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# An introduction to the Book of Judges

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AN INTRODUCTION

— to —

THE BOOK OF JUDGES.

Charles H. Johnson.

## THE BOOK OF JUDGES

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The history of the People of Israel will always possess intense interest to the student of religion and history. The remarkable series of events by which the mass of slaves became a nation of freemen, by which a people contaminated by the degraded religious belief of their environment were made the bearers of the purest system of religious teaching the world had then seen are and always will be of more than passing interest. Of the different periods of this evolution none is more picturesque and dramatic than that of the Judges. Across the pages of the Book of Judges troop warriors, sages, heroes, men and women of action, and the sound of the clash of arms is almost perpetual from the start to the finish. Dean Stanley says: "The characteristics of this period are such as especially to invite our critical and historical inquiries. Other portions of Scripture may be more profitable 'for doctrine, for correction, for reproof, for instruction in righteousness'; but for merely human interest for the lively touches of ancient manners - for the succession of romantic incidents - for the consciousness that we are living

face to face with the persons described - for the tragical pathos of events and characters - there is nothing like the history of the Judges from Othniel to Eli."

In coming to a study of this interesting description of an interesting period, we must from the start lay aside certain expectations . Because this people was selected by God to be the bearer of a high religious belief many fear to speak of them in terms other than those of veneration and feel called upon to condone all their wrong-doings. But in the period covered by our book there is little about the people of Israel which excites either veneration or admiration. There is nothing ~~big~~ ideal about the nation as a whole or the people individually. There was no high national ideal because there was indeed no national life which could foster such an ideal. Their moral ideals are on no higher level than ~~their~~ many of the surrounding heathen tribes. Cowardice, weakness in times of great danger. idol worship in times of peace and cries to Jahveh for aid in times of trouble characterize only too often these tribes singly and collectively. On one occasion of great danger more than twenty thousand men publicly confessed their fear and went to their homes, leaving a brave leader with but a handful of men to meet a strong enemy. We are not to expect to find in this book an account of an ideal people, nor to read into it conceptions and doctrines which came to them centuries later. We find

an account of a nation in the rough, we are brought face to face with the process of nation making.

With this foreword, then, we come to the book itself, a consideration of which will give us abundant opportunity to study the times and leaders of this transitional era.

I. NAME. Like many other books of the Old Testament it takes its name from the persons who are the principal actors in the events described. It is called in the Hebrew "Shopetim", in the LXX "Kritai", and in the Vulgate "liber Judicum". One old Syrian version has the title "Deliverers of the Israelites".

II. PLACE IN THE CANON. In the Hebrew Bible it is placed among the Former Prophets, and stands with Joshua, Samuel and Kings. This place is very appropriate as these books together give a continuous history of Israel from the invasion of Canaan to the fall of Jerusalem (586 B.C.). The book of Ruth was originally a part of this book, but about the middle of the fifth century A.D. it was placed in the Hebrew copies immediately after the Song of Solomon. In the LXX, however, it still retains its original position. but as a separate book. The canonicity of Judges has never been doubted and the testimony of all Jewish writers is to the effect that it was considered a divinely inspired book.

The book is not found in the Samaritan Canon, which con-

sists only of the Torah. The reason why only the Torah is found in this Canon is supposed by some to be that at the time of the schism, those books which were in the Jewish Canon were taken along and the books which were later recognized as authoritative by the Jews, were never admitted to the Samaritan Canon. The book of Judges contained nothing which would be offensive to the Samaritans, and the conclusion which may be drawn is that when the Samaritan canon was formed the Jewish canon at Jerusalem consisted only of the Torah and not of the Nebim.

III. DIVISION. The divisions of the book are quite well defined, and commentators seem, with variations of but a verse or two, to agree on a threefold division. This division as given by Moore, the latest commentator on the book, is as follows:

1. A brief account of the conquests and settlements of the Israelites in Canaan. 1/1-2/5.
2. The history of Israel in the days of the Judges, 2/2-16/31.  
This contains two subdivisions:
  - a) Introduction = 2/6-3/6
  - b) The stories of the Judges and their heroic deeds = 3/16-16/31.
3. Two additional stories of the Judges = 17-21.

From this outline it will appear that the second division is really the heart of the book and that part to which the name of the book really applies.

