



Summary of the Book of Judges

This summary of the book of Judges provides information about the title, author(s), date of writing, chronology, theme, theology, outline, a brief overview, and the chapters of the Book of Judges.

Title

The title refers to the leaders Israel had from the time of the elders who outlived Joshua until the time of the monarchy. Their principal purpose is best expressed in [2:16](#): "Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of . . . raiders." Since it was God who permitted the oppressions and raised up deliverers, he himself was Israel's ultimate Judge and Deliverer ([11:27](#); see [8:23](#), where Gideon, a judge, insists that the Lord is Israel's true ruler).

Author and Date

Although tradition ascribes the book to Samuel, the author is actually unknown. It is possible that Samuel assembled some of the accounts from the period of the judges and that such prophets as Nathan and Gad, both of whom were associated with David's court, had a hand in shaping and editing the material (see [1Ch 29:29](#)).

The date of composition is also unknown, but it was undoubtedly during the monarchy. The frequent expression "In those days Israel had no king" ([17:6](#); [18:1](#); [19:1](#); [21:25](#)) suggests a date after the establishment of the monarchy. The observation that the Jebusites still controlled Jerusalem ([1:21](#)) has been taken to indicate a time before David's capture of the city c. 1000 b.c. (see [2Sa 5:6-10](#)). But the new conditions in Israel alluded to in chs. 17-21 suggest a time after the Davidic dynasty had been effectively established (tenth century b.c.).

Themes and Theology

The book of Judges depicts the life of Israel in the promised land from the death of Joshua to the rise of the monarchy. On the one hand, it is an account of frequent apostasy, provoking divine chastening. On the other hand, it tells of urgent appeals to God in times of crisis, moving the Lord to raise up leaders (judges) through whom he throws off foreign oppressors and restores the land to peace.

With Israel's conquest of the promised land through the leadership of Joshua, many of the covenant promises God had made to their ancestors were fulfilled (see [Jos 21:43-45](#)). The Lord's land, where Israel was to enter into rest, lay under their feet; it remained only for them to occupy it, to displace the Canaanites and to cleanse it of paganism. The time had come for Israel to be the kingdom of God in the form of an established commonwealth on earth.

But in Canaan Israel quickly forgot the acts of God that had given them birth and had established them in the land. Consequently they lost sight of their unique identity as God's people, chosen and called to be his army and the loyal citizens of his emerging kingdom. They settled down and attached themselves to Canaan's peoples together with Canaanite morals, gods, and religious beliefs and practices as readily as to Canaan's agriculture and social life.

Throughout Judges the fundamental issue is the lordship of God in Israel, especially Israel's acknowledgment of and loyalty to his rule. His kingship over Israel had been uniquely established by the covenant at Sinai ([Ex 19-24](#)), which was later renewed by Moses on the plains of Moab ([Dt 29](#)) and by Joshua at Shechem ([Jos 24](#)). The author accuses Israel of having rejected the kingship of the Lord again and again. They stopped fighting the Lord's battles, turned to the gods of Canaan to secure the blessings

of family, flocks and fields, and abandoned God's laws for daily living. In the very center of the cycle of the judges (see Outline), Gideon had to remind Israel that the Lord was their King (see note on [8:23](#)). The recurring lament, and indictment, of chs. [17 - 21](#) (see Outline) is: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (see note on [17:6](#)). The primary reference here is doubtless to the earthly mediators of the Lord's rule (i.e., human kings), but the implicit charge is that Israel did not truly acknowledge or obey her heavenly King either.

Only by the Lord's sovereign use of foreign oppression to chasten his people -- thereby implementing the covenant curses (see [Lev 26:14-45](#); [Dt 28:15-68](#)) -- and by his raising up deliverers when his people cried out to him did he maintain his kingship in Israel and preserve his embryonic kingdom from extinction. Israel's flawed condition was graphically exposed; they continued to need new saving acts by God in order to enter into the promised rest (see note on [Jos 1:13](#)).

Out of the recurring cycles of disobedience, foreign oppression, cries of distress, and deliverance (see [2:11-19](#); [Ne 9:26-31](#)) emerges another important theme -- the covenant faithfulness of the Lord. The amazing patience and long-suffering of God are no better demonstrated than during this unsettled period.

Remarkably, this age of Israel's failure, following directly on the redemptive events that came through Moses and Joshua, is in a special way the OT age of the Spirit. God's Spirit enabled people to accomplish feats of victory in the Lord's war against the powers that threatened his kingdom (see [3:10](#); [6:34](#); [11:29](#); [13:25](#); [14:6,19](#); [15:14](#); see also [1Sa 10:6,10](#); [11:6](#); [16:13](#)). This same Spirit, poured out on the church following the redemptive work of the second Joshua (Jesus), empowered the people of the Lord to begin the task of preaching the gospel to all nations and of advancing the kingdom of God (see notes on [Ac 1:2,8](#)).

