

BOOK OF JUDGES

Struggle between Faith and Culture

Part One - Chapters 1-8

The Book of Judges continues the story of Israel's conquest and gradual occupation of the Promised Land – a task that will not be completed until the reign of David. The period of judges extended for two hundred years, roughly from 1200-1000 B.C., from the time of Joshua's death to the time of Samuel. Politically, it was a time when Israel was ruled by a loose tribal confederacy. *"In those days there was no King in Israel; everyone did what he thought best"* (17:6). Each tribe was autonomous in most of its dealings, but all were responsible for the protection of all the tribes from outside invasion. The vacuum of leadership and of a central government left Israel very vulnerable to attacks by their Canaanite neighbors.

The Book of Judges is the seventh book of the Bible and the second book in the so-called deuteronomistic (D) history of Israel. (See introduction to Joshua for more on this.)

The book received its name from the main characters in the text called Judges. As we shall see, judges in this book do not refer to black-robed persons sitting behind a bench, holding a gavel and making decisions on matters of law. Rather, judges in this book refer to charismatic military leaders raised up by God to deliver the Israelites from oppression by their Canaanite neighbors.

Deuteronomistic principle in Judges

In our introduction to Joshua, we saw that the term deuteronomistic history (D) refers to the six books of the Bible, namely, Joshua, Judges 1 and 2, Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. These books are called D-History because most scholars believe that they came from the same school of writers who were deeply influenced by the Book of Deuteronomy and used it to judge Israel's behavior prior to the Exile.

The core or central teaching of Deuteronomy is that obedience to the *Torah* or God's law leads to welfare and peace, while *disobedience* leads to hardship and defeat (see Dt 30:15-20). This core teaching which flows through the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, is sometimes called the *deuteronomistic principle*. In the Book of Judges, this principle is

expressed in a five-fold pattern that repeats itself several times.

- The people do evil in the sight of God. They forsake the God who delivered them from Egypt by worshipping the gods of their neighbors.
- God's anger flares up against the Israelites. He allows their Canaanite neighbors to oppress them.
- In their affliction, the Israelites cry out to God.
- Moved to pity for his oppressed people, God raises up a judge or military leader to deliver them. As long as the judge lives, Israel enjoys peace and rest.
- When the judge dies, the people revert to worshipping false gods. God becomes angry and the people are allowed to fall into the hands of their neighbors again (see Jgs 3:7-11).

Temptations of the Canaanite culture

The Book of Joshua leaves us with the impression that when Joshua died, Israel had captured nearly all of the land of Canaan. As we shall see, that is not true. So, as we move to the Book of Judges, Israel had only taken possession of a portion of the land and, in most cases, they lived side by side with the Canaanites. As a result, they got to see first-hand the way the Canaanites farmed the land and worshipped their gods. As they intermingled with their pagan neighbors (in defiance of Moses' instruction), they left themselves wide open to embracing the ways of pagan worship. This especially happened when *"a new generation arose that did not know the Lord, or what he had done for Israel"* (2:10-12).

To give some idea of the challenge that the Canaanite culture and religion presented to the Israelites, consider the following. The Canaanites were good farmers while the Israelites, formerly a desert people, did not know much about farming. In the eyes of the Canaanites, a good harvest was almost guaranteed by worshipping the fertility god, Baal, recognized as lord of the earth, giver of rain, and source of grain, wine, and oil. *"To ignore Baal Rites in those days would have seemed impractical and even reckless"* (Bernhard Anderson).

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that many Israelites turned to their neighbors, especially when it came to harvesting the land.

In turning to the Canaanite gods, the Israelites might not have thought that they were rejecting the God of the Exodus and the Sinai covenant, but simply paying allegiance to *both* God and Baal.

Slowly but surely, the Israelites start to adopt the pagan ways of their neighbors and integrate them with their faith in the God of Sinai. In a military crisis, they look to God, and in an agricultural crisis, they look to Baal. Slowly but surely, they *accommodate* their faith to their new cultural milieu. It was this adjustment that started Israel's fall from grace.

They should have known better. They very well understood from the first commandment of the Decalogue that their God was a jealous God who tolerated no rivals. In his book *Understanding the Old Testament*, Bernhard Anderson writes: "Therefore, to suppose that God was Lord in one sphere (history) and Baal in another (fertilization of the soil) was a fundamental violation of the meaning of the covenant. Later Israelite prophets saw clearly the basic conflict between the two faiths and threw down the challenge: either God or Baal. Joshua's appeal at Shechem resounded from generation to generation. "Choose whom you will serve!" (Josh 24:15). There could be no compromise, for God claimed sovereignty over the whole of life and demanded devotion of the whole heart" (pp 172-3).