IV. THE JUDGES. In order to understand the value of the book

this second division deserves our closer attention. "The transition from the book of Joshua to Judges is like the descent from the mountain to the city at its foot, like the change from the music of a symphony to the voice of the street". "Out from the gentle calm of that sunset splendor when Joshua had reached his old age and had calmed the warring peoples into peace, we are called to rush into the rough stormy times of the Judges as pictured by the hurried chapters of one of the bloodiest books of the Old Testament". Concerning the deliverers of the Israelites we learn from this book

### 1. Their Office.

a). Its origin. The government of Israel after the arrival into the Promised Land was purely Theocratic. God Himself was to be their ruler and all matters of dispute were to be settled by Him through His recognized channel, the Urim and Thummin. But the difficulty which mankind has always labored under in grasping the invisible, manifested itself. Feeling as if there were no head to which they were responsible, the Israelites became exceedingly lax in morals and religious customs. The tribes had already begun to segregate when God appointed this new form of government.

b). Its character. It was not a kingship and was not attained to by succession but by election. With but two exceptions the judges were elected by popular acclamation. The exigencies of the time brought forth men in

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whom the people recognized qualifications for leadership, but in all cases the guiding hand of God was supposed to be in the election. The office had a life tenure and seems to have been filled by men wise enough never to take upon themselves the title or quality of royalty. They maintained no retinue of courtiers but on the contrary were, says Jahn, "simple in their manner, moderate in their desires, free from avarice and ambition, and were also noble and magnanimous men who felt that whatever they did for their country was above all reward and could not be recompensed".

c). Its duties. These were not simply judicial in character but also military. Moore remarks that the verb may mean both deliverer and governor. They were governors in time of peace and generals in time of war. Their wonderful prowess in times of war would beget in them the confidence of the people. In times of peace when arbitration was needed between families or clans, their services would be called for because the people felt that they could trust in their wisdom and authority. They levied no taxes for their maintenance, and for their labors they received no salary "nor was any income appropriated to them, unless it might be a larger share in the spoils and those presents which were made them as testimonials of respect". Judg. 8/24. Their authority was limited and in important emergencies they could convoke a general assembly of the leaders or rulers. over which they presided and exerted a

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powerful influence. There was no fixed or national capital, and the Judge selected his own place of residence.

2. Their times. It may be briefly said that it was

a). Period of transition. This is true of the method of divine revelation. Hitherto God had communicated His will to men through angels. through the Urim and Thummin and such media, but hereafter it was to be through prophets. It is in the days of the Judges that the prophetic office is developed and Samuel organizes the school of the prophets. In Samuel the judge is finally absorbed in the prophet.

The transition is also apparent in the life of the tribe. Hitherto wandering nomads, they were now about to settle in a land which was to be theirs. Hitherto no strong form of government, they were now to have a preparatory government which was to lead the way for the monarchy.

b). Period of unrest. This is the natural state of things during a period of transition in the life of a people. Among the Israelites it is seen

(1) In their relation to God. There was a constant tendency to idolatry, caused by their heathen environment. They made no determined and united effort to exterminate these peoples as Jahveh desired they should do. Instead therefore of becoming their rulers, they were very often, religiously at least, the subjects of the strange gods and

their worshippers. In connection with the religious life of the times it is worthy of note that when worship was tendered to Jahveh it was done in a way contrary to the law of the Pentateuch. Robertson Smith in his volume entitled "Old Testament in the Jewish Church" says: "all God's acts of grace mentioned in the Book of Judges, all His calls to repentance, and all the ways in which He appears from time to time to support His people and to show Himself their living God, ready to forgive in spite of their disobedience, are connected with the local worship. The call to repentance is never a call to put aside the local sanctuaries and worship only before the ark or Shiloh. If the Pentateuchal programme of worship and the rules which it lays down for the administration of the dispensation of grace existed in those days, they were at least absolutely suspended. It was not according to the Law that Jahveh administered His grace to Israel during the period of the Judges." He also calls attention to the fact that from the days of the Judges down to the exile the law was never strictly enforced in Israel. The history is a record of constant rebellion and shortcomings, and the attempts at reformation made from time to time were comparatively few and never thoroughly carried out. The deflections of the nation from the standard of the Pentateuch come out most clearly in the sphere of worship. In the time of the Judges the religious condition of the nation was admittedly one of anarchy, says Smith. "The leaders of the nation, divinely appointed

deliverers like Gideon and Jephthah, who were zealous in Jahveh's cause, were as far from the Pentateuchal standard of righteousness as the mass of the people. Gideon erects a sanctuary at Ophrah, with a golden ephod - apparently a kind of image - which became a great center of illegal worship; Jephthah offers his own daughter to Jahveh; the Lord departs from Samson, not when he marries a daughter of the uncircumcised, but when his Nazarite locks are shorn!

