — During the times of the judges, Israel repeatedly followed a cycle of sin, slavery, sorrow, salvation and success. A judge was chosen by the LORD to save the people from their oppressor and give them rest which on one occasion lasted up to eighty years. Eventually, however, a new generation would sin and depart from the LORD and the whole cycle would start over again.

3:1-4 — The LORD left four nations in the Promised Land to test the Israelites with their gods to see if they would be faithful to Him. The four nations were the five lords of the Philistines (southwestern Palestine), all the Canaanites, the Sidonians (southern Lebanon) and the Hivites (Syria) to make war with them. The LORD taught Israel through war that sin brings certain judgment and great suffering.

3:5-8 — Israel failed their test of faithfulness to the covenant that they had made with the LORD. They did not separate from the wicked people in these nations, but allowed their daughters and sons to intermarry with their sons and daughters. This led their children to worship the gods of their heathen spouses. Israel was unfaithful to her covenant with the LORD like a man or woman that violates the marriage covenant with his wife or her husband. The LORD was angry with Israel for her unfaithfulness to Him and raised up the king of Mesopotamia to put them in bondage for her sin. She served him for eight years until she repented and cried out to Him for deliverance. Then He raised up a judge to save her.

II. Victories of the Judges — 3:9-31

A. Othniel, the Functional Judge — 3:9-11

3:6 — "Served their gods" - Israel's first apostasy came through inter-marriage with the heathen, which in turn led to idolatry.

3:7 — "Groves" - this is "asheroth," meaning pillars. It was the high place where worship of Ashtaroth or Ashtarte was conducted.

3:8 — "Chushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia" - this king was probably a Habiru leader from the area around Haran in Aram. This Mesopotamia was not the one between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Habiru were fierce fighters and harsh rulers who enslaved Israel for eight years.

3:9 — "The LORD raised up a deliverer...Othniel" - the LORD called Othniel to this task. Othniel had proved his faith in the LORD earlier by conquering Debir (1:13). Driving the wicked inhabitants out of that city showed that he was functional by his effectiveness in winning that battle. It prepared him for this battle against the king of Mesopotamia.

3:10, 11 — When Othniel proved that he was a brave, strong and successful leader by his faith in the LORD, the LORD chose him to be the first judge to deliver His people. Othniel gave his people the beginning of a forty-year period of rest. He did well as a spiritual leader of Israel,

B. Ehud, the Formidable Judge — 3:12-30

3:12, 13 — "Moab" - when Israel apostatized again, the LORD strengthened Moab to discipline His people. Two other nations joined Moab in her attack against Israel (the Ammorites and the Amalekites). All three nations were located on the east side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River.

"City of Palm trees" — this refers to Jericho, not the city, but to the area near where the city was located.

3:14 — "Eglon" may have been a name of disdain among the Hebrews. It means "fat bullock," which certainly fit his physical condition (3:17).

3:15 — "Ehud. . .a Benjamite" - Eglon set up his rule over the children of Israel in Benjamin, the tribe of Ehud. It does not appear that Moab controlled all the tribes of Israel, but certainly it controlled Benjamin and those adjacent to it (Reuben, Gad, Ephraim and possibly Judah).

"A man left-handed" — being left-handed, Ehud wore his dagger on his right side (3:16). This played an important part in hiding his weapon when he came to execute Eglon.

3:16 — "Dagger...of a cubit length" - it was a short sword of about eighteen inches, maybe less.

3:17 — "Present unto Eglon" - Ehud brought his people's annual tribute to Eglon. A significant leader of the conquered people was required to make this presentation to further humiliate them before their conquerors. This indicates the importance of Ehud.

3:18, 19 — Ehud and his men left Eglon after they had presented their tribute, but when they came to the quarries by Gilgal, not far from Jericho, Ehud sent his men on their journey and he returned to Eglon's headquarters alone to carry out his mission against Eglon alone. Ehud's bravery is amazing and made him a formidable warrior.

3:20-23 — Ehud was cool-headed in every aspect of his mission. He executed his plan without a flaw.

3:27-30 — Ehud wasted no time in taking advantage of Moab's confusion. He got some men organized immediately to finish the task that he had begun. His faith in the LORD is evident by his words to the warriors, "Follow after me: for the LORD has delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hand" (v. 28). His faith was rewarded with a complete victory over Moab that gave Israel its longest rest - eighty years. Ehud showed forethought, courage, skill, confidence, leadership, faith and persistence.

C. Shamgar, the Forceful Warrior — 3:31

3:31 — Shamgar judged Israel after Ehud during Israel's eighty year period of rest (v. 30). He was not a major judge, but was too important to be ignored. He delivered Israel from the Philistines by killing 600 men with an ox goad. An ox goad was a long wooden shaft with a sharpened point on one end to urge the oxen forward when the pulling was difficult. It had a chisel on the other end to clean the plow. It was an unusual weapon for warfare, but very effective in Shamgar's hand. He must have been very strong to use it so effectively. He is mentioned by Deborah in her song of victory over the Canaanites as one source of inspiration for Israel (5:6).