Other temptations. Besides the temptation to worship Baal, the Israelites were also vulnerable to embracing other Canaanite practices that were abhorrent to the Lord, e.g., temple prostitution and child sacrifice.

The period of Judges was a harsh and ruthless time when the Israelites and their pagan neighbors engaged in bloody conflicts for survival. In this book, we will hear tales of intrigue and assassination (3:15-30), deceit and murder (ch. 3), war (chs. 6-8), treason and fratricide (ch. 9), rash vows (ch. 11), civil conflict (ch. 12), vandalism, treachery, and suicide (chs. 13-16). There is an appendix of stories about the tribes of Dan and Benjamin (chs. 17-21) which are even more gruesome than those in Chapters 1-16. The book paints a dreadful picture of what happens when people turn away from God. Left to itself, humanity degenerates into a frightful caricature of what it ought to be. We have seen examples of this in the last century when

some leaders sought to construct a godless society and ended up in war and self-destruction.

What is the story? The Israelites continue their conquest of the Promised Land. But the Canaanite natives who had not been driven out by the Israelites regroup and counterattack. In addition, the Israelites begin to adopt the customs and idolatrous worship of their pagan neighbors. A series of 12 leaders, each in a time of grave national crisis, arises to rouse the people and lead them against the threatening enemy. And every time, in response to the people's repentance, the Lord has mercy and recues Israel.

Division of chapters

PART ONE: Conquest of Canaan (1:1-3:6)

PART TWO: Stories of the Judges (3:7-16:31)

PART THREE: Complete deterioration and terror (chs 17-21)

Pause: What are some ways that we, as disciples of Christ, run the risk of accommodating our faith to un-Christian elements of our secular culture?

PART ONE: CONQUEST OF CANAAN

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: Failing to take possession of the land

"Manasseh did not take possession of Beth-shear . . . Neither did he dislodge the inhabitants of Dor and its towns. . ." (v. 27)

In its introduction to this chapter, the Collegeville Commentary states: "The section presents a different view of the conquest of Palestine from the one presented in Josh 1-12. Here there is no acquaintance with the idea of a comprehensive conquest of Palestine by a united army of Israel. Rather, the picture is that of each tribe, alone or with one or two others, struggling to carve out a territory for itself" (p.250).

As we read verses 19-33 of this chapter, we repeatedly come across the phrases "could not dislodge" and "did not take possession of the land." Individual tribes

could have driven out the Canaanites from their land but failed to do so. It seems that the tribes did not follow up their military victories with physical occupation of the land. This failure to act decisively against the Canaanites meant that “they shall oppose you and their gods shall become a snare for you” (2:3).

In his commentary on Judges, Clinton McCann writes: “In the book of Judges, God’s opposition to the Canaanites should not be understood to mean God’s hatred of a particular people; rather it indicates God’s opposition to a way of life that was based on injustice and unrighteousness that consequently resulted in deadly oppression.

“Canaanites” in Judges, is a kind of code word referring to those forces, structures, and individuals who were seen to be in opposition to the good order of God. The real adversary was not a whole people, but a way of organizing society. To oppose the Canaanite system is, in essence, to choose life as God intends it. But as we shall see in this book, this is a choice the Israelites did not make” (p.21).

Pause: When it comes to God’s treatment of the Canaanites, does the above quote from McCann help? Have you ever wondered why some nations get such a bad deal in life?

CHAPTER 2: Israel’s infidelity to God

Verses 1-5. An angel of the Lord offers words of assurance and words of warning: “*It was I who brought you up from Egypt and led you into the land which I promised on oath to your fathers. I said that I would never break my covenant with you, but that you were not to make a pact with the inhabitants of this land, and you were to pull down their altars. Yet you have not obeyed me. What did you mean by this? For now I tell you, I will not clear them out of your way; they shall oppose you and their gods shall become a snare for you.*” *When the angel of the Lord had made these threats to all the Israelites, the people wept aloud; and so that place came to be called Bochim. They offered sacrifice there to the Lord.*

The word “Bochim” means weeping. As we shall see in this book, the Israelites will do a lot of weeping.

Verse 6 has Joshua dismissing the people to take possession of the land that was allotted to them – something they failed to do to a great extent.

Verse 7 notes that the people served the Lord during Joshua’s lifetime and during the lifetime of the elders who served with Joshua. They remembered God’s deeds and honored him with their loyalty and obedience.

Verses 10-23 – A generation who knew not the Lord.