(ii) In their relation to each other. It was a period of constant jealousy. The tribes seemingly could not unite upon and force any joint undertaking. Unity of the tribe was the only unity that seems at all times to have been recognized. Independent groups or transient alliances were formed as occasion urged, when neighborhood of territory required some common right or exposed to a common danger. Allen in his "Hebrew Men and Times" says of this characteristic of disunion: "Very disunited and disloyal were the tribes. Their distracted and humbled condition matched their recreant temper. In the days of Shamgar 'there were no highways in Israel and the traveller walked in by-ways'. So deplorable was their position of dependance among the hostile population, that at one time 'there was no smith in Israel, but they went down to the Philistines to sharpen every man his share and his coulter and his axe and his mattock'. The proud tribe of Judah, which had even then withdrawn from the rest in a sullen and separate national-

ity, degraded itself so far as to deliver up bound the great champion Samson on the Philistine summons, and to plead as an excuse for its treachery, that they were the masters of the land. The declaration so often made "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" is a true picture of the lack of unity which existed. Dean Stanley has compared the period of the Judges with the medieval period of history. Dean Milman calls it "the heroic age of Hebrew history. It abounds in wild adventure and desperate feats of individual valor". Society was in a chaotic state. Might was right. It was the Sahara desert of Israel's history. As we shall see there were indeed oases, but long stretches between.

Renan says "although definitively established on the soil Israel in reality continued to lead a nomad life. ~~The~~ What distinguished the nomad tribes from those which had been nomad was their hatred for central government. Not alone did the Israelite nation, as a body, fail to recognize any federal authority, but each tribe lived in a sort of anarchy, very much resembling the condition of the Arab tribes of to day, where the life and the property of the individual are sufficiently protected by the solidarity of the members of the tribe, although there was hardly anything to represent the public weal".

3. Incumbents. There are fifteen judges mentioned in the book, some of whom are more prominent than others. While by no means without faults they were men of marked abili-

ity, as must be apparent when we note that the obedience paid to them was voluntary and unforced. In an age when the tendency to anarchy and disruption was very strong, it is a mark of high ability that these heroes were able to unite, even to the extent they did, these discordant forces around their banners. Those concerning whom details are given are

Othniel	who delivers	from	Mesopotamia.
Ehud	"	"	" the Moabites.
Deborah	"	"	" " Canaanites.
Gideon	"	"	" " Midianites.
Jephthah	"	"	" " Ammonites.
Samson	"	"	" " Philistines.

Six others whom we only know by name are Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon. Eli and Samuel stand apart as men with a certain mission.

V. CHRONOLOGY. Much time and labor has been spent in effort to make the chronology of this book consistent. Josephus reckoned it 443 years, Archbishop Ussher makes it 309, Bishop Hervey puts it in round figures 300, Weiss says there were 12 judges in 365 years, Sir George Smith says 431, the German historian Jahn says from Joshua to Samuel was a period of 450 years. The total number of years given by the chronology of the book itself is 410 years. But this must be wrong if 1 Kings 6/1

is right. In the latter place it is said that 480 years was the period from the Exodus to the fourth year of Solomon. This period of 480 years includes the 40 years of the wilderness, the 7 years of the conquest, the 20 years of Samuel, and the c. 20 years of Saul and the 40 years of David and the 4 years of Solomon. Were all these events added to the 410 years claimed by the book of Judges we would have a total of 541 years.

Upwards of fifty different ways of harmonizing these dates have been suggested. Some have suggested that some of the periods in Judges overlap, others that round figures have been given. It may be that the Kings calculation is wrong and is a construction of 40 and 12. Certainty of dates and orderly sequence of events, are by no means to be looked for in the annals of such a time. Such chronology as we have may be said to be purely artificial and arbitrary. Different estimates of the same period vary as widely as from 320 to near 750 years. Despite all efforts then, it must be confessed that the matter is confusing and that an exact chronology of this period is unattainable.

