

Resource: Study Notes - Book Intros (Tyndale)

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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JDG

Judges

Judges

The book of Judges tells the stories of the inspired leaders who rescued Israel from their enemies time after time. During this period, the people were frequently unfaithful to God's covenant, and God allowed their enemies to oppress them. Israel repeatedly turned to the Lord for help, and the Lord repeatedly sent charismatic judges to deliver Israel. These powerful leaders did amazing things, but they were unable to transcend Israel's anarchy and lawlessness. Israel needed a leader whose authority could give them national coherence and unity.

Setting

The period of the judges is best understood against the backdrop of its own age. Historians and sociologists have compared the book of Judges with the epics of Homer, the sagas of old Iceland, and the French *La Chanson de Roland*, each of which represents the "Heroic Age" in a civilization's adolescence. During the times described in these works, unorthodox men and women marched to a different drum, exhibiting behavior at odds with accepted norms yet accomplishing great things.

After Moses died, the Israelites' campaigns under Joshua provided the desert nomads with a settled land, but hardly a settled society. That would take hundreds of years and the emergence of a stable monarchy under King David. But Moses and Joshua did leave the Israelites with an *organized* society. According to the biblical text, the tribal structure was well established and the lands were clearly apportioned. A few central shrines (e.g., Gilgal and Shiloh) had emerged, and leaders such as priests, Levites, and tribal elders brought Israel a degree of order. The people continued to remember the old traditions—the covenant promise to Abraham, the sojourn in Egypt from which Israel had been rescued by divine strength, the desert wanderings,

and the ratification of the covenant. But something was still lacking.

According to Judges, Israel's shortcomings had two sources. First, the prologues ([1:1–2:5](#) and [2:6–3:6](#)) explain that the tribes failed to possess their allotted territories because they capitulated to the norms of Canaan rather than adhering to the divine covenant given under Moses. The second issue looms large in the epilogues (chs [17–21](#)) and is summarized in the repeated sentence "In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes" ([17:6](#); [18:1](#); [19:1](#); [21:25](#)). The prologues highlight Israel's unfaithfulness to God; the epilogues are concerned with a failed social structure. The age of heroes could not produce the stable political institutions required for implementing God's rule over the children of Israel.

The book of Judges does not, however, reject the principle of charismatic leadership embodied in the judges. The judges' inspiration came at God's initiative and fulfilled God's purpose in leading and saving Israel (see [2:16–19](#)). The stories celebrate the principle of heroic leadership, making it clear that the Achilles' heel of the era was not in the divinely inspired leaders but in the sinfulness of the people's hearts, which, as suggested by the book of Judges, had to be addressed by a different form of governance.

Summary

Judges follows an A-B-A structure, beginning with two prologues. Each is introduced by the death of Joshua—a pivotal event in Israel's national life—thus picking up the narrative from [Joshua 24:28–31](#). The first prologue ([Judg 1:1–2:5](#)) recalls the failures of individual tribes to follow through on God's covenant. By contenting themselves with partial occupation of the land, they demonstrated their disregard for the Lord's promise and provoked the withdrawal of his protection ([2:1–3](#)).

The second prologue ([2:6–3:6](#)) turns from the failures of the tribes to introduce the individuals whom the Lord used to keep the flame of conquest and settlement alive in a chaotic time. The story moves from Joshua to the elders who outlived him but had experienced God’s power in the wilderness and conquest, and finally to the third generation “who did not acknowledge the Lord or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel” ([2:10](#)). The account then introduces the central feature of the book, the judges whom God raised up to rescue Israel and call them back to covenant obedience ([2:16](#)), the evidence of which would be faithful occupation of the Promised Land. [Judges 3:1–6](#), like the close of the earlier prologue, informs readers in advance that the effort will end in failure.

The central section ([3:7–16:31](#)) contains a series of “cycles”—longer accounts of the six major judges (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson) and shorter accounts of the six minor judges (Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon). This section includes the rise of an anti-charismatic leader, Abimelech (ch [9](#)), whose rule was like that of a king. Following Abimelech, the spiral is clearly downward. The figures at the beginning of the story are more ideal (Othniel to Gideon), while the characters toward the end are more questionable (Jephthah, Samson). In all, there were twelve judges, apparently representing each of the twelve tribes of Israel (see study note on 12:8). The inexorable march toward chaos throughout the book points to their need for a more centralized society.

Judges culminates in two epilogues (chs [17–18](#); [19–21](#)) that highlight the historical and theological failure of Israel under the judges, and the ensuing spiritual and social chaos. The epilogues are marked by the summary refrain, “In those days Israel had no king,” to which is twice added, “all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes” (see [17:6](#); [18:1](#); [19:1](#); [21:25](#)). This conclusion begs for a sequel in which a new approach to leadership reverses the declining effectiveness of individual charismatic leaders.

