

THE BOOK OF JUDGES – “DOWNWARD SPIRAL”

What is the basic message of Judges?

- the repeated failures of Israel to love God and the inadequacy of all the judges to truly rescue Israel

The Book of Judges is a series of redemption cycles:

- (1) the people rebel against God
- (2) God allows the people to suffer from their sins
- (3) the people cry out to God for deliverance
- (4) God sends a judge – a deliverer
- (5) there is a period of rest and peace

You see this pattern in the first judge – Othniel | Judges 3:7-12

Stage 1 – Israel rebels against God

⁷ And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth.

Stage 2 – God allows his people to suffer from their sins

⁸ Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia. And the people of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.

Stage 3 – Israel cries out to God for deliverance

^{9a} But when the people of Israel cried out to the LORD,

Stage 4 – God sends a deliverer

^{9b} the LORD raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD was upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand. And his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

Stage 5 – There is a period of rest and peace

^{11a} So the land had rest forty years.

Stage 6 – Judge dies; repeat stages 1-5

^{11b} Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died. ¹² And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD.

The pattern devolves until there is absolute darkness and despair

Judges 8

²⁴ And Gideon said to them, “Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil.” ... ²⁷ And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.

³⁰ Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. ³¹ And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. ³² And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

Judges 13:1-2

¹ And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. ² There was a certain man of Zorah... Samson.

Judges 14:1-2

¹ Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. ² Then he came up and told his father and mother, “I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife.”

Judges 19:1

In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.

Judges 19:22-25

²² As they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the house, beating on the door. And they said to the old man, the master of the house, “Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him.” ²³ And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing. ²⁴ Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out now. Violate them and do with them what seems good to you, but against this man do not do this outrageous thing.” ²⁵ But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and made her go out to them. And they knew her and abused her all night until the morning.

Judges, “The Downward Spiral” | Notes

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Like a nightmare-ish broken record

- the people rebel | God sends a judge | there is peace | but the judge dies | the people rebel again

So is message of Judges hopeless despair?

- no – this gospel in negative relief | we see the gospel in the negative space