

JUDGES

THEME

Author and Title

The name of the book of Judges comes from the title given to the 12 leaders (“judges,” whose temporary leadership was both civil and military) of Israel during the period between Joshua and Samuel. The book is anonymous; nowhere in Scripture is any author indicated. The book consists of various blocks of material about different judges, which conceivably could have been written by multiple authors over a period of time. Late Jewish tradition ascribes authorship to Samuel, which is certainly possible. However, in the end, the book’s author is not known.

Date

Date of events. The events in Judges took place in the period between Joshua’s death (either mid-14th or late-13th century B.C.) and the rise of Samuel and Saul (mid-11th century).

Date of composition. The earliest the book would have been written is after its last recorded event, in the mid-eleventh century B.C. If the phrase in [18:30](#), “the day of the captivity of the land,” refers to the Babylonian exile, then the final form of the book does not precede the time of the exile. But most likely most of the book had been written by David’s time (1010–970 B.C.), because the introductory framework in [chapter 1](#) states that the Jebusites were living in Jerusalem “to this day” ([1:21](#)). Since David captured the city c. 1003 B.C., most Jebusites presumably did not inhabit the city after that. On the other hand, some evidence suggests they persisted in the city to some degree (e.g., [2 Sam. 24:16](#)), so this is not a conclusive argument.

Theme

The theme of Judges is the downward spiral of Israel’s national and spiritual life into chaos and apostasy, showing the need for a godly king to lead it ([17:6; 21:25](#)).

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Purpose, Occasion, and Background

Purpose. The book of Judges was written to show the consequences of religious apostasy and to point the way to a king who, if righteous, would lead the people to God. In contrast to the serene way in which the book of Joshua ends—with all Israel obeying God’s commands, for the most part—the book of Judges shows that, in fact, Israel began to disobey God even during the time of Joshua. This disobedience continued and grew more serious—and more debased—throughout the period of the judges. Time and again Israel turned its back on God and embraced the gods and the ways of the Canaanites, as the introductory summary in [2:16–23](#) indicates. Israel’s history unfolded in this period in a cyclical or repetitive way: each cycle took Israel further downward in its debasement and apostasy. By the end of the book, Israel had violated its covenant with God in almost every way imaginable.

Occasion. The book of Judges arose out of the apostate conditions of the time. It was written as a justification for the monarchy, since the final verdict of the book—“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” ([21:25](#))—implies that things would have been different had there been a (godly) king leading the nation: they would have done right in *God’s* eyes. The next book in the English Bible is Ruth, which ends with a genealogy that points to David, the godly king par excellence ([Ruth 4:18–22](#)). Following the book of Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel relate the establishment of the legitimate Davidic monarchy in Israel, which God was pleased to bless ([2 Samuel 7](#)). God had planned for kings to rule in Israel from the beginning ([Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11; 49:10](#)), and had even given instructions for their conduct ([Deut. 17:14–20](#)). These instructions were very countercultural: rather than a king “like the nations,” where the prevailing model was the king as warrior, Israel’s king was to focus on keeping the Mosaic law ([Deut. 17:18–20](#)). If such a king had arisen in the period of the judges, things would have been far different. As it was, Israel’s apostasy pointed to the need for establishing the legitimate kingship under David.

Historical background. The period of the judges spanned a major transition in the ancient Near East, when the Late Bronze Age (c. 1550–1200 B.C.) gave way to the Early Iron Age shortly after 1200 B.C. The Late Bronze Age was a period of prosperity. In Palestine, the system of relatively small, independent city-states in the Middle Bronze Age (c. 2100–1550 B.C.) was replaced by large empires (Egyptian, Hittite, etc.) in the Late Bronze Age. However, Israelites and Canaanites were able to live there relatively undisturbed, the former in the hill country and the latter in the lowlands and coastal areas.

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At the end of the Late Bronze Age, major upheavals took place throughout the Mediterranean basin. Widespread destruction is evident. Archaeological evidence shows a radical drop in population in major centers and an increase in more briefly inhabited sites in outlying areas, in the hill country, and in desert fringe areas. Imported pottery abruptly ceased. The large, visible signs of society collapsed. However, there was a continuity of culture at the grassroots level. Rough as it was, pottery did continue to be made.