Background

Fixing precise dates for the judges is difficult and complex. The dating system followed here is based primarily on [1Ki 6:1](#), which speaks of an interval of 480 years between the exodus and the fourth year of Solomon's reign. This would place the exodus c. 1446 b.c. and the period of the judges between c. 1380 and the rise of Saul, c. 1050.

Jephthah's statement that Israel had occupied Heshbon for 300 years ([11:26](#)) generally agrees with these dates. And the reference to "Israel" in the Merneptah Stele demonstrates that Israel was established in Canaan before 1210 b.c..

Some maintain, however, that the number 480 in [1Ki 6:1](#) is somewhat artificial, arrived at by multiplying 12 (perhaps in reference to the 12 judges) by 40 (a conventional number of years for a generation). They point out the frequent use of the round numbers 10, 20, 40 and 80 in the book of Judges itself. A later date for the exodus

would of course require a much shorter period of time for the judges (see Introduction to Exodus: Chronology; see also note on [1Ki 6:1](#)).

Literary Features

Even a quick reading of Judges discloses its basic threefold division: (1) a prologue ([1:1](#) -- [3:6](#)), (2) a main body ([3:7](#) -- [16:31](#)) and (3) an epilogue (chs. [17-21](#)). Closer study brings to light a more complex structure, with interwoven themes that bind the whole into an intricately designed portrayal of the character of an age.

The prologue ([1:1](#) -- [3:6](#)) has two parts, and each serves a different purpose. They are not chronologically related, nor does either offer a strict chronological scheme of the time as a whole. The first part ([1:1](#) -- [2:5](#)) sets the stage historically for the narratives that follow. It describes Israel's occupation of the promised land -- from their initial success to their large-scale failure and divine rebuke.

The second part ([2:6](#) -- [3:6](#)) indicates a basic perspective on the period from the time of Joshua to the rise of the monarchy, a time characterized by recurring cycles of apostasy, oppression, cries of distress and gracious divine deliverance. The author summarizes and explains the Lord's dealings with his rebellious people and introduces some of the basic vocabulary and formulas he will use in the later narratives: "did evil in the eyes of the Lord," [2:11](#) (see [3:7,12](#); [4:1](#); [6:1](#); [10:6](#)); "handed them over to," [2:14](#) (see [6:1](#); [13:1](#)); and "sold them," [2:14](#) (see [3:8](#); [4:2](#); [10:7](#)).

The main body of the book ([3:7](#) -- [16:31](#)), which gives the actual accounts of the recurring cycles (apostasy, oppression, distress, deliverance), has its own unique design. Each cycle has a similar beginning ("the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord"; see note on [3:7](#)) and a recognizable conclusion ("the land had peace . . . years" or "led Israel . . . years"; see note on [3:11](#)). The first of these cycles (Othniel; see [3:7-11](#) and note) provides the "report form" used for each successive story of oppression and deliverance.

The remaining five cycles form the following narrative units, each of which focuses on one of the major judges:

1. Ehud ([3:12-30](#)), a lone hero from the tribe of Benjamin who delivers Israel from oppression from the east.
2. Deborah (chs. [4 - 5](#)), a woman from one of the Joseph tribes (Ephraim, west of the Jordan) who judges at a time when Israel is being overrun by a coalition of Canaanites under Sisera.
3. Gideon and his son Abimelech (chs. [6 - 9](#)), whose story forms the central account. In many ways Gideon is the ideal judge, evoking memory of

Moses, while his son is the very antithesis of a responsible and faithful judge.

4. Jephthah (10:6 -- 12:7), a social outcast from the other Joseph tribe (Manasseh, east of the Jordan) who judges at a time when Israel is being threatened by a coalition of powers under the king of Ammon.
5. Samson (chs. 13 - 16), a lone hero from the tribe of Dan who delivers Israel from oppression from the west.

The arrangement of these narrative units is significant. The central accounts of Gideon (the Lord's ideal judge) and Abimelech (the anti-judge) are bracketed by the parallel narratives of the woman Deborah and the social outcast Jephthah -- which in turn are framed by the stories of the lone heroes Ehud and Samson. In this way even the structure focuses attention on the crucial issue of the period of the judges: Israel's attraction to the Baals of Canaan (shown by Abimelech; see note on 9:1-57) versus the Lord's kingship over his people (encouraged by Gideon; see note on 8:23).

