

JUDGES (The Jewish Study Bible)

THE BOOK OF JUDGES is the second of Former Prophets. Its place was determined chronologically—it covers the period after Joshua's death at the end of the book of Joshua and before the anointing of Saul as king in 1 Samuel. The book is named after its central characters, “judges” (typically translated in NJPS as “chieftains”). Although the book ends before the birth of Samuel the prophet, 1 Samuel 8.1, “When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons judges over Israel,” suggests that Samuel and his sons should be considered judges as well.

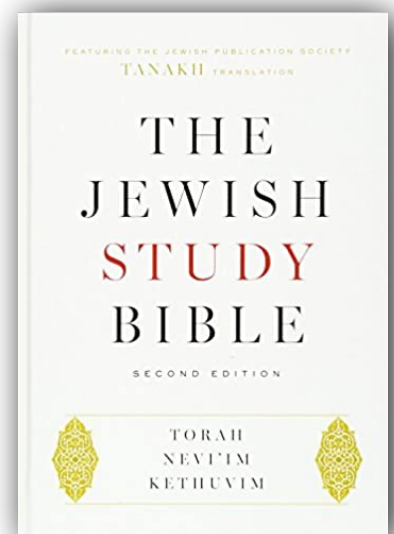
The judges are mostly shown as tribal leaders who delivered their people from oppression. Some were military leaders (Othniel, Ehud, Barak, Gideon, and Jephthah), some were lone warriors (Shamgar and Samson), and one was both leader and commander (Jephthah). Some judges were prophets (Deborah and Samuel), one was a Nazirite (Samson), some were also priests (Eli and Samuel), or sat in judgment (Deborah and Samuel), while the acts of others are not specified (Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon). The term “judge,” Hebrew *shofet* (see esp. 2 Sam. 7.11; 2 Kings 23.22; Ruth 1.1; 1 Chron. 17.6, 10), thus covers the range of diverse leaders who flourished in the period prior to the monarchy. It should not be understood in a narrow juridical sense.

The book of Judges does not describe the entire period of the judges, nor is it organized chronologically. It opens in the time of the elders who survived Joshua and concludes with Samson, so the last judges, Eli (1 Sam. 4.18) and Samuel (1 Sam. 7.15–17), now appear in the book of Samuel. The ending of the book of Judges, however, deals with events that took place at the start of the period: the conquest of Dan and the war against Gibeah, both of which are placed in the third generation after the exodus from Egypt (18.30; 20.28). Its nonchronological order shows that the editors' purpose was not only to describe and record the period, but to draw lessons from it. The book's main theme is the inefficacy of the judges, who could only save and affect their people for a limited time; then the people would relapse, would be punished, and would cry to the LORD to save them again. This recurrent theme of sin, punishment, and rescue gives the book a cyclical structure.

The book offers two principal lessons. The first concerns the role of God in history: It describes the course of history as an interaction between God and His people, with God heeding His people's cries, and saving them through various judges. The second concerns the type of preferred leader: The judges are not depicted as ideal leaders, and their depiction thus paves the way for the establishment of a more successful political institution, namely the monarchy. The ideal king could confront the people's enemies and prevent anarchy, though the book warns that the king may also be a villain, as in the case of Abimelech, symbolized by the bramble (ch 9).

The book can be divided into three parts. The first is an exposition that describes the background to the rise of the judges (1.1–3.6). The second, main part of the book is devoted largely to the acts of the judges (3.7–16.31). The third, final part describes two episodes: that of Micah's graven image and the shrine built at Dan, and the story of the rape in Gibeah and the subsequent civil war (chs 17–21). These final episodes create the impression that monarchy alone could end the chaotic period of the judges, when “there was no king in Israel; every man did as he pleased” (17.6; 21.25).