The causes of the widespread destruction are not clear, but they coincide with the migrations of the “land and sea peoples” known from Egyptian texts. These peoples clashed with Egypt at the end of the thirteenth century B.C., and they were also involved in other disturbances in the eastern Mediterranean. Due to such conflicts, the Early Iron Age (c. 1200–1000 B.C.) was a “dark age” of sorts. It was not until c. 1000 B.C. that a true internationalism reasserted itself throughout the eastern Mediterranean, and houses and cities again began to rival those of the Late Bronze Age.

Canaanite religion and culture. The major problem for Israel during the period of the judges was its penchant for turning away from the Lord and toward the gods of the Canaanites. What was it about Canaanite religion and culture that proved to be such an irresistible attraction? The land of Canaan was awe-inspiring to the Israelites, as can be seen in the story of the spies who reported on its wealth and strength ([Numbers 13](#)). To a recently freed slave people, accustomed to the hardships of life in the wilderness, the cosmopolitanism and material wealth of Late-Bronze-Age Canaan, with its large urban centers, could not have failed to impress. The Canaanites were clearly superior to the Israelites on many levels: art, literature, architecture, trade, political organization, and more. It is not difficult to see how the Israelites would have been tempted by the elaborate Canaanite religious system, which ostensibly supported—and even provided—all of this.

One prominent feature of Canaanite religion was its highly sexualized orientation. The system of sacred prostitutes—“priestesses” of Baal—allowed people to combine sensual pleasures with worship of Baal. This undoubtedly was attractive to many Israelites (cf. the Israelites seduced by the Moabite women in [Numbers 25](#)).

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The Setting of Judges

c. 1375/1210 B.C.

The incomplete conquest of the Promised Land set the stage for the book of Judges, which recounts the exploits of various leaders raised up to deliver Israel from their oppressors.



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Assessment of the Judges

Two of the most famous judges were anything but paragons of virtue. After an auspicious beginning, Gideon's badgering God for a confirmatory sign ([6:36–40](#)) may indicate a decided lack of faith (or at least fear). Later he made an ephod that became an object of worship and a snare for him, his family, and all Israel ([8:24–27](#)). Samson violated all of the main provisions of his Nazirite vow ([13:7](#); cf. [Num. 6:1–21](#)): he drank wine at his wedding feast ([Judg. 14:10](#): "feast" here [Hb. *mishteh*] is specifically a "drinking feast"); he had contact with the dead (e.g., [14:8–9](#), [19](#); [15:15](#)); and he allowed his hair to be cut ([16:17–19](#)). Furthermore, he married an unbelieving Philistine ([14:1–20](#)), and he had intimate relations with at least two other Philistine women ([16:1, 4](#)).

In general, the book does not describe the judges as leading Israel in true repentance and in putting away foreign gods, certainly not in the way the reforming kings did later in the kingdom of Judah. The one judge who did the most along this line—Gideon ([6:25–32](#))—did so only at the beginning of his "ministry"; by the end, he was leading the people in exactly the opposite direction ([8:24–27](#)).

The NT may seem to present a more idealized view of Gideon, Samson, and others than what is found in the book of Judges: Hebrews lists Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, along with David, Samuel, and the prophets, as examples of those "who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions" ([Heb. 11:32–33](#)). However, to say that these heroes had some measure of faith is not to say that they were consistent models of faith and virtue. Undoubtedly they demonstrated faith (at times) that allowed God to "conquer kingdoms" through them, but just as surely, the book of Judges focuses more on other aspects of their character to make a point about the widespread apostasy during the period.

While the judges themselves did not always contribute to improving the spiritual conditions in the land, this was not always their fault. The people as a whole did not supply the repentance that makes a godly leader effective. But despite their flaws, the judges often acted heroically. The book of Judges does not exaggerate or romanticize their exploits. These stories are not primarily about the judges as individuals: the judges' main function is to dispense God's justice and merciful faithfulness to his people, usually by military deliverance. All servants of God's purposes for his people have their flaws; the question is whether God should choose to allow those flaws to bear their bitter fruit. Even in these circumstances, God is working out his plan; he is not thwarted, even by human failure.

