

JUDGES

Introduction

Author. Although Samuel is the author of the book according to tradition, the writer is impossible to determine. It may be that Samuel assisted and other prophets such as Nathan or Gad assisted in the process (1 Chronicles 29:29).

Date. The date of the book is undoubtedly during the monarchy sometime. The phrase *In those days Israel had no king* (17:6; 18:1 et al.) strongly suggests a date after the monarchy was established.

Structure. For all the moral chaos which the book records it is highly ordered from a literary standpoint. The introduction (1-3) and the conclusion (17-21) balance and surround the main section (4-16) which alone includes the activities of the judges. The first section (1-3) divides neatly into two sections: the disobedience of Israel and the Divine principles of operation during this period. The middle section is easily divided into six main sections each of which begin with the phrase *The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord* (3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; and 13:1). The statement that God gave them over to oppression soon follows in each section along with the cycle of *apostasy, oppression, distress and deliverance*. Each section then closes with a recognizable conclusion of "the land had peace . . . years" or "led Israel . . . years." Beyond this the chiasmic structure of the narrative focuses attention upon the center section. The first section (3:7-11) is relatively very short and seems to introduce the narrative pattern described in the paragraph above. Then five sections follow which are arranged chiastically. The outer edges of the chiasm (3 and 13-16) concern two lone heroes who judge and deliver, Ehud and Samson. The next balanced pair of stories (4-5 and 10-12), concern those of lower station in life, a woman, Deborah and Jephthah, a social outcast. Finally, the focus of the chiasm (6-9) involves Gideon, the ideal deliverer and Abimelech, his antithesis. In Gideon are demonstrated two crucial issues of the period, baal worship and the kingship of God. In both of these issues Gideon is the exemplary judge and deliverer.

Message Statement. After the initial fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham realized in the settlement of the land under Joshua and before the next stage of fulfillment under the monarchy the people of Israel repeatedly and seriously violated the covenant of God. In each of these periods of rebellion God shows himself faithful to the covenant relationship by disciplining the nation with foreign oppression and then responding to their pleas with deliverance. Thus, the message of the book is: *The continual covenantal disobedience of Israel before a king ruled is repeatedly challenged by God's discipline and eventual mercy.*

Argument

- 1A ISRAEL'S INCOMPLETE CONQUEST AND APOSTASY 1:1--3:6
 The first two chapters serve to introduce the book in two parts, each one having a different purpose. The two parts are not connected chronologically and neither present an chronological overview of the period. The first (1:1--2:5) sets the stage historically for what is to follow by explaining the failure of the tribes of Israel to completely conquer the land after Joshua. The second section (2:6--3:6) reveals the basic apostasy of the period and God's methods of dealing with Israel.
- 1B Israel's Disobedience 1:1--2:5
 The historical background of Israel's failure to settle the land provides the background to the book. In reality, the Israel's failure to conquer the remaining inhabitants of the land was a case of sinful disobedience. Because the battle was God's, the resources to finish the task which Joshua had begun were available by faith. Thus, any failure to appropriate the victory was sinful. This sin then provides the background for the apostasy of the book of Judges. Not only did Israel begin a pattern of disobedience by not driving out the inhabitants, but she also provided herself with a constant source of temptation by allowing the pagan canaanites to live among them. This section is divided into two portions (1:1-36 and 2:1-5).
- 1C Israel's failure to drive out the inhabitants 1:1-36
 Although Israel began well after Joshua's death they could not sustain their victory. Judah is called upon first to conquer her surrounding territories, thus taking the leadership in taking the land and in saving her brothers. This leadership had been anticipated in the blessing of Jacob (Genesis 49:8-12). Besides Judah, Joseph is the only tribe to have achieved any success at all (1:35-36). The success of both of these tribes reflects the blessing of their father Jacob upon them (Genesis 49).
 The remainder of the tribes, however, failed to drive out the land before them. In a pitiful series the author narrates their individual failure (1:27-34).
- 2C God's evaluation and judgment of Israel's failure 2:1-5
 Until this point the author had only recounted the historical facts. At this point God's interpretation and evaluation of history is given. In a summary statement God crystallizes the issue at hand: *I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides*

and their gods will be snare to you (2:1b-3). The facts that 1) Israel's failure was in reality disobedience, and that 2) God would nevertheless remain faithful to them but that 3) they would be disciplined are all made clear. In the next section (2:6-3:6) the means of God's discipline will be explained.

