

The Judges

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A. Introduction

1. The book of Judges opens with a record of Israel's ongoing success in conquering the land after the death of Joshua.
2. However, it also records their failure to complete the conquest and their unwillingness to destroy the pagan altars, even though God had proved faithful to his covenant and given them the land.
3. As a consequence, the Angel of the Lord pronounces judgement upon them, warning them that the Canaanites will harass and stumble them (Judges 2:1-3:4).
4. The parents also evidently failed to pass on the faith to their children. 'Another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the work which he had done for Israel.' No blessing outlives the generation of the faithful.
5. The godly generation of warriors died in due course and the people embraced pagan Canaanite gods alongside Yahweh. God withdrew his blessing to test the people as to whether they would follow him or the pagan gods. So began a cycle of oppression at the hands of their unconquered enemies. What followed was a repeated pattern of

SIN—SLAVERY—REPENTANCE—DELIVERANCE—SAFETY—SIN

6. This sequence covered a period of around 350 years (c.1380–1045 BC) plus another 30 years for Samuel, who was a Judge as well as a prophet.

B. The Judges of Israel

1. When the people repented, God raised up judges to deliver them and to govern them. None of these governed the whole land properly, and several proved to be rogues!
2. Who were these Judges? The Hebrew word *shophetim* carries the meaning of deliverers, champions, governors, akin to regional chieftains.
3. The book was written, probably by Samuel, between 1043 and 1004 BC. It is thematic rather than strictly chronological in order and follows a pattern of seven distinct cycles to demonstrate what happened when 'everyone did what was right in his own eyes.'
4. The last chapters of the book reveal a time of barely controlled anarchy coupled with religious syncretism and appalling immorality, murder, intertribal warfare and sex trafficking.
5. Here is a chart of the Judges and the enemies that they faced and defeated. Some are recorded in Hebrews 11 as people of faith. They are marked with an asterisk.

Reference	Oppressor	Years of tyranny	Judge	Years of peace	Comments
Jud 3:7-11	Mesopotamians	8	Othniel	40	Defeated Chushanrishathaim
Jud 3:12-30	Moabites	18	Ehud	80	Left handed & killed Eglon
Jud 3:31	Philistines		Shamgar		Killed 600 with an ox goad
Jud 4:1-5:31*	Canaanites	20	Deborah/ Barak	40	Sisera killed by Jael with a tent peg
Jud 6:1-8:32*	Midianites	7	Gideon	40	300 select men with trumpets and torches
8:33-10:5	Abimelech	3	Tola/Jair	45	Gideon's son killed by a millstone
Jud 10:6-12:15	Ammonites	18	Jephthah/ Ibzan/Elon/ Abdon	6/7/10/8	Sacrificed his daughter because of a vow
Jud 13:1-16:31	Philistines	40	Samson	20	Superman ensnared by Delilah
I Sam 4:15-18	Philistines	40	Eli		Nurtured Samuel but failed with his sons
I Sam 7:15-8:1-3	Philistines	52	Samuel/ Joel/Abijah		The transition to kingship but failed with his sons

C. Women of note and notoriety

1. Women were much abused during this period but some play a significant role, indicating that the Israelites were not entirely a stereotypically patriarchal society.
 - a. Rahab – a prostitute who hid the spies by faith and saved her family. She married an Israelite and gave birth to Boaz, and appears in the genealogical line of Jesus.
 - b. Deborah – a prophetess who inspired Israel to victory in spite of weak leadership by Barak.

- c. Jael – killed the fugitive king Sisera by hammering a tent peg through his head.
- d. 'A certain woman' – dropped a millstone on Abimelech's head during a siege.
- e. Jephthah's daughter – was sacrificed because of his rash vow.
- f. Manoah's wife – was miraculously made fertile.
- g. Samson's wife – betrayed her husband.
- h. Delilah – seduced Samson into giving away the secret of his strength.
- i. Micah's mother – cursed some silver and made an idol.
- j. The Levite's concubine – was raped to death and hewn into twelve pieces.
- k. Naomi – was prepared to lose her daughters-in-law.
- l. Ruth – married Boaz and produced royal ancestry.
- m. Hannah – cried to the Lord for children and conceived Samuel.

D. A tale of two Levites

1. A Levite in the north becomes a hired priest to an idolatrous man named Micah. The Danites, seeking to extend their territory, decide to invade a peace loving Sidonian community. They hijack the Levite and the idols to bring them good fortune. They conquer Laish and rename it Dan, setting up the idol and establishing an independent priesthood.
2. Another Levite in the south takes a concubine but she runs back to her father. The Levite visits the father who agrees to return his daughter but delays the farewell. The Levite finally gets away and they reach Gibeah in Benjamin by nightfall where an old man takes them in. A gang demands sex with the Levite but the concubine is thrown to them instead. She is gang raped all night and found dead at dawn. The Levite dismembers her body and sends twelve pieces to the tribes of Israel. The outrage provokes war against Gibeah. The Benjaminites are defeated, and their womenfolk slaughtered. Seeing the potential annihilation of Benjamin, but having vowed not to give their women to them, the Israelites capture other women to ensure tribal survival.

E. Hope amidst failure

1. This anarchic scene is also the setting for the beautiful romance of Ruth and Boaz. A Moabite woman forsakes her pagan heritage to embrace the faith of her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi. Impoverished, they arrive in Bethlehem where Ruth finds field work with a wealthy kinsman of Naomi's named Boaz. He treats her well and protects her from harm. Naomi urges Ruth to offer herself to Boaz because he is a kinsman redeemer. However, another man has priority, but he declines the offer. Boaz marries Ruth. Their child, Obed, is raised in honour of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech. Obed fathers Jesse, the father of David and he is included in the genealogy of Jesus.