

# Judges

In those days there was no king in Israel;  
everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25)

When the evaluative judgment “it cannot get any worse than this” is rendered, one of two courses generally follows: either the thing being evaluated comes to an end or things change for the better. The Book of Judges contains a scathing evaluation of the moral, ethical, and spiritual condition of the nation of Israel following Joshua’s conquest of the Promised Land until just before the establishment of the monarchy. On the basis of the book’s evaluation one is forced to concede that Israel was on a course of self-destruction, both spiritually and physically. Left to themselves the nation could not long endure, even with the Lord God as its head. As such, the author provides the necessary background for the introduction of Israel’s monarchy, pointing to the need for a human king and the type of a king needed.

## Authorship

As with all the Old Testament historical narratives, the author of the Book of Judges remains anonymous. While critical scholarship advocated some form of documentary hypothesis on the model of the Pentateuch’s supposed formation, recent study has adequately demonstrated the unity of Judges by giving attention to its literary structure and canonical functions.<sup>1</sup> The Deuteronomistic school holds that the whole corpus of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings was written in the seventh century by a single hand as a defense of the central sanctuary and the Israelite monarchy.<sup>2</sup> Talmudic tradition holds that Samuel is the author (*B. Bat. 14b*). There is the possibility of later editorial additions but these do not necessarily argue for late authorship. It is sufficient to observe that a human author, under divine superintendence, has produced a skillfully designed account of the essence of this period of Israel’s history.

## Date

It is evident from internal evidence that the author lived sometime after the beginning of the monarchy (cf. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The reference to Dan’s illegitimate priesthood extending “until the day of the captivity of the land” (18:30) has been taken as indicating a post-

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the authorship and composition of Judges see Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 120-23.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise evaluation see David M. Howard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 77-78.

exilic date of composition. However, there are other ways to understand this vague statement, including reference to the Assyrian invasion of the northern region (that is, to Dan's area) in 733 B.C. or to a Philistine incursion during the time of Samuel or Saul.<sup>3</sup> Dillard and Longman feel that the last closing chapters of the book are written with a distinctive political viewpoint respecting the schism between Israel and Judah following the division of the monarchy at Solomon's death. This would make it relatively early in the monarchy though they feel that it could be as late as the sixth century B.C.<sup>4</sup> If Judges was written with a view to throwing light on the desirability of a monarchical form of government, then it is best to assume that it would have been available to those who were experiencing the rule of Yahweh's kings fairly early on. The fact that Judges may have something to say to the political and religious defection of the northern kingdom, does not argue for a divided-monarchy dating for its composition any more than does reference to blessing and cursing in later writings warrant a late dating of the Book of Deuteronomy. Divine involvement in the authorship of Scripture means that Israel's course may be supernaturally anticipated and thus preemptively prepared for. The last events recorded in the book take place ca. 1050 B.C. The reference to the Jebusites living in Jerusalem "to this day" may be taken to mean that some portion of the book at least was composed prior to David's taking of their city, ca. 1000 B.C. A date of composition near the very end of the eleventh century, ca. 1010 B.C., is not unreasonable.

### Historical Setting

The events of Judges cover the period from about the time of Joshua's death until just before the rise of Samuel and the beginning of the monarchy, that is from 1366 B.C. until ca. 1050 B.C. Hence, it covers a period of some 300-350 years.<sup>5</sup> Culturally, it covers the transition between the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550-1200 B.C.) and the early Iron Age (ca. 1200-1000 B.C.). In Canaan this was a time during which there was a radical drop in the population of major centers and an increase in "one-period sites in outlying areas—in the hill country and desert fringe areas."<sup>6</sup> Two technological advances of the period were the development of iron tools and weapons and of plastered cisterns for water storage. The Philistines appear as a major group

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Dillard and Longman, *Introduction*, 120-21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>5</sup> This dating assumes the early date of the Exodus, that is, ca. 1446 B.C.