- 2B Divine Principles of Operation 2:6--3:6
The basic perspective of the principles of the period rather than historical incidents are related in this section. The basic vocabulary of the book is introduced as well: "did evil in the eyes of the Lord," 2:11 (cf. 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1 et al.; "handed them over to," 2:14 (cf. 6:1; 13:1); and "sold them," 2:14 (cf. 3:8; f:2; 10:7).

The author begins with the historical background of how Israel came to the current situation (2:6-10). The people were faithful while the leadership of Joshua remained but soon after turned from the Lord. The basic cycle of discipline involved first 1) *apostasy*, then 2) *oppression* from the Lord through foreign domination, 3) *distress* on the part of the people until they cried out to the Lord and finally 4) *deliverance* from the oppression through a judge raised up by God.

Unfortunately, the pattern is best described not just as a cycle but as a descending spiral, "But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, . . ." (2:19). Because of the people's failure to trust God they left themselves a spiritual vacuum which was quickly filled by the gods of the land.

- 2A GOD'S MERCY IN DELIVERANCE THROUGH THE JUDGES 3:7--16:31
The structure of this, the major portion of the book, is easily identified through the careful writing technique of the author. It is divided into six definite segments, each of which begin with the phrase *The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord* (3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; and 13:1). The statement that God gave them over to oppression soon follows in each section along with the cycle of *apostasy*, *oppression*, *distress* and *deliverance*. Each section then closes with a recognizable conclusion of "the land had peace . . . years" or "led Israel . . . years."

Beyond this the chiasmic structure of the narrative focuses attention upon the center section. The first section (3:7-11) is relatively short and seems to introduce the narrative pattern described in the paragraph above. Then five sections follow which are arranged chiastically. The outer edges of the chiasm (3 and 13-16) concern two lone heroes who judge and deliver, Ehud and Samson. The next balanced pair of stories (4-5 and 10-12), concern those of lower station in life, a woman, Deborah and Jephthah, a social outcast. Finally, the focus of the chiasm (6-9) involves Gideon, the ideal deliverer and Abimelech, his antithesis. In Gideon are demonstrated two crucial issues of the period, baal worship and the kingship of God. In both of these issues Gideon is the exemplary judge and deliverer.

In all of these cycles God shows himself faithful as he delivers Israel from her sin. No matter how detestable the sin of the people, upon their repentance God hears as a loving Suzerain and delivers them.

- 1B Othniel: The First Deliverer 3:7-11
The small amount of ink given to Othniel does little more than introduce the reader to the pattern of the narrative and record God's first deliverance of his people. The phrases "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; . . ." " . . . He sold them . . ." and "So the land had peace for forty years . . ." both introduce and conclude this narrative.
- 2B Ehud: A Lone Deliverer 3:12-20

The narrative of Ehud balances that of Samson at the end of the section (13-16). Ehud acted by himself and cut down the king of Moab by sheer wit and courage. This then inspired the nation which was victorious against her oppressor.

