JUDGES

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Both the Jewish and Christian traditions consider Judges to be a continuation of Israel’s sacred history that begins with creation and sagas of the patriarchs in Genesis, and continues with the epic of Israel’s liberation from slavery, journey across the wilderness, and covenant with God through Moses in Exodus through Deuteronomy. The covenant between Israel and God, initiated on Mount Sinai, is a contracted commitment to exclusive loyalty. Israel may neither worship nor submit to any other god, and the people must demonstrate their loyalty through obedience to God’s law. God in turn will establish Israel in its own territory and assure its protection and prosperity.

Covenant, Crisis, and Deliverance

Judges together with Joshua portray how that covenant comes to fulfillment in Canaan, the Promised Land. But while Joshua describes Israel’s conquest
of Canaan as unified and thorough, Judges depicts the hold on the land as fragmented and fragile. Israel as a unified nation seems to exist more in potential than in reality. The triumphant victory over Canaan led by Moses’ successor Joshua deteriorates into an ongoing scrabble by Israel’s disparate tribes to preserve their lives and livelihood. Judges is an epic of tumult and transition before Israel’s emergence as a single nation-state.

Perhaps the most unexpected thing about the book of Judges is how little judging goes on in it. The heroic (and not so heroic) figures of these stories are charismatic leaders called judges, but they serve primarily as military commanders. We read about men and women who actually “judged” or ruled in Israel, but we do not read about acts of great judicial wisdom as much as acts of great deliverance. The judges of Israel were local heroes whose success in battle was taken as evidence of God’s choice and favor: the “spirit of the
Lord” was upon them. While this allowed them to serve at times as princes, prophets, and even priests, their divine charge was ultimately to deliver Israel from its enemies.

A concern for deliverance pervades all aspects of Judges. The individual stories, larger literary structure, and overarching themes emphasize the idea that Israel 1) repeatedly forgets its history of deliverance by God, 2) is constantly in need of deliverance by God, and 3) can always count on God’s deliverance. Some aspects of Judges may seem disjointed, and layers of oral and textual history sometimes result in contradictory messages. Ultimately, however, the book as a whole reinforces the notion that God’s people can and must rely on God’s power and love as expressed in covenantal relationship. God is always faithful, though not always in ways we expect.
The Structure and Origin of Judges

The book itself can be roughly divided into 3 sections. Judges 1:1–3:6 recapitulates the Israelite settlement of Canaan, with an emphasis on the Canaanite peoples not eradicated in Joshua. The second section, Judges 3:7–15:20, is the main body of the book, recounting the dramatic folk-history of the judges themselves. The third and final section is chapters 16–20, in which Israel’s glory and blessedness disintegrate into moral and political chaos.

This larger structure presents the period of the judges as a kind of glorious but failed experiment in decentralized nationhood. Close examination reveals that the thrilling stories of battle are fairly provincial. It is rare that any judge commands fighters from more than a handful of Israel’s twelve tribes. Nevertheless, the text frames each crisis as a national one, the result of all Israel turning away from God, and each
victory as the restoration of all Israel’s peaceful existence in the land. In Judges 3:7–15:20 the pattern goes roughly as follows:

- The Israelites did (again) what was evil in the sight of the LORD…
  
  …and the LORD gave them into the hand of (an enemy people).

- The Israelites cried to the LORD…

  …and the LORD raised up (someone to save them).

- So the land had rest (for some period of time).

Thus a story like Jephthah’s (Judges 11 & 12) that seems to concern only Gilead and Ephraim is appropriated as a part of a national narrative for all twelve tribes.

To illustrate the point, consider the folk-heroes of the United States. Betty Zane of Wheeling, W. Va. is primarily a local hero of the revolutionary war, but the Daughters of the American Revolution have stitched her into a larger narrative of American female heroism.
Similarly, John Chapman ("Johnny Appleseed") of Ohio and Indiana, John Henry of West Virginia, and John Luther "Casey" Jones of the lower Mississippi Valley are regional folk-heroes whose stories were made into national legends. Through song and story, these figures became national icons of perseverance and bravery.