Authors and Date of Composition

Nothing is known about the author(s) or compiler(s) of Judges. The historical books (Joshua—2 Kings) are a connected narrative. Tradition tells us that various sources were combined into a theological narrative under the influence of Israel’s prophetic schools.

Evidence from the last chapter of this history ([2 Kgs 25:27–30](#)) suggests the exile to Babylon as a final date for the composition or collection of this material. Judges may have received its final form at the same time, although there is little in the book of Judges itself that points beyond the early monarchy. Judges knows nothing of a central shrine or national capital in Jerusalem; the social structures reflected in the book indicate a nation still struggling with issues of settlement and governance.

Chronology of the Judges

One long-standing question has been how to fit the accounts of the judges into the chronology of the period from Joshua to Saul. Dating and ordering the judges is notoriously difficult; the results depend to a great extent on whether the Exodus is seen as having occurred in the 1400s or in the 1200s BC. The longer chronology (based on an earlier date for the Exodus) harmonizes well with [Judges 11:26](#) and [1 Kings 6:1](#). The shorter chronology (based on a later date for the Exodus) seems to fit better with external evidence (such as archaeological findings), but it forces the period of the judges into a relatively short time frame.

The people of Israel entered the Promised Land of Canaan in either 1406 or 1230 BC, depending on the date of the Exodus (see Exodus Book Introduction, “The Date of the Exodus”). The people of Israel then lived in the land and experienced cycles of oppression by neighboring countries and rescue through various judges until the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as king of all Israel around 1050 BC.

The accounts of the judges themselves are told as a sequence, giving the impression that one judge followed another. Most of the accounts of the judges also provide chronological indications, specifying how long oppressors dominated God’s people and the period of peace that followed their rescue by each judge. However, simply adding these numbers produces a sum of years that significantly exceeds the time available in this period of history.

A solution to this difficulty is to realize that the judges did not always work sequentially but sometimes overlapped with one another. For example, [Judges 10:7](#) states, “So the Lord burned with anger against Israel, and he turned them over to the Philistines and the Ammonites.” It follows that Jephthah freed his people from the Ammonite

threat in the northeast while Samson began to rescue Israel from Philistia in the southwest.

In certain cases, the text does point to a sequence between judges. For instance, Shamgar judged “after Ehud” ([3:31](#)) and Deborah “after Ehud’s death” ([4:1](#); see also [5:6](#)). Nonetheless, Judges does not provide these types of connections between most of the judges, and most of the judges held influence over only a limited part of the land of Israel. The period of the judges was characterized not only by moral depravity and spiritual darkness, but also by political fragmentation. None of the judges had a national following—each was followed by only a few tribes at most, usually those in the vicinity of the judge’s hometown.

When we realize that the judges were local and that their time periods often overlapped, we can conclude that the period of the judges thus fits into history.

Meaning and Message

What kind of leadership does God’s work require, and where can God’s people find such leaders? Judges gives a partial answer to both questions but stops short of providing the final word.

Judges celebrates charismatic (gifted, inspired) leadership while recognizing its limitations. One enduring biblical principle of leadership is that God raises up heroes and fills them with his Spirit to rescue his people. Moses and Joshua had been such rescuer-leaders, and Saul and David would be as well. The heroes of Judges had flaws, but God used them nonetheless. A true charismatic leader is a man or woman who is given a divine gift (Greek *charisma*) that equips for the task.

A second kind of leadership, often called “official,” has authority that does not come directly from God but flows from an office or appointment. While the Israelite judges were classic charismatic leaders, the kings represented official authority in the military and political sphere. Prophets and priests often presented the same contrast in Israel’s spiritual life—generally speaking, the prophets were inspired leaders while the priests were official leaders.

Which type of leader has God’s approval? How do those who want to follow the Lord faithfully know which structures of leadership are worthy of obedience? The book of Judges demonstrates God’s unmistakable commitment to raise up powerfully endowed, spirit-filled leaders appropriate for the

occasion. The practice of charismatic leadership, despite its limitations, is never set aside in biblical narrative.

Even in the transition to kingship in 1 and 2 Samuel, there is ambivalence toward the new form of official leadership. Kingship began with Saul, a charismatic judge-king in whom the weaknesses of both systems combined to bring about his downfall. Charismatic leadership is then affirmed and renewed in the life of David, a great hero-king. David was so distinctly a charismatic king that it is initially difficult to distinguish him from a successful judge. What answers the plaintive cry of Judges is not the rejection of charismatic leaders but the addition of God’s covenant with his chosen king, David ([2 Sam 7:1–29](#)). God’s ideal is in the combination of inspired and official leadership. Israel’s judges and kings, with all their limitations, look forward to Jesus, the perfect charismatic king, who combines in his person the qualities lacking in each of his predecessors.