VI. DATE AND AUTHORSHIP. This seems to be a matter of just as much uncertainty as the chronology. The Talmud, proposing to tell who wrote the Old Testament books, says that Samuel wrote the book of Judges. Driver says, however, that the whole passage of the Talmud is "manifestly unhistorical". This seems

probable, for the intense partisanship of the compiler of Judges for royalty, precludes the idea of Samuel's authorship. Some have assigned the first sixteen chapters to Ezra, but the Jews and even others have been disposed to load Ezra with a burden greater than he can bear. Ewald, Bleek, Knobel, DeWette and Davidson believe that it was reduced to its present form shortly before the captivity. Others have thought that the book was of early origin, but that the part of it containing the history of Micah and the Danites and the Levite, was added by another hand. Keil supposes from the statement in 1/21 that it was written in the first seven years of David's reign. In the Introduction to the Cambridge Bible, the idea is advanced that either of the prophets Nathan or Gad were the writers and the date between 1092 and 1023 B.C. Moore's statement of the way in which the book came to its present form is, in short, that the oldest version of the heroic deeds of the Judges dates from the early part of the 9th century B.C. and is by J, the next version was written about a century later by E, and was entirely independent of the former. E was then revised by E2. Then came along an author belonging to the Deuteronomic school of the 6th century, and using these two documents as a basis, constructed a third account of the Judges. Finally in the 5th century another Editor made his appearance and combining all three versions brought the present book of the Judges into existence. The Polychrome Edition of Judges, illustrating by colors this

theory may well be called the "Rainbow" edition of the book. But this theory is opposed by other critics. Kuenen and Kittel for instance do not hold to this theory.

It is quite evident however that the book is of composite authorship and not an independent historical work. "We cannot well imagine" says Bleek "that the same author could have written in a perfectly independent way the two introductions ~~and~~ to the history of the Judges 1/1-2/5, and 2/6-23, and have placed them in connection and sequence in which we now find them."

There are many things throughout the book which speak for a plurality of authors and editors, and yet we hesitate to accept as finally conclusive the details of Moore and the Polychrome Edition. It seems to be the refinement of criticism. It seems beyond the ability of even the modern advanced student of Hebrew to be able to account historically for every word of the book. Ryle says "Most of the historical books of the Old Testament are unmistakably the results of compilation. It is not always easy to say where the compiler is simply transcribing his authorities, and when he is himself working up and redacting material derived from a hundred different sources. It is generally possible to analyse a compilatory work so as to reduce it to its main component literary elements. But it becomes a precarious task, one on which we cannot place much reliance, when the attempt is made to break up each of the component

parts in their turn, into their ultimate constituents. To attempt to decide the date of the compilation with any precision would be out of the question".

When all the doctors and authorities who have applied the tests of literary and historical criticism to the book, thus so to speak, unanimously disagree as to date and authorship, the average student of the book must conclude that the author or authors and their precise date is unknown.

VII. LITERARY FEATURES. As might be expected of a work compiled from many sources and of different periods there is no continuity of style. Professor Kent in his "History of the Hebrew People" says: "The prophetic writers have not recast but instead in most cases, have transcribed these ancient records verbatim from earlier sources, adding only such introductory matter as seemed to be necessary for their purpose. Although these extracts are broken and incomplete, and sometimes fit awkwardly into their stereotyped setting, they give true glimpses into the conditions which existed in that early period. Literary style and contents testify to their antiquity and suggest that they were committed to writing not long after the events, which they record, occurred."

Aside, however, from the question of general style and construction of the book, there are found in it portions which are of great interest from a literary point of view. Prof.

Moulton has declared that the epic element predominates largely throughout the book. As to the ability to portray life in its most active forms we have already quoted Dean Stanley.

There is perhaps no book in the Bible in which are found more interesting accounts of individuals and events, as for example, the story of Gideon, of Jephthah, of Jael and many others. A few of the special forms of literary work found in the book are

1.) Deborah's Ode. Bishop Lowth calls this "a specimen of the perfectly sublime ode, the exordium of which deserves particular examination for its native magnificence and sublimity". It is one of the oldest poems in all literature and one of the best and it exercised considerable influence upon succeeding poetry.

