

JUDGES

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There may be problems with the chronology of the book of Judges but Arthur Cundall has set out a guide mainly to show how long a period of time was involved.

The oppression of Cushan-rishathaim	8 years
The period of rest following Othniel's deliverance	40 years
The Moabite oppression	18 years
Period of rest after Ehud's deliverance	80 years
The oppression of Jabin	20 years
Rest following Deborah's deliverance	40 years
The oppression of Midian	7 years
Rest following Gideon's deliverance	40 years
The reign of Abimelech	3 years
The judgeship of Tola	23 years
The judgement of Jair	22 years
The oppression of Ammon	18 years
The judgeship of Jephthah	6 years
The judgeship of Ibzan	7 years
The judgeship of Elon	10 years
The judgeship of Abdo	8 years
The oppression of Philistia	40 years

This is 390 years to which may be added 20 years of Samuel's judgeship giving a total of 410 years. The oppressions of Ammon and Philistia may be contemporaneous and there is the 20 year period of Samson's judgeship but it is within the period of the Philistia oppression. No allowance has been made for Shamgar and the 40 years of Eli has not be counted for. But what is being put forward is that the figures remains very high.

Frequent references to the moral and religious shortcomings of the judges will be found in this book but the basic religion was based on four principles. As we have said before, the Bible is a honest book and reveals the weaknesses of the children of Israel and Christians and yet objectors to Christianity expect Christians to be perfect.. The four principles of religion were:

God is righteous

God is sovereign

God is gracious and longsuffering

The importance of faith.

What is clear from the beginning of this book is that while Canaan was subdued the conquest was, however, incomplete. The success of Joshua is presented in a way that sets the need for judges. Enquiry is made of the Lord as to which tribe or tribes should take the lead against the Canaanites. Judah and Simeon were blood brothers and had the closest relationship and they lead the attack on the Canaanites and Perizzites and, at Bezel, killed 10,000 men. One of the enemies was Adonibezek who was captured and his thumbs and big toes were removed. It must be remembered that the Canaanites were evil people.

Some Canaanites were defeated in Hebron and Caleb, who may have been the younger brother or nephew of Othniel, and said he would give his daughter as wife to the victor of this battle at Kirjatharba the original name of Hebron.

There were also defeats at Zephath, Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron. But the tribe of Benjamin did not defeat the Jebusites in Jerusalem. Manasseh did not drive out those in Bethel and Megiddo and other tribes were also unsuccessful.

An angel of the Lord reminded the children of Israel that the Lord delivered them from the cruelty of Egypt and that they were to make no leagues with the Canaanites. The people of Israel had lamented the passing of Joshua but the people now mingled with the enemies and turned to apostasy performing evil in the sight of the Lord and went after heathen gods such as Baalim as Ashtoreth. The Lord was angry and sent spoilers among the Israelites who had broken their covenant with God and who now refused to drive out the enemies.

There is something obvious here but it must be said. When Joshua was alive the people of God were basically loyal to the Lord. Joshua was a great leader and a fine soldier. Now he is dead and the people have embraced apostasy and God's judgement is upon them. The nation had forsaken the Lord.

The nation's failure to eliminate the enemies allowed them to make bonds with them including intermarriage and the worship of heathen deities and this they did willingly.

And so the children of Israel lived with their enemies. The Lord was angry and raised up Cushan-rishatha, king of Mesopotamian. Israel served him for 18 years and the Israelites cried to the Lord for deliverance and the deliverer was Othniel.

But the people did evil again. Eglon, king of Moab, was the next oppressor and eventually he was stabbed to death but Judge Ehud and Moab was defeated and 10,000 people were killed.

Judge Shamgar took on Philistia with an ox goad and 600 enemies died.

The apostasy of the nation was the reason for Divine punishment but also to test Israel's loyalty.

Chapter 4 of the book of Judges introduces us to the oppression of Jair, king of Hazor, and Sisera and they had 900 chariots of iron.

We are also introduced to Deborah, the saviour of the people and the only female judge who was already established as a prophetess as well as a judge in a non-military sphere She challenged Barak to gather his men at Mount Tabor and he was not happy to respond quickly, understandably

for the foe was formidable, The tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali went to fight with ten thousand men and Deborah accompanied them. Sisera fled for his life to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, and while Sisera was asleep, Jael drove a nail into his temple and killed him and the oppression was subdued. Deborah and Barak rendered a song of thanksgiving.

But the Israelites fell into sin again and were oppressed by the Midianites and the frightened Israelites made themselves caves, dens and strongholds. The Amalekites joined the Midianites in the oppression of Israel who eventually called on the Lord for deliverance.