<sup>6</sup> Howard, *Introduction*, 104.

along the Mediterranean coast of Canaan. Politically it is important to note that Judges does not mention a problem with the larger nations oppressing Israel.<sup>7</sup> It was the smaller nation states immediately surrounding Israel that God used for specific disciplinary situations, particularly the Philistines. The Lord had providentially prepared the international scene for the secure introduction of His people into the Promised Land. Religiously, there was an elaborate and developed system revolving around fertility rites, sensuality, and materialism. There is much evidence of the effect of this system on Israelite religion.<sup>8</sup>

### **Original Readers / Occasion**

On the basis of the repeated statement “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” it is apparent that some sort of apologetic or explanation for the monarchy is at work. Whether Judges was intended to temper dissatisfaction with the monarchy or simply to underscore just how bad things would get without a strong central leader, it must have been intended for those living under monarchy as a means of encouragement as to the need for the ultimate king—Messiah. God’s presence needed to be more immediate than could be experienced through the mediation of Torah by a priesthood, as was the situation during the time of the judges.

### **Special Issues**

Chronological Issues. On the basis of internal notices, mostly concerning Joshua and Caleb, Merrill concludes that “a reasonable date for the transition between Joshua and the judges” is 1360-1350 B.C.<sup>9</sup> On the basis of the three hundred year period mentioned in Judges 11:26 coupled with the forty year Philistine oppression, Samson’s judgeship would have ended ca. 1084 B.C.<sup>10</sup> Even taking the early date for the Exodus (1446 B.C.) there must be some overlapping of various judgeships. Merely totaling the figures for the judgeships and adding in the periods of rest yields 407 years. However, working backwards from 966 B.C., the date when

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<sup>7</sup> Merrill comments: “The maelstrom of international politics and military campaigns seems to have bypassed Israel completely. It is as though the history of Israel had turned into a cul-de-sac totally removed from the turbulent course of world events” (Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987, 1996), 151. For a fairly extensive discussion of the various nations mentioned in Judges see Leon J. Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House), 71-116.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Howard, *Introduction*, 106-7.

<sup>9</sup> Merrill, *Kingdom*, 148.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

Solomon began to build the temple, there are only 311 years available in which to fit Judges. Given the regional nature of the various oppressions and the way in which they are built into the narrative structure this is not at all unlikely and it allows the numbers to be taken as they stand. However, if the late date for the Exodus is taken (ca. 1275-1250) there is only about 235 years for the events of Judges.<sup>11</sup> Though an exact chronological sequencing is not possible, if all the numbers referenced are taken as they stand in the record good historical sense results.

Israel's Organization. When Israel was redeemed out of Egypt they came out as one people. They were solidified in identity and experience, not to mention their formation as a covenant nation, renewed under Moses at Moab and under Joshua at Shechem. Torah envisioned them functioning as one nation. However, Judges reveals a largely loose association of tribes, bound not so much by principle and outlook as by their occasional common enemies. Even if the scholarly idea of Israel being organized on the analogy of the Greek "amphictyony" is completely dismissed (as it should be), Israel's lack of organizational unity during this period must be addressed. Deuteronomy envisions a people bound together by a central place of worship and overseen by the priesthood as supported by the Levites who were scattered throughout the land. What Judges depicts is a rather disorganized, often factious group of related tribes, who may or may not cooperate with each other. This can be evaluated in two different ways. It can be viewed as a complete failure of the theocratic nation as envisioned by the Lord or it can be seen as a transitional period "showing Israel between its status as a landless people entering a new land . . . and its status as an established political entity, with national boundaries and a king . . . ."<sup>12</sup> The truth may be a combination of the two. Israel had been appointed to live as a united nation under Yahweh's kingship as mediated by the priesthood, though they failed to appreciate the fact and live that way. Therefore the period of judges became a transition to monarchy, which would be found to be fraught with its own set of problems.<sup>13</sup>

The Office of the "Judge." The English term "judge" suggests a prime activity of making legal decisions. While this does appear to describe an aspect of what at least some of the judges did, it is not the primary connotation. The text itself defines the function of the judge when it

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>12</sup> Howard, *Introduction*, 109.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the lack of a central organization see Alan J. Hauser, "Unity and Diversity in Early Israel Before Samuel," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (December, 1979): 289-303.

