

Judges – Core

Today we go to the Book of Judges. This book is a sequel of sorts to the book of Joshua; where that book describes the conquest of Canaan, Judges describes their efforts to make their lives there.

The setting is historical, but the message is unambiguously theological. Even though these books contain a lot of traditions that are clearly very old, one must use caution when trying to extract too much historical information from Judges (and Joshua for that matter). This is less a book about judges and heroes as it is a book about covenants.

Joshua begins and ends with episodes that involve Israel committing itself to a covenantal relationship with God. Judges is about how successful they were, or weren't in keeping those covenants.

As we read into Judges, what we find is that there is a cycle of boom and bust, so to speak in which the people slip in and out of God's favor, and usually have to be delivered from their own ineptitude and inability to keep the covenant.

The cycle goes something like this; things are going fine, the people are doing the right thing, but then they get enamored of the surrounding Canaanite religion and start to follow other gods and participate in their religion. Then God stops favoring them, or one might read it that God actively turns against them, and they get themselves into trouble. They cry to God for help, and God responds by raising up a "judge" who is some kind of charismatic leader who kind of comes out of nowhere. This leader takes control of the situation, and finds a way to deal with the crisis. The people fall into line, and everything is great until the cycle starts all over again.

Judges 2:10-23 is a kind of introduction to this cycle in a generalized way. The meat of the matter is in verses 18-19:

¹⁸Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. ¹⁹But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshipping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

One thing you'll notice in these stories is that with a few exceptions, we don't see the judges doing much judging. This is partly because the word translated here as "judge" might better be rendered as "chief," which does fit rather well with how these people act.

The judges, or chiefs, or whatever you want to call them in this book are called, as needed, by God. What I find particularly interesting about these leaders is that they come from all over the place. There isn't any one tribe that seems to have a corner on leaders. They can be anybody, male or female, and quite often are not people one might think were cut from heroic timber. The judges do not have direct successors, so there is no way that a judge could evolve into a king.

Another thing we notice is that each pass through the cycle takes Israel as a whole a little lower each time. As they get near the end of the book, the Israelites even lose the Ark of the Covenant in a battle with the Philistines. They just can't seem to get any traction on what is not so much a cycle as a downward spiral. And while God is continuously willing to reach out and pick up his people, the clear sense is that these cycles can only lead to utter disaster.

One of the lessons we see right away is that God picks the leaders for each crisis on his own terms. There's no predicting, really, who it is going to be. This is an important point for those of us who are going through difficult times and who might be in need of someone to help us. It might be your local church leaders, but deliverance can also come from other directions and appear in other forms. It's also quite possible that you may find yourself confronted with a friend or stranger who is in need of help, in which case God might be calling you to put yourself out for someone else. We can take comfort that Judges makes very clear that those whom God calls are driven, guided, and protected by his spirit.

The rescues of Israel from their enemies can be a little disturbing to the modern reader. The battles that drive back the enemy de jour are usually decisive, but very bloody. Often no quarter is given, or sought. A lot of people get killed and even if the numbers are inflated, which is frequently the case with battle reports from every age, it can be challenging for those of us who think of God as loving and merciful. The book of Joshua has, if anything, more of this kind of thing.

On the other hand, we face this kind of ambiguity every day in our time. We see bad things happening to people who may or may not deserve it. In the case of Judges, one has to remember that this is how their world operated. War was a fact of life, and battle in those days was up close and very personal.

Warfare had a social dimension in those days as well. Much like the Bedouin Arabs of later centuries, one's reputation determined one's place in society and prowess in battle was a great reputation-builder. Where I'm going with this is that perhaps God is limited in what he can do by the type of societies he much work with. If a military victory is what is needed in order to rescue his people in a way that matches their expectations or desires, then that is what happens.

Incidentally, it's also important to mention that another very effective way of building reputation was the ability to give good advice, mediate disputes, and provide good information. This was the prophetess Deborah's specialty; she is one of the very few people we see in Judges who is doing any actual, well, judging. It was her reputation that doubtless made her such a powerful presence in addition to her divine calling and message. It's not required in the lesson, but you really do need to read Judges 5 and the Song of Deborah. Besides being a powerful piece of poetry, the song contains some of the oldest Hebrew literature in existence.

It makes me wonder whether God would just as happily opted for a more peaceful solution, if there was a way to prevent the influence of foreign religious ideas from finding their way into Israelite religion.

Speaking of which, Judges speaks of the Israelites running after and worshipping the "Baals", plural. It's a curious expression, but there are a couple of ways to account for this term. One is that there was not just one god "Baal". The word simply means "Lord" and gets used fairly generically. The word can also mean "owner" or "husband." In this case, there were different colors and flavors of "Baal," Baal tzaphon, 'alyn Baal, Baal Hadad, and so on. So to speak of "Baals" probably refers to a collection of Canaanite gods, rather than a single god. That said, there was a "Baal" viewed as the chief god, sort of the way we might use the word God both as a generic noun and as a proper noun.

