

JUDGES

As a kid, we used to go down to the Pike in Long Beach and ride the "Jackrabbit Racer"--one of the fastest and fanciest roller coasters in the world!

Then, in our teens, they opened Disneyland. The Matterhorn became the roller coaster to ride. Knott's Berry Farm got the Mine Ride and the Log Ride.

Each time we'd get off the ride, run around and get in line again.

You begin to get the feeling that those ups and downs got to be familiar.

We've "been here and done that" before!

That's the way it was in the history of Israel.

They kept repeating the same old cycle of ups and downs.

Author

The author of Judges is not identified in the book.

The Talmud attributes it to Samuel.

Whoever wrote it did so after the death of Samson since he mentions that event.

He shows no evidence of knowledge of David's conquest of Jerusalem.

This would indicate that the author is at least a contemporary of Samuel.

Date

The events mentioned above date the writing of the book, and its events, between about 1390 and 1050 B.C. (a period of about 340 years).

Background

Following the conquest of Canaan and the division of the land, Joshua died.

He left each tribe to govern its own affairs and to eliminate the remaining

Canaanites from their territory.

Political and geographical factors isolated the tribes from one another.

Local tribes feuded with one another.

There was no strong national leadership to inspire or direct the people, so every individual began to do as he pleased.

Joshua left the nation on a spiritual mountain top, having just confirmed again their loyalty to Yahweh and their submission to His rule over them.

However, it didn't take long for them to fall from the peak.

Two major failures produced their degeneration:

- 1) They failed to obey God's orders to eliminate totally the Canaanites from within their borders.

They either failed to trust God to defeat the Canaanites, or decided to be kind to them and to become their friends.

- 2) They failed to teach their children about Yahweh.

Joshua's generation served the Lord during their lifetime.

Soon thereafter another generation arose that didn't know Yahweh.

These two basic failures started their slide down.

After their incomplete obedience regarding the Canaanites, they began to make alliances with them.

Many of their pagan, perverted customs were adopted.
Intermarriage between the two followed, which led eventually to idolatry and total moral perversion.
Yahweh was soon forgotten.

In order to draw His people back to Himself, God would send another nation to oppress Israel.
Their suffering would motivate people to repent and to call upon God.
He would bring forth a leader to guide the people to victory over their enemies.
Once the crisis passed, the people would gradually forget about Him again and return to their former practices.

The cycle continued throughout the period of the judges:

- * Rebellion
- * Oppression
- * Repentance
- * Salvation

Purpose and theme

Like other historical books, a major purpose of the book of Judges was historical.

It reveals the historical development of Israel
from the death of Joshua, while the people are still settling in Canaan,
up to the reformation and unification movement under Samuel.

Of greater importance is the theological purpose which it shares with other historical books.

Judges illustrates how God deals with His covenant people.

The basic principle revealed:

obedience to God's commands produces blessing,
while disobedience brings cursing.

In Judges we observe that, in God's sight, partial obedience is equal to no obedience. God demands total trust, submission and obedience.

God is revealed as faithful to fulfill His promises.

He is sovereignly in control of history, even directing events in pagan countries.

He loves His people, even when they forget Him or rebel against Him.

He demonstrates that love even as He corrects them.

He forgives them for their sin and draws them back into fellowship with Himself.

As we look at Israel, man's repeated failure and unfaithfulness is revealed.

In spite of God's love and blessing, Israel disobeys His commands.

They fail to train their children in God's ways.

Due to lack of a strong national leader, everyone goes about doing whatever he feels like,
rather than seeking God's will for their lives.

The book reveals one of Israel's darkest hours.

Rather than seek God's will and receive His blessing, Israel goes its own way and repeatedly requires God's firm hand of correction.

As a result, they ride the roller coaster of spiritual ups and downs, as God seeks to restore them to consistent fellowship with Him.

Organization

The structure of Judges is simple:

It is introduced by a prologue which explains how Israel moved from the mountain top at Joshua's farewell to the degenerating picture painted in the book of Judges (1-3:7).

The body of the book presents the repetitious cycle which leads from failure to oppression and eventually to restoration (3:8-16:31).

The extremely sad spiritual condition of God's people is pictured in two stories which form a fitting epilogue to the book (17-21).

The stories demonstrate how sad their condition has become.

Argument

FAILURE PRODUCED BY PARTIAL OBEDIENCE 1-3:6

Judges begins in spiritual victory.

Just prior to Joshua's death he leads God's people in a reconfirmation of their relationship to God.

They vow to follow Him in accordance with His commands. They remain faithful to those promises during the rest of that generation.

In conformity with that relationship, the book opens with the people of Israel seeking God's direction in order to be faithful to His commands.

PARTIAL CONQUEST OF GOD'S LAND 1-2:5

God ordered them to totally destroy the Canaanites living in the promised land.

