

BOOK OF JUDGES: The Canaanizing of Israel

The book of Judges is the historical record of Israel's failure to completely capture the land of Canaan and as a result, the subsequent curse from God that would allow the Canaanite gods to ensnare Israel. While there were episodes of righteous faith found in this book, the end is an ugly fulfillment of the prophecy made by the Angel of the Lord (2:3).

Judges is often said to be the book that chronicles Israel's transition from an established patriarchal type of rule (Adam – Joshua) to the inevitable royal rule of appointed kings, starting with Saul. While this is true in a chronological sense, the real purpose is to have a recorded history of the corrupt decline of God's people as they occupied the Promised Land. The book of Judges exposes a period of time in Israel's history that almost ended in self-destruction as they were determined to rule themselves.

SOME KEY RULES FOR A CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF JUDGES:

1. Recognize the whole book is not arranged in a chronological fashion. The Epilogue (the last 5 chapters) will closely follow the Prologue (1:1-3:6) time wise. The chronological section will be in the body between them.
2. Recognize that Judges is not necessarily a "book of heroes." Misbehavior and spiritual dysfunction are common and often highlighted throughout the book.
3. Recognize that the total time span of the Judges was 410 years. The shortest cycle (Samson) was 20 years, while the longest cycle (Gideon - Jair) was 88 years. People and circumstances can change dramatically in 40 years.

THE BOOK IS DIVIDED IN THREE SECTIONS:

I. The Prologue (1:1-3:6)

- * The tribes fail to drive out the Canaanites. The Lord will not drive them out in order that the Canaanite gods will become a snare to Israel.
- * Joshua dies, and a new generation rises up that does not know the Lord.
- * The cycle of rebellion and deliverance is introduced and explained (2:16-19):
 - The people forsake God and follow other gods.
 - God sends an oppressor who enslaves God's people.
 - The people suffer and cry out for a deliverer.
 - The Lord raises a judge (Hebrew: *Shophet*) to lead / deliver the people.
 - When the Judge dies, the people forsake God and revert back to idolatry.

Key thematic verses in the Prologue:

- 2:3 – Canaanites were left in the land to become a snare to Israel
- 2:19 – With the death of each Judge, Israel became more corrupt.

II. The Body: 6 Erosive Cycles (3:7 – 16:31)

- 1- Othniel
- 2- Ehud, Shamgar
- 3- Deborah, Barak
- 4- Gideon, Abimelech, Tola, Jair
- 5- Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon
- 6- Samson

Some important considerations:

- Many judgeships were tribally based
- Some of the oppressions affected only portions of Israel
- Some of the Judges “ruled” concurrently

III. The Epilogue (17:1-21:25)

Chapter summaries:

17 – Micah’s theft, making a shrine, hiring a Levite

18 – The Danites invasion of Micah’s house, and migration to Laish

19 – The Levite’s concubine, her murder in Gibeah

20 – Israel declares war on Benjamin

21 – Israel acts to replenish Benjamin with new wives

Note:

The final 5 chapters of Judges are a collection of ugly episodes that give us an insight into how far the nation of Israel had fallen away from God. Rather than trying to fit these events into a palatable conclusion that would satisfy our disturbed senses, we need to see these as God Intended: graphic pictures of the moral degeneration and spiritual depravation of Israel.

It is in the Epilogue where we find the expression: *“In those days there was no king in Israel”* recorded 4 times (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). It is at the beginning and end of the Epilogue (17:6; 21:25) where we read the additional statement: *“Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* This is the real message of the book.

LESSON OF THE BOOK FOR US TODAY:

From the beginning God has warned His people to keep themselves from the corrupting influence of the world. It does not happen overnight but the constant exposure to and participation with the world, sets a course of spiritual erosion that if not checked, will infect the people of God and surface as apostasy/unbelief in future generations.

The insidious part of this phenomenon is that individuals will often still think themselves spiritual and in good stead with God. They will keep a modicum of faith and worship, appealing to Jehovah as their God; but in reality the faith they hold is not in God’s word, but rather in their own wisdom to decide for themselves what is true and what God really wants. This attitude and behavior is not lost on their children, and soon they will become the next generation who *“does what is right in their own eyes,”* each year moving further away from God’s word.

This is where the relevance and value of a present day study of the book of Judges will become more evident with each class.

Note: Lesson sheets will be given for each of the 6 cycles discussed in class