says “Then the Lord raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them” (2:16). Though they are called “judges” by the author (2:18) the noun is never used as a title for individuals. This suggests that the position was not an “office” but rather a function or responsibility to which individuals were appointed by the Lord as the need arose.<sup>14</sup> Any perpetuation of that role within a family was resisted. It was Yahweh alone who was to be reckoned as the true leader of the nation. Hence the judges derived their mandate and sphere of service directly from Him and only for as long as He determined. The classification into “major” and “minor” judges is only based on the amount of ink spent on them, not on a discernable distinction of function.

The Angel of the Lord. About one-third of the occurrences of the term “angel of Yahweh” in the Old Testament are found in Judges (18 of 59 occurrences).<sup>15</sup> When he makes an appearance the response is often as though Yahweh Himself had been encountered (cf. 6:22-23; 13:21). His association with Yahweh is so remarkable that it is difficult to escape making some sort of personal identification between the two. The angel’s identification as the pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ is extremely probable if not certain. Exodus 23:20-23 is a key text in regard to the way the angel uniquely represents God. His importance in the interpretation of Judges lays in the way he represents Yahweh in a visible, human-like, form. The Lord had promised to be present with His people as they took up their inheritance of the Promised Land.<sup>16</sup> Hence, he represents Yahweh’s presence on earth with His people, as a reminder of His commitment to lead and protect them as well as to discipline them as His own children (cf. Deut 8:5).

### **Theme Statement**

In failing to recognize and respond to Yahweh’s leadership, Israel comes under discipline for their ungodly ways, and yet continually experience the Lord’s gracious deliverance from their enemies when they cry out to Him; the ever worsening reoccurrence of this pattern anticipates a change in the way Yahweh will govern His people.

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<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, 295-303 and John Bright, *A History of Israel* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 171-74.

<sup>15</sup> They are 2:1,4; 5:23; 6:11, 12, 20, 21, 22, 22; 13:3, 13, 15, 16, 16, 18, 20, 21, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Exodus 23:20-33; 33:2, 9, 14.

## Outline

- I. Prologue: After Joshua, Israel fell into a pattern of unbelief and rebelled against Yahweh to serve other gods.....1:1–3:6
  - A. Israel’s conquest of the land was incomplete, resulting in a perpetual handicap and snare.....1:1–2:6
    - 1. Judah had proved Yahweh’s presence for victory but had never fully availed themselves of it.....1:1-21
    - 2. Joseph’s tribe experienced Yahweh’s victory on their behalf. ....1:22-26
    - 3. All the rest of the tribes failed to drive the inhabitants from their land. ....1:27-36
    - 4. The Angel of Yahweh had said this would happen.....2:1-6
  - B. Israel’s devotion was not consistent, resulting in a downward spiral of corruption and suffering. ....2:7–3:6
    - 1. The second generation in the land did not know Yahweh. ....2:7-10
    - 2. Israel forsook Yahweh and served the gods of the land. ....2:11–3:6
      - a. Israel forsook Yahweh evoking His anger. ....2:11-13
      - b. Israel was handed over by Yahweh to their enemies.....2:14-15
      - c. Israel was delivered by Yahweh’s judges. ....2:16-19
      - d. Israel was tested by Yahweh who refused to drive out their enemies.....2:20–3:6
- II. Development: Time and again Yahweh delivered Israel from their enemies only to be forsaken by them with increasing seriousness.....3:7–16:31
  - A. Othniel delivers Israel from Cushan-Rishathaim of Mesopotamia. ....3:7-11
    - 1. Israel did evil and served the Baals and Asherahs. ....3:7
    - 2. Yahweh sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim. ....3:8
    - 3. Israel cried out to Yahweh who raised up Othniel to deliver. ....3:9
    - 4. Othniel is empowered by the Spirit to judge Israel.....3:10
    - 5. The land had rest for forty years.....3:11
  - B. Ehud delivers Israel from Eglon of Moab.....3:12-30
    - 1. Israel did evil and were given into Eglon’s hand.....3:12-14
    - 2. Israel cried out to Yahweh who raised up the left-handed Ehud. ....3:15
    - 3. Ehud delivers Israel from Moab. ....3:16-29
    - 4. The land had rest for eighty years.....3:30
  - C. Shamgar delivers Israel from Philistines.....3:31
  - D. Deborah & Barak deliver Israel from Jabin of Hazor.....4:1–5:31b
    - 1. Israel did evil and were given into the hand of Jabin and Sisera. ....4:1-2
    - 2. Israel cried out to Yahweh for deliverance from Jabin. ....4:3
    - 3. Barak delivers Israel by Deborah and Jael. ....4:4-24
    - 4. Deborah sings praise to Yahweh for His deliverance.....5:1-31a
    - 5. The land had rest for forty years.....5:31b
  - E. Gideon delivers Israel from Midian.....6:1–8:28
    - 1. Israel did evil and were given into the hand of Midian.....6:1-6
      - a. Israel was driven into hiding places by Midian. ....6:1-2
      - b. Israel was impoverished by Midian. ....6:3-6

