

The Book of Judges

Lesson 1 - Introduction

Today we begin our study of the book of Judges, one of the lesser-read books of the bible and equally so one of the lesser-researched sections of Scripture by scholars. I will tell you frankly that Christian scholars in particular just don't know quite what to do with this book, and Jewish scholars seem to prefer to go around it for reasons that will become apparent as we proceed. But by any standard this is an important and truly fascinating book of the Tanach, the Old Testament, that will keep your interest; and especially because it has significant parallels to the modern church age if we'll only have eyes to see and ears to listen. Let me say that again because I'm going to make this point to you boldly and often: the time of the Judges greatly mirrors the current tenuous situation of the Church Age. This week is a preparation for the study of Judges so that we'll view it in the proper context and know what to look for and hopefully see how to apply its lessons to our lives.

Believers tend to know of the book of Judges mostly from the story of Samson and Delilah, a favorite among children's Sunday School teachers. Who could ever forget about the handsome and charismatic young man with the long locks that were the secret of his superhuman strength, and the beautiful woman who seduced him and betrayed him to his enemies? So the story is usually told as a tale of a heroic figure of extraordinary physical prowess (kind of the Incredible Hebrew Hulk) that took on the wicked Philistines that were lording over a goodly portion of the 12 Israelite tribes at that time. The finale has Samson sacrificing his own life as a courageous martyr in order to destroy the pagan temple to Dagon while killing many of the Philistine priests and lords in the process.

Unfortunately the way the story is commonly told usually misses the point and miscasts the role of the characters (especially Samson) much the way King Solomon is commonly miscast as an extraordinarily wise and regal figure just going about doing God's work in a way the Lord approves. Nothing could be further from reality in either case.

The entire (and by the way, unfinished) salvation history of Israel is important but there are few more critical eras Israel's development than the one chronicled in the book of Judges. This is the era that Israel slid rapidly towards national suicide due to their determined apostasy from YHWH. I'm afraid that when we take the proper perspective of this historical record it is one of great sadness and of a self-delusional people who insist on the one hand that they ARE faithful to Yehoveh but on the other hand vigorously pursue peace and friendship at any price with their pagan neighbors; and the price for this peace is invariably voluntary assimilation into the pagan cultures and Mystery Babylon religious systems that the whole remainder of the known world reveled in.

Thus we see 3 major themes developed in Judges. The first is Israel's military and spiritual

struggles as they wrestle among themselves and battle with the remaining Canaanites (that Joshua failed to drive out) in order to settle within the land and create a lasting and more durable society of farmers, shepherds, and craftsmen.

The second theme is the amazing grace and longsuffering (but not infinite) patience of God's faithfulness to the covenant He made with Israel, as opposed to the amazing disinterest and schizophrenic behavior of Israel in their lack of faithfulness in return.

The third theme is what some scholars call, "the Canaanization of Israel". In other words it is how the people of God became more and more like the world around them instead of staying separate from the world, or their lives influencing the world around them to be more like Israel. And the world all around Israel at this time was the various Canaanite tribes and peoples. We'll witness Israel being oppressed in many ways by a number of enemies, but not so much that they were forcibly dragged kicking and screaming into idolatry; rather Israel preferred more of the pagan gods that the world enjoyed and less of their own God because it seemed not only the more tolerant thing to do but also it was more economically and socially expedient.

I hope this last theme pricked your ears and maybe even stabbed at your heart a bit, because it certainly stabs at mine. Anyone who listens to Torah Class regularly knows that I am at times quite critical of the modern church; not because I'm above it but because I'm part of it. I'm in the midst of it and I love the church, I love my brothers and sisters of the faith (Messianic Jew and Traditional gentile) and I am at times befuddled and downhearted at the obvious place we have arrived, and the equally obvious path of confusion and downright idolatry that we merrily rush along with full confidence that we are in good stead with the Almighty in the so doing. Many of you can see it and are making personal decisions and changes to chart a new way or (as I prefer to think of it) a return to the old well-defined and documented ways of the earliest body of Believers when the Lord's presence was tangible and His power flowed in ways we have not seen in a long time.