How strange it is that people, even today, call upon God when they are in trouble but not before. Some even pray to God in whom they do not believe.

The children of Israel are again reminded of their deliverance from Egypt by the voice of a prophet.

An angel appeared unto Gideon in chapter six, who is instructed to save Israel from the Midianites and the angel performed a miracle by providing fire to cook unleavened bread and flesh. And Gideon built an altar in Ophrah, as instructed

Gideon tested God. He said, If I put out a fleece and if the dew be on the fleece only and the earth be dry I will know that the Lord wants me to save this people Gideon was a fearful man, afraid of his father's household and the men of the city, and offered a burnt sacrifice by night. This was discovered and voices exclaimed, Who has done this? The men of the city were cross because an altar to Baal had been taken down and the men wanted Gideon to come out. His father, Joash, said, Are you pleading for Baal? Joash defended his son.

Then Gideon put the Lord to the test by saying, If I put out a fleece and only the dew makes it wet and the ground be dry than I will know that I am to save Israel and Gideon repeated the test by saying, Let the fleece be dry and the earth be wet. And it was so.

This raises an often quoted problem. Are we right to test God? Was Gideon right to do so? He was probably coming very close to angering the Lord. See Deuteronomy 6.16 and Luke 4,12.

Gideon is now called Jerubbbaal and gathered his army. 300 men were chosen lapping water with their hands and the Lord promised that this small army would be victorious. Gideon had a dream that a barley loaf would tumble into a tent of Midian which was overturned. This was taken as a sign of victory. Two princes of the Midianites.. Oreb and Zebec were captured and later slain.

The Ephraim tribe were initially offended as they appeared to have enjoyed a supremacy over other tribes and yet why were they not invited to join forces to fight against the Midianites. The reply was that the prince of Midian have been delivered into their hands and so the Ephraim tribe were appeased.

Zebah and Zalmanna were defeated. The men of Succoth of the tribe of Dan did not offer any sustenance for Gideon's returning and exhausted army which army were true to Gideon and admired him. The Midianites were subdued.

Gideon died of a good age,

In chapter nine, we encounter Abimelech, one of the sons of Gideon. He sought to rule over Shechem and he eliminated all opposition including three of his brothers but brother Jotham stayed alive. Abimelech did become king of Shechem and ruled for about three years until a conspiracy was launched against him and civil war broke out. Abimelech cornered the rebels in a tower and came near to burning it down. A woman in the tower slipped and dropped a rock on Abimelech's

head. Knowing he would not survive, he ordered his young armour bearer to kill him which he did and so the battle ended.

It is tragic to believe that Gideon, who was basically a good man, had such an evil son.

In chapter 10, we read of the brief reigns of two judges, Tola and Jair.

And Israel went back to evil ways and the worship of Baal. The Lord was understandably angry and allowed them to fall into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites. The Ammonites encamped in Gilead and the Israelites in Mizpeh and the enemies said, Who will dare to fight against us, the Ammonites? After crying to the Lord the children of Israel were reminded of their great deliverance from Egypt and they put away their gods.

Gilead was an area in the Promised Land and Mizpeh was in that area belonging to the tribe of Dan and the scene was set for a battle.

We read of Jephthah in chapter eleven who came from Gilead and was a mighty man of valour and was the son of a prostitute and was thrust out of the family because of his mother. He fled and dwelt in Tob and other mighty men gathered to him. The threat of the bellicose Ammonites was such that the men of Gilead later sought him out. There was some debate and the elders agreed that if Jephthah was victorious he would be both head and captain of the people.

He sent messages to the Ammonites asking what is the cause of this threat and they replied that Israel had taken away their land.

Jephthah made a solemn vow unto the Lord that if he were to be victorious then he would sacrifice the first thing that appeared from his house in gratitude and it happened to be his daughter. The victory over the Ammonites is only briefly recorded.

There is much written in secular books and other sources about whether the daughter of Jephthah story is true and I cannot see what value there is in disputing the matter save for those who want to condemn the Bible at every opportunity.

A query has arisen during these talks and it is, Did the judges judge all of Israel? From North to South was about 160 miles and travelling that distance could be achieved in a fortnight and the judges would also have messengers and staff. In the time of Moses (Numbers 32), two and a half tribes took possession east of Jordan and acknowledged their geographical separation from the nine and a half tribes. The two and a half tribes were Gad, Reuben and half of Manasseh but there is no evidence that they were not under the judgeship of the rest of Israel. In today's terms this area would be called Transjordan which means over Jordan or beyond Jordan.

