

THE RELEVANCE OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES TODAY

Judges

Daniel I. Block

Hebrews 11:32 has exercised a profound and pervasive influence on the history of Christian interpretation of the Book of Judges. With a hermeneutic that tends to read the Old Testament in light of the New, to this day many readers understand the book as a collection of stirring tales of the exploits of genuinely virtuous heroes, mighty men of God. These personalities are held up as models after whom Christians should pattern their lives. It is indeed true that all believers are called to a life of faith and that without faith nothing can be accomplished for God, but this evaluation of the primary judges at least is much too positive, especially when we allow the author of Judges to speak for himself. The primary significance of the book for the modern reader, especially Western Christians lies in quite a different direction.

Earlier it was mentioned that the central theme of the Book of Judges is the Canaanization of Israel. Herein lies the key to the relevance of this ancient composition for North American Christianity, for like the Israelites of the settlement period, we have largely forgotten the covenant Lord and have come to take for granted his gracious redemptive work on our behalf. Like the ancient Israelites we too are being squeezed into the mold of the pagan world around us. Evidences of the "Canaanization" of the church are everywhere: our preoccupation with material prosperity, which turns Christianity into a fertility religion; our syncretistic and aberrant forms of worship; our refusal to obey the Lord's call to separation from the world; our divisiveness and competitiveness; our moral compromises, as a result of which Christians and non-Christians are often indistinguishable; our [male] exploitation and abuse of women and children; our reluctance to answer the Lord's call to service, and when we finally go, our propensity to displace "Thy kingdom come" with "My kingdom come"; our eagerness to fight the Lord's battles with the world's resources and strategies; our willingness to stand up and defend perpetrators of evil instead of justice. These and many other lessons will be drawn from the leaves of this fascinating book as we proceed.

But the book teaches important positive lessons as well, especially about God. First, God graciously calls his people to covenant relationship with himself. This relationship is the highest privilege imaginable, and when the recipients of grace hold their divine Benefactor in contempt, abandoning him for other allegiances, the God of grace is rightfully angry. Second, the impassioned God ('El Qanna) tolerates no rivals. The believer cannot serve him and other gods. To do so is to trample his grace underfoot. Third, God is gracious still, often treating his people not according to what they deserve but out of his boundlessly merciful heart. Fourth, if anything positive is ever accomplished in the church, it is the work of God. Human leaders have a profound propensity to disappoint and to exploit the church for their own purposes. Fifth, in the words of Jesus, God will build his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt 16:18). The Book of Judges presents the picture of a nation called the people of Yahweh but seemingly determined to negate that appellation if not destroy itself. But the Lord will not let this happen. He has chosen them to be his agents of light and life to the world; he has rescued them from Egypt; he has entered into an eternal covenant with them; and he has delivered the land of Canaan into their hands as an eternal possession. In the final analysis, God cannot let his program abort. The mission of grace to the world depends upon the preservation of his people. So against all odds, and certainly against Israel's deserts, the nation survives the dark days of the judges. The true hero in the book is God and God alone.

