

The Book of Judges: An Overview

The book of Judges follows the book of Joshua, which records the victories the Israelites held when they invaded the lands west of the Jordan River, taking the cities and often destroying them. The lands were divided just as God commanded. The people won victories because they got rid of their foreign gods and kept the covenant they made with the God of the Israelites. The question was, would the next generation continue to keep God's covenant, or would it turn to the gods of the Canaanites?

Israelites Among the Canaanites (1:1—3:6)

The book begins with God choosing Judah to begin the invasion of the land west of the Jordan River. Judah invited the Simeonites to join them so that they could take the territory allotted to both of them. God enabled them to defeat the Canaanites and Perizzites.

The tribes who moved north were not successful in driving out the Canaanites. Thus, they began to live among them, worshiping their gods. This breach of the covenant angered God, and He refused to drive the Canaanites out.

The next chapters begin with the accounts of Joshua's death and the gathering of the "whole generation . . . to their ancestors" (2:6-10). The next generation of the Israelites, however, continued to do evil by worshiping the Canaanite gods. When the Israelites went out to war, they were defeated because God was against them. God raised up "judges" (a Hebrew term meaning "leaders") who led them into battle "and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived," though they worshiped other gods.

The Rise of Judges/Leaders (3:7—5:31)

God would not forsake His people. When they cried out to Him because they were "sold into the hands" of the Canaanite kings, God would raise up a judge/leader, such as Othniel who "overpowered" the king of Aram and gained "peace for forty years." The king of Moab, Eglon, had taken possession of the City of Palms (Jericho) and required the Israelites to give him tribute. The Benjaminite Ehud brought the tribute and then told the king he had a secret message for him. When the king sent everyone else out, Ehud killed the king

and escaped. When Ehud called the Israelites to attack the Moabites, they joined him and destroyed the Moabites. They had peace for 80 years.

Deborah, both a prophet and a judge, told Barak that God had commanded him to take 10,000 men to fight Sisera, a mighty warrior in northern Israel. When Barak requested Deborah to go with him, he demonstrated his lack of confidence in God's support. While Deborah agreed, she also told him that even if he won the war he would not have the honor of the victory. When the battle took place, rain poured down so hard that the Kishon River overflowed, turning the ground into mud. The chariots were so clogged that the Canaanites fled the Naphtali and Zebulun warriors. Sisera ran north toward Hazor, the city of King Jabin. Being exhausted, he accepted the invitation of Jael, wife of Heber, to hide and rest. When he was asleep, Jael "picked up a tent peg and a hammer" and "drove the peg through his temple." Barak did not receive the honor of victory, but Jael was counted as "most blessed of women" (5:24).

Gideon, God's Warrior (6:1—8:35)

For seven years, God gave the Israelites into the hands of the Midianites, who annually invaded the land of the Israelites to take their crops, sheep, and cattle. When they cried out, God told Gideon: "Go in the strength you have and save Israel" (6:14). Gideon first built an altar to God and, that same night, he tore down the altar to Baal that his father had built.

When the Midianites crossed the Jordan, Gideon sent messengers throughout the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. Gideon was insecure, and wanted God to verify His promise, first by placing dew on the fleece but not on the ground, and then, by placing dew on the ground and not the fleece.

The camp of Midian was north of the spring of Harod where Gideon's soldiers were camped. God told Gideon that there were too many men there, and all left except 300. That night, Gideon divided the 300 into three groups with trumpets and torches in jars. At his signal, they blew the trumpets and broke the jars. The Midianites fled. The Israelites from Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh pursued them, and Ephraim seized Jordan to block those trying to escape.

Gideon and his 300 men continued to chase the kings Zebah and Zalmunna and their 15,000 men. When Gideon and his men attacked their army, all fled, enabling Gideon and his men to capture the two kings. Later, Gideon himself executed them.

The Israelites wanted to make Gideon their king, but he rejected their offer. Instead he asked them for the gold earrings from the spoil. He made an ephod and placed it in his town of Ophrah; there, the people fell back into idolatry and once again worshiped the gods of the Canaanites.

Jephthah, Commander of the Army (10:6—12:7)

When the Israelites again worshiped the Baals and Ashtoreths, God became so angry that He turned them over to the Ammonites, who oppressed them for 18 years. When the Ammonite army camped in Gilead, the leaders of the people did not know who could take the lead in attacking them.

Because "Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior" (11:1), the elders of Israel requested him to lead the army to fight the Ammonites. Jephthah was not sure that the elders were serious; however, they stated that "The LORD is our witness" (v. 10).

Jephthah sent a message to the Ammonite king stating that when Israel came up from Egypt, they did not go through the lands of Edom or Moab. They asked permission of the Amorite king Sihon to go through the land. When Sihon attacked Israel, God gave the Amorite army into their hands and they took the land. For 300 years, they lived there. The king of Ammon, however, did not pay any attention to the message.

