

## Unit 2 Introduction

# The Cycle of Sin, Oppression, Deliverance, and Peace in the Book of Judges

### Asking Important Questions

**T**he land that Israel fought for was occupied by a number of ethnic groups who worshiped many gods. There was Baal-Hadad, god of rain; Asherah, the Mother goddess and consort of El, the Creator; Shemesh, the sun god; Yareah, the moon god; Yam, god of the sea; Mot, god of death; Anat, goddess of war; Resheph, god of plague and healing; Dagon, god of crop fertility; and many others. Israel had made a covenant to worship Yahweh (God) alone. Yahweh had delivered Israel from the bondage of Egypt and provided for them in their desert wanderings.

When Israel settled in the land, they began to grow crops. Yahweh was a great God of deliverance, but could He make crops grow? In a poor season when the land produced little food, some began to question His ability. Listening to the crying of their hungry children intensified that question. Their neighbors would tell them that Dagon was angry because the proper sacrifices were not being offered. Not only the Israelites, but their neighbors also were suffering. After all, whoever heard of one god being able to make the sun rise, the rain fall, and the crops grow? That was absurd.

The ancients believed that everything that happened was caused by a god. The concept of cause-and-effect, so important in our culture, was not considered then. When the car won't start, we may pray to God asking for help, or ask more simply, "Why today?" Then we call for a tow truck. For the ancients, if disease swept thru the community, they asked which god had been offended.

### The Cycles of the Book of Judges

Judges 2:10—3:6 describes the cycles Israel went through before rulers were appointed over the nation. During the life of Joshua and the generation that followed, Israel faithfully served Yahweh, the God of Israel (v. 7). The next generations, however, were attracted to the foreign gods, or Baals (v. 11). The term "Baal" simply means "lord." It can refer to a god, but also occasionally to a man. In Genesis 20:3, Sarah, the wife of Abraham, is referred to as "a married woman," or more literally, "the wife of a lord [baal]." Most often, Baal refers to the rain god Baal-Hadad. Rain coming at the right time and in the right amount was very important for growing crops. If Baal-Hadad's worship was neglected, the rain would be withheld by

the god. To insure a good crop to feed the family, Israel began also to worship Baal and his consort, Asherah (v. 13).

Because Israel broke the covenant they made at Mount Sinai with God (Exodus 24:1-8), God allowed the nations around them to oppress them. Israel groaned under the oppression and afflictions they suffered. God graciously relented, for they were His people (v. 18). What is significant is that there is no mention of the people repenting, only that they cried out to Yahweh (3:9, 15; 4:3; 7:7; 10:10). God's heart was broken, and He moved to ease their suffering by raising up a judge, a deliverer who would free them. As long as the judge lived, Israel enjoyed a time of peace, but when the judge died, the people returned to worshipping the other gods (v. 19). Thus, there was a repeating cycle: 1) The people broke the covenant and sinned by worshipping other gods; 2) God withdrew His protection and allowed another nation to oppress them; 3) God relented when the people cried out and raised up a judge who delivered them; 4) While the judge lived, Israel enjoyed a time of peace, but when the judge died, the cycle began again.

### The Judges of Israel

One who delivered Israel from the grasp of another nation was called a "judge." Deborah, a prophet, was the only judge we know of who also sat in judgment deciding disputes between the Israelites prior to defending Israel (4:4-5). Most likely, after delivering Israel, the people would ask these judges to settle their disputes.

The judges came from a number of different tribes. The stories of their courageous and daring escapades were recounted among the people in oral form. When the families gathered around an evening fire to listen to traveling musicians and storytellers (5:10-11), the stories stirred the imaginations of many young people. Eventually, someone compiled these stories, put them in writing, and placed them in the four-part cycles.

There are six major judges and six minor judges. The major judges are introduced by identifying who they were, what tribe they came from, who the oppressing enemy was, and that God heard their cry. The defeat of the enemy is given in some detail. The stories close by noting how long the land had peace. The other six are called "minor" judges because little information about them is given in

the brief accounts (one to three verses only). Let's look at the minor judges first.

