THE BOOK OF

JUDGES

A STUDY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOK OF JUDGES

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The Book of Judges
INTRODUCTION
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Shechem, Israel (1390 B.C.) All the leaders, officers, judges and elders of Israel had been summoned to the ancient city of Shechem (near present-day Nablus), Israel. The call had come from the nation’s 110 year-old leader, Joshua. He was to make his final speech to the leaders on that historic day - and all desperately wanted to hear his words.

Well over a century earlier, Joshua had been born to slave parents in Egypt. Growing up there, he was familiar with the lash, the cursing directives of his task-masters, the impossible and back-breaking work in the brick fields, and the dark future that faced him. Little did he realize that although a slave himself, he would rise to become the great Moses’ top staff member and, upon Moses death, he himself would become Israel’s supreme leader and commander. He would lead the conquest of the Promised Land Israel.

He realized his life span was about over and he had final directives to his beloved nation:

Joshua 24:14-15 (New King James)
"Now therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord! [15] And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Joshua had reminded the nation’s leaders that it was God Who had given them everything. And he had reminded them that if they turned away from Him, their lot would be sad, indeed:

Joshua 23:11-13 (New King James)
Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the Lord your God. [12] Or else, if indeed you do go back, and cling to the remnant of these nations—these that remain among you—and make marriages with them, and go in to them and they to you, [13] know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the Lord your God has given you.
For a short period time, following Joshua’s death, the people followed God’s laws and wishes. But THE DECEPTIVENESS OF THE GRADUAL came into play and the nation began to fall away from their Lord. Do we not see this very thing happening in the United States? Born out of religious desire and obedience to God, we have gradually become a secular state with many denying the very pious roots from which we were formed.

Joshua’s prophecy came true. The nations around Israel truly did become “snares and traps, scourges and thorns” (verse 13) to Israel. From the victories we read about in the Book of Joshua, we now see the fabric of the land turn to defeat. Judges is a book of violence and sadness. The promised and very possible prosperity God promised the people of Israel now became only a shadow. In view of the continually repeated cycles (seven of them) of apostasy, Israel suffered and had only herself to blame.

THE TITLE OF THE BOOK

The book is so named because it is a history of the 14 judges who ruled and delivered Israel. It is even more specifically an account of Israel’s repeated departures from God.

THE CYCLES

From time to time there would be a Godly generation followed by descendants who would be largely indifferent to the claims of God. This would be followed by open falling away from Him - or apostasy, as it is called. Soon the falling away would provoke divine punishment for sin always ends in death (that is its very nature!). At that point God would allow invasions from other nations which would be painful and degrading for long periods of time. Then God would raise up a judge (a deliverer) who would bring about victory over the oppressors. Then - for a time - Israel would continue in fellowship with their Creator until the next falling away.

The primary task of the judges whom God raised up - both men and women - was the organizing and rallying of the people to overcome their conquerors and get back to God. These people, the judges, were not really rulers or administrators. They were, simply, deliverers.

THE THEME OF THE BOOK

An often-repeated phrase in Judges is this: EVERY MAN DID THAT WHICH WAS RIGHT IN HIS OWN EYES.
WHO WROTE THE BOOK AND WHEN

Most scholars would accept that Judges was written later by Samuel. Obviously it could
not have been written by one of the judges for it was conceived after the culmination of
the events it describes.

The events in Judges took about four centuries to take place. It is helpful to remember
that the book covers the history of Israel from the death of Joshua (1390 B.C.) to the birth
of the prophet Samuel.

This book was written during the period of the monarchy, judging by the phrase which
occurs four times: "In those days there was no king in Israel." All the judges were
themselves limited in their capabilities. In fact, each one seemed to have some defect
and handicap which was not a hindrance but became a positive asset under the sovereign
direction of God. None of them were national leaders who appealed to the total nation
as Moses and Joshua had done. The record is not continuous but rather a spotty
account of a local judge in a limited section of the nation.

CHAPTER ONE

Judges 1:1-4

Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass that the children of Israel asked the
Lord, saying, "Who shall be first to go up for us against the Canaanites to fight against
them?" [2] And the Lord said, "Judah shall go up. Indeed I have delivered the land into
his hand." [3] So Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me to my allotted
territory, that we may fight against the Canaanites; and I will likewise go with you to
your allotted territory." And Simeon went with him. [4] Then Judah went up, and the
Lord delivered the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand; and they killed ten
thousand men at Bezek.

We learn immediately that the Jews’ enemy in that land were the Canaanites. These
were the country’s original people who continued to be a pain in the Israelite’s side even
during the early monarchy of Saul and then David.