- 3B Deborah: The Female Deliverer 4:1--5:31
Although Deborah did not actually lead the troops into battle she is given top billing in the salvation of Israel because of the reluctance of Barak to lead. As a prophetess, the word of God came through her to Barak to deliver the nation. Because of his hesitation to go without her, Deborah prophesied that God would hand over Sisera, the enemy king, to a woman. Through providential events, Sisera was killed by another woman named Jael. The whole series of events was evidently legendary in Israelite history and memorialized in the song of Deborah (5:1-31).
- 4B Gideon: The Ideal Deliverer 6:1--10:5
The focus of the literary structure falls upon Gideon. Although a reluctant hero, he is a pleasant contrast to his son, Abimelech, who was full of self-confidence. At every turn Gideon is dependent upon the God of Israel and only acts when assured of God's direction. Abimelech judges Israel after his death and oppresses rather than delivers his people. In this he is the antithesis of his father.
- 1C Gideon 6:1--8:28
In two key issues, the worship of baals and the kingship of God, Gideon provides spiritual leadership and deliverance for the nation.
- 1D The Lord is the God of Israel 6:1--8:21
As his second name, Jerub-Baal (let Baal contend), implies, Gideon struggled against Baal worship in his day. He began by tearing down the altar to Baal in his hometown and then by defeating the armies of Baal. In all of this Gideon was totally dependent upon the Lord, having no confidence in his own abilities. As he was in the process of securing the victory, he even some the people of Israel opposed him (8:1-9). Those Israelites who refused to help Gideon eventually found themselves suffering the same fate as Gideon's enemies (8:13-17). Clearly in the battle against Baal it was not possible to remain neutral.
- 2D The Lord is the King of Israel 8:22-28
After enjoying success from the hand of God, the nation desired to renounce the kingship of God by installing Gideon as king. Keenly aware of the spiritual implications, Gideon responded, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you" (8:23). Later Israel would fall to the same temptation in desiring a king before the proper time with the exception that the next candidate would not be so noble.
- 2C Abimelech: The wicked deliverer 8:29--9:57
Abimelech, the son of Gideon serves as a perfect contrast to his father. In the two crucial issues of Baal worship and the kingship of God, he fails miserably. He is a self-sufficient, murderer who acquires the kingship for himself. Instead of delivering his brothers he murders them in order to secure the rule for himself. In an ironic and insolent move Abimelech sought for the kingship and attempted his Canaanite revival in Schechem, the very place where Joshua had renewed the covenant with Israel (9:1-3).

After subscribing help from Baal (9:4), murdering his brothers and claiming the

throne, his lone surviving brother pronounced a curse upon him (9:7-21). The essence of the curse was that the city and their king were both wicked and basically deserved, and would destroy, each other. Through the providence of God the people and the King eventually destroy each other. Abimelech suffers the particularly ignoble affliction of nearly dying at the hands of a woman.

5B Jephthah: The Despised Deliverer 10:6--12:15

Jephthah seems to have been a deliverer who was despised both before and after his deliverance of Israel. Having been born the son of a prostitute he was rejected by his brethren until they needed his military leadership. He did deliver his people from their oppressors with the help of God. In securing that help he made a rash vow which probably lost him his daughter. In faith he kept the vow (the exact nature is unknown) and honored God. Afterward he defended himself against the Ephraimites and killed forty-two thousand of them.

6B Samson: A Lone Deliverer 13:1--16:31

In many ways Samson epitomizes Israel in the age of the judges. He experienced the mercy and power of God and yet never had the moral strength to rise above himself. Like the nation he was *born* by special divine providence, *consecrated* to the Lord from birth, *endowed* with unique power, his foolish chasing of *foreign* women, until he was cleverly *subdued* by one of them.

His story balances that of Ehud, another lone deliverer, who single-handedly triumphed over powerful enemies.

1C His miraculous birth 13:1-25

As with many other sons of promise (Isaac, Genesis 18:10; John the Baptist, Luke 1:13; Jesus, Luke 1:31), Samson's birth was predicted by a special visit of God (13:3-23).

2C His marriage and vengeance on the Philistines 14:1--15:20

Samson's first instance of deliverance from (actually slaughter of) the Philistines began with his interest in a Philistine woman whom he desired for his wife. Although his choice was to the chagrin of his parents, God was using Samson even in his sin to wreak vengeance upon Israel's enemies (14:4). Samson actually kills Philistines at three different times in the one episode: first when he killed the thirty men for their garments; second, when he slaughtered those for taking his wife; finally, when he killed a thousand men as they attempted to take capture him.