### The Minor Judges

Shamgar (3:31) saved Israel by slaying 600 Philistines with an ox goad, a long stick with a pointed end. He is called "son of Anath." Anath, or Anat, was a Canaanite goddess. Shamgar's father may have been named after the goddess, or the phrase may mean that he came from a city of that name, such as Beth-Anath. No information is given as to how long he judged Israel or where he was buried.

The other minor judges are identified by tribe, some personal information, how long they led Israel, and where they were buried. No oppressor is named, nor is any account of deliverance included. Tola (10:1-2) of the tribe of Ephraim led Israel 23 years and was buried in Shamir. Jair (10:3-5) from Gilead had 30 sons. He led Israel for 22 years and was buried in Kamon.

Ibzan (12:8-10) came from Bethlehem in Judah. He led Israel for seven years and was buried in Bethlehem. Elon (12:11-12) was from the tribe of Zebulun, led Israel eight years, and was buried in Aijalon. Abdon (12:13-15) led Israel for eight years and was buried at Pirathon, a town in Ephraim. The latter five judges led Israel for a total of 70 years.

### The Major Judges

Contrary to the will of God, the Israelites began to intermarry with the neighboring peoples. The foreign wives and husbands enticed their spouses to serve their gods (3:6). The first judge, Othniel (3:7-11), of the tribe of Judah, was the model judge. He was married to Aksah, the daughter of Caleb (1:12-13); a proper marriage indeed. The Spirit of Yahweh enabled him to defeat Cushan-Rishathaim, the king of Aram. The land had peace for 40 years, a symbolic number for a generation (Numbers 14:33-34).

Eglon, king of Moab, had enlisted the Ammonites and Amalekites to join in conquering Israel. Ehud of the tribe of Ephraim was in charge of delivering tribute to the king at Jericho (3:12-29). By trickery, he assassinated Eglon and then called on the Israelites to attack his armies also at Jericho. Taking possession of the fords of the Jordan River, they slaughtered his armies as they attempted to flee back to Moab. Israel then enjoyed 80 years of peace, two generations.

The third judge was Deborah, a prophet who held court in the hill country of Ephraim (5:1—6:31). Because Israel had sinned, God allowed Jabin, the king of Canaan who ruled from Hazor, to conquer

the northern tribes of Israel. God commanded Barak through Deborah to attack Sisera, the commander of the forces of Jabin. Barak refused unless Deborah went with him. After she agreed, Barak gathered the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and defeated Sisera's army of 900 chariots. However, Sisera himself was killed by another woman—Jael. In this account, the women are major characters along with Barak. The land had peace for 40 years.

Starting with Gideon of the tribe of Manasseh (6:1—8:35), the story of the judges begins to deteriorate. God had allowed the Midianites to oppress the Israelites. While Barak was hesitant to follow the commands of God, Gideon needed God to give him assurances three times (6:17-22, 36-40; 7:9-15). Using the tactics given by God, Gideon was able with the aid of the tribes of Naphtali, Asher, Manasseh, and Ephraim to defeat the Midianites. The Israelites asked Gideon to be their king. He refused, but then requested them to give him their gold earrings. He used the gold to make an ephod, a sacred object, which the Israelites began to worship. Israel had peace for 40 years.

When the Israelites were oppressed by the Ammonites, they turned to Jephthah the Gileadite to be their commander. God was not consulted, but He did honor their choice. Jephthah was successful in defeating the Ammonites, but the men of the tribe of Ephraim were jealous of his success. A civil war broke out and 42,000 Ephraimites were killed; Israelites were killing Israelites. Jephthah led Israel only six years, an indication that Israel was in trouble.

The final judge was the powerful Samson from the tribe of Dan (13:1-16:31). His enemies were the Philistines, whom he slaughtered in personal battles, even in his death. Samson was an anti-hero. He never led an army. He chased after non-Israelite women. As a Nazirite, he broke his vows by drinking wine at his wedding party, touching the dead body of a lion, and having his hair cut, though not at his request. He was never able to deliver the Israelites, leading them only 20 years, half of a generation.

Israel was in serious trouble. The final chapters of Judges (17—21) record Israel's continual spiral downward into idolatry, the relocation of the tribe of Dan, and a tribal war that nearly exterminated Benjamin. The book ends looking for a king who would establish justice, for at that time, "everyone did as they saw fit" (21:25).

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