2. Israel cried out to Yahweh who sent them a prophet.....6:7-10
3. The Angel of Yahweh appears to Gideon for encouragement.....6:11-24
4. Gideon replaces an altar to Baal with the altar of Yahweh. ....6:25-32
5. Gideon gathers an army by the Spirit of Yahweh.....6:33-35
6. Gideon, in doubt, requests confirmation via a sign by the fleece. ....6:36-40
7. Gideon, by faith, subdues the Midianites with three hundred. ....7:1-8:21
8. Gideon refuses to be made king over Israel but errors in the matter of the ephod.....8:22-27
9. The land had rest for forty years.....8:28
- F. Abimelech conspires to become king over Israel. ....8:29-9:57
  1. Israel lapses into idolatry after the death of Gideon. ....8:29-35
  2. Abimelech kills his brothers to become king.....9:1-7
  3. Abimelech and the men of Shechem are rebuked for their evil. ....9:8-21
  4. Abimelech and the men of Shechem are destroyed by God.....9:22-57
- G. Tola judges Israel for twenty-three years. ....10:1-2
- H. Jair judges Israel for twenty-two years.....10:3-5
- I. Jephthah delivers Israel from the Ammonites. ....10:6-12:7
  1. Israel did evil and were given into the hands of the Philistines and of the people of Ammon. ....10:6-9
  2. Israel cried out to Yahweh for deliverance from Ammon. ....10:10-16
  3. Yahweh delivers Israel from the Ammonites. ....10:17-11:40
    - a. Gilead makes Jephthah their head and commander.....10:17-11:11
    - b. Jephthah defeats Ammon. ....11:12-40
      - 1) He defends Yahweh's dispossession of Ammon.....11:12-28
      - 2) He defeats Ammon by the Spirit of God and with a vow of offering. ....11:29-33
      - 3) He fulfills the vow of offering with his daughter.....11:34-40
  4. Jephthah leads Gilead in a slaughter of Ephraim. ....12:1-7
- J. Ibzan of Bethlehem judges Israel for seven years. ....12:8-10
- K. Elon the Zebulunite judges Israel for ten years.....12:11-12
- L. Abdon the Pirathonite judges Israel for eight years.....12:13-15
- M. Samson contends with the Philistines and judges Israel for twenty years.....13:1-16:31
  1. Israel did evil and were given into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. ....13:1
  2. The Angel of Yahweh heralds the birth of Samson. ....13:2-24
  3. Samson afflicts the Philistines by the Spirit of Yahweh. ....13:25-15:20
    - a. Yahweh creates an occasion against the Philistines via Samson's marriage to a Philistine woman in Timnah.....13:25-14:20
    - b. Samson avenges the loss of his wife. ....15:1-8
    - c. Samson defeats the Philistines at Lehi. ....15:9-20
  4. Samson is afflicted by the Philistines apart from Yahweh's presence. ....16:1-31
    - a. Samson is deceived by the harlot of Gaza, and loses his strength and freedom as well as God' presence.....16:1-22
    - b. Samson avenges himself, though dying in the process. ....16:23-31