In the days of the Judges there was a remnant of Israelite leaders that warned and begged the people to wake up and recognize how their faith had been co-opted by other Israelite leaders who sought only to further their private agendas or to blend in with their neighbors and thus gain wider acceptance. In opposition to this remnant of the faithful was the ever-growing majority of Israelites and other leaders that said that the current situation demanded that the definition of sin be altered and that peace with their neighbors was more important and a greater good than obedience to an ancient decree about sacred land holdings or full devotion to their one god and His laws.

I've regularly said that the Church and Israel have run nearly parallel historical paths with the analogy of the two rails of a railroad track. The picture being that the rails are separate and distinct and never touch one another, yet they are connected in purpose and origin. They begin at the same place, follow the same path, and arrive at the same destination. They're made of the same stuff and behave in the same ways. And it is natural that this would be the case because the immutable God-ordained patterns that rule the Universe mean that history is doomed to repeat itself in never-ending cycles until Messiah comes again to put an end to it. Thus just as the Israelites detoured nearly overnight from their golden era of obedience and

faith to Yehoveh as they conquered Canaan and celebrated victory after victory, in the book of Judges we see them taking a devastating turn down a path of darkness all the while calling it light and progress. It was only a matter of a couple of decades after Joshua's death that we find Israel mired in idol worship and oppression, all of it at their own hand.

And of course the church is following this same pattern. After centuries of victory when (against all odds) for all practical purposes every remote corner of our planet has been penetrated and presented with the Gospel of Yeshua; after a mere 60 years when at the cost of their own lives the righteous stood up against and defeated the indescribable evil of Adolf Hitler and his satanic desires to dominate the world and rid it of God's chosen people; today a loud and growing voice within the church says that sin must be redefined because it doesn't fit with modern societal needs. A Christian no longer even needs to believe in Christ. A Jew can perfectly comfortable as an atheist. That same rising voice says that love means peace at any price, mercy means protecting the lives and rights of the guilty at the expense of the innocent, and unity means compromise of principles to the lowest common denominator to achieve consensus. More and more denominations have made it their creed that God by any name is still God and therefore we should honor and respect all other religions and see them as no better than our Judeo-Christianity because all paths to the divine are equal and good.

As Arthur Cundall says in his commentary on the book of Judges: ***"It may be that the modern reader of Judges will hear the warning voice of the (Holy) Spirit, 'This is NOT the way, walk ye NOT in it'"***. I can only hope that as we delve into the destructive foibles of the tribes of Israel contained in these passages that we will have the humility and openness to see that we are not on the outside looking in on some hapless ancient Hebrews bent on wickedness; but rather we are THEM and we are in great danger of committing spiritual suicide. We as the body of Messiah already have the gun to our collective heads and our finger on the trigger. Will we lay the gun down, repent, and realize that our religious philosophies and manmade denominational doctrines that seek to apologize for God's commands or even to replace them must be abandoned for the better and more pure ways of His Word? Or as in Yeshua's parable of the seeds will we listen for a while to a call to holiness and purity, but then fall away and go back to the easier more familiar path, return to the comfortable and accepted ways of the majority, and dare Yehoveh to exercise His righteous justice upon those whom He loves so very much?

A long time from now when the story of the current Christian era is retold, it is certainly going to look much like a modern adaptation of the book of Judges; only the names and places are changed. So let's pay attention to what the Lord is going to tell us and take it to heart, and then put it to action. Let's determine together to take the better but more difficult path through the narrower gate and please the Father rather than surrendering to false accusations, peer pressure, and short-term harmony with the world or even with religious institutions that have lost their way but don't want to lose you.

The title of this book (Judges) easily conjures up a false image of its meaning and (in 21st century minds) just what their function was in the centuries in between Joshua and the first king of Israel. The English title "book of Judges" comes from the Latin ***Liber Judicum***, which comes from the Greek ***Kritai***, which indeed means judge just as we think of it. In all cases

these words are an attempt to translate the Hebrew **Shophetim**.

We must not think of this kind of judge as portrayed in the book of Judges as a person who sits behind a bench in dark robes determining guilt or innocence of an accused. While some of the several **Shophetim** may have performed this function it was minor and simply fell to them at some moments in their role as leaders. These folks did not operate in the legal sphere; rather they were more like saviors and rescuers raised up for a season and usually for a limited purpose among an equally limited group of Israelite tribes. That is these judges were only for certain tribes, not all the tribes. They were NOT national leaders, they were regional leaders.

