

JUDGES: IT'S SHAPE AND CONTENT

Judges

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Whatever its history, Judges as we now have it has a very clear structure. The long central section that deals with the careers of the judges themselves extends from 3:7 to 16:31. It is preceded by an introduction into parts (1:1-2:5 and 2:6-3:6) and followed by an epilogue also into parts (chs. 17-18 and 19-21). The questions that is asked at the beginning of the book (1:1-2) is again asked in very (different circumstances at the end (20:18). So as we come to the end of the book we are invited to reflect on the point from which we set out, and on all that has happened in between.

The first part of the introduction (1:1-2:5) is about the progressive deterioration in Israel's position vis-a-vis the Canaanites that followed the death of Joshua (1:1). The efforts of the various tribes to possess and occupy the lands that had been allocated to them (Josh. 13-19) run into increasing difficulties as the Canaanites, particularly on the coastal plain and in key fortified cities in the north, put up very determined resistance (see esp. vv. 19, 27-28). This leads to a tense stalemate situation in which Israelites and Canaanites live side by side. The Israelites hold the upper hand but are still excluded from significant parts of the land. The tribe of Dan in particular is confined to the hills and is unable to get a secure foothold in its allotted territory near the coast (1:34). It is a situation that falls far short of the expectations with which Israel had set out, expectations grounded in the promises God had made to their ancestors (Josh. 23:1-5; cf. Gen. 12:1-3; 15:12-21; 28:13-15). This part of the introduction ends with the Israelites weeping before Yahweh at Bochim (Bethel) and being told what has gone wrong (2:1-5). The reason for their failure has not been the iron chariots or strong fortifications of the Canaanites, but their own unfaithfulness. In the territory they had succeeded in taking they had begun to compromise by allowing the altars of the Canaanites to remain standing, and because of this Yahweh had withdrawn his help from them. In addition to looking back, this key speech by Yahweh's messenger also looks forward, with the prediction that the Canaanites and their gods will become a snare to the Israelites.

The second part of the introduction (2:6-3:6) returns to the beginning (notice how Joshua reappears in 2:6) and makes this underlying spiritual problem the main focus of attention. In a few deft strokes Israel's initial decline into apostasy is sketched (2:6-10) and then the whole patten of the ensuing judges era is laid out (2:11-19). It is presented as a period of persistent apostasy, in which Yahweh alternately judges the Israelites by handing them over to foreign oppressors, and then (when they are in great distress) has pity on them and raises up a judge to save them. At these times the Israelites temporarily give up their apostasy, but quickly return to it when the judge dies (v. 19a). In short, despite Yahweh's many attempts to retrieve them from their evil ways, the Israelites persist in them (v. 19b). This leads to another crucial speech in 2:20-22, in which Yahweh announces what he intends to do as his final response to all that has taken place. The nations which were originally left (at the time Joshua died) to test Israel's faithfulness will now be left permanently as a punishment for her unfaithfulness. This is the climax of the second part of the introduction, and to the introduction as a whole. The verses that remain (2:23-3:6) are essentially a summary of all that has gone before.

So the introduction, as well as diagnosing what went wrong and mapping out what is to follow, makes it very clear what the central issue of the book is, namely, Israel's persistent apostasy in the judges period and Yahweh's response to it. The book answers the question, "Why didn't Israel ever fully possess the land that God promised to their ancestors?" and gives the answer, "Because of the apostasy that followed the death of Joshua, and continued in spite of all Yahweh's efforts to reclaim Israel from it." Judges



defends Yahweh's action in leaving the remaining nations long-term as fully justified in view of Israel's behavior. The later books of the Deuteronomistic History go on to explain and justify his later, more drastic act of evicting Israel from the land altogether.

The central section of the book (3:7-16:31) fills out the outline already given in the introduction (2:11-19) and develops a number of subthemes in the process. It records the careers of twelve judges in all: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Barak, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. Deborah and Jael both play very significant roles in the Barak episode, and Deborah is even said to have judged Israel (4:4-5), but in terms of the overall design of the book chapters 4-5 must be seen as essentially about Barak; and although the activities of Gideon's son Abimelech are recounted in some detail, he is not a judge at all in terms of the way that office has been described in the introduction.

Just as the first part of the introduction began with Judah and ended with Dan (1:1-34), so this central section begins with judge Othniel from Judah (3:7-11) and ends with judge Samson the Danite (chs. 13-16). Othniel is a model judge whose career exemplifies what a judge was meant to be and do. The following judges represent a series of variations on this basic pattern, culminating with Samson, whose behavior is so bizarre that he is barely recognizable as a judge at all. The pattern of this part of the book has frequently been described in terms of a repeating cycle of apostasy, oppression, calling on Yahweh, deliverance, peace, and renewed apostasy. There is certainly much repetition in this long central section, but there is also progressive change, so that the result is better described in terms of a downward spiral than a simple cycle. Disunity among the Israelites first appears in the Barak episode (5:16-17, 23), and grows worse under later judges. After the forty years that follow Gideon's victory (8:28) the land is never again said to enjoy rest, and by the time of Samson the Israelites no longer even cry out to Yahweh to save them. Furthermore, as these chapters run their course, the judges themselves gradually become more and more implicated in the wrongdoing of the nation as a whole. The climax is reached in Samson, whose personal waywardness and reluctance to embrace his calling perfectly epitomize the waywardness and struggle of Israel. As Israel had been set apart from other nations by God's covenant with her, so Samson is set apart from other men by his calling as a Nazirite. As Israel went after foreign gods, Samson goes after foreign women. Israel wanted to be as other nations; Samson wants to be as other men; and as Israel repeatedly called on Yahweh in its distress, so does Samson. In short, the subthemes that run through the whole central section of the book (Israel's struggle against her destiny and Yahweh's perseverance with her in judgment and grace) are finally brought to a sharp focus in the story of Samson. His personal story is also the story of Israel as a whole in the judges period.

The two stories that form the epilogue (chs. 17-21) are also located in the judges period (when "there was no king in Israel") but do not follow chronologically from what has gone before. There is also a shift of focus in them, from the sin of Israel as a whole to the sins of the individuals and communities that comprise it: everyone does what is right in his own eyes (17:6). The first story, in chapters 17-18 (Micah and his idols), is about the religious chaos of the period; the second, in chapters 19-21 (the Levite and his concubine), is about the accompanying moral chaos. Together they show that Israel was even more endangered by its own internal decay, morally and spiritually, than by any external attack. In particular, the second story shows how the very institutions which should have provided stability (the Levitical priesthood, hospitality and family life, eldership, and the assembly of tribal leaders) were all rendered ineffective, and even positively harmful, because of the moral bankruptcy of individuals. The way the book ends leaves us in no doubt that it was certainly not the quality of its leadership or its institutions that held Israel together. Israel's survival in the period of the judges was a miracle of God's grace.

The refrain that runs through the epilogue ("In those days there was no king in Israel... " 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) rings down the curtain on one period and anticipates another. Kingship, like judgeship, will have its place in Israel's ongoing history and prove useful in its time. But it, too, will fail through human sinfulness. As the Deuteronomistic History as a whole shows, no institution, however valid, holds the key to Israel's future. It is only God's ongoing commitment to his people, in spite of everything, that does this.