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Key Themes

1. Israel's existence in the land, which had been promised by God, was threatened by its continuing apostasy. Israel had not conquered the land completely ([ch. 1](#)), and its unfaithfulness was to blame ([2:1-3, 20-22](#)). Therefore, the day would come when the nation would be taken captive, away from the land ([18:30](#)).
2. The oppressions, chaos, and generally negative picture in the book are due to Israel's repeated sin. Time and again the Israelites broke the covenant, turning to the Canaanite gods and generally "doing evil" ([2:3, 11-13, 17, 19; 3:6, 7, 12; 4:1; 6:1, 10; 8:24-27, 33; 10:6; 13:1; 17:6; 21:25](#)). As a result, they repeatedly suffered the consequences.
3. God's faithfulness was the counterpoint to Israel's apostasy. Despite Israel's repeated falling away, God continually delivered his people. This was due not to Israel's merits or repentance, but to God's compassion and pity ([2:16, 18](#)) and his promises to Abraham and his descendants ([Deut. 6:10-11](#); cf. [Gen. 12:7; 15:7, 18-21; 26:2-3; 35:12](#)).
4. The judges did little to arrest the downward cycle of apostasy; if anything, they accelerated it. Major judges such as Gideon ([8:24-27](#)), Jephthah ([11:30-31, 34-40](#)), and Samson ([chs. 14-16](#)) were guilty of significant sin. The shining exception was a woman: Deborah ([chs. 4-5](#)).
5. Israel needed a godly king to lead in doing right *in the Lord's eyes* rather than a leader who "did what was right in his own eyes" (cf. [17:6; 21:25](#)). God had promised from the beginning that there would be kings ([Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11; 49:10](#)), and had given explicit instructions about what a godly king would look like ([Deut. 17:14-20](#)). The book of Judges shows the chaos and apostasy to which the people of Israel descended in the absence of a godly king.

The Judges of Israel

c. 1375–1050/1210–1050 B.C.

The judges came from various tribes and regions of Israel, and they likely held varying degrees of influence over their neighboring regions and tribes.

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History of Salvation Summary

God's people were to fulfill their calling by being faithful to the covenant in the land God had given them. The leadership of Joshua had set them up to do just this, and yet success was not automatic. The people depended on faithful leadership, which they generally lacked. Even the judges fell short of the ideal for leaders; nevertheless, God

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used them to preserve and chastise his people, and to teach them their need for a faithful king (a provision narrated by 1–2 Samuel). (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the [Overview of the Bible](#). See also [History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ](#).)

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Judge	Reference	Tribe	Oppressor	Period of Oppression	Period of Rest	Total Length of Time*
Othniel	3:7–11	Judah	Mesopotamians	8 years (3:8)	40 years (3:11)	48 years
Ehud	3:12–30	Benjamin	Moabites	18 years (3:14)	80 years (3:30)	98 years
Shamgar	3:31		Philistines			
Deborah	chs. 4–5	Ephraim	Canaanites	20 years (4:3)	40 years (5:31)	60 years
Gideon	chs. 6–8	Manasseh	Midianites	7 years (6:1)	40 years (8:28)	47 years
Tola	10:1–2	Issachar			23 years (10:2)	23 years
Jair	10:3–5	Gilead-Manasseh			22 years (10:3)	22 years
Jephthah	10:6–12:7	Gilead-Manasseh	Ammonites		24 years (10:8; 12:7)	24 years
Ibzan	12:8–10	Judah or Zebulun?			7 years (12:9)	7 years
Elon	12:11–12	Zebulun			10 years (12:11)	10 years

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Abdon	12:13–15	Ephraim			8 years (12:14)	8 years
Samson	chs. 13–16	Dan	Philistines	40 years (13:1)	20 years (15:20 ; 16:31)	60 years

* Added together, the dates in this column total about 410 years. However, many of the episodes in Judges overlap each other, unfolding in different parts of the land.

Literary Features

The format of Judges is a collection of individual “hero stories”; together, they tell the history of Israel during a specific era. Like Genesis, Judges pictures a mixture of good and bad behavior: the judges are not idealized, nor is their portrait uniformly negative. Mingled with the hero stories are brief units of historical facts about judges whose stories are not told in detail. The famous Song of Deborah ([ch. 5](#)) is poetry, while the story of Samson ([chs. 13–16](#)) meets the usual criteria of literary tragedy.