In a sense, these verses constitute the real introduction to Judges. The previous texts (1:1-2:9) could be taken as an appendix to the book of Joshua. This section opens with these words:

“But once the rest of that generation were gathered to their fathers, and a later generation arose that did not know the Lord, or what he had done for Israel, the Israelites offended the Lord by serving the Baals. Abandoning the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had led them out of the land of Egypt, they followed the other gods of the various nations around them, and by their worship of these gods provoked the Lord” (vv 10-12).

In the Book of Deuteronomy, God through Moses, stressed the importance of teaching the Torah to the next generation (6:7). God knew that if the children were not grounded in the teaching of the Torah, they would turn to the worship and false practices of their new neighbors. As we read the above verses, it is clear that someone dropped the ball. The tragic result was that a new generation grew up that “did not know the Lord.”

Pause: It is one thing to know the answers to catechism questions. It is another thing to “know the Lord.” What is the difference? When would you say you came to know the Lord?

Verses 13-19 outline the pattern we will often notice in this book: the people turning away from God; God becoming angry with them and punishing them by allowing their neighbors to oppress them; God raising up a judge to deliver them.

PART TWO: THE JUDGES

CHAPTER 3: Othniel and Ehud

“When the Israelites cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a savior, Othniel . . .” (v. 9)

Verses 7-11 talk about the first judge with minimum detail. The events follow the pattern mentioned above:

sin, oppression, repentance, raising of a judge. Othniel was a model of what a judge should be. He was raised up by God and empowered with God's Spirit. He was successful in defeating those who were oppressing the Israelites.

Verses 12-30 – Ehud, the left-handed trickster.

Israel's second judge is Ehud who the text states, is left-handed (v.15). Because he is left-handed, he carries his sword on his right side which probably fooled King Eglon's bodyguards as they would have expected him to carry his sword on his left side.

Then Ehud tricks Eglon into a private visit during which he murders the King. Against all odds, the left-handed lone ranger defeats the well established fat cat (v.17).

Verse 31. Shamgar, the first of the minor judges, must have been quite the guy, having slain 600 Philistines with an ox goad.

Pause: What are your thoughts about the first two judges?

CHAPTERS 4-5: Deborah

General Barak said to Deborah "If you come with me, I will go; if you do not come with me I will not go" (v. 8).

Deborah is the only female judge. She is also a prophetess, civil magistrate, charismatic leader, wife and mother.

This story features not only Deborah, but also Barak and Joel. After being oppressed for twenty years, the Israelites cry out to the Lord (4:4). Then Deborah appears on the scene as one who plays the role of judge for the people. She calls General Barak and tells him that he and his men are to go out and fight the powerful General Sisera and his mighty army. Barak is told that he need not fear for the Lord will win the battle for him. But Barak refuses to 'man up' and place his trust in Deborah's prophetic word. He refuses to go into battle without her.

Deborah warns Barak that he will not receive the glory for winning the battle, for it will go to a woman (v.9). With more words of encouragement from Deborah (v.14), Barak goes into battle and easily defeats Sisera's army. Sisera escapes and runs to the

tent of Jael (v.12) who kills him while he is asleep. Ironically enough, neither Deborah nor Barak kill Israel's big enemy. Rather, that honor falls to another woman who is only a half-Israelite.

Chapter 5 is a poetic description of Chapter 4. It praises God for what he accomplished through Deborah, Barak, and Jael.

Verse 3 is an invitation to listen to this hymn in praise of God.

Verses 4-5 recall how God led Israel into Palestine by a series of cosmic events.

Verses 6-8 describe the situation before Deborah was raised up.

Verses 12-18 revolve around Deborah's call to the tribes to fight.

Verses 19-22 tell about the battle.

Verses 23-27 describe Jael's slaying of Sisera.

Verses 28-30. Sisera's mother waits for her son's return. She wonders if they are dividing the spoil they took and enjoying the damsels (v.30). Before we become too sorry for this mother, we must remember that for years, she and her household's lifestyle would have been enhanced by the booty accumulated from her son's military battles.

Pause: What picture of Deborah do you take from this story? What female leader in our time do you most admire? Why?

CHAPTERS 6-9: Gideon, the reluctant judge

"The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon and said, "The Lord is with you, O champion!" "My lord," Gideon said to him, "if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are his wondrous deeds of which our fathers told us when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' For now the Lord has abandoned us and has delivered us into the power of Midian." The Lord turned to him and said, "Go with the strength you have and save Israel from the power of Midian. It is I who send you." But he answered him, "Please, my lord, how can I save Israel? My family is the meanest in Manasseh, and I am the most insignificant in my father's house." "I

shall be with you,” the Lord said to him, “and you will cut down Midian to the last man” (vv. 12-16).

Beginning with Othniel (3:7-11) and continuing through Samson (chs 13-16), we will meet twelve judges, six of whom are called major judges. As you will see, minor judges receive only the briefest mention. The first group of judges is good, the middle group is morally ambiguous, and the last is more of villains than heroes. The declining character of the individual judges represents the declining state of the people.

After the death of Deborah, the Midianites return to power and oppress the Israelites. They raid the Israelites’ property and steal their harvests. When the Israelites cry to God, he once again responds by raising up a judge who is also a prophet.

The call of Gideon (6:11-24). This is one of the great call stories in the Bible, similar to the call of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Mary.

An angel comes to Gideon, a name which means ‘hacker’ (for he will be called to hack down the altar of Baal. Maybe he could be the patron saint of modern day computer hackers!). When the angel says to Gideon, *“The Lord is with you,”* Gideon sarcastically replies that he did not notice God’s presence. *“If the Lord is with us, why have all these bad things happened to him and his people?”* As far as Gideon is concerned, God has abandoned his people.

The angel ignores Gideon’s remarks and goes on to tell him that he has been chosen to deliver Israel from oppression. *“Go with the strength you have and save Israel from the power of Midian. It is I who send you (6:14).”* Gideon is being commissioned to lead a sort of new exodus.

Like Moses (Ex 3:11), Gideon at first responds to his commission by asking another question: *“Please, my Lord, how can I save Israel? My family is the meanest in Manasseh (a tribe), and I am the most insignificant in my father’s house”* (v.15). What Gideon does not know yet is that God loves using the “weakest” and the “least” so that they will know clearly that their victories are due to God’s power.

God’s response to Gideon is the same that he offered to Moses, *“I will be with you”* (v.16).

Like Moses, Gideon asks God for a sign of his presence. And God obliges. Fire consumes Gideon’s sacrifice (6:17-24) and the fleece left on the ground stays dry although the ground around it is wet with morning dew (6:36-40).

Verses 25-32 – Order to tear down the pagan altars. At night, God comes to Gideon and tells him to *“destroy your father’s altar to Baal and cut down the sacred pole that is by it. You shall build instead, the proper kind of altar to the Lord, your God, on top of this stronghold”* (vv 25-26). This was a scary command for Gideon to tear down his father’s (and community’s) place of worship, a place where he most likely worshipped as well.

Gideon obeys God’s bidding. When the townspeople discover who had torn down their place of worship, they come to Gideon’s father looking for his life. Fair dues to Gideon’s dad; he defends his lad and probably saves his life.

Verses 33-40. Gideon prepares for battle with Israel’s enemies, and in the process asks God for two more signs that he is with him.

CHAPTER 7: Defeat of the Midianites

The Lord said to Gideon, *“You have too many soldiers with you for me to deliver Midian in their power, lest Israel vaunt itself against me and say, “My own power brought me the victory”* (v.2).

Twice God reduces the number of soldiers in Gideon’s army so that he and the people will know that it is God who gives them the victory.

Verses 16-22 describe the attack against the Midianites.

Verses 4-21 recount the pursuit of the Midianites. These verses do not paint a positive picture of Gideon. Rather than being God-directed, he seems to be more interested in settling a personal vendetta.

CHAPTER 8: Offer of Kingship and the Ephod

Verses 22-23. The people come to Gideon and say, *“Rule over us—you and your son and your son’s son—for you have rescued us from the Midianites.”* Gideon rightly declines the offer, *“I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you. The Lord must rule over you.”*

Verses 24-27 – Gideon becomes greedy. Even though Gideon acted correctly in refusing the people’s offer to make him king, his story ends on a bad note. Commenting on these verses, the authors of *Walking with God* write: “He asks the people for a large portion of the spoils, particularly the gold, forgetting that the spoils went to the Lord who fought for Israel. Worse still, he uses the gold to make himself an ephod, a priestly garment adorned with gold and jewels. Gideon usurps the role of Aaron, and leads Israel into apostasy, just as Aaron did with the calf made from gold plundered from the Egyptians. The narrator clearly alludes to this connection, saying, ‘all Israel played the harlot after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family’ (Jgs 8:27). The image of the harlot is repeated in the narrative of Gideon’s death, when Israel again goes after the Amorite gods. The author sadly observes that Israel did not ‘remember’ the Lord, who had repeatedly rescued them” (p. 130).

Pause: What speaks to you most in the Gideon story?

Among other things, the Gideon story is a great example of God using someone who suffered from a poor self-image (“I am the most insignificant”) to do his work.

How does this speak to you?

God was upset with Gideon’s fearfulness. How does this speak to you?