



Summary of Judges

Introduction

The Book of Judges was written to show the consequences of religious apostasy and to point the way to a king who, if righteous, would lead the people to God. In contrast to the serene way in which the Book of Joshua ends, with all Israel obeying God's commands for the most part, the Book of Judges shows that, in fact, Israel began to disobey God even during the time of Joshua. This disobedience continued and grew more serious, and more debased, throughout the period of the judges. Time and again Israel turned its back on God and embraced the gods and the ways of the Canaanites, as the introductory summary in 2:16-23 indicates. Israel's history unfolded in this period in a cyclical or repetitive way: each cycle took Israel further downward in its debasement and apostasy. By the end of the book, Israel had violated its covenant with God in almost every way imaginable.

Chapter One

Following on from the death of Joshua, the Israelites correctly enquired of the Lord as to whether they should fight and who should fight for them. The Lord chose Judah and they took Simeon with them. The Lord gave them many great victories over the Canaanite peoples.

However, the account shows that many other tribes failed in their attempts to remove the pagan tribes from their midst: Judah, Benjamin, Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali and Dan are named. There is no mention that they sought the Lord to lead them in their endeavours to settle the land.

Chapter Two

Although God confirms that he will never break the covenant he has made with Israel, because they have not remained faithful to him, he will not drive out the remaining nations that still live in the land of Canaan.

The chapter recounts the death of Joshua and the leaders of his generation. Although Israel had remained faithful to God under Joshua's leadership, the generation that replaced them neither knew God nor what he had done for their ancestors.

Because of this, they turned away from the Lord and worshipped the gods of the people around them. This caused God to become angry and he allowed the nations around them to come in and defeat the Israelites, for God no longer fought for them. However, in his grace and mercy, he would raise up judges from time to time who would lead them out of their adversity. Yet they did not even listen to the judges and the cycle of apostasy, adversity and salvation continued.

Chapter Three

The chapter commences with a list of nations that God allowed to stay in the land to test the Israelites and to allow those that did not have experience of war to gain it. The people failed the test, did not obey the commandments of God and even intermarried with the nations, adopting their gods.

The account then follows the exploits of the first three judges: Othniel, who delivered them from the Aramites; Ehud, who killed the Moabite king and led the Israelites to defeat the Moabites; and Shamgar, who took on the Philistines.

Chapter Four

This chapter describes Israel's remarkable victory over the more powerful Canaanites. The judge is the prophetess Deborah and the leader of the Israelite army who supported her was Barak. The Israelites, because of their apostasy, had been handed over by the Lord to King Jabin of Canaan.

It is Deborah who gives direction to Barak in his battle against Sisera, the leader of Jabin's army. Barak gives chase to Sisera but his death comes from an unlikely source, a woman called Jael drives a tent peg into his temple as he rested in her tent, thus fulfilling the prophecy Deborah had given from the Lord. Israel went on to defeat Jabin and his army.

Chapter Five

The victory song of Deborah and Barak praises God for his triumph over the Canaanites on Israel's behalf and reviews the events of the victory, as did the songs of Moses and Miriam after God had allowed them to cross the Red Sea to safety and had defeated the Egyptian army in doing so (Exodus 15:1-21).

Chapter Six

The cycle continues. The people went away from God, he handed them over to a foreign oppressor, this time the Midianites who came and stole all the food products and animals and, finally after seven years, the people once again cried out to God. However, before raising up a judge to save them he rebukes the nation for their continued apostasy.

The angel of the Lord came to Gideon and said he would be the saviour of Israel for the Lord had given the Midianites into his hand. Gideon at first protested that he was not the one the Lord should choose but he wanted to show hospitality by offering the angel meat and bread. When he brought this the angel touched the stone on which it lay and it was immediately consumed by fire. Thus Gideon knew it was the Lord. He feared for his life as he had seen God but was reassured of his safety. Later, the Lord instructed Gideon to destroy his father's altar and sacred pole, making it into an altar and offering his father's bull upon it.

Gideon destroyed the altar as commanded and the people called his father to bring him out to face punishment by death, but his father replied that, if Baal were a god, he could contend for himself with Gideon. The Midianites and Amalakites then came upon across the Jordan. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon who called the Israelites to arms and several tribes responded.

