

Leaders Training Day – 28th July 2018

Introduction to Judges

The structure of Judges

Introduction (1:1-3:7)

The judges and their spiral into corruption (3:7-16:31)

- *Pretty-good (3:8-5:31)*
 - Othniel (3:7-11)
 - Ehud (3:12-30)
 - Shamgar (3:31)
 - Deborah (4-5)
- *Okay (6-9)*
 - Gideon (6-8)
 - Interlude: the disastrous sort-of-kingship of Abimelech (9)
- *Bad (10-12)*
 - Jephthah
- *Worse (13-16)*
 - Sampson

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The corruption of Israel as a whole (17-21)

- *Religious chaos: the incident with Micah (17-18)*

- *Moral chaos: the Levite, his concubine, and Israel's first civil war (19-21)*

Themes

- Cycle: sin → oppression → repentance → deliverance (via judge) → peace → sin.

- Not just a cycle, a spiral.

- The cause: covenant unfaithfulness.
 - Israel is told to take the land but meets with far less success than expected. Why? 2:1-5. Not because of the Canaanite's military superiority but because of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness: already, they are allowing pagan altars to remain standing, which they were expressly told not to do.
 - 2:11-19: a summary of the entire period of the judges and why things go as badly as they do - apostasy.
 - The key question of the book is, 'Why didn't Israel ever fully possess the land God promised to their ancestors?' and the answer is, 'Because of the apostasy that followed the death of Joshua, and continued in spite of all God's efforts to reclaim Israel from it.'

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- The cure: a king (17:6, 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).
 - But even then, kingship itself won't solve the problem, because ultimately the problem is not this or that form of government, but the sinfulness that infests every human's heart, judge or king. Just see the history of the kings!
 - What Israel needs isn't *a* king but *the* king; a leader who, untouched by the problem of human sin, can pull them out of the spiral of disaster and into the life of covenant faithfulness they were always meant to live.
- Yahweh's relationship with Israel has never been dependent on Israel's desert, but on Yahweh's elective love, i.e. grace. This was as true then as it is now.

Purpose

- *Judges* is set between the death of Joshua and the rise of the monarchy. This sets it between about 1325BC and 1090BC, a period of about 235 years.
- Dating is disputed, but it was probably written at some point shortly after the split between Israel and Judah but possibly as late as the sixth century BC.
- Purpose:
 - To remind its readers of God's faithfulness to Israel even in its darkest hour. The period of the judges was so chaotic Israel could easily have been lost. But it wasn't: not because the Israelites were good, but because God was.
 - To reinforce the advantages of kingship.

Bringing it into the New Testament

Judges barely gets mentioned in the New Testament. There are some veiled allusions but only two explicit references: one to the period of the judges as a whole in Ac 13:20, and one which lists some of the judges as people of faith in Heb 11. This last reference is worth looking at, as it is the best direct evidence of how the New Testament thinks about *Judges*:

'And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised . . .' Heb 11:32-33.

This passage gives us three helpful pointers for understanding *Judges* as Christians:

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1. It does not condemn the judges but praises them alongside such worthy figures as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Despite all their faults, they are still part of the ‘great cloud of witnesses’ (12:1) which looks on at our lives.
2. The judges appear in a passage all about faith (11:1-2). In fact, they are specifically said to have ‘*through faith conquered kingdoms*’ (11:33). As such we can’t see them entirely as failures. Despite all their sins, they, too, lived ‘by faith’ in some way.
3. This passage is a summary of salvation history, starting with Abel and ending with Jesus (11:4-12:3). As such, the judges form part of that salvation history. They are not just an aberration but are part of a wider storyline of God’s dealings with us.

This last point is the most important. The best way to read *Judges* is to see how it adds to the overall storyline of the Bible. In particular, it is to see that it is one stage along the way to God unifying not just the world but the whole cosmos under *one ruler*, Jesus.

Judges is a snap-shot of one particular time in history when God’s rule was established on earth, but only part of it (only in Israel, and only parts of it), and only in a fragmented way (under occasional judges, not permanent kings). Eventually, we know that God’s rule will extend across the whole universe and in a unified way, under the kingship of Christ (Eph 1:10). As Christians, we live between these times, in which God’s rule now extends across the earth, in the form of the church, and has been established firmly in the hands of one man, Jesus Christ. In seeking to spread the gospel to more people, and in awaiting Christ’s return to claim his rule of the cosmos, we form part of God’s plan to end the fragmentation of his world under sin and death and unite it under his rule of righteousness and life.

Further resources

- *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Longman III & Dillard (eds.)
- *The Book of Judges*, Webb (long, but readable)
- *Judges: such a great salvation*, Ralph Davis (short, and very readable)
- <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/judges/>