Judah’s asking Simeon to help him subdue the Canaanites was a clue that the 12 tribes of
Israel were not in themselves able to defeat their enemies. They had to be united to do
so. It is possible here to believe that their faith was more in their own abilities than in
God’s to deliver them - a truth we will learn quite fully in the exploits of another great
judge, Gideon.
This very first chapter reveals Judah showing at least some initiative in subduing certain tribes of the Canaanites and Perizzites. The leader of these enemies was Adoni-bezek whom Israel captured and treated rather severely: Judges 1:5-7  

And they found Adoni-bezek in Bezek: and they fought against him, and they slew the Canaanites and the Perizzites. [6] But Adoni-bezek fled; and they pursued after him, and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and his great toes. [7] And Adoni-bezek said, Threescore and ten kings, having their thumbs and their great toes cut off, gathered their meat under my table: as I have done, so God hath requited me. And they brought him to Jerusalem, and there he died.

Adoni-bezek was known to the Israelites as a king who had removed the large toes and thumbs of kings he subjugated to render them harmless as warriors, presumably so they could no longer wield weapons or fun. Judah’s warriors employed the ancient Biblical law of “eye for an eye” and apparently did the same thing to Adoni-bezek before sending
him to Jerusalem as a slave. Adoni-bezek is recorded as saying, “Seventy kings with their thumbs and big goes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table. As I have done, so God has repaid me (verse 7).”

Sadly - and this sets a tone for the entire book of Judges - Israel put the Canaanites to tribute and failed to drive them out. They were satisfied with less than total victory, a weakness that would haunt Israel through most of the Old Testament - and even today.

Recently, the United States stabbed Israel in the back at the United Nations (in my opinion) by not vetoing a bill condemning Israel for building settlements in the West Bank. The U.N. has a long history of condemnations of Israel (our ally and the only democracy in the Middle East) while usually remaining silent about the various and multitudinous offenses by Muslim nations against freedom-loving people. President-elect Trump’s appointment of David Friedman as Ambassador to Israel has the State Department’s bureaucrats munching carpet. As Jerusalem-based news reporter Caroline Glick succinctly points out, “That means the State Department bureaucracy believes the U.S. must be hostile to Israel.” But now its members are panicking. They fear that their influence will be eroded with Friedman’s appointment. The holy grail of the State Department on Israel is fairly straightforward: It doesn’t matter that the Palestinians siphon off hundreds of millions of dollars from their U.S.-funded budget each year to pay terrorists and incite terrorism. (Jerusalem Post - this week’s edition) Nor does it seem to matter that the U.S.-funded Palestinian Authority indoctrinates the Palestinians in a Nazi-like exterminationist view of Jews. The Palestinians actions and intentions are either completely irrelevant or justified in the State Department’s intellectual universe because, like the Palestinians, the State Department believes that the Jews are responsible for the absence of peace in the Middle East. These bureaucrats are really shaking now because they know that Friedman supports Israel’s legal right to govern Judea and Samaria - and further supports moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv. Bottom line: Israel has NEVER had more than 20-25% of all the land God originally committed to Abraham and his progeny. The prophecies of Daniel are coming true before our very eyes - right now!

According to Judges 1:19 (Judges 1:19 And the Lord was with Judah; and he drave out the inhabitants of the mountain; but could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron.) Israel did not have the military equipment they thought they needed to drive out the enemy. However, in our own lifetime, the Six-Day War of 1967 proved that all Israel ever needed was God!

Following that miraculous conflict, I had the privilege of interviewing Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations, Abba Eban, who summarized it this way: I witnessed an unusual
spectacle at the U.N. The government of the United Arab Republic which announced its intention to exterminate Israel, which concentrated 90,000 troops and 900 tanks for that purpose, which issued operation orders in mid-May to its commanders in the field for bombardment of Israel's airfields, which imposed a blockade of Israel's entire southern coast, which called on other governments to join in the war of extermination against Israel, which expressed in mid-May and early June that Israel's end was near - this government came to the U.N. to present itself as a victim of aggression!"

This has been the 'whiny' plea of anti-Jews since time began - with the early Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Greeks under Antiochus, the Romans under Hadrian and right up to now with the betrayal by the United States of Israel last week at the U.N. All of these foes somehow cannot come to grasp with the intent of the Israel's enemies - to wipe them off the face of the earth. And yet....and yet Israel has never owned a fraction of the land God committed to them 'way back in Abraham's time.

OTHNIEL

Judges 1:11-15

From there they went against the inhabitants of Debir. (The name of Debir was formerly Kirjath Sepher.) [12] Then Caleb said, "Whoever attacks Kirjath Sepher and takes it, to him I will give my daughter Achsah as wife." [13] And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, took it; so he gave him his daughter Achsah as wife. [14] Now it happened, when she came to him, that she urged him to ask her father for a field. And she dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What do you wish?" [15] So she said to him, "Give me a blessing; since you have given me land in the South, give me also springs of water." And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.

Othniel's story as an Israeli judge (deliverer) is a carry over from the previous book of Joshua. He apparently was a relative of the famed Caleb (who was one of the two spies sent out earlier by Moses, along with Joshua, to go into the Promised Land and find out how strong the opposition would be). There is some question how Othniel was related to Caleb. I would guess an uncle or even more distant relative for Caleb promised the hand of his daughter Achsah to the one who could conquer the Canaanites in the Hebron region. Othniel certainly was successful and introduced four decades or so of relative peace to Judea. Following his death he was buried in a cave near Hebron - but not the Cave of Machpelah where Abraham and other patriarchs were placed.