The people, in obedience to His command, ask for direction as to who should move first (1:1).

Following this positive beginning, Israel only partially obeys God's instructions (1-3:6). Instead of totally destroying the Canaanites, the tribes of Israel only partially conquer them. Finally they decide to coexist rather than fight.

Partial obedience is really disobedience and therefore God disciplines His people as their condition degenerates.

Judah and Simeon's conquests 1:1-20

Judah begins the conflict, as God indicated they should.

They start well, but fail to drive out the Canaanites (1:19).

The other tribes follow their example and failed to drive them out.

Benjamin's failure 1:21

Joseph 1:22-29

Zebulun 1:30

Asher 1:31-32
Naphtali 1:33
Dan 1:34-36

Resulting thorns and snares 2:1-5

The angel of the Lord spoke to them about their failure.
God had ordered them not to make covenants with the Canaanites.
They were to destroy the people and their religious system.
Since Israel failed to obey God's commands, He will not drive them out of the land.
They will remain in the land and continue to afflict Israel.

OCCASIONAL OBEDIENCE OF GOD'S LAW 2:6-3:6

Cycle Introduced: In addition to their partial obedience in the conquest of the land, Israel also enters a cycle of rebellion and discipline in their spiritual walk and lifestyle.

Initial faithfulness 2:6-9

Following the death of Joshua, the people served the Lord.

Ignorant generation 2:10

However, they fail to instruct their children in God's ways and soon another generation arose which did not know Yahweh.

Idolatrous disobedience 2:11-13

That generation began to decline spiritually.
They disobey God and begin to worship pagan gods from surrounding nations.

Corrective punishment 2:14-15

God sends oppressive nations against them to correct them.
Under the weight of the oppression, they call out to God to deliver them.

Liberating leadership 2:16-18

Then He sends judges as political liberators to save them.

Repetitious rebellion 2:19

The people refuse to listen to these leaders that God sent.
As soon as the judge dies, they return to their rebellion again.
They didn't want to change.

Oppressing nations 2:20-3:6

God continued to send oppressive nations to disturb Israel throughout the period of the judges.

FAILURE PRODUCED OPPRESSION 3:7-16:31

The main body of Judges describes God's intervention to deliver Israel from the oppressors.

God raises up judges as political liberators of His people.

These leaders bring the people to temporary repentance and give them victory over their enemies.

OTHNIEL'S LIBERATION FROM MESOPOTAMIA 3:7-11

The first judge described is Othniel who liberated Israel from Cushan-Rishathaim, king of Aram-Naharaim, in northwest Mesopotamia.

EHUD'S LIBERATION FROM MOAB 3:12-30

When Israel again responded in disobedience to God, He sent Eglon, king of Moab to afflict them.

God brought Ehud to save the people from Moab.

He devised a plan by which he was able to kill Eglon and defeat Moab in the confusion which followed.

SHAMGAR'S LIBERATION FROM PHILISTINES 3:31

After Ehud, Shamgar saved Israel from affliction by the Philistines.

DEBORAH'S LIBERATION FROM CANAAN 4-5:31

After Israel again returned to their rebellious ways, God sent a Canaanite king of Hazor to afflict Israel.

The story 4

After twenty years of suffering, Israel called on God for help.

Deborah was leading the people at the time.

She summoned Barak to lead an army against them.

He agreed, as long as she would go with him.

The honor of victory would be given to a woman rather than to him, but he did lead the army to victory over the Canaanites.

The affliction 4:1-3
The judge and the plan 4:4-10
The victory 4:11-16
The death of Sisera 4:17-24

The song 5

Following the battle, Deborah and Barak sang a song of victory, as a testimony of praise for the victory God had given them.

GIDEON'S LIBERATION FROM MIDIAN 6-8

Israel again did evil and suffered affliction from the Midianites for seven years.

Condition described 6:1-10

The Midianites destroyed Israel's crops and kept them poor until Israel called to God for help.

Gideon called 6:11-24

God calls Gideon to lead the people out of the oppression.

Baal's altar destroyed 6:25-32

Gideon destroys the altar of Baal in Israel.

God's army selected 6:33-7:8

In order to demonstrate that God is giving them the victory, and not Israel's army, only 300 men are chosen to fight.
Gideon asks for a double test of fleece. He wants to be sure about this!
God reduces the army from 32,500, to 10,000, to 300--to go against an army of 135,000!
There's no way they could do this on their own!

God's army victorious 7:9-22

After God demonstrates to Gideon that He would give them victory (9-15), he leads the small army against the Midianites.

God causes great confusion in the camp so the Midianites attack one another and Gideon is victorious (16-22)

Midianite army pursued 7:23-8:3

Gideon calls other Israelites to pursue the fleeing Midianites.