It is difficult to find the words to describe the role of a **Shophet** (the singular form of **Shophetim**, which is plural) partly because they didn't all do the same things. Nor were the skill sets and attributes of these several judges that same. If we use the term savior (in a general sense) to at least partially define their purpose it does help us to a degree to get the picture. Think about Jesus' role and it helps us to grasp the office of **Shophet** especially when Jesus explained that He came NOT to judge (not to hand out judgment) but to save. In other words in Yeshua's first coming (as in the role of Messiah Ben Yoseph, the suffering servant), He indeed did NOT come to be a judge of mankind, but rather to save us from our predicament that we might not face judgment. LATER at His future second coming He WILL come in an entirely different role as Messiah Ben David, the warrior-king; He will come NOT as savior (not as a **shofet**) but as one who carries out the Father's justice and thus comes as one who judges as from the bench and orders sentences carried out.

So like Messiah these **Shophetim** of the book of Judges were sent by God to save certain segments of Israel from whatever their current predicament, as opposed to sending them to render judicial judgments against Israel. I don't want to carry that comparison between Yeshua and the **Shophetim** too far for obvious reasons, but as far as I have gone is appropriate.

Now the use of the term **Shophet** didn't first appear in the book of Judges; we find Moses using it earlier in Deuteronomy chapters 16, 17, and 19 to describe an appointed leader who was to stand side-by-side with the High Priest as perhaps the next highest leader of Israel. This kind of earlier **Shophet** indeed had civil judicial responsibilities that extended to the military (Joshua's army) and to a lesser extent to religious matters. As we discussed in the closing lessons of the book of Joshua, the duties of a **Shophet** changed significantly over time as one can imagine, because circumstances changed so significantly from the time of the Wilderness journey, to the Conquest of Canaan, to this time here in the book of Judges. In fact the **Shofetim** of the book of Judges wouldn't be recognizable in Moses' day and vice versa.

There were a number of **Shofetim** raised up by God for Israel and the book of Judges identifies 12, or 13 counting Deborah. There is some minor disagreement among both Jewish and Christian scholars as to just who counted as a judge, so the number can vary by one or two depending on whom you listen to. There are a few names that are often called judges, but that is questionable depending on how we define the office. For instance, Samuel is often included as a judge but he is not mentioned in the book of Judges, and the same goes for Eli. We DO find Abimelech mentioned in the book of Judges and more or less called a judge but he's usually rejected as a legitimate **Shophet** by most biblical scholars because he was self-

appointed and not called by God.

Thus we see that perhaps the PRIME characteristic (and the common denominator) among all the **Shophetim** of the book of Judges was their being specifically called by God for this purpose. Theirs is not unlike the office of a true biblical Prophet. Over the centuries many ancient Hebrews claimed to be prophets, just as beginning in early church times and continuing right up until today we have thousands of Believers who declare themselves as prophets of God. But from a Biblical perspective a prophet is only a prophet when there is a tangible appointing of that person by Yehoveh to be a prophet. So at least during the time from the death of Joshua until the emergence of Saul as the 1st king over Israel, a judge by definition was 1) appointed by God, and 2) sent by God as a savior to rescue some number of Israelite tribes from an oppressor.

Going with the idea that there were 12 judges, they were (in chronological order): Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Barak, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Samson, and Abdon. If we add the 13th (and I think we should) it is Deborah and she is concurrent with Barak. If we were to add another (that quite a few Jewish and Christian scholars add) it would be Samuel (but I'm not too keen on that because he was far more prophet than judge and the savior aspect is also not clear).

Of these divinely authorized **Shophetim** there are 7 where the stories of their actual deliverance of Israel from a predicament are recorded: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Barak (and Deborah), Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. Five others are SAID (in the book of Judges) to have saved Israel from something or another but no account of that event has survived.

There is no real evidence of who wrote the book the Judges. Jewish tradition says that Samuel did, but otherwise the author is unknown. The only real controversy about the authorship of Judges is WHEN it was written and how many times it might have been edited. But the most rancorous argument over the book is the actual time period of the Judges, and there is a wide disparity over that for reasons we'll examine briefly.