While Othniel had success, others did not and Israel as a whole did not seem driven to make conquest of the land God promised them. Judges 1:28 And it came to pass,
when Israel was strong, that they put the Canaanites to tribute, and did not utterly
drive them out.

(Verse 29) Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites
(Verse 30) Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants
(Verse 31) Neither did Asher drive out the inhabitants of Accho
(Verse 33) Neither did Naphtali drive out the inhabitants of Bethshemesh
(Verse 34) The Amorites forced the children of Dan into the mountain
(Verse 35) ...they became tributaries (slaves)

These are all names of the tribes of Israel and their record in this first chapter is one of
defeat and accommodation at best. As we will see in the next chapter GOD WAS NOT
HAPPY!

CHAPTER TWO

Judges 2:1-5 And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, I
made you to go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which I sware
unto your fathers; and I said, I will never break my covenant with you. [2] And ye
shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their
altars: but ye have not obeyed my voice: why have ye done this? [3] Wherefore I also
said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your
sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you. [4] And it came to pass, when the
angel of the Lord spake these words unto all the children of Israel, that the people
lifted up their voice, and wept. [5] And they called the name of that place Bochim:
and they sacrificed there unto the Lord.

Gilgal was a settlement near Jericho and the Jordan River. Bochim (“Place of Weeping”)
was situated in the hill country near Bethel north of there. It is aptly named “place of
weeping” for conviction came upon the Israelites for their lack of faith and obedience to
take the land.

THE DEATH OF JOSHUA

Judges 2:6-10 And when Joshua had let the people go, the children of Israel went
every man unto his inheritance to possess the land. [7] And the people served the
Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who
had seen all the great works of the Lord, that he did for Israel. [8] And Joshua the
son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being an hundred and ten years old. [9]
And they buried him in the border of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the mount
of Ephraim, on the north side of the hill Gaash. [10] And also all that generation
were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them,
which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.

The great general of Israel, Joshua, died at 110 and was buried somewhere on his own
property in the region of Ephraim, north of Jerusalem (and somewhere between the
Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River).

Can you imagine the grief that must have swept across that nation when it was learned
Joshua had died? I think of America’s national sorrow when President Lincoln was shot
and the train bearing his body crossed the nation’s heartland. Or President Kennedy
whose body was born to the cemetery through masses of grieving Americans. And I
could list many others. So place yourself in ancient Israel. Joshua - 110 years old, the
last of the men who had left Egyptian bondage and who had successfully worn the mantle
of the legendary Moses, was dead.

THE FICKLENESS OF THE ISRAELITES

While he lived, the people pursued God....or was it their love of Joshua that motivated
them? When Joshua died, so did Godly fervor among the people. Think back to
chapter 24 of the previous book of Joshua in which the general had challenged the people
to serve God. Joshua 24:15-16  ...choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether
the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the
gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will
serve the Lord. [16] And the people answered and said, God forbid that we should
forsake the Lord, to serve other gods; And as long as Joshua lived, they kept that
commitment. But when he died???

Judges 2:11-15  And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and
served Baalim: [12] And they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, which brought
them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that
were round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the Lord
to anger. [13] And they forsook the Lord, and served Baal and Ashtaroth. [14]
And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the
hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and he sold them into the hands of their enemies
round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies. [15]
Whithersoever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the
Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn unto them: and they were greatly
distressed.
We do not follow spiritual heroes nor venerate them. We do not create images of them to adorn our churches. Why? Because we follow Christ! The falling away of the Israelites following the passing of Joshua is a warning to all of us to keep our eyes on the only One Who matters.

The great song writer Haldor Lillenas passed away 50 years ago, but he left us with a treasury of great songs...such as this one:

> Others may sing of treasures on earth; sing of their glitter and gold.  
> But I have a theme of far greater worth; exhaustless it never grows old!  
> HE IS THE LOVELY THEME OF MY SONG!

If the people of ancient Israel had been as enthralled with God as they were with Joshua their history might have been far different - and the 400 years of dark ages under the Judges might never have occurred.

**THE WARNING OF THE ANGEL OF THE LORD**

Judges 2:1-3  And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, I made you to go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which I sware unto your fathers; and I said, I will never break my covenant with you. [2] And ye shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars: but ye have not obeyed my voice: why have ye done this? [3] Wherefore I also said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you.

J. Vernon McGee observed: “I believe that the angel of the Lord is none other than the pre-incarnate Christ. God appeared in a form that could be perceived by human senses. Although He had always met the need of His people, they had not obeyed His voice. This is the beginning of the ‘hoop of history.’ They repeated the weary round of forsaking God, sinning, being reduced to servitude by the enemy, returning to God in repentance, being delivered by God-appointed judges, back to obedience to God.

This brought about God’s response which will be our theme for this study:

Judges 2:16  Nevertheless the Lord raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them.

NEXT WEEK: THE BIZARRE STORY OF EHUD, THE LEFT-HANDED JUDGE