Likewise, the stories of Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Samson, and the others most likely began as local folklore, tales told within their own tribes and territories that drew on classic types such as tricksters and bandits. The narrative frame does not diminish individual stories but reorients them from sources of local pride to sources of national identity. The heart of that identity is the covenantal requirement that Israel devote itself to God alone. Each story is a reminder of the unifying obligation to be faithful, just as God has been faithful. Each time Israel falls away from God in Judges, it is because in a sense the people have forgotten who they are.
Despite their habit of forgetting, God always delivers them. This generates more stories of God’s faithfulness that reinforce the covenantal core of Israel’s identity. Each act of deliverance and its resultant story ought to prevent future forgetfulness; but, sadly, they never do.

The book of Judges then not only recounts a history of Israel, but represents a moment in Israel’s development that required a national narrative. This historical moment is most likely the early monarchy, the period of those first kings Saul and David whose unifying agenda needed all the help it could get. The book of Judges ties the heroes of the tribes together in the same way that the early kings struggled to unite those tribes under a single political banner. The genius of Judges is its skill at celebrating local heroes at the same time it questions the capacity of local leaders to keep Israel morally or militarily secure. Chapters 17–20 describe mounting chaos with the refrain “There was no king in Israel then, and everyone
did what was right in his own eyes.” For the narrator of Judges, a lack of central political authority is the primary cause of Israelite apostasy and national decay. Unlike the loose federation of tribes in Judges, a single, unifying king will provide moral, political, and military stability.

**A Place at the Center for those on the Margins**

At the same time that the narrator advocates against decentralized authority, the book also betrays reservations about human kingship and revels in the opportunities a looser structure can provide. The covenantal imperative of exclusive loyalty to God strongly implies that Israel should have no king other than God. Each new charismatic leader is a divine gift whose authority always points back to God’s. Attempts to establish a human monarchy such as the appeal to Gideon in chapter 8 or Abimelech’s power grab in chapter 9 are clear-
ly condemned as overreaching and hazardous to the health of the covenant.

Without a strong, central institution of power, there is more authority to go around, and anyone gifted by God can have access to some of that authority. Women, illegitimate sons, and other marginalized people are able to exercise power in ways they will not be able to do in the more regulated structure of the monarchy. In fact, those who are socially marginal seem to be better suited for the role of “judge” because it is itself a somewhat marginal role. The hero endowed with God’s own spirit negotiates between the human and divine worlds, dispenses justice in battle and in peace, and upends the socially established power of the strong in defense of the weak. Bandits, bastards, and south-paws have no stake in the status quo that regards them all with suspicion, and so are perhaps more ready for a divine call to clean up the misery and injustice that inevitably follows from abandoning God’s covenant.
A good example of this is Ehud (Judges 3), a lefty from the tribe of Benjamin—a name that happens to mean “son of the right hand.” In Ehud’s story, the Moabites are the oppressing enemy. Ehud comes before the corpulent Moabite king Eglon (meaning “Calf”) for a ceremonial presentation of tribute offerings. The palace guards, not expecting him to be left-handed, have inspected only Ehud’s left side, from which a right-handed man would draw his sword. After the ceremony, Ehud lures the “fatted calf” Eglon off and dispatches him with a dagger smuggled in on the right thigh. Ehud saunters out and musters the Israelite army before the Moabites even know they have been tricked and undone. So honor comes to the God of Israel through a left-handed rogue.

Judges in no way depicts ancient Israel as an ideal of gender equality, but the stories in the book are very comfortable with assertive and even aggressive women. The first of these is Achsah,
who successfully demands that her father give her property with water rights (Judges 1). Better known are the prophet Deborah and the heroine Jael. Deborah’s charisma is such that Barak, the man called by God to muster an army against the Canaanites, will not go into battle without her. Deborah agrees but openly scorns Barak for timidity. Jael is wife to a Kenite allied with Israel’s Canaanite enemy, but ultimately becomes one of Israel’s greatest heroes. When the Canaanite general Sisera seeks asylum in Jael’s tent, she acts decisively and with startling violence, driving a tent peg into his skull. This story was so beloved that Judges tells it twice, first in prose narrative (Judges 4) and then in a song that may be the most ancient text preserved in Scripture (Judges 5). That song celebrates the ruggedness of Israelite women in mocking contrast with Canaanite women’s fragility.