- III. Epilogue: In the absence of a king, Israel had fallen into debased idolatry and destructive infighting. ....17:1–21:25
- A. As illustrated by Dan, Israel had become prone to establishing its own religion rather than following Yahweh through His Torah. ....17:1–18:31
1. Micah of Ephraim creates his own gods and priesthood. ....17:1-13
  2. The tribe of Dan adopts Micah’s idolatry and resettles in Laish.....18:1-31
- B. As illustrated by Gibeah, Israel’s future as a nation was threatened through retributive civil war. ....19:1–21:25
1. Gibeah manifests debased sensuality against a Levite.....19:1-30
  2. Israel unites in battle against Benjamin, threatening the very existence of the tribe. ....20:1–21:24
    - a. United Israel suffers defeat before overcoming Benjamin.....20:1-48
    - b. All Israel undertakes to provide for Benjamin’s continuance as a tribe. ....21:1-24
- C. Summary statement: In the absence of a king everyone did as they personally saw fit.....21:25

### Theme Statement

In failing to recognize and respond to Yahweh’s leadership, Israel comes under discipline for their ungodly ways, and yet continually experience the Lord’s gracious deliverance from their enemies when they cry out to Him; the ever worsening reoccurrence of this pattern anticipates a change in the way Yahweh will govern His people.

### Theme Development

I. Prologue: After Joshua, Israel fell into a pattern of unbelief and rebelled against Yahweh to serve other gods (1:1–3:6).

Whereas the Book of Joshua had emphasized Israel’s obedience and the resulting possession of the land of promise, Judges highlights the people’s disobedience and resulting experiences of discipline. Hence, the first two books following Deuteronomy develop the themes of blessing and cursing associated with covenant performance (Deut 28). By giving an interpretive summary of Joshua as the prologue to Judges, the author shows that the seeds of failure had actually been present even under Joshua’s leadership. Not all in Joshua had been perfect. Not everything in Judges was evil.

A. Israel’s conquest of the land was incomplete, resulting in a perpetual handicap and snare (1:1–2:6).

The two death notices for Joshua (1:1 and 2:7-9) are not to be taken as marks of two hands of authorship representing opposing traditions. Rather, this section is a skillfully crafted “literary bridge connecting the end of the account of Joshua with the introduction to the



narratives of the judges.”<sup>17</sup> Apostasy did not begin immediately upon the death of Joshua, as Judges 2:7 clearly states. Judah experiences Yahweh’s help in defeating various Canaanite enclaves, and yet was still unable to effect a complete victory (1:1-21). While the house of Joseph is successful (1:22-25) the rest of the tribes experience various degrees of failure in the task of conquest (1:27-36). The account of the Angel of Yahweh’s appearance at Bochim (lit. “weeping”) is apparently a flashback to the time of Joshua with the purpose of encouraging Israel regarding their difficulties in the conquest. The reasons for their failure lay in disobedience to Yahweh’s commands to not make covenants with the inhabitants of the land but, instead, to break down their altars. Yahweh’s unique presence in the person of the Angel of Yahweh looks forward to the need for His presence on earth in order to effect the fullness of blessing for the covenant people. This motif will be developed through the institution of the monarchy with respect to the Son of David. The continuance of the Canaanites, with their gods, in the land would be a snare to Israel, a condition which the whole book of Judges displays in a most shocking way.

B. Israel’s devotion was not consistent, resulting in a downward spiral of corruption and suffering (2:7–3:6).

The second notice of the death of Joshua serves to bring the narrative into the period of the Judges per se. Israel had continued to prevail as long as elders who had been associated with Joshua remained alive (2:7). However, the next generation did not have the same experience of Yahweh’s sovereign, holy presence (2:10). The result was a cycle of covenant violation (“evil”), the promised discipline of Yahweh in turning them over to the affliction of their enemies (cf. Deut 28:25), Israel’s appeal to the Lord for deliverance, and His response in sending a “Judge” (2:11-18). This cycle was repeated over and over, with each turn becoming progressively more serious (2:19). Israel’s violation of her covenant relationship with Yahweh prohibited Him from completely driving out the nations left after Joshua’s time; they would remain as a test of each generation’s obedience and devotion (2:20-23). Those nations are listed, along with the notice that there was intermarriage with them and the serving of their gods (3:1-6).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Merrill, *Kingdom*, 142. For an analysis of this whole section see *ibid.*, 141-46.