The pattern introduced in [2:11–23](#) shapes the plot: (1) the Israelites do what is evil in the sight of God; (2) God allows the nation to be conquered and oppressed by a neighboring nation; (3) the people cry to God; and (4) God sends a judge to deliver them (see [chart](#)). Then the cycle repeats itself. In addition to this cycle, the book is structured on the premise of a double plot. The overall story is one of national descent into lawlessness and apostasy; but within this national narrative lies a collection of stories that celebrate the heroic exploits of judges. Even though they had severe flaws, four of these judges are mentioned among the heroes of the faith ([Hebrews 11](#)).

Realism permeates Judges, for the book refuses to overlook the sordid side of life. As the book unfolds, readers encounter shocking accounts of violence, sexual abuse, idolatry, and misuse of power. Before the book is over, gruesome scenes of bodily mutilation and dismemberment are disclosed. While Judges portrays the worst with regard to bad behavior, such realism was included to reveal something important about life and human nature apart from God.

Outline

- I. The Roots of Israel’s Apostasy ([1:1–3:6](#))
 - A. Prelude to apostasy: incomplete conquests ([1:1–2:5](#))
 1. Initial battles and the seeds of apostasy ([1:1–2:1](#))

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2. Incomplete conquests portending apostasy ([1:22-36](#))
3. The angel of the Lord and Israel's apostasy ([2:1-5](#))
- B. The unfolding and consequences of apostasy ([2:6-3:6](#))
 1. Joshua's death and the coming apostasy ([2:6-10](#))
 2. The recurring pattern of Israel's apostasy, God's grace, and God's anger ([2:11-23](#))
 3. The testing of Israel ([3:1-6](#))
- II. The Downward Spiral of Israel's Apostasy ([3:7-16:31](#))
 - A. Othniel ([3:7-11](#))
 - B. Ehud ([3:12-30](#))
 - C. Shamgar ([3:31](#))
 - D. Deborah ([4:1-5:31](#))
 1. Victory over the Canaanites ([4:1-24](#))
 2. Deborah and Barak's victory song ([5:1-31](#))
 - E. Gideon ([6:1-8:35](#))
 1. Continuing apostasy ([6:1-10](#))
 2. Gideon's call ([6:11-40](#))
 3. Gideon's first battle ([7:1-8:3](#))
 4. Gideon's second battle ([8:4-21](#))
 5. Gideon's apostasy ([8:22-28](#))
 6. Gideon, father of Abimelech ([8:29-32](#))
 7. Continuing apostasy ([8:33-35](#))
 - F. Abimelech, apostate "king" ([9:1-57](#))
 1. Abimelech's sordid rise ([9:1-6](#))
 2. Indictment of Abimelech: Jotham's fable ([9:7-21](#))
 3. Abimelech's violent reign and end ([9:22-55](#))
 4. Final verdict on Abimelech ([9:56-57](#))
 - G. Tola ([10:1-2](#))
 - H. Jair ([10:3-5](#))

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- I. Jephthah ([10:6–12:7](#))
 - 1. Apostasy and distress ([10:6–18](#))
 - 2. Introduction to Jephthah ([11:1–3](#))
 - 3. Jephthah's commissioning ([11:4–11](#))
 - 4. Diplomatic discussions ([11:12–28](#))
 - 5. Victory and Jephthah's foolish vow ([11:29–40](#))
 - 6. Jephthah's conflict with Ephraim ([12:1–7](#))
 - J. Ibzan ([12:8–10](#))
 - K. Elon ([12:11–12](#))
 - L. Abdon ([12:13–15](#))
 - M. Samson ([13:1–16:31](#))
 - 1. The birth of Samson ([13:1–25](#))
 - 2. Samson and the Philistines, part 1 ([14:1–15:20](#))
 - 3. Samson and the Philistines, part 2 ([16:1–31](#))
- III. The Depths of Israel's Apostasy ([17:1–21:25](#))
- A. Religious corruption ([17:1–18:31](#))
 - 1. Religious corruption of a household ([17:1–6](#))
 - 2. Religious corruption of a Levite ([17:7–13](#))
 - 3. Religious corruption of a tribe ([18:1–31](#))
 - B. Moral and social corruption ([19:1–21:24](#))
 - 1. Moral outrage at Gibeah ([19:1–30](#))
 - 2. Civil war ([20:1–48](#))
 - 3. Chaotic aftermath ([21:1–24](#))
 - C. Final verdict ([21:25](#))¹

¹ Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 433-438). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.