The daughter of Jephthah displays faithfulness that is at once heroic and
alarming (Judges 11). Her ambitious father bargains with God for victory in exchange for the sacrifice of whomever or whatever first meets him when he comes home from battle. When the war is won, his daughter greets Jephthah first, and declares astonishing acceptance of her fate. She demands a stay of two months to go off with friends into the hills, a rite of mourning that the young women of Israel would commemorate for four days a year for some years afterward. Was Jephthah’s daughter the unwitting victim of her father’s reckless promise, or did she make an ethical choice to prevent the death of those more vulnerable in her father’s house? Do the daughters of Israel celebrate her submission to God and her father, or her moral courage and prophetic sacrifice? The text leaves us to ponder these questions.

**Questions Without Answers**

Moral ambiguity and issues of justice continue through the remainder
of Judges. Samson is the last of the individually named judges, and certainly the most colorful, but he seems ravenous, half-wild, and all too entangled with Philistines and foreign women to be a true deliverer for Israel. Curiously, the Israelites do not seem all that interested in being delivered. Instead, they demand he stop meddling with their oppressors and even hand him over as a prisoner (Judges 15). In this episode, Samson performs one of his best-known deeds, slaughtering a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Samson continues to leave a trail of lifeless Philistines behind him, but this is generally the result of selfish vengeance, not a commitment to Israel. The spirit of God is with Samson, but his charisma does not seem oriented toward God’s covenant with Israel. Instead, this unpredictable Nazirite careens about the land indulging his unrestrained violent and erotic appetites.

After Samson, the book of Judges ceases to be an epic of individual
heroes, but instead an epic tragedy of families, cities, and tribes grasping for power and failing to connect with God. “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 17:6). In matters of worship, war, and justice, the people show little interest in what their God truly wants from them. Self-interest eclipses social responsibility and corrupts virtually every relationship, even between mother and son.

The saga opens with a man, Micah, confessing that he has stolen money from his mother, who then blesses him, and commissions an idol to be made from the stolen silver. Micah sets up this idol in a dubious shrine with the dubious priestly service of a wandering Levite from Bethlehem. Soon after the unsettled tribe of Dan also comes wandering through Micah’s territory, and extort the whole package from him: shrine, idol, and priest. They go on to decimate the peaceful city of Laish, take possession of it for themselves as the
city of Dan, and establish their own questionable cult-site there. This tale of escalating corruption is crowned by the revelation that the Levite-for-hire is Jonathan son of Gershom, the son of Moses.

There then follows another Levite, unnamed, whose lack of judgment and compassion leads to the rape and murder of one of his own wives in the Benjaminite city of Gibeah. He responds to the atrocity by cutting up the woman’s body and sending out the pieces to all Israel—a gruesome call to vengeance against the city. Pretending the role of Judge, the Levite manipulates the covenant’s unifying power into a rationale for civil war. The tribe of Benjamin refuses to attack Gibeah and for two days resists the rest of Israel’s armies, eliminating forty thousand Israelite soldiers. By the third day, however, all but six hundred Benjaminite men are slaughtered. The victorious tribes vow not to allow their own daughters to marry into Benjamin, but soon regret that their
kindred tribe will face extinction. Their solution is to turn a blind eye on Benjaminite raids and mass kidnappings of young women from Jabesh-Gilead and even the holy sanctuary at Shiloh. The liberty of decentralization and charismatic authority has given way to anarchy and mindless violence.

**Hope in the Midst of Uncertainty**

There is no happy ending to Judges. We are left only with unanswered questions. Where is God in all of this? What is he going to do about it? Will God not deliver his people? Yet, the power of these questions is to make us turn the page and see what God will do next. The uncertainty at the end of Judges keeps us engaged with the story, because Judges is not the end of the story. God will ultimately respond to his people, but divine deliverance will take on different forms to meet the needs of the people in their changing circumstances. The stories in Judges, and all of Scripture, are compelling because they
demonstrate that God is never finished, but always about to do something new.
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