The following two nights Gideon, in his human weakness, put God to the test twice with a fleece. Once testing that the fleece would be damp with dew but the ground around dry; the second was a reverse. God graciously did what Gideon asked of him.

Chapter Seven

The Lord considered the 32,000 troops that had gathered to fight Midian as being too many for he knew they would then believe they had gained the victory in their own strength rather than giving glory to God. So he reduced the numbers by two tests. The first was to allow all those who were afraid to fight to return home. The second was to separate the remainder by the way they drank water, leaving only 300 men out of the original 32,000.

The Lord then allowed Gideon to enter the Midianite camp where he overheard one of them telling a dream that showed Gideon would overcome them in battle. This was to encourage Gideon.

The tactic used to rout the Midianites was to come upon their camp at night, suddenly reveal their lights and make a lot of noise. God used this to throw the Midianites into disarray and they started to fight each other. They then ran away pursued by men from other tribes that Gideon had summoned.

Chapter Eight

Gideon has to pacify the Ephraimites who were miffed at not being called out to battle sooner. He continued to lead the chase as the Midianites and their allies fled. In Transjordan they asked for bread from the residents of two towns, Succoth and Penuel, but were refused. After Gideon had captured and killed the two opposing kings, he returned and punished the towns who had refused to help.

Israel wanted Gideon to become their king and he rightly refused saying that it was the Lord who was their king. Despite his statement he acted regally and thus led his family and the nation back into idolatry. The death of Gideon saw the nation once again plunge into even greater apostasy.

Chapter Nine

This is an extended account of Abimelech's violent grab for power. The seeds of his offence are found in Israel's continuing apostasy, in its request for a warrior-king and rejection of the Lord, and in his father Gideon's misdeeds and mistakes. The account starts with Abimelech seeking the backing of his mother's kin in Shechem to sponsor him to kill almost all of his own brothers so that he alone can rule over the people. Only Jotham remained alive.

Using the Parable of the Trees Jotham challenges the leaders on Shechem to consider if they had done what was right by the house of Gideon by appointing Abimelech as their leader. God turned the people of Shechem against Abimelech and he was eventually killed, thus God avenged the deaths of his brothers.

Chapter Ten

The chapter commences with two very brief accounts of the next two judges, Tola and Jair. When the Israelites again turned away from the Lord and worshipped the gods of the nations around them, he handed them over to the Ammonites, who oppressed them for eighteen years. When the people cried out to the Lord for help, he rebuked them, refused to help and told them to cry out to the new gods they now worshipped. However, when they finally repented, the Lord relented and he gathered the people together in order to raise up a new leader to fight against the Ammonites.

Chapter Eleven

The chapter begins with the family background of Jephthah, the son of a prostitute driven out of his community by the sons of his father's wife, and settling with outlaws. When the Ammonites threatened the people turned to Jephthah and asked him to be their leader, which he would only undertake if they would swear before the Lord to accept him back. This they did.

In a dialogue between Jephthah and the king of the Ammonites, the king claimed that Ammon was against Israel because they had stolen his land and wanted Israel to give it back peaceably or he would take it by force. Providing a lesson from history as to how the Israelites had been opposed by the various peoples as they travelled to the Promised Land, finally leading to war between some of them. Jephthah showed that the land was rightfully theirs and was given to them by the Lord. The king rejected his argument.

Jephthah then made a foolish vow before the Lord. He promised that, if the Lord gave him victory over the Ammonites, then whatever or whoever met him as he returned to his home he would offer as a burnt-offering to the Lord. Jephthah was then victorious in battle.

On his return home it was his only child that met him and thus she was to be the burnt-offering. She accepted that her father must keep his vow to the Lord but asked for a period of grace for two months to spend with her friends lamenting the fact that she would never marry. After the two months she was offered to the Lord and the vow fulfilled.

Chapter Twelve

Jephthah had crossed the Jordan while pursuing the Ammonites and he was challenged by the Ephraimites because they believed he had not invited them to fight alongside him. Unable to pacify the Ephraimites, Jephthah fought with them. This civil war cost the lives of many thousands of men from Ephraim.

Following the death of Jephthah, the chapter concludes with brief accounts of three further judges: Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.