<sup>18</sup> That this section (2:7–3:6) should be taken as part of the prologue instead as the introduction to the main body is adequately demonstrated by the structural analysis of David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 118-20.

II. Body: Time and again Yahweh delivered Israel from her enemies only to be forsaken by them with increasing seriousness (3:7–16:31).

The narration of the activities of the various judges begins with the service of Othniel, which is patterned according to formulation given in the prologue, that is, that (1) “the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord” (2) the Lord in His anger delivers them into the hand of an oppressor (3) “the children of Israel cried out to the Lord” (4) the Spirit of the Lord came upon a deliverer who secured Israel’s release and security and (5) the land had rest for some number of years. This is the pattern. However, it is never slavishly followed and sometimes hardly at all. What can be said is that the narrative alternates between the judges who receive more attention and those who receive less. There is also alternation with respect to use of the introductory formula “. . . the children of Israel did evil . . .” With the exception of Abimelech, this phrase always occurs with those judges given relatively more attention. There are other variations, especially with respect to Yahweh’s response to Israel’s cry for help.<sup>19</sup>

Othniel sets the standard pattern (3:7-11) and Ehud adds the motif that each judge will act in a manner uniquely appropriate to the situation (3:12-30). Shamgar, whose deliverance of Israel is very concisely summarized, completes the first 2-1 series (3:31). It should be observed that none of the first three judges are guilty of anything contrary to Torah or of anything disrespectful to Yahweh.

The next series of judges occupies considerably more space than the first three. The services of deliverance are more involved and there are more complicating (and negative) circumstances introduced, both with respect to the Canaanite threat and to the characteristics and actions of the judges themselves. Deborah is evaluated in a very positive manner, having already entered into some sort of leadership role (4:4-5). At the Lord’s instigation she informs Barak of his calling, assuring him of Yahweh’s presence, only to have him cajole her assistance (4:6-10). Barak performs admirably, though apparently not with the confidence of his predecessors. The reader detects a slight movement downward in the quality of Israel’s *ad hoc* leadership, though overall his evaluation is positive (4:23-24). Deborah’s song praises those who came and fought for Yahweh while raising questions about the reasons for some who stayed

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<sup>19</sup> The variation with respect to the “evil” statement falls into a 2-1-2-1-2-1-3-1 pattern. This follows the pattern variation with respect to those judges covered in more detail and those just mentioned, with the exception of Abimelech who is a special case in almost every regard. This pattern reinforces the cyclical structure with the downward spiral feature.

away (5:1-31). As with Barak, there is no suggestion of rebellion, merely the hint of faintheartedness or perhaps apathy.

Gideon is the next judge on the scene and garners the greatest portion of the narrative to this point, being both positively and negatively evaluated. Every part of the pattern is expanded. The Midianite oppression of the land and people is given in some detail (6:2-6). The Lord's response to Israel's cry receives a new feature in that He sends a prophet to remind them that He Himself had been their deliverer, which meant they were not to fear the gods of the Amorites, something that they had not obeyed (6:7-10). In addition the Angel of Yahweh appears to Gideon in order to assure him of the Lord's presence to deliver (6:11-12). Gideon's response betrays doubt and fear, but is never the less positive, as Yahweh draws His servant into worship (6:13-24). He is commanded to tear down his father's altar to Baal in order to build an altar to Yahweh and obeys, but not without some hesitation (6:25-32). Under the influence of the Spirit Gideon raises an army but is still fearful over his anticipated conflict with Midian, asking God to reconfirm His intentions via a test with a fleece (6:33-40). In a valiant act of faith Gideon responds to God's instructions to pare his army to three hundred soldiers, with whom he won a great victory (7:1-8:21). When asked to rule over Israel as a king he wisely refuses (8:22-23). However, he foolishly makes an ephod with the plunder of his victory, becoming on occasion for Israel entering into idolatry by worshipping the object (8:24-27). The lengthened postlude to Gideon's life and ministry (8:29-35) sets him apart from the others in the narrative strategy. Part of that strategy has to do with the next ruler, his son Abimelech, who makes himself a king. However it may also have to do with the overall structure of the book. A case has been made that Gideon is the pivot or turning point in the narrative with respect to the treatment of the main judges, that is Othniel, Ehud, Deborah-Barak, Gideon, Abimelech, Jephthah, and Samson.<sup>20</sup> It has already been observed that Gideon is the first judge with a truly mixed evaluation. From here on it is all down hill with each situation getting worse with respect to Israel's hope for a recovery of its sense of purpose and destiny as Yahweh's special people.