3C His humiliation and vengeance on the Philistines 16:1-31

The second major deliverance of Samson came with his death. Once again this occurred because of his moral weakness. After Samson's strength was gone due to his betrayal of his Nazirite vow, the Philistines forced him to women's labor at Gaza. This was particularly humiliating for the Israelite hero because Gaza was the location of one of his greatest feats of strength (16:1-3). While celebrating their god in his temple God empowered Samson one last time to exact vengeance from the enemy. His final legacy was "he killed many more when he died than while he lived" (16:30).

3A RELIGIOUS AND MORAL DISORDER IN ISRAEL 17:1--21:25

These five chapters are a distinct unit divided into two stories. These stories do not involve a judge and his deliverance of Israel as the major section (3-17) did nor are they related chronologically to a particular judge; rather they focus more upon the moral degeneracy of individuals, cities and

tribes. The reason for decadence is given in the refrain "In those days Israel had no king; . . ." which occurs four times (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25). The first and last occurrences of the phrase are followed by the words "everyone did as he saw fit" (17:6 and 21:25). The section therefore contrasts the period of the monarchy with that of the judges.

1B Corruption in Israelite Worship 17:1--18:31

The basic point of this story seems to be the corruption in Israel's religious system. Micah, a man from Ephraim, first cast an idol for himself. He then irreverently installed his son as priest for the idol. In a vain attempt to add some legitimacy to his apostate system Micah *hired* a levite, who was disenchanted with his own inheritance and searching for somewhere else go, to act as priest. The young levite was obviously turned by the financial benefits of Micah's offer because when the tribe of Dan later made him a better offer he accepted!

The tribe of Dan which was unable or unwilling to possess their allotted land, in a move of gross ungratefulness and disobedience, moved on to the north of Israel. On the way they coveted Micah's religious system because of their positive experience with it in the past and they stole it. The levite who saw and was involved in it all objected until he heard that the theft would be in his favor. The final and sad commentary on the whole issue was that Dan continued in their course of idolatry until the captivity of the land even though God's house was available in Shiloh (18:30-31).

2B Corruption in Israelite Morals 19:1--21:25

Like the story before it, this story relates the tragedy and sin which was rampant in the land. Although this story also involves a levite, he is not the villain of the story, but rather the one who calls the nation back to its senses. The story involves the wickedness of the men of Gibeah, Benjamin's near extinction and the provision for Benjamin.

1C The wickedness of Benjamin 19:1-30

The author clearly frames the story after the pentateuchal account of Sodom and Gomorrah in order to highlight the decay in Israel. Upon one man's hospitality to the levite the wicked men of the city come to the door and demand to have sex with the visitor. Just as Lot did, the man offered his virgin daughters to appease the vile men. After a night of abuse the concubine died and the levite dismembered her body and sent it to the twelve tribes as testimony to the wickedness of Gibeah.

2C The destruction of Benjamin 20:1-48

After a refusal to hand over the men of Gibeah, the whole tribe of Benjamin fought against Israel. They wickedly set the ties of blood above loyalty to God. As in the beginning of the book (1:2) God chose Judah to take the leadership and deliver the nation. After two defeats and fasting to God, He revealed a plan for victory reminiscent of the days of Joshua and the battle of Ai. After total victory nearly all of Benjamin was exterminate except for six hundred men.

3C The provision for Benjamin 21:1-25

After weeping over the loss of a tribe and their vow not to give one of their daughters to a Benjamite, the rest of the tribes found themselves in a dilemma. They needed some creativity to "righteously" provide the remaining six hundred men of Benjamin with wives for them to repopulate their tribe. In order to provide wives and avoid the curse they had put themselves under they arranged for the Benjamites to have four hundred young women from Jabesh Gilead and another two hundred from the feast of Shiloh.

JUDGES

1A	ISRAEL'S INCOMPLETE CONQUEST AND APOSTASY	1:1--3:6
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