There are two basic timelines set out for the era of the **Shophetim**: the 400-year version and the 200- year version. You'll find excellent scholars on both sides of the argument, each with solid foundations for their conclusions (so we're not about to settle that argument here nor get into any doctrinal disputes about it). And then within each of these two basic timeline versions there are differences depending on whether or not one adds Samuel and Eli as judges because it would automatically extend the period. Note that one timeline is virtually twice as long as the other. That is pretty significant. The primary reason one goes with the 400-year version is the conclusion that the Exodus was much earlier than the other version theorizes. The 400 year version sees the Exodus as happening in the 1400's BC, while the 200 year version sees it as happening in the late 1300's to early 1200's BC. The end point of the judges of around 1040 to 1020 BC is pretty well defined because we have sufficient records from a number of sources to show that this is when Saul became the first king of Israel (which by definition ends the era of the Judges).

Now for you archaeology buffs the book of Judges is essentially the transition period from the

Bronze Age to the Iron Age and it coincides with the settlement of the Sea Peoples who later came to be known in the bible as the Philistines. Thus by the time we get to the era of Samson (who is one of the last judges), we see that the Philistines have become well established in Canaan and are creating havoc for Israel and especially the tribe that is adjacent to them, Dan and another nearby tribe, Judah.

So WHEN was Judges written? Well it certainly had to be AFTER all the events of the book of Judges had occurred, and it had to be sometime AFTER the time of Saul because the last words of the book of Judges says that everything written in the book happened before there was a king over Israel. So the writer knew when that first king was anointed. That means it had to have been written around 1025 B.C. or later. We can probably narrow it down a little better because the writer of Judges tells us that the city of Gezer was still under control of the Canaanites at the time it was written, and we know that by the time of King Solomon Israel had gained control over Gezer from the Philistines.

So it was probably written during the early days of King David, when he was only king over Judah and before he became king over a united Israel that included the 10 tribes of the northern area that was dominated by the Israelite tribe of Ephraim; perhaps 990 – 995 B.C. The important thing is that it was written soon after the period of the Judges so the information can be taken as historically reliable.

Now from a political standpoint the era of the Judges is an extended time of instability for the 12 tribes and Levi (we'll talk a little more about that in a few minutes). They had no central leadership as they had under Joshua. That said they were SUPPOSED to have looked toward YHWH as their king, and His will was to be ascertained by means of the priesthood, the Torah, and liberal use of the Urim and Thummim stones. The priesthood was to have performed (to a degree) as the central government for the 12 tribes; but I submit that a better characterization of their intended purpose was as Israel's central conscience and moral compass and in some ways it fulfilled that function but rapidly lost its hold as each tribe decided to do things their own way. Let's face it; we all know how easy it is to ignore our conscience when we find it convenient.

So how could we describe the kind of governing that the tribes of Israel operated under? Let me throw a 50-cent word at you: amphictyony. An amphictyony is not a made-up academic word; it is Greek and is the name of a certain type of ancient Greek political/governmental structure that existed for hundreds of years. Among the Greeks it was a loose confederation of city/states that attempted to help one another for the common defense and economy, and to abide by a common set of laws and ethics but only to a point. This was NOT a centralized government or a republic with a visible leader; it was more similar to an extensive trade and security treaty, and not unlike the UN whereby participation is voluntary and there is no actual central authority except on a case-by-case basis.

Israel operated much like an amphictyony; but what made Israel a unique kind of amphictyony during the era of the Judges is that while (like the Greeks) they too were a loose confederation without a formal central government, the binding elements were not security and economy, but rather family and religion. All 12 tribes and Levi were descended from Jacob and they were all

loyal to the Covenant of Moses. Thus they could be viciously fighting one another for a time, and then turn around and recognize that they are brother tribes of Jacob and let bygones be bygones. We see this same thing happening all over the Middle East and most visibly in Iraq; this is one of the interesting characteristics inherent in tribal societies, which at the same time leaves Westerners confounded and frustrated as we watch it happen. One tribe (that perhaps we back politically) is on the verge of soundly defeating another (that we want defeated) and then everything inexplicably stops and they make a peace treaty! Why? Because in the end they recognize their common ancestors and therefore blood relationship (even if quite distant) and do not wish to eliminate them from the gene pool or see their so-called “brothers” overly humiliated. Keep this in mind as we study Judges because it will help you to understand why they made some of the strange and befuddling decisions that they did.