In spite of petty inter-tribal feuding, the people respond to his appeal and complete the job.

Succoth and Peniel avenged 8:4-21

A related incident demonstrates that God blesses those who identify with His people and curses those who oppose them.

Help denied 8:4-9

Although not the focus of the story, the inhabitants of Succoth and Peniel refuse to provide food for Israel when it is needed.

Midian defeated 8:10-12

Vengeance dealt 8:13-17

After defeating the fleeing Midianites, Gideon returns and destroys these towns also.

Kings of Midian judged 8:18-21

Finally, Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian, were slain for their oppressive attacks on God's people.

Gideon refused rule 8:22-35

His refusal 8:22-23

Israel tries to convince Gideon to become their king.

Gideon refuses to rule over them because they are God's people and He alone is to be their King.

He speaks for future generations as well: "*Nor my son!*"

His ephod 8:24-27

While in this he was wise, he did mislead the people by setting up a golden ephod which the people began to worship.

His peace 8:28-32

Gideon's victory again restored peace to Israel which they enjoyed for the next forty years.

Their failure 8:33-35

When Gideon dies, the people again return to their idols and forget about God.

ABIMELECH'S TYRANNY OVER ISRAEL 9

Abimelech's offer 9:1-6

Following Gideon's death, as a result of Israel's return to pagan gods, Abimelech, the son of Gideon, offers to rule over Shechem.

Jotham's warning 9:7-21

In the process of establishing himself, Abimelech kills all his brothers except Jotham, the youngest, who escapes.

Jotham tries to warn the people of their dangerous condition but they won't listen to him so he escapes.

Gaal's opposition 9:22-41

After Abimelech rules three years, God raises up Gaal in opposition to him, and the people follow his resistance movement.

Abimelech's vengeance 9:42-49

Zebul, Abimelech's representative in Shechem, sends word to Abimelech who puts down the movement and later destroys the city for their identification with Gaal.

Abimelech's death 9:50-57

When he tries to do the same thing in Thebez, a woman throws a millstone from the tower, fatally wounding him.

His servant finishes the job at his request.

In this way, God used rebellious men to punish His people for their rebellion against Him.

TOLA AND JAIR'S LIBERATING LEADERSHIP 10:1-5

A period of relative tranquility follows under the leadership of Tola and Jair.

Tola 10:1-2

Jair 10:3-5

JEPHTHAH'S LIBERATION FROM AMMONITES 10:6-12:7

Israel's condition 10:6-9

The rebellion of God's people caused renewed oppression by the Philistines and the Ammonites.

Israel's petition 10:10

When they cry out to God for help, He chides them for forsaking Him.

Yahweh's rejection 10:11-14

He suggests that they call on their new gods for help.

Israel's repentance 10:15-16

Realizing that these gods cannot help, they leave themselves at His mercy to deal with as He wishes.

They get rid of the foreign gods and decide to follow Yahweh. Therefore, He responds to their cry for help.

Jephthah's elevation 10:17-11:11

Jephthah, an outcast from his own family, was chosen to lead God's people because of his ability as a mighty warrior.

After challenging their desire to accept him as a leader, Jephthah finally accepts--on the condition that they will submit to his authority over them (Offers a picture of their relationship with Yahweh).

Jephthah's dialogue 11:12-28

Jephthah discusses the land rights issue with the king of the Ammonites. He demonstrates historically how God took the disputed territory away from the Amorites and gave it to His people. Therefore, they have legal claim to the land.

Jephthah's vow 11:29-31

When the king of the Ammonites refuses to pay attention to Jephthah, he made a vow to the Lord that he would sacrifice whatever came out of his house to meet him upon his return.

Jephthah's victory 11:32-33

Jephthah's vow fulfilled 11:34-40

When God gave Jephthah victory, he returned home and was horrified when his daughter, his only child, came out to meet him. Nevertheless, he fulfills his vow.

Jephthah's confrontation with Ephraim 12:1-7

After the victory over the Ammonites, the proud and jealous men of Ephraim protest having been left out of the battle.

Jephthah answers that they called for help and no one responded, so they fought alone. The discussion results in conflict between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites. Jephthah and the Gileadites were the victors.

IBZAN, ELON AND ABDON'S LEADERSHIP 12:8-15

Following Jephthah's victories, Israel is led by three other judges of less significance in the story of Israel:

Ibzan 12:8-10

Elon 12:11-12

Abdon 12:13-15

SAMSON'S LIBERATION FROM PHILISTINES 13:1-16:31

When Israel again did evil, the Lord sent the Philistines to oppress them.

His birth and promise 13

God raises up another deliverer for His people.

This deliverer is to be special.

His birth was prophesied by the angel of God.

He was to be separated from others of his own generation by a Nazirite vow from his birth.

He was set apart for God's service from birth.

He started well (24-25).

