



## The Book of Judges

There is a repeating pattern to all the stories of the Judges:

### **Ehud: 2<sup>nd</sup> Judge**

Israel disobeys God: 3:12 “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord”

Israel falls to enemies: Moabites led by Eglon

Israel cries out to God

Ehud is raised up and defeats Eglon by deceit (Ehud, being left handed, hides a dagger in his right leg, different to other soldiers who used left leg because all right handed).

Israel defeats Moabites

### **Deborah: 4<sup>th</sup> Judge**

Israel disobeys God: 4: 1 “again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, now that Ehud was dead”

Israel falls to enemies: Canaanites led by Jabin whose general was Sisera

Israel cries out to God

God raises up Deborah: who was already a prophetess/wise woman. Deborah lures the Canaanites into battle in a marshy place where they are picked off by the Israelites. Sisera seeks refuge in the Kenite settlement, taking refuge in the tent of Hebel, a Kenite. His wife Jael kills Sisera while he sleeps by driving a tent peg through his skull.

Israel defeats Canaanites.

### **Gideon: 5<sup>th</sup> Judge**

Israel disobeys God: 6:1a “he Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord”

Israel falls to enemies: 6:1b “and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites”

Israel cries out to God

God raises up Gideon: Gideon built an altar (in spite of Deuteronommic commands not to), was also called Jerubbaal meaning probably once a worshipper of Baal. Gideon asks for a sign – fleece – is given the sign and goes to battle with an army of only 100 men. They blow trumpets and smash jars. God causes the Midianites to panic and they are defeated.

Israel defeats Midianites with only a few men.

### **Samson: Final Judge**

Israel disobeys God: 13: 1a “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord,

Israel falls to enemies: 13: 1b “so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years”

Israel cries out to God

God raises up Samson: by brute strength Samson conquers. He is deceived by Delilah but is still able to defeat the Philistines after his hair grows back. Samson shown to be much weaker in character than the other judges, though many of them are not exactly Godly! Unlike other judges, Samson dies saving Israel.

Israel defeats Philistines.

# The Theology of the Book of Judges

The book of Judges is replete with terrible deeds that are carried out in the name of God by some very dubious characters. The Judges are not 'heroes' in the way we would use the term. Jephthah sacrifices his daughter, Samson is deceived by a prostitute – the list goes on. The stories have all the components of a lurid TV drama – we might be forgiven for thinking the writers of Eastenders have used Judges as an inspiration for their story lines! So where does all this fit into the story of a people who have a Covenant with a loving God?

The stories in the book of Judges are meant to be didactic – they are used to teach the people of Israel something about their relationship to God and the results of falling away from their covenant with Yahweh:

“ It is clear .. that these hero tales have been formulated for a didactic purpose, to reiterate the starchy warning of Joshua 23:16 that violation of Yahweh will risk the land”. (Birch et al, 2005, p206)

The issue of land is a major theme in the Old Testament and it is integrally tied up with the idea of Covenant. When the people disobey God they lose control of the land and it is given over to 'invaders' who oppress them. The stories in Judges are of an oppressed people, angry and bitter, standing up against their oppressor – meeting violence with violence. Sadly, we can see how this still continues today.

If these stories were written during the Exile, which is now believed by most scholars to be quite likely, then their message is clear: Israel has disobeyed God and fallen to her enemies (the Babylonians), if they cry out to God and return to the Covenant, God will deliver them and the land back into their hands.

The stories of Judges also serve to give a reason for the rise of the Monarchy because when there is “no king in Israel” Israelite society falls into 'evil' - away from God and into chaos. The Deuteronomistic historian repeats this phrase throughout the last chapters of the book. It is a wonderfully polysemic phrase (ie it has more than one meaning): there is no human king in Israel and there is no divine King acknowledged by Israel; God's chosen people have deserted Yahweh and everyone is just doing what they like, with no heed to the laws of the Covenant. It is ironic that the only time in the book of Judges that all the tribes act together is in order to destroy the Benjamites, one of their own, not an enemy. The moral and social bankruptcy of Israel at the end of the period of the Judges is explained by the Deuteronomist as being due to Israel's continued infidelity to Yahweh. Attempting to live in a 'theocracy' has failed the Israelites, not because of God but because of their own frailties in keeping the Covenant. The tenuous way forward seems to be a strong, centralized authority, namely a King – but, as we shall see, that is not an ideal solution either. (<http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/r1st-145>).

Dawn Glen, 2015

## Bibliography

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