Jephthah fought the Ammonites and God gave them into his hands. He made a vow to God that if God gave him victory, he would sacrifice whatever came first out of the door of his house. When he returned home, his daughter came out dancing. Jephthah was devastated for she was his only child. For two months, she and her friends roamed the hills praying and weeping because she would never marry. When she returned, her father fulfilled "the vow he had made" (v. 39).

Samson, the Last Judge (13:1—16:31)

An angel of God revealed to the childless wife of Manoah that she would bear a son of tremendous strength. He was to be a Nazirite who never drank wine, ate anything unclean, or cut his hair.

Samson saw a young Philistine woman he wanted to marry. At the wedding party, he tried to trick the 30 guests. They threatened his wife that they would kill her if she didn't find out his riddle. When they recited the meaning of his riddle, Samson left without his wife. When he later returned for his wife, the father told him that she had been given to another man. In anger, he caught 300 foxes, fastened torches to them, and released them into the fields of grain, vineyards, and olive groves.

Then Samson went down to a cave in Judah. The Philistines who followed him required the people of Judah to surrender Samson to them. Since the Philistines were the rulers of Judah at that time, 3,000 men from Judah went to the cave to tie him up. Samson allowed them to bind him with two new ropes. The Philistines were elated when they saw him apparently subdued. Then the Spirit of God came upon Samson. The ropes on his arms became like flax. He grabbed “the fresh jaw bone of a donkey” and “struck down a thousand men” (15:14-15).

Later, Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah. The Philistine rulers approached Delilah and offered her 1,100 pieces of silver if she would find out “the secret of his great strength and how (they) could overpower him” (16:5). Three times Delilah tried to get Samson to tell her the secret of his “great strength.” However, each time when she called to him that the Philistines were there, he broke “the bowstrings,” then the “new ropes,” and finally the pin on the loom.

On the fourth try, Delilah was able to get Samson to tell her his secret about his strength. As “a Nazirite dedicated to God” he was to never cut his hair. If he did he “would become as weak as any other man” (16:17). Delilah informed the Philistines that she had the secret of his strength. When he fell asleep on her lap, she had his seven braids of hair cut off. The Philistines then came and “seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza” (v. 21).

The rulers of the Philistines offered a sacrifice to their god Dagon, believing that he had delivered Samson to them. Then they

brought Samson out of the prison so that he could entertain them. When he came out, he asked “the servant who held his hand” to put him between the two pillars that supported the temple. Then Samson prayed to God that He would give him strength once again. He placed his right hand on one pillar and his left hand on the other pillar and pushed with all his strength, bringing the temple down on the rulers, the people, and himself. His brothers and their whole families went to bring back his body and place him “in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had led Israel for twenty years” (v. 31).

War with the Benjaminites (19:1—21:25)

A Levite went to Bethlehem to gain back his unfaithful concubine. They left her father’s home and went to Gibeah, a Benjaminite city, and were invited by an old man to spend the night at his home. That evening, wicked men of the city demanded that the old man give them the Levite and his concubine so they could abuse them. They were about to storm the house when the Levite sent his concubine out to them. When the Levite opened the door the next morning, he found his concubine lying dead in the doorway. He put her on his donkey and set out for home. When he arrived, he cut her body into 12 parts and sent them to the tribes of Israel.

The Israelites were so angered that they assembled 400,000 soldiers and sent messengers to the tribe of Benjamin demanding that they turn over the wicked men to them so that they might put them to death, but the Benjaminites refused. The

Benjaminites gathered soldiers from their towns to prepare for war.

The Israelites asked God who of their armies should fight first against the Benjaminites, and God said “Judah.” However, the Benjaminites fought them and killed 22,000 men. God told Judah to fight again the next day and again they suffered great losses. The third day, they inquired again of God; this time, He told them He would give their enemies into their hands. In that battle, they killed every man, woman, child, and animal in the tribe of Benjamin, with the exception of 600 men.

Earlier, the Israelites had pledged that they would not give their daughters in marriage to the Benjaminites. After the battles, they became aware that they were about to destroy an entire tribe and they cried out to God. Only the people of Jabesh Gilead had not sworn such an oath. So, the rest of the tribes sent soldiers to kill the men and women of the town, with the exception of 400 virgins, who were then given as wives to the Benjaminites.

Since many were still without wives, some of the Israelites told them to go to the festival at Shiloh and hide themselves in the vineyards. When the young women of Shiloh came out dancing, those Benjaminites without wives each grabbed one of the young women. Then they returned to their lands and rebuilt the towns. “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (21:24-25).

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