His carnality 14-16:20a

In spite of the special circumstances of his birth and the promise for his future, Samson wanted to be like everyone else.

He used his God-given talents for his own benefit and demonstrated greater interest in beautiful women than in obeying God's will.

Samson and his marriage 14-15:2

Samson and his conflicts with the Philistines 15:3-20

Samson and the prostitute 16:1-3

Samson and Delilah 16:4-20a

His defeat 16:20b-22

These carnal tendencies would eventually cause his downfall.

The tragic commentary which reveals the sad state of Samson's walk with God indicates that he was not aware that God had left him.

Thus Samson went down in defeat.

His victory 16:23-31

God was still not finished with Samson.

In their pride and self-confidence, the Philistines made fun of Samson but forgot to assure his continued weakness by keeping his hair short.

As his hair grew, Samson earned the final victory for God's people, but it cost him his life.

Thus one of the great judges of Israel provides a warning concerning the danger of carnal desires, but also teaches God's love and forgiveness for His people.

Warning: Danger of attempting great things for God in the flesh!

God still chose to use Samson to liberate His people, in spite of his human weakness.

FAILURE PRODUCED PERVERSION 17-21 EPILOGUE

The stories of the judges themselves demonstrate the extent of the degeneration within God's people during this period.

Israel's failure is even more graphically demonstrated by the two stories which conclude the book.

Two stories of ever-increasing perversion of God's plan for His people.

Things go from bad to worse!

INFIDELITY: MICAH, THE PRIEST AND THE DANITES 17-18

The story of Micah and the priest indicates serious problems that were present in Israel.

Micah and the priest 17

The story is tragic to begin with because one of God's people is worshiping idols (1-6).

The tragedy compounds when a Levite passes by and sells his services for personal gain and becomes a priest for Micah's idol worship (7-13)

The priest and the Danites 18

The evil multiplies again when a group of Danite warriors, rather than correcting or judging Micah, steal the idols for themselves.

Thus they are both thieves and idolators (1-17).

The priest adds the final touch as he forgets all loyalty to Micah and accepts a better offer from the Danites, becoming their idolatrous priest (18-31)

The religious incident, as well as the way the Danites fought other cities, demonstrates the lack of control in their public life.

The author uses the incident to demonstrate how things had degenerated.

Everyone was doing whatever they felt like doing.

The whole nation was out of control.

IMMORALITY: A GIRL, THE LEVITE AND THE BENJAMINITES 19-21

The same condition was demonstrated even more graphically by the second story, of a girl, a Levite and the Benjaminites.

Atrocity committed 19

Again the story begins with a tragic situation, a Levite's concubine was unfaithful to him.

Finally she went home to her father.

After four months of separation the Levite goes to get her (1-10)

After several days of partying at the home of his father-in-law, he finally took her and left for home.

Soon after their departure, night came.

To avoid any potential problems with the pagan Jebusites, they passed up Jebus, planning to stay where they would be more secure, in an Israelite town.

Arriving in Gibeah, they were treated worse by the men there than the pagans would have treated them (11-28).

After being denied homosexual rape with the Levite, they took the concubine and abused her sexually to such an extent that by morning she had died.

The Levite wants to impress the Israelites with what happened.

Instead of giving her a decent burial, he cuts her in 12 pieces and sends them to the 12 tribes of Israel (29-30).

Offenders attacked 20

When the tribes gathered in horror, he told them what had happened (1-7).

All the tribes gathered to take action against Gibeah.

When the tribe of Benjamin decides to defend them, the other tribes declare war against them (8-48).

The alliance of tribes consults God about their plans and receive His approval.

Nevertheless in the first two encounters they are defeated.

Each defeat brought greater unity of purpose and greater dependence on the Lord.

On the third day God gave them victory over the Benjaminites, by means of an ambush. As a result, the entire tribe was eliminated except for 600 men who had escaped to the rock of Rimmon.

Wives provided 21

Faced with the problem of what they should do about Benjamin's inheritance, the other tribes had to provide wives for the 600 surviving men.

No one wanted to give their daughters to such people as they.

They killed the people of Jabesh Gilead who had not taken part in the destruction of the scandalous Benjaminites.

400 of their virgin survivors were sent to the camp at Shiloh.

In addition, from the virgins who participated in the dancing at the annual festival of the Lord in Shiloh, the surviving Benjaminites were allowed to grab a wife.

In that way the inheritance of Benjamin was preserved.

With these two tragic stories illustrating the total lack of discipline among God's people during this period, the book of Judges closes

The author underlines the point with a final summary description of the period:

Since there was no strong leadership in Israel, everyone was doing whatever he felt like (21:25).

That kind of carnality looks pretty ugly in the midst of God's people!

WHAT LESSONS DO YOU SEE IN THIS BOOK FOR US?