

## Judges

A DOWNWARD SPIRAL  
OR DISOBEDIENCE  
AND RUIN



### Unity

- Mainstream scholarship believes it to be a compilation of independent stories about of local tribal heroes.
- Later some “Deuteronomistic” compiler combined them and added prologue (1:1 – 2:5), introduction (2:6 – 3:6), and depressing appendix (17:1 – 21:25).
- This possible, but we must get our canonical message from the book’s final form, including the prologue, and conclusion.

### Title

- Hebrew *shopetim* = “judges”
  - Not so much a judicial role (cf. Deborah)
  - More a military role

### Purpose

- Twofold purpose:
  - To show the disastrous consequences of disobedience (Judg 2:16 – 23)
  - To arouse hopes for a righteous king (Judg 17:6; 21:25).
  - “God emerges as the true ‘hero’” in this book of heroes (Howard, 102):
    - He raised up these heroes whenever the people got into trouble.
    - Not only did the people keep failing God, but even some of the heroes failed.

### Authorship and Date

- Anonymous, perhaps a collection of various records compiled about individual judges.
- Dating the book:
  - Mainstream: final form ca. 7<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.
  - Traditional: early monarch (e.g., Harrison)
  - Must be after latest events recorded in it:
    - End of judges (ca. 1050 BC)
    - Speaks of “the captivity of the land” (Judg 18:30), which would indicate 6<sup>th</sup> century BC—at least for final edition of the book.

### Canonical Placement

- Date of the events: About 300 – 350 years, from early 14<sup>th</sup> century – 1050 BC.
  - Can’t just add up the periods mentioned in book, which would come to 410 years (too long).
  - Must be considerable overlap of concurrent events in different parts of the land:
    - Moabite king Eglon oppressed Israel, but took only “the city of palms” (3:12 – 14, i.e., Jericho, Deut 34:34; 1 Chr 28:15).
    - Ehud (3:15 – 30) may be been localized in territory of Ephraim and Benjamin.
    - Gideon’s battle with Midianites included his own tribe Manasseh (6:15) and then Asher, Zebulun, and Naphthali (6:35; 7:23) and later with Ephraim (7:24).
  - A little easier to date toward the end, where Jephthah’s dating occurs and with the overlapping work of Samson and Samuel.

## ANE Historical Setting

- **Dates:**
  - ⌚ Late Bronze Age (1550 – 1200 BC)
  - ⌚ Early Iron Age I (1200 – 1000 BC).
- **Civilizations:**
  - ⌚ Independent city-states gave way to imperial powers (Egyptian and Hittite).
  - ⌚ Israelites (hill country) and Canaanites (lowlands and coastal plains) managed to retain some freedom.
  - ⌚ Transition to Iron age (ca 1200 BC) shows collapse of “civilization”:
    - Depopulation of urban centers and dislocation to the hill country and desert edges.
    - Sharp cessation of imported pottery (e.g., Cypriot and Mycenaean) and increased use of cruder local (Philistine) pottery.
    - Migration of peoples who clashed with the Egyptian overlords of Palestine and eastern Mediterranean at end of 13<sup>th</sup> century BC.

## Israel's Twelve-Tribe Structure

- **Sometimes compared with the Greek “amphictyony” (cf. Noth).**
  - ⌚ A political and defensive arrangement of *twelve* parties, rooted in a religious association revolving around a central shrine (e.g., Delphi).
  - ⌚ Israel revolved around the place that God would choose (Deut 12:5, 11, etc.). Shechem, then Shiloh (Judg 9) and eventually Jerusalem.
    - Dephi from 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, judges as much as 8 centuries earlier.
    - At that time, no real contact with “Greece.”
    - Neither the central shrine nor the twelve-tribe league seemed all that definitive throughout the period of the judges.

## Setting (cont.)

- **Technological advances:**
  - ⌚ Iron tools for war and farming, technology
    - Philistines initially monopoly on it (Judg 1:19; 1 Sam 13:19 – 21).
    - By 10<sup>th</sup> century, Samuel, Saul, and David reversed this and subdued the Philistines.
  - ⌚ Plastered cisterns, freeing settlements from total dependence on wells, springs, rivers, or lakes.
- **Philistines**
  - ⌚ A group of allied city states, each under their own war lord (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath).
  - ⌚ Followed Dagon (Dagan), an agricultural deity, a “god of grain.”

## “Judge” (*šōpētîm*)

- **Not a judicial figure in court (cf. Deborah, 4:4 – 5).**
- **A royal and military figure (Judg 2:16).**
  - ⌚ “No individual is called a ‘judge’ in the book; the only time the term is used in that way it refers to God (11:27).... It is the Lord who is the true judge of His people” (Howard, 109).
  - ⌚ Amphictyonic distinction between “major” and “minor” judges:
    - The “major” judges: charismatic *military* deliverers (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson)
    - The “minor” judges: *judicial* leaders dispensing justice (Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon)
  - ⌚ This idea doesn’t necessarily hold in Israel, which doesn’t appear to show this distinction, where *all* of the judges seemed to have a military role.

## Canaanite Religion & Culture

- **Canaanites in Israelite eyes:**
  - ⌚ Recently freed slaves saw powerful, wealthy, and sophisticated urban centers.
  - ⌚ Canaanite religion focused on agricultural fertility, which could manifest itself through various fertility rites.
    - *El* was titular head of the Canaanite pantheon, father of both the gods and man—but weak compared with Baal.
    - *Baal*, a storm god who provided life-giving rain, was the most powerful (cf. 1 Kgs 16:29 – 22:40).
    - *Astarte/Ashteroth*, a goddess of love and fertility (cf. *Ishtar*).
    - *Anath*, Baal’s sister and wife, was a bloodthirsty goddess of love and war, but doesn’t really feature in the biblical stories.

