

UNIT THREE

THE BOOK OF JUDGES

INTRODUCTORY HISTORICAL MATTERS

- **THE OFFICE OF JUDGE**
 - 'Judge' has a broader meaning in the book of Judges than it does today – being derived from a Semitic word meaning 'to administer', 'govern' or 'rule'.
 - The judges ruled Israel as representatives of God, the supreme judge – they were empowered by his Spirit at times of crisis.
 - Most judges did not come from influential backgrounds or from important religious or political centres – God chose to work through very ordinary people.
 - A contrast is often drawn between 'major' judges who led Israel in battle and 'minor' judges who did not – but such distinctions are hard to sustain based on the Bible text.
 - 'Judging' Israel seems to have involved administrative, judicial, religious and military duties – further categorisation is very difficult with the available evidence.
 - Some suggest that the judges dealt with only local matters and that their elevation to national leaders was a later idealisation.
 - However, no other book uses the term 'Israel' to refer to the twelve tribes as much as the book of Judges.
 - Despite the rarity of incidents involving all twelve tribes, everything is viewed in terms of its impact on the whole nation and several judges are linked with tribes other than their own.

- **THE NATURE OF THE WARS IN THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES**
 - Mostly, the wars of the period of the judges were holy wars, undertaken at Yahweh's command and with the outcome determined by his divine intervention.
 - Three categories can be determined:
 - Occupation and Settlement
 - Liberation
 - Civil Wars
 - Yahweh's involvement is much less direct and obvious in the civil wars – these arise more from jealousy and personal ambition than from divine initiative.

OUTLINE OF CONTENTS

- **INTRODUCTION (1:1-3:6)**
 - **After Joshua: Military Decline**
 - 1:1-2 The Israelites enquire of the LORD
 - 1:3-21 The successes and failures of the southern tribes
 - 1:22-36 The successes and failures of the northern tribes
 - 2:1-5 Israel accused of disobedience
 - **After Joshua: Spiritual Decline**
 - 2:6-10 The slide into apostasy
 - 2:11-19 Overview of the judges period
 - 2:20-3:6 The LORD's ultimate response

- **THE CAREERS OF THE JUDGES (3:7-16:31)**
 - 3:7-11 Othniel
 - 3:12-30 Ehud
 - 3:31 Shamgar
 - 4:1-5:31 Barak (plus Deborah and Jael)
 - 6:1-9:57 Gideon (plus Abimelech)
 - 10:1-2 Tola
 - 10:3-5 Jair
 - 10:6-12:7 Jephthah
 - 12:8-10 Ibzan
 - 12:11-12 Elon
 - 12:13-15 Abdon
 - 13:1-16:31 Samson

- **EPILOGUE (17:1-21:25)**
 - **Religious Chaos: Micah and his Shrine**
 - 17:1-13 The origin of Micah's idols
 - 18:1-31 The subsequent history of Micah's idols
 - **Moral Chaos: The Levite and his concubines**
 - 19:1-28 The outrage in Gibeah
 - 19:29-21:25 The response to the outrage

OVERVIEW: STRUCTURE AND THEMES

- **THE INTRODUCTION**
 - The first part of the introduction is about the deterioration of Israel's position in Canaan after Joshua's death.
 - Efforts by the tribes to possess and occupy the land run into determined resistance and this leads to a stalemate with Israelites living alongside Canaanites.
 - The situation falls short of Israel's expectations, and they wonder what has gone wrong.
 - They are told in no uncertain terms that the problems are the result of their own unfaithfulness.
 - In the territory they have succeeded in taking, they compromise by allowing pagan Canaanite altars to remain, which angers God.
 - The second part of the introduction returns to the beginning and focuses on the spiritual problems.