We have established what a **Shofet** (a judge) is, that he functioned as a savior or rescuer of Israel and not as an arbiter of civil or criminal cases, and in general how many Judges there were (from 12-16 depending on your precise definitions of a judge). We learned that the era of the **Shophetim** was immediately following Joshua (somewhere between about 1400 and 1300 BC) and ended with the crowning of the first king of Israel, Saul (at around 1020 B.C.) We also know that they operated as a loose confederation of tribes (called an amphictyony) whose point of cohesion and reason to remain a federation was ancestral family ties and common devotion to the Covenant of Moses.

Therefore let's now take a look at what the overall situation was that existed for the 12 tribes in the land as the era transitioned from Joshua to Judges, from a strong central leadership and a common cause to an ill defined governmental structure that supposedly had YHWH as their king and the priesthood as His earthly messengers but in reality it was closer to every man for himself.

First is that just as in any system of society there was not a monolithic train of thought or behavior among the Hebrews of the land. The high standards and ideals demanded by God and demonstrated by Moses and Joshua and (at least for a short time) Joshua's immediate successors weren't necessarily emulated or even admired by the Israelites in general. They had more practical matters to deal with such as raising families, growing crops, tending vines, and shepherding flocks. And we must not fail to put into the back of our minds the reality that one of Joshua's last acts was to have a covenant renewal ceremony during which he pleaded with the people to get rid of their false gods and idols. None of this boded well for the character of Israel.

Next is that Joshua's inability to lead Israel to a total and complete conquest of Israel, and his (and his elders' and tribal princes') proclivity to make treaties with the various Canaanite tribes instead of driving them out of the land or destroying them as the Lord demanded, was going to prove to be Israel's Achilles heel. In a nutshell Israel quickly adapted to the idea of having the Canaanites as neighbors and tried to find ways to live among them in peace; naturally compromise and tolerance was the word of the day. The 12 tribes lost any enthusiasm to finish what they had started and complete the conquest of Canaan. The result of that decision is the root of troubles we witness in the Middle East today.

We're going to see that as a result of this lax attitude that mixed marriages between Hebrews and Canaanites became quite a normal and accepted arrangement in a startlingly short time; but because of the way ancient societies operated this necessarily meant that there must be a compromise or a clash over the issue of whose god would be preeminent in that blended family, Yehoveh or one of the Baal gods, and one can imagine that this made family situations pretty tense at times.

The result of two widely different cultures mixing in such a way is unavoidable: syncretism. There's another new 50-cent word for some of you. Syncretism comes from the word synchronize and we all generally understand that to synchronize something is to make two or more things operate simultaneously or in a coordinated way. So syncretism is an attempt to reconcile two different moral or religious systems and mold them into something else that retains elements of both and thus is reasonably acceptable for all parties. When it comes to religion in those ancient times that meant that somebody's god had to take an inferior position and another person's god a superior position, but both were retained. Or both persons' gods might be given generally equal status, with equal recognition and equal authority. Rarely is this process of blending and harmonizing two religious systems and god pantheons done at a bargaining table or is it even really a conscious effort (but it does happen as with Constantine and the Councils of Nicea and Laodicea). Rather it usually happens quietly and naturally over time, slowly and without much deliberation, fanfare or overt intent. One moment Yehoveh is your only god to whom you give your full devotion; but then you marry a Canaanite who worships the Ba'als and a few years later you suddenly look up to realize that not only is Yehoveh NO LONGER your only god, He holds an equal or inferior position to another god. What was foreign is no longer strange. A little more time passes and now the syncretism becomes cemented and a whole new system has been created and any questioning of the rightness or wrongness of it has disappeared. Any memory of how it happened becomes irrelevant or at times lost to history.