## Judg 1:1 – 2:5 and Josh 10

- **Follows Joshua’s death, a new era but without mention of a new leader.**
- **Indicates incomplete conquest (Judg 1:21, 27 – 36, cf. complete conquest in Josh 10).**
  - ⌚ More war is the result (1:1 – 26)
  - ⌚ Explicit note of incomplete conquest (1:27 – 36).
  - ⌚ Note that this constituted disobedience (2:1 – 5).

### “Angel of the LORD”

- About 1/3 of Old Testament occurrences are in Judges (cf. “angel of God,” Judg 6:20; 13:6, 9).
- **Nature:**
  - ⌚ Sudden appearance as representative of the LORD.
  - ⌚ A supernatural appearance that caused great fear for life (Gideon, 6:22f; Manoah, 13:21f), as if one had seen the LORD himself (cf. Exod 33:20).
  - ⌚ Individual appearing to Gideon is referred to alternately as the “angel of the LORD” and as the “LORD” himself (6:12, 14, 16).
  - ⌚ Can even speak as the LORD in the first person (Judg 2:1 – 3).

### Jephthah’s Vow (cont.)

- ⌚ **Howard on this:**
  - “He was rash, foolish, and he sinned in doing this” (Howard, 117).
  - “Did Jephthah have to follow through on this vow? Essentially, the answer is yes. Vows were made only to God, and they were solemn affairs that did indeed have to be kept. People were not forced to take them, but, if they did, they must be kept (Deut. 23:21 – 23; Ps. 15:4; Eccles. 5:4 – 5).
- ⌚ How is this “profitable” (2 Tim 3:16)? “Jephthah is one more example of the deterioration of morality and of the ‘Canaanization’ of life that is depicted in the book of Judges” (Howard, 118).

### “Angel of the LORD” (cont.)

- **Three options for identity:**
  - ⌚ *My choice:* An “angel,” since he’s called “the angel of the LORD” (see esp. Exod 23:20 – 23).
  - ⌚ *Howard’s choice:* A humanoid theophany, since he is referred to alternately as an “angel” and as “the LORD” and speaks in the first person as the LORD.
  - ⌚ *A frequent evangelical choice:* A Christophany, a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ in human form.
    - Argument for this identification: Angelic-like imagery compared with John’s description of Jesus (Dan 10:6; Ezek 1:26 – 28; Rev 1:14, 16).
    - Argument against this identification: New Testament identifies Jesus Christ as prophet, priest, and king but never as “angel.”

### Theology of Land in Judges

- Israel’s disobedience in not completely annihilating the Canaanites and in turning to their gods left them unable to complete conquest of the land (Judg 2:1 – 3, 20 – 22).
- The book sounds an ominous note that the gift of the land would be withdrawn from them, in “the day of the captivity of the land” (Judg 18:30).

### Jephthah’s Vow

- Made pre-battle vow that led to sacrifice of his daughter 91:30 – 31, 34 – 40).
  - ⌚ What did he intend to vow: “Whatever” (ESV, NIV, JPS) or “whoever” (RSV, NRSV, NET) comes out the door “to meet me” (Judg 11:31)?
  - ⌚ What did he do when he “did with her according to his vow that he had made” (Judg 11:39).
  - ⌚ How could this be?
    - Human sacrifice expressly forbidden (Lev 18:21; 20:2, cf. Jer 19:5; Ezek 20:30 – 31).
    - Had God’s Spirit on him and was commended (1 Sam 12:11; Heb 11:32).

### Israel’s Apostasy vs. God’s Faithfulness

- Israel’s apostasy provokes these threats to the land (2:1 – 3, 20 – 22).
- God’s faithfulness repeatedly provides deliverance when Israel cries for help (3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10).
  - ⌚ Even the judges don’t do much to improve Israel’s faithless spiritual condition, even though they acted as God’s agents of deliverance (cf. Heb 11:32).
    - Course killing of Eglon (3:21 – 24)
    - Gideon’s lack of faith (Judg 6) and leading the nation into apostasy (8:34 – 37)
    - Abimelech’s downfall (Judg 9)
    - Jephthah’s bad breeding and lifestyle (Judg 11:1 – 3) and his foolish vow (11:30 – 31, 34 – 40).
    - Samson violating all the tenets of his samsonite vow and his sexual addiction.
  - ⌚ God is the hero of the book.

### The Case for Kingship

- General downward spiral indicates that something other than another “judge” is needed.
- Repeated editorial comments: “In those days there was no king in Israel (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) with the additional note that “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6; 21:25).
- Perspectives on would-be kings in Judges:
  - ⌚ Gideon rejects kingship because they offered it for the wrong reasons, treating him rather than God as the delivering hero (8:22f.).
  - ⌚ Abimelech’s abortive attempt at kingship is ridiculed and turns into a bloodbath (Judg 9).

### Judges and the New Testament

- “Strange heroes they are—a reluctant farmer, a prophetess, a left-handed assassin, a bastard bandit, a sex-addicted Nazirite, and others” (Dillard & Longman, 127).
- We too should remember, “That is what some of you were” (2 Cor 6:11) and thank God that we are “washed, sanctified, and justified” by God’s grace.
- We all serve with “mixtures of ignorance, frail obedience, and tangled motives”; and by God’s grace, we may “conquer kingdoms, administer justice, and gain what was promised” (Heb 11:32 – 33).