But what was the attraction? Why was Canaanite religion so popular and so alluring to the Israelites? Canaanite religion was very closely concerned with the matter of fertility. In that day and age, you paid attention to fertility or you went extinct. With very high infant and child mortality rates, the possibility of

drought and disease that could sweep through the land without warning, people were very much aware of the precariousness of their lives. In Israelite religion, fertility is controlled strictly and exclusively by God. But if Canaanite religion offered rituals that might contribute to the fertility of the land and the people, why not hedge your bets?

Because Hebrew is a Canaanite language, it made it pretty easy for them to understand their Canaanite neighbors and learn about their religious ideas. But God demanded their exclusive allegiance, that was the agreement of the covenant. In exchange for their loyalty, he would look after them.

Scholarly Section:

As we said in the previous section, Judges is meant to be a follow-up to Joshua, but at the same time there are some clear points on which the two books diverge. For one thing, Judges demonstrates that the conquests in Joshua were not complete; there were plenty of places where the Israelites needed to beat various enemies to turn their toehold into a more secure habitation. For example, the land area that Joshua conquers is much less than the land area that he divides among the tribes. There is no mention of how the Israelites captured places like the cities on the coastal plains, the central hill country, or Shechem.

Of course, that isn't really the point of the story in Joshua that gets continued in Judges: God fights Israel's battles. So, naturally, one only needs to mention a few examples of this kind of divine military intervention in order to make that point. Another reason is that in this particular culture, we see certain features that require the conduct of warfare. What I mean is that in these kinds of ancient semi-pastoral societies, political power was built on a person's reputation, and one of the more important ways to acquire reputation was to prove oneself in combat. In order for the people to take their judges seriously the culture demanded that they display the ability to kick the Philistines around.

Judges describes a very foreign society, at least to our way of thinking. There is no centralized government to speak of. The closest thing to it is the Tabernacle where the ark resides, but this central locus of power is not strong enough to reign in all the tribes at will, or even at need. Tribes enjoyed a great deal of autonomy to conduct their own affairs, which also gave them the freedom to ignore the needs of other tribes if they didn't see sufficient benefit or too much

risk. Hence one of the themes of Judges: there was no king in the land and every man did what was right in his eyes.

Not only were these Judges—which might be better rendered as “chiefs” or even “warlords” people who seemingly came out of nowhere, they had no successors; the system was incapable of being redirected into dynastic rule, let alone a thoroughgoing monarchy.

Judges has been read, correctly I think, as an extended essay on the value of monarchy over a tribal league. WE talked before about the cycle of righteousness, falling into sin, delivery into foreign power, the cry for deliverance, and the raising up of a Judge who would rescue Israel. But, as we also mentioned in the last section, the cycle was a downward spiral; each iteration of the cycle left the Israelites less and less able to carry out even rudimentary expected functions of government.

One of these was when they lost the Ark of the Covenant in battle to the Philistines. This happens in 1 Sam 4, but it’s part of this same pattern of governmental ineptness that we see in Judges. It’s pretty hard to overstate just what a disaster this would have been for Israel. This is not just some Bronze Age equivalent of one school’s fraternity stealing the mascot of a rival school before the big game. The Ark was not just a symbol, but virtually the embodiment of the Covenant that defined them as a people. Its loss was very nearly existential in nature. This was, literally, the throne of God, which meant that God could not speak to them in his usual way. Worse, it implied that God had allowed this to happen because he had completely rejected Israel. As it happened, the Ark found its way back, but its loss left the Israelites shaken.

Another huge wake up call to the Israelites was the rape of the Levite’s concubine. This episode that begins in chapter 19 reads very much like a similar episode in Genesis, when Lot entertains two messengers at his home in Sodom. In this case, a Levite and his concubine are traveling, and they come to a Benjaminite city. An old man offers them shelter for the night, in accord with the best traditions of hospitality. Then we see a familiar pattern in which the men of the town seek to extort the old man by threatening his guest with homosexual rape. At this point things start going wrong in several directions at once. By tradition, the Old Man should have confronted and met the mob, but the Levite’s concubine is sent out instead, where she is raped until she is dead. The Levite cuts her body in twelve pieces and sends a piece to each tribal leader. The message is clear. Such a violation of hospitality was cause for extermination. It could not be tolerated.

This is the one instance where all of the tribes except Benjamin are united on anything, and they go to war against Benjamin. But they can't even get this right; the smallest of all the tribes, Benjamin, holds its own and even beats the tribal armies at least at first. Gradually the tide turned against Benjamin, but only after considerable loss on the part of Israel. The point here is that Israel had trouble enforcing even the most basic standards of behavior, the institutions of hospitality.

Judges is part of the deuteronomistic history, and as such is really about covenant, but also about the failure of Israel to consistently keep that covenant. While there is a clear sense that things would go better with a king in the land, it's also clear that the authors distrusted monarchy just a little. Like most of the Old Testament, the scriptures offer not only answers, but the raw materials from which we must forge our own answers and ideas.