Again the Ephraimites quarrelled and this time it was with Jephthah about their non involvement with the latest conflict. Cundall points out that the Ephraimites were jealous and they had made a similar complaint in the time of Gideon and the Ephraimites felt that they had been slighted in not being called to battle. But the argument seems to be that the Ephraimites were called to action but did not respond. The Ephraimites sneered at this, accusing the Gileadites of being renegade Ephraimites.

This bitter debate ended in war between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites and 42, 000 Ephraimites were slain in battle, a battle that should never have been.

Even today in the Christian church, there is 'civil war' such as Catholics versus Protestants and in the Pentecostal and charismatic churches there are terrible divides with other evangelical groups.

The Pentecostals and charismatics say that they, and only they, have the true Gospel which they call the Full Gospel which, like the Ephraimites is a claim to be superior.

We now encounter in chapter twelve, three judges of which we know little. Ibzan who had 60 children which suggests his wealth. Then there was Elon of the tribe of Zebulun and Abdon whose wealth is also shown by his many sons and grandsons.

Samson is the subject of chapters 13 to 16. His birth was foretold and the child was to be a Nazarite from birth. A Nazarite abstained from wine and the fruits that were used in it ; they did not cut their hair and they were not to be connected with graves or corpses. The Lord had chose Samson to fight the Philistines since the children of Israel were again doing evil in the sight of the Lord.

The angel of the Lord appeared unto Manoah's wife and she told her husband of this visitation and the promise of a son to her barren body who was to be a Nazarite. Manoah entreated the Lord to send the messenger again and some visitation took place, Manoah was troubled because he had seen God and thought that he and his wife might die so he offered up a meat sacrifice. Samson was born and the Lord blessed him

At one stage he was infatuated with a daughter of the Philistines. A lion roared at him and he fought with it and killed it. The carcass swarmed with honey and bees.

Samson married the Philistine woman contrary to Jewish tradition It appears that Manoah might have tried to stop the wedding. Samson told them a riddle and would award sheets and garments if someone solved it in seven days. The riddle was, Out of the eater came forth meat and out of the strong came forth sweetness. The riddle could not be solved and people tried to get his wife to force Samson to reveal its meaning. His wife became upset and accused him of not loving her and so he told her. What a trivial thing to get upset about !

Samson was cross at his wife's indiscretion and angry with the Philistines. The payment of the wager and the desire for revenge put away any thoughts of marriage and he went to Ashkelon and slew 30 Philistines who were probably connected in some way with the wedding feast and showed disrespect towards Samson, whose wife was given to his best man.

Due to climate change, the wheat harvest varies in the regions of Palestine and there is a reference to the harvest in the story of Samson.

Samson's anger has now been reduced and he decides to go to Timnah to live with his wife.. He took a gift of a kid to counter her resentment but her parents regarded his abrupt dismissal of their daughter as complete alienation and sought to remove the disgrace by giving her to the best man The offer of the bride's younger sister to Samson may have been due to the fear that Samson could display, or the parents thinking that they had acted hastily and wanted to placate Samson. Samson refused the offer of the younger sister and, as he was deeply hurt, he vowed vengeance on the Philistines. He took foxes and put firebrands to their brushes and sent them through the cornfields of the Philistines and this was a common method of retaliation in the ancient world.

When the fire reached the olive plantation the Philistines anger was greatly increased. It is true that two wrongs do not make a right and what Samson did provoked an act and response. Three thousand men of Judah went to the top of the rock at Etam and lamented that the Philistines were ruling over them. There was a further slaughter of the Philistines and Samson used the jawbone of an ass as a weapon. Thirsty, after his exhaustion., the Lord struck a rock to produce water.

Human thought is not the same as the written word but many believe that Samson was not free from blame He should not have married an enemy of his people,. His riddle sparked off

unnecessary controversy. His cruelty to the foxes and his despicable destruction of the harvest was appalling.

But God had given a barren woman a son and he did deliver Israel from the Philistines who oppresses Israel for forty years.. However, his behaviour was unorthodox and it does not sanction anyone to follow his example. Samson judged Israel for 25 years in the days of the Philistines.

In chapter 16, Samson goes in to a prostitute and news of this got around particularly among the Gazites, the people of Gaza who threatened to kill him. They were constantly spying on him and wanting to ruin his reputation.. In his anger he tore down the gates of the city and took them up a hill facing Hebron.

It is written that Solomon loved many strange women who turned his heart away from the Lord and he did evil in the sight of the Lord. Samson.. although not as promiscuous as Solomon, had unbridled passion and now the secret of his life was about to be discovered and it concerned another lover. Her name was Delilah and the Philistines offered her a reward if she could discover the secret of his great strength, This was going to be another problem such as that with Samson's riddle. She went about this deception with cunning and we have to wonder why Samson did not catch on.