Chapter Thirteen

Samson's story opens with the typical statement about Israel's apostasy, but the rest of Chapter 13 is a lengthy and atypical introduction to Samson. It details the encounter between Samson's parents and the angel of the Lord, who announced Samson's birth and mission. Clearly, Samson was to be used by God against the Philistines (Judges 14:4), even if, in his own life, he did not follow God's instructions.

Chapter Fourteen

Samson saw a Philistine woman and desired her so he asked his parents to negotiate for her to become his wife. They protested, wanting a Hebrew wife for him, but he insisted and they did as he asked, unknowingly obeying the Lord's will.

At his wedding feast, Samson told his thirty companions a riddle based on a feat of strength he had displayed. When they could not solve it, they enlisted his

wife's help and she extracted the answer. In his rage at this trickery, Samson killed thirty Philistines to obtain the garments he owed his companions. In his absence, his wife was given to his best man.

Chapter Fifteen

When Samson went to Timnah to visit his wife, his father in law would not allow him to see her saying that he thought Samson had rejected her and that she had now been given to another man. In response, Samson caught three hundred foxes, tied them in pairs by their tails, set fire to them and released them so that they destroyed all the crops, vineyards and olive groves. In response to this the Philistines killed Samson's wife and her father.

The Philistines then went up against Judah looking for Samson. Feeling threatened by the Philistines, to whom they were subjugated, the Judæans went to Samson and, agreeing not to harm him themselves, they bound him and took him to the Philistines.

When they had delivered him, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson, he broke the ropes binding him and killed one thousand Philistines with a donkey's jawbone. This was thirsty work and there was no water in that place, so God miraculously supplied Samson with water to drink.

Chapter Sixteen

The second segment of the Samson stories details his fateful involvement with yet two more Philistine women – a prostitute (vv.1-3) and Delilah (vv.4-22) – and his final revenge on the Philistines and their god (vv.23-31). Significantly, the Spirit of the Lord is nowhere mentioned in this chapter. Finally the Lord departs from him (v.20), and Samson's miraculous strength is gone.

Chapter Seventeen

Micah returned an amount of silver to his mother that he had taken from her and, although she said she would consecrate it to the Lord, she actually had an idol made from it and dedicated it in the name of her son Micah, who then set up his own shrine and appoints one of his own sons as a private priest. When a travelling Levite came by Micah hired him also to be his private priest.

Chapter Eighteen

The story of Micah's apostasy continues from the previous chapter. A band of treacherous men from the tribe of Dan offer Micah's Levite more money and prestige to be their priest, so he joins them. In addition, they stole the religious artefacts that belonged to Micah, threatening him harm if he protested about it. A whole tribe now sins just as Micah's family had done.

The tribe of Dan were looking for a land of their own and they spied out the people of Laish, a peaceful and prosperous town, with no allies close by, so the Danites went up with six hundred warriors and took the land for themselves.

Chapter Nineteen

These verses recount one of the most sordid stories in the Bible. The rape and murder of a Levite's concubine, and callous indifference lead to the death of an innocent woman and, eventually, to civil war.

Chapter Twenty

Gibeah, the site of the moral outrage of Chapter 19, was a Benjaminite city, and so an assembly of all Israel convened at Mizpah to unite against Benjamin. However, the Benjaminites, who apparently were not at the assembly, refused to deliver the inhabitants of Gibeah to them, but rather prepared for battle. The battle was joined, Judah going first, and the Israelites were repelled twice by the Benjaminites at Gibeah.

Each time, God directed the Israelites to continue the fight. The third time, Benjamin was routed and subjected to the complete annihilation that earlier had been reserved exclusively for the Canaanites. Readers are not told whether God approved of this; certainly he did not explicitly command it. It was a grim measure of Israel's apostasy and the attendant chaos that complete annihilation now was directed internally, against fellow Israelites.

Chapter Twenty One

The war against Benjamin hardly solved Israel's spiritual and social problems. Chaos continued to reign. After the defeat of Benjamin, the remaining Israelites regretted that one of the tribes might cease to exist. Thus, the chapter shows the provision for Benjamin's continued survival. Four hundred wives were obtained through a punitive action against Jabesh-gilead, which had not joined in the original battle. Two hundred more wives were obtained through an action at Shiloh, legitimised on more flimsy grounds. The book ends with one final editorial comment about the apostasy in the land.