2.) Jotham's Fable. The utterance of this was an ingenious piece of work. The author did not have much of a chance for political promotion but with great cleverness and daring he improves the opportunity for a parting shot and relates this beautiful fable of the bramble. The olive tree and the vine refused to assume the royal dignity, but the worthless bramble accepted at once the first offer of a tyrannous superiority over the trees of the forest. This is a specimen of the prophetic parable and is one of two specimens of primitive fable preserved in the Scriptures. Human thoughts are ascribed to things of the vegetable world.

3). A cycle of riddles. This was a form of popular proverb. It was customary at popular festivities to indulge in a game of riddles and one such game is preserved in this book. It is in connection with Samson and is found in the 15th chapter. The last days of this hero have been, from a literary point of view, finely portrayed by Milton in "Samson Agonistes".

VIII. SOCIAL CONDITIONS. A knowledge of these must be gathered piecemeal for they come to view only incidentally. At first glance the social conditions would seem to be very degraded and indeed at the lowest possible stage of morality. But this is not the whole truth. It is true that in their conflicts with each other the tribes showed at times a savagery which permits of very little excuse, but in their internal relations we may also find at this time the rudiments of future culture. Prof. Allen says "Popular music, of a rude, yet stirring and effective character, was practiced on all festive or state occasions. The timbrel and dance and enthusiastic song were part of the most ancient inheritance of the race. And it was a generous trait, distinguishing this from most Oriental nations, that women claimed a share, freely yielded them, in all matters of public interest; and were often the controlling or saying power in great emergencies of the state. Miriam and Deborah, the daughter of Jephthah, and the mother of Samuel, are instances

which show how freely and heartily the influence of women entered as one of the motive powers of the Hebrew commonwealth, and how the freedom of their position was often met with a respect and delicacy too infrequent in the life of ancient nations. As has been often said, the ~~history~~ written history of this period is the narrative of its diseases. The unwritten history, as we can here and there construct it, is by no means without its mark of vigorous health. At first glance we see only barbarism and misrule everywhere; but presently traces appear of a genuine popular culture, native to the blood and rooted in the soil".

In studying this period it must be remembered that it is a formative period and not an age following years of opportunities of cultivation. "The period of the Judges is an admirable illustration of the great principle of spiritual as well as physical development ~~enunciated~~ enunciated by the great Teacher, 'First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear'. The seed of divine truth sown by Moses was taking root and the blade was just beginning to appear. The soil, however, was rocky and filled with thorns; for the Canaanitish civilization into which they entered and which they in part adopted was corrupt and tainted with immorality. The low practices of the age was due rather to ignorance than to a deliberate resolve to do wrong. Through the mists of barbarism the light of a higher truth was gradually penetrating; under its fostering

influence the blade was slowly developing into the ear."

Herman Schultz says in his "Old Testament Theology": "During this period the morals of the people as a whole must have been tolerably pure, and their sense of morality and justice very active. The horrible crime at Gibeah is represented as something absolutely unheard of in Israel, it remains a by-word for centuries"

#### IX. PURPOSE.

1). Historical Its historical purpose is indicated by its place in the canon. It was to be a link connecting the time of Joshua with that of Samuel, giving a brief and far from complete historic sketch of the period of Israelitish history when no king reigned in the land.

2). Moral. Like all other books in Hebrew religious literature it had a distinct moral purpose which, in this case would suit every period of the world's history. "An examination of this old writing soon discloses the fact that it was not cast in its present form ~~principally~~ primarily for the purpose of recording history, but rather to teach and illustrate spiritual truth. This explains why the early Hebrews recognizing its dominant religious aim, classified it under the head of prophetic literature" (Kent).

It had an historical purpose and it may as Lange points out be considered in a special sense the first historical book of Israel. "It does not like the book of Joshua, relate the deeds of one man, nor does it like the last four books of Moses, revolve around the commanding figure and lofty wisdom of a prophet. It relates the earliest history of the people of Israel in Canaan, it is the history of a people for the first time in possession". But if this is all we observe, we have missed the very purpose for which the book was written. "The Biblical books are throughout books of instruction. For this purpose and this alone they were written. Their design is to show the relations, first of God and through God of Israel, to history. In their view, all history and that of Israel especially is a continuous fulfillment of the truth and purposes of God."

The lessons we can learn from this ancient book are then that God is long-suffering and full of mercy and when His people were in need he would and will raise up for them deliverers, but that He was also a God of righteousness who will visit punishment upon those who deliberately are untrue to Him. These are lessons for every age and for Jew and Gentile.

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*some of the sources*  
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