The Sages (b. B. Bat. 14b) assumed that the book of Judges was written by the prophet Samuel, who lived not long after the events described. Biblical scholars, however, maintain that this book, like the other historiographic books in the Bible, was written later, and should not be



viewed as a unified work of a single author. Scholars suggest that it could only have been written in an established social culture possessing self-consciousness, appropriate institutions, and a receptive public. Scholars distinguish between the judges' stories, which are based on local-tribal traditions of deliverance and which do not interpret events with theological causality, and their frameworks, which depict the deliverer in a broad national context, characterized by a cycle that begins with sin and ends with peace. There is widespread agreement that these frameworks reflect a Deuteronomistic redaction which took the tribal stories, gave them a national-religious character, and fitted the whole into the great Deuteronomistic work that describes the history from the years in the wilderness (the book of Deuteronomy) to the Babylonian exile (the end of the book of Kings). At a later stage, they suggest, post-Deuteronomistic redactors added certain passages, such as the ones about the Canaanite nations that were or were not driven out, in the exposition (1.1–2.5) and the concluding chapters (17–21).

But the assumption that the book of Judges reflects the ideological world of Deuteronomy may not be correct. Deuteronomy's ideology and style are only partly evident in the book of Judges. Deuteronomistic literature criticizes monarchy (Deut. 17.14–20), places prophets above it (Deut. 18.15–19; 1 Kings 12.22–24, etc.), demands centralization of cult (Deut. 12.5–28; 1 Kings 8.16ff, etc.), and depicts the deity as a remote being whose name alone dwells in the Temple (Deut. 12.5; 1 Kings 8.27, etc.). By contrast, the book of Judges has positive expectations from the monarchy, makes scarcely any reference to prophecy and its function of predicting historical events, does not call for the centralization of the cult, and shows God intervening in the events, directly or by means of angels. Moreover, the phrases that are typical of Deuteronomistic literature are concentrated only in the exposition of the book (2.6–3.4). It would seem, therefore, that the main redaction of the book of Judges was completed in the pre-Deuteronomistic stage—namely, in the late 8th or in the 7th century BCE—and that it reflected the shocked mood in Judah after the downfall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 (see the allusion to exile in 18.30). This would explain the negative portrayal of the northern tribes throughout the book, from the exposition which accuses them of the sin of failing to drive out the local inhabitants, to the final chapters that speak of Mount Ephraim and the shrine at Dan as sinful places. By contrast, the tribe of Judah is depicted in the opening as a tribe which succeeded completely in driving out the local inhabitants and was faithful to the covenant with God. The redaction sought to justify the punishment that befell the Northern Kingdom by showing it as a group of sinful tribes; this theme is evident in each of the sections of the book. The book later was slightly adapted when it became part of the great Deuteronomistic work of Deuteronomy-Kings. Additions from this period or later may include: Deuteronomistic phrases noticeable in the exposition (2.11–19), the text criticizing Gideon for making the ephod (8.27b), and the episode of the concubine in Gibeah (chs 19–21), which is mainly a veiled polemical attack on the house of Saul.

The book of Judges presents itself as covering a period of more than 400 years—111 years of subjugation, and 299 of judgeship and peace (or possibly 319 years, given the uncertainty about the length of Samson's period). These data do not agree either with the chronology of 1 Kings 6.1 , according to which 480 years passed from the exodus to the building of the Jerusalem Temple, or with the historical and archeological findings, which suggest that less than 200 years passed from the end of the 13th century, when the hill country was settled, to the latter half of the 11th century BCE and the beginning of the established monarchy. Modern research has abandoned the conservative view, which accepted the bulk of the book of Judges as historically authentic, and has emphasized certain ideological (anti-Northern Kingdom, anti-Saul, pro-Davidic) and literary elements of the book. At the same time, it acknowledges the fact that ancient traditions sometimes preserve some echo of the historical reality. Thus, while some scholars chose not to speak of a “period of the judges” at all, other scholars regard this period—namely, the time of settlement leading up to the monarchy—as a decisive one in the history of the people of Israel, in the course of which groups of settling nomads grew into an established society, developed a sense of national identity with a cultural-religious heritage, and came to form the people of Israel.