The epilogue (chs. 17 - 21) characterizes the era in yet another way, depicting religious and moral corruption on the part of individuals, cities and tribes. Like the introduction, it has two divisions that are neither chronologically related nor expressly dated to the careers of specific judges. The events must have taken place, however, rather early in the period of the judges (see notes on 18:30; 20:1,28).

By dating the events of the epilogue only in relationship to the monarchy (see the recurring refrain in 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), the author contrasts the age of the judges with the better time that the monarchy inaugurated, undoubtedly having in view the rule of David and his dynasty (see note on 17:1 -- 21:25). The book mentions two instances of the Lord's assigning leadership to the tribe of Judah: (1) in driving out the Canaanites (1:1-2), and (2) in disciplining a tribe in Israel (20:18). The author views the ruler from the tribe of Judah as the savior of the nation.

The first division of the epilogue (chs. 17 - 18) relates the story of Micah's development of a paganized place of worship and tells of the tribe of Dan abandoning their allotted territory while adopting Micah's corrupted religion. The second division (chs. 19 - 21) tells the story of a Levite's sad experience at Gibeah in Benjamin and records the disciplinary removal of the tribe of Benjamin because it had defended the degenerate town of Gibeah.

The two divisions have several interesting parallels:

1. Both involve a Levite's passing between Bethlehem (in Judah) and Ephraim across the Benjamin-Dan corridor.
2. Both mention 600 warriors -- those who led the tribe of Dan and those who survived from the tribe of Benjamin.

3. Both conclude with the emptying of a tribal area in that corridor (Dan and Benjamin).

Not only are these Benjamin-Dan parallels significant within the epilogue, but they also form a notable link to the main body of the book. The tribe of Benjamin, which in the epilogue undertook to defend gross immorality, setting ties of blood above loyalty to the Lord, was the tribe from which the Lord raised up the deliverer Ehud (3:15). The tribe of Dan, which in the epilogue retreated from its assigned inheritance and adopted pagan religious practices, was the tribe from which the Lord raised up the deliverer Samson (13:2,5). Thus the tribes that in the epilogue depict the religious and moral corruption of Israel are the very tribes from which the deliverers were chosen whose stories frame the central account of the book (Gideon-Abimelech).

The whole design of the book from prologue to epilogue, the unique manner in which each section deals with the age as a whole, and the way the three major divisions are interrelated clearly portray an age gone awry -- an age when "Israel had no king" and "everyone did as he saw fit" (17:6). Of no small significance is the fact that the story is in episodes and cycles. It is given as the story of all Israel, though usually only certain areas are directly involved. The book portrays the centuries after Joshua as a time of Israelite unfaithfulness to the Lord and of their surrender to the allurements of Canaan. Only by the mercies of God was Israel not overwhelmed and absorbed by the pagan nations around them. Meanwhile, however, the history of redemption virtually stood still -- awaiting the forward movement that came with the Lord's servant David and the establishment of his dynasty.

Outline

Prologue: Incomplete Conquest and Apostasy (1:1;3:6)

First Episode: Israel's Failure to Purge the Land (1:1;2:5)

Second Episode: God's Dealings with Israel's Rebellion (2:6;3:6)

Oppression and Deliverance (3:7;16:31)

Major Judges

- A. Othniel Defeats Aram Naharaim (3:7-11)
- B. Ehud Defeats Moab (3:12-30)
- C. Deborah Defeats Canaan (chs. 4-5)
- D. Gideon Defeats Midian (chs. 6-8)

(Abimelech, the anti-judge, ch. 9)

Minor Judges

1. Shamgar (3:31)
2. Tola (10:1-2)

E. Jephthah Defeats Ammon (10:6;12:7)

3 .Jair (10:3-5)

4 .Ibzan (12:8-10)

5. Elon (12:11-12)

6. Abdon (12:13-15)

F. Samson Checks Philistia (chs. 13-16)

Epilogue: Religious and Moral Disorder (chs. 17-21)

First Episode (chs. 17-18 17:6;18:1)

Micah's corruption of religion (ch. 17)

The Danites' departure from their tribal territory (ch. 18)

Second Episode (chs. 19-21 19:1;21:25)

Gibeah's corruption of morals (ch. 19)

The Benjamites' near removal from their tribal territory (chs. 20-21)

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If your Church doesn't have a ministry-program, on the Doctrine on the Fruit of the Spirit, as found in the Bible, would you please reach out to us, and Let's team up and let's Win Souls for Christ !

My His blessings be upon you and yours today and always in Jesus' Mighty Name!

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