He was probably blinded by his passion. In her first three attempts to find the information, Samson probably thought it was teasing or sexual play but the Philistines were always waiting.

Delilah pleaded with him to tell her the secret of his strength. He replied, If some ties me with seven fresh bowstrings I'd be as weak as any other men. So the Philistines brought her seven new bowstrings and she tied him and then shouted, Samson. the Philistines are upon you. He broke free and escaped. The second attempt was with fresh unused ropes and she bound him and then shouted the alarm and he escaped again The third attempt was when Delilah complained that he did not love her and would not share this secret with her. Samson replied that if braids of his hair were fastened to the fabric of the loom and was tightened with a pin he would be as weak as any man. He revealed the secret to her saying, If my head is shaved I will lose my strength. Delilah told the Philistines.

Samson went to sleep on her lap and someone shaved his head of seven braids of hair. The Philistines captured him, gouged out his eyes.. and led him away captive duly shackled. He worked grinding grain in the prison. The Philistines praised their gods for this victory and they wanted to mock Samson and get him to entertain a crowd of 3000 in a heathen temple. Samson was brought out and ridiculed. He prayed to God for strength and pulled down the pillars of the temple and it was said that he killed more Philistines in his death than in his lifetime. His body was recovered and buried in the family grave.

The final five chapters are appendices and deal first with the story of Micah who lived in the hill country of Ephraim. He admitted to his mother that he had stolen her 1100 shekels of silver. He gave it back but his mother said he could make a silver image. A silversmith was given 200 shekels to make the image and it was put in Micah's house. This is an example of idolatry in these times of religious and political upheaval. He made a shrine an ephod and other household gods and installed one of his sons as priest. A young Levite from Bethlehem came to his house looking for somewhere to stay. For ten shekels a year, Micah would house him if he were to be a father and priest to him.

Before the Danites had their inheritance as one of the tribes of Israel, they were seeking land. Their five spies came to Micah's house and they recognised the young Levite who said that the spies journey would be profitable and was approved by the Lord. They reported back to the Danites who with 600 men at Micah's gate waited while the spies went in and took the idol, the ephod and the household gods. The Danites went their way and Micah's men overtook them but returned home

while the Danites went to peaceable Laish and attacked the people and burned the city. Later they rebuilt the city.

Chapter 19 deals with the story of the Levite and his concubine who proved unfaithful to him, left him and went back to her parents. After a few days, the Levite went to seek her out and the parents welcomed him. The Levite regularly tried to go but was welcomed back by the parents spending a few days and nights there. Eventually, the Levite, his concubine and a servant left on two donkeys. As night fell, they thought of staying in Jerusalem but it was inhabited by non-Israelites and so they went on to Gibeah and began to stay the night in the square but an old man took pity on them and took them to his house.

The men of that city wanted the Levite to come out and have sex with them. This did not happen but they took the concubine and raped her. The angry Levite cut the concubine up into twelve pieces, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and messengers, who took the parts to the tribes, told the story of the outrage of the men of Gibeah.

All of Israel were summoned to an assembly but the Benjamites did not come or lend their support but presumably they were summoned. The problem was that Gibeah was of the tribe of Benjamin and they would not give up the wicked miscreants and, as a result, the rest of the tribes demanded vengeance. The Benjamites would not release them and gathered an army together of some 26,000 soldiers and fought the Israelites and the tribe of Judah was in the front line. The tribe of Benjamin were defeated

This is a curious story. Why would the Levite mutilate his concubine? Why go to a full scale war over a few miscreants?

The final chapter deals with wives for the Benjaminites. The men of Mizpah had taken a vow not to give their daughters to Benjaminites. But the rest of Israel grieved for the children of Benjamin but a vow was made that anyone who did not assemble before the Lord at Mizpah should be put to death, men and women, but virgins were to be spared and taken to the camp at Shiloh.

The total assembly then offered peace to the Benjaminites. The 400 girls were not sufficient for all the men and so the men were told to hide and when the girls came out of the vineyards dancing a man should seize one for his wife.

This also is a strange story but, as it says, there was no king of Israel in those days and no universal law and some attitudes and actions were extreme. When Samuel was old, Israel demanded a king (1 Samuel 8) but before this a centralised monarch was desired by some.

The lessons of the book are that God will not allow sin to go unpunished and He does exercise discipline. Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth says the anonymous writer to the Hebrews. In many modern churches today there is no discipline but anything goes and, surely, only the best is good enough for the Lord.

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