- The period of the judges is presented as a period of persistent apostasy in which the LORD alternately judges the Israelites, then raises up a judge to deliver them.
 - Each time the Israelites quickly return to their apostasy after the judge has died.
 - The nations that were left to test Israel's faithfulness are now to be left permanently to punish unfaithfulness.
 - Judges tells us why the Canaanites were never fully evicted from Canaan – because of the apostasy that followed Joshua's death.
- **THE MAIN BODY**
 - The central section of the book records the careers of twelve judges in all, from Othniel to Samson.
 - Deborah judges Israel for a time, but her main role (as a prophetess) is to commission Barak as the chosen deliverer.
 - Abimelech, son of Gideon, is not strictly a judge at all even though his career is recounted in some detail.
 - Othniel is a model judge whose career exemplifies what a judge was supposed to do – Samson's behaviour is so bizarre that he is barely recognisable as a judge at all.
 - The main pattern of the book is a repeating cycle:
APOSTASY ► OPPRESSION ► CALLING ON THE LORD ► DELIVERANCE ► PEACE
 - There is also progressive change, so a better description may be a downward spiral rather than just a cycle.
 - After the forty years that follow Gideon's victory (8:28), the land is never again said to enjoy peace and by the time of Samson, the Israelites are no longer even crying to the LORD for help.
 - The climax comes at the time of Samson, whose waywardness mirrors that of Israel itself.
 - As Israel goes after foreign gods, Samson goes after other women, and as Israel wants to be like other nations, Samson wants to be like other men – his story mirrors Israel in the period of the judges.
 - **THE EPILOGUE**
 - The two stories here do not follow chronologically – they focus on the sins of individuals rather than Israel as a whole.
 - The first story is about the religious chaos of the period, and the second is about the accompanying moral chaos.
 - These stories show that Israel was endangered more by its own internal decay than by outside threats.
 - The institutions that should have protected Israel are ineffective due to the moral bankruptcy of individuals.
 - The common refrain 'In those days Israel had no king' leads from one era into another.

A CASE STUDY: JEPHTHAH AND HIS VOW

- This story unfolds in five episodes, in each of which dialogue plays a crucial role.
 - Renewed apostasy and its consequences (10:6-16)
 - The recruitment of Jephthah (10:17-11:11)
 - Diplomatic exchange (11:12-28)

- The battle (11:29-38)
- A confrontation (12:1-7)
- At one level the story shows how the LORD used Jephthah to save Israel from the Ammonites, but the dialogues point to a deeper meaning.
- The Gileadites have already rejected Jephthah, and so when they offer to make him their leader he is suspicious.
- This parallels Israel itself – having rejected Yahweh, they only offer renewed loyalty when circumstances force them to.
- Like Jephthah, Yahweh is not deceived – he knows they are trying to use him without making any effort to change their ways.
- Jephthah's vow is also manipulative – an attempt by an insecure man to enlist Yahweh's help.
- The vow does not have any effect on the outcome of the war – this has already been settled – all that is achieved is the death of an innocent daughter.
- The story shows us the tragic consequences that follow when religion becomes debased into bargaining with God.

KINGSHIP IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

- Kingship in Judges is seen, on the whole, as an institution which is foreign to Israel.
- Kings are generally among Israel's oppressors, and are portrayed as evil tyrants.
- The 'kings of Midian' are enemies of Israel at the time of Gideon, and Jephthah has to do battle with the 'kings of Ammon' – in Judges, nations ruled by kings are enemies of Israel.
- At the same time, the book shows us that the Israelites were fascinated by kingship – Gideon was offered kingship but declined on the grounds that Yahweh was Israel's king.
- However, Gideon's lifestyle suggests that he was king in all but name.
- Gideon's son Abimelech openly took the title of king and reigned for three disastrous years.
- The book of Judges makes it clear that Israel's one experiment with kingship in this period was an unmitigated disaster.
- The book does not rule out kingship completely – the refrain running through the later chapters links the chaos to the fact that Israel had no king.
- Judges may rule out kingship on a Canaanite model but does not reject the whole concept.

RELEVANCE FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY

- The New Testament contains very few clear references to Judges – apart from a passing reference in Acts and the inclusion of some judges as heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11.
- Some references point to a deeper continuity – through Christ, God would finally atone for all sins in the culmination of all his acts of judgement, including those in Judges – the God who was faithful to those people is our God too.
- It may seem surprising the people with such obvious faults should be held up as heroes of the faith, but one thing they all knew was that only the LORD could save Israel.