Abimelech aspires, and conspires, to be king not for the sake of Israel, which has once again lapsed into idolatry (cf. 8:33), but for his own honor (9:1-57). He ruthlessly kills all but one of his seventy brothers and has himself proclaimed king by the men of Shechem (9:1-6).

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<sup>20</sup> Dorsey makes a compelling case for the chiasmic parallels Othniel-Samson, Ehud-Jephthah, and Deborah/Barak-Abimelech with Gideon at the emphasized center as a turning point (*Literary Structure*, 113-16).

Neither he nor his “subjects” respond to Yahweh’s word of warning through Jotham, the escaped sibling, thus incurring the promised wrath of God (9:7-21). After only three years God causes the unholy alliance to sour with the result that they all die as punishment for their treachery (9: 22-57). There was no future in monarchy at this point in Israel’s history.

A slight change in the pattern occurs at this point as two judges, Tola and Jair, are briefly given their place in history (10:1-5), though not as tersely as Shamgar. Their length of “judging” is given (23 and 22 years respectively) suggesting that they had significant ministries and leading to the conclusion that the author has chosen which subjects to develop on the basis of his narrative strategy. An extended notice of Israel’s oppression is given, the longest thus far, carrying forward the idea that things are getting worse and worse (10:6-9). This time when they cry out to the Lord He only rebukes them for their apostasy and avows not to deliver them again (10:10-14). When Israel continues to plead for deliverance, putting away their foreign gods and serving Yahweh, “His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel” (10:15-16). The next leader will be selected in yet another manner.

Jephthah’s rise to power happens similarly to that of Abimelech in that it becomes a matter of tribal politics, rather than an overt act of divine selection, so that they end up making Jephthah “head and commander over them” (10:17–11:11). To his credit he defends Yahweh’s dispossession of the Amorites’ land so that Israel might possess it (11:12-28). In addition, unlike Abimelech, the Spirit of Yahweh came upon him for his conflict with Ammon (11:29). However, in the matter of the sacrifice of his daughter (11:29-40) and in his bloody conflict with Ephraim (12:1-7) he is to be negatively evaluated.<sup>21</sup>

Three more judges are mentioned before the extensive coverage of Samson. They are Ibzan (who judged seven years), Elon (ten years), and Abdon (eight years) (12:8-15). Two of them had extremely large families, which is not a criticism in itself, except that it flies in the face of the implications of Torah and thus stands as another indication of Israel’s increasing departure for Yahweh and His ways.

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<sup>21</sup> With respect to the sacrifice of his daughter it is tempting to put it in the best light and interpret the vow as having been fulfilled by means of a redeeming animal sacrifice and permanent dedication to the tabernacle. However, the circumstances of the time with respect to Israel’s adoption of Canaanite religion would perhaps argue better for her actual killing as a whole burnt offering. As abhorrent as this seems, it should be remembered that Jephthah has not shown any real evidence of a deep faith in the Lord and that later on in Israel’s history king Ahaz does actually “burn his children in the fire according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel” (2 Chr 28:3).

Finally, the judgeship of Samson is given extended coverage (13:1–16:31). In many ways it is different from the others. About the only things in common with the previously noted pattern are (1) the children of Israel being handed over to the Philistines for their evil–13:1 (2) mention of the Spirit of Yahweh coming upon the judge–13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14 and (3) the concluding statement that he judged Israel for twenty years–16:31. Samson’s birth is extraordinary in three respects. First, his mother had been barren all of her life. Second, it was announced by the Angel of Yahweh; and third, he was to be set aside from birth as a Nazirite (13:1-5). Samson actually performs his service through violating the prohibition against intermarrying with the inhabitants of the land, in this case the Philistines (14:1-4). However, even this was being incorporated into the Lord’s plans to move against Israel’s enemies (14:4). Samson never really judges Israel in the sense of raising and leading an army or of offering judicial and/or political leadership. Instead he takes occasion to wreck mayhem and death upon the Philistines in response to personal affronts and treachery. In Samson God is showing that He is capable of delivering, and will deliver His people by whatever means is available as a display of His sovereign grace and covenant commitment. This is not to say that Samson never acted in faith, for he did (cf. 16:28; Heb 11:32). It is, rather, to affirm that the sole reason for Israel’s preservation lay in Yahweh’s favor.

III. Epilogue: In the absence of a king, Israel had fallen into debased idolatry and destructive infighting (17:1–21:25).

The epilogue, which structurally mirrors the prologue, breaks with the general chronological scheme, in order to highlight two earlier episodes from the period that serve as a summary of the spiritual, moral, and political corruption of this phase of Israel’s history.<sup>22</sup> Each is punctuated with the editorial comment to the effect that there was no king in Israel with the result that everyone did as they pleased (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The narrator leaves no doubt as to Yahweh’s evaluation of this period.

A. As illustrated by Dan, Israel had become prone to establishing its own religion rather than following Yahweh through His Torah (17:1–18:31).

Whereas the Levites had been entrusted with the responsibility of preserving and promoting pure Yahwism in Israel, their only mention in Judges is negative. Micah, a man of Ephraim, makes idols and creates his own religion, recruiting a Levite to function as his priest,

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<sup>22</sup> For a demonstration of the ways in which the sections of the prologue and epilogue correspond according to a chiasmic structure see *ibid.*, 118-20.

supposing that this will guarantee Yahweh's blessing (17:1-13). When the Danites discover this situation they adopt Micah's idolatry, stealing the implements of his religion as well as his priest, who himself follows them for purely selfish reasons (18:1-26). The text makes it clear that this was in clear violation of the worship of Yahweh whose official place of residence was currently in Shiloh, the current location of the tabernacle (18:31).

B. As illustrated by Gibeah, Israel's future as a nation was threatened through retributive civil war (19:1-21:25).

The second episode likewise revolves around a Levite. In the sordid incident of the violation of his concubine to death and his subsequent carving up and sending her members to the tribes of Israel, things have sunken to a new low (19:1-30). The resulting civil war against Benjamin threatens the existence of the whole tribe, a foreboding of what would likely happen to all the tribes eventually if things did not change (20:1-48; cf. 21:3). Though the crisis of their extinction is averted by the action of the other tribes, it is not without its own improprieties (21:1-23). Not only was Israel's faith in danger of being lost (17:1-18:31) they were in danger of passing out of existence altogether if left to themselves much longer. The concluding statement could not be more appropriate: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (21:25).

## **Conclusion**

Though things had begun well when Israel entered the land under the leadership of Joshua, they had gone steadily downhill over the next four hundred years, until it looked as though Israel might self-destruct altogether. Yahweh had provided everything Israel would need to live successfully in the land as His special treasure, His kingdom of priests: they had Torah; they had the Tabernacle; they had the priesthood; they had Himself as their provider and protector. However, in the absence of the kind of leadership provided by Moses and Joshua, Israel did not live as they were intended to live. Kingship had been suggested (to Gideon) and attempted (by Abimelech) but not with Yahweh's approval. He was now ready to give them a king, which would be the next phase in Israel's experience of nationhood. Thus, Judges prepares Israel for the advent of a king.

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