I hope this is causing the wheels to turn in your minds right about now. The church has been in engaged in syncretism for centuries. The earliest church syncretism was when it blended the pagan religions of the gentiles with the Messianic religion of the Jews; the result was the Roman Church in the West and the Orthodox Church in the East. The progress of Christian syncretism with the world's cultures long ago passed the tipping point and now practically every demographic that can be applied to the world in general is the same for the church in general. Marriage, divorce, abortion, criminal activity, and more recently sexual orientation is nearly indistinguishable between Believers and non-Believers. And, of course, the culture and behavior that has won out in this constant blending of Christianity and the world is that of the majority, the unbelieving world. This is the nature of syncretism. The Interfaith Movement is currently advancing religious syncretism like a virulent cancer in our time, and is being touted and admired by many of the top Christian and Jewish leaders (and naturally the top secular leaders) the world over. And what was originally intended to harmonize Christian doctrines among the thousands of denominations (to foster unity) is now attempting to harmonize Islam with Christianity, and those faiths with the Oriental mystical religions. For those of you who are undecided as to whether or not the Interfaith ideal is a good or a bad thing, let me remind you that the God-principle which under grids the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation is dividing, electing, and separating. The Lord created distinctions between His people and those who are

not His people and carefully defined which were which; and He demands that those distinctions be maintained. Syncretism is but the modern academic word for dissolution of distinctions. It is the term for the reversal of the God-principle of dividing, electing, and separating. Syncretism is what Nimrod strived for with the Tower of Babel as its monument.

The syncretism that was the downfall of Israel in the era of the Judges is the same that we are engulfed in today within institutional Christianity. Do you have eyes to see and ears to hear? The test is not to simply agree on an intellectual level, but to act upon that agreement.

Let's move on to look at the next element of Israel's overall situation as they enter the time of the Judges; it is that the godly leadership of Joshua and his immediate successors all but disappeared. The marvelous Torah-based standards were soon set aside for the kind of self-serving and pragmatic behaviors that we're all too familiar with in our modern politicians and corporate kingpins.

This condition was not only reserved for the godless or the backslidden leaders of Israel; practically every **Shophet** that the Lord called upon had significant moral and character flaws and the Scriptures make no attempt to hide them. None of the **Shophetim** of the book of Judges could hold a candle to the leadership skills and ethics of Joshua, Moses, or Phinehas. Samson in particular is problematic; this grown man with the self-control and emotional capacity of a Junior High School-er, who was born under a Nazarite vow, showed practically no interest in spiritual matters whatsoever; yet he would be chosen by God to smite the enemy Philistines. Samson was a party animal, married a foreign girl, and killed at times for his own pleasure or simply to show off. His final undoing was a beautiful prostitute who seduced him with little effort.

Earlier in the period of the Judges we'll run into Jephthah whose mother was a Harlot, and whose reputation was so bad that he was run out of his own tribal territory. But, he was such a good fighter and military leader that he was asked to return to fight off an oppressor. When he at least showed some humility before the God of Israel he ruined it by declaring that he'd sacrifice the first thing that came through his home's doorway to greet him as he returned from a presumed victory. That "thing" turned out to be his only daughter. And despite the Christian apologists who claim that he didn't ACTUALLY sacrifice his daughter to YHWH, the Scripture plainly says that he did what he had vowed to do. We're even told of his daughter going away for a few weeks knowing what her fate would be so that she could mourn not ever being able to have a husband and family, and it became a tradition (spoken of in the Bible) to mourn her sad fate.

As we go through each of the 7 stories of deliverance, each by a different judge, we'll find a seriously dark side and equally perverted sense of morality inherent in each of them. But frankly, that's one of the reasons to believe the Bible; nothing is whitewashed away and even its heroes are shown to simply be what they were: flawed humans.

Now while this admittedly dark and pessimistic summation of Israel's condition at that time is accurate, to be balanced it must be said that on the positive side they did well to maintain their tribal structure and that when left alone the tribes were generally harmonious. It was when

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outside influences were exerted that one tribe or another would buckle under the pressure and this would sometimes lead to inter-tribal warfare. Even then there was no serious attempt at genocide of one Israelite tribe upon another, or even to erase the existence of a tribe by means of full and complete absorption by a more dominating tribe.

With this as a backdrop, we'll begin Judges chapter 1 next time.