

# The Book of Judges

The transition from Joshua to Judges resembles the transition from Deuteronomy to Joshua. In each case, a new generation arises. Because the generation that followed Moses in the wilderness was notoriously disobedient and unfaithful, they died in the wilderness. By their fidelity to God, the subsequent generation followed Joshua into the Promised Land and accomplished great things. But this ideal generation also passed away. The generation that arises after the death of Joshua “did not know the LORD or what he had done for Israel” (2:10). They did not see the wonders of God in the Exodus, wilderness, or conquest. Consequently, they worship the gods of the nations surrounding them. This lack of fidelity becomes the major problem of the Book of Judges. God and the people seek a political arrangement that will keep the Israelites faithful to God’s law.

A related problem that pervades the book is the issue of political succession. With the death of Joshua, as with the death of Moses, the Israelites are “like sheep without a shepherd” (Numbers 27:17). Now that Israel possesses the land promised to them through Abraham, they are expected to settle and live according to the Law of Moses. Consequently, neither Joshua nor God appoints a leader for the Israelites to succeed Joshua. The Book of Judges examines whether Israel can live without formal political structures but rely on the leadership of God instead. God continues to lead through the written law and the judges.

## The Judges Cycle

The beginning of Judges indicates the pattern of the narrative for the whole book. Judges 2:10–23 lays out this pattern (known as the Judges cycle). The cycle has seven elements:

1. The Israelites worship other gods.
2. God becomes angry and gives the Israelites over to the power of their enemies.
3. The Israelites cry out to God.
4. God raises up a judge to deliver the Israelites.
5. The judge frees the Israelites from their enemies.
6. The land has rest while the judge lives.
7. The judge dies, and the cycle begins again.

The fourth and central step in the cycle is God’s raising up a judge to deliver Israel. This raising up, often noted as “the spirit of the LORD” coming upon the judge (3:10, 11:29), is the means by which God continues to govern Israel. What is different, however, is that God’s governance is not continuous. Between judges, Israel has only the Law for a leader. As the cycle indicates, the people do not observe the Law in the absence of a judge.

The above cycle describes what a judge is. Even a casual reading of the stories makes clear that these judges not only decide legal cases or settle disputes (as seems to be the case in 4:5) but are primarily military leaders. The above description of the pattern of history in the time of Judges may sound repetitive. Even the term *cycle* suggests ending at the beginning. However, each cycle is not exactly the same. Indeed, the differences among the stories of various judges are so striking that the pattern is not



easy to discern unless one looks for it. Still, some parts of the cycle are missing from some narratives. For example, Abimelech is hardly a typical judge and several parts of the cycle are absent from the story about him (e.g., God does not raise him up).

A careful examination and comparison of the judges' narratives indicates that the Judges cycle may be understood as a downward spiral. Each judge seems less adequate than the one before: Gideon introduces idolatry; Abimelech is more a local thug than judge; Jephthah sacrifices his daughter; and Samson never even raises an army to liberate his people but seems motivated only by his own private good. By the end of the book, the Israelites are fighting each other. Four times, the book notes "There was no king in Israel" (17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25). In the first and last occurrences, this phrase is followed by the expression "everyone did what he thought best." By itself, these expressions do not indicate whether the absence of a king is a good or bad thing. In the context of stories about rape and civil war, however, the lack of a king seems to be something to lament. The narrative seems to express the hope that a monarchy could fix the problems that judgeship has been unable to solve.

The failure of judgeship as a form of government casts doubt on the leadership of God. God chooses not to maintain a consistent line of leaders following the death of Joshua but rather raises up judges only when the people cry out. Since the Israelites follow the Law of God while the judge lives, we are left to wonder why God does not provide a successor to each judge but allows the leaderless people to slip into the worship of other gods.

The political problem is focused by the Israelite request that Gideon establish a dynasty: "Rule over us—you, your son, and your son's son," (8:22). Gideon refuses on the grounds that "the LORD must rule over you" (8:23). This expression may also be translated as an indicative statement: "The LORD rules over you." Gideon voices the notion that his family cannot rule over Israel without usurping the place of God. The people's request, however, already indicates that they are dissatisfied with God's leadership.

## Violence and the Treatment of Women

The introduction to Joshua already alluded to the moral critique of the Scriptures. In Judges, the moral critique primarily focuses on the issues of violence continued from Joshua and the treatment of women. Judges explores the role of women in society. In general, women are treated worse and worse as the Judges cycle continues its downward spiral. In the beginning of Judges, the woman Deborah, a prophetess and judge, directs male military leaders dependent on her guidance (4:4–9). The woman Jael is celebrated for her heroism (4:9,21; 5:24–27). Similarly, another nameless woman ends the tyranny of Abimelech (9:53–56). By the end of the book, however, women have become objects to be used and abused by men. One nameless woman is raped to death (19:22–30), while others are abducted to become wives against their will (chapter 21). Between these extremes, Samson's mother is visited by an angel and shows more wisdom than her husband (chapter 13). The other women in Samson's life are less sympathetically portrayed. What Judges says about women in the context of its political concerns is open to interpretation. Might the worsening treatment of women be part of the problem that the narrative hopes monarchy will address?

## Conclusion

The introduction to Joshua also noted the rational critique of the Scriptures and the problems concerning the archeological evidence surrounding the conquest. The historicity of the conquest has become dubious not only because of recent archeological discoveries but also because the Book of Judges tells a different



story than the one we read in Joshua. By the end of Joshua, the Israelites are in possession of the whole land and Joshua dies knowing that the mission of the conquest is accomplished. In Judges, however, the Israelites live in a land not completely conquered. Even within the Scriptures, various accounts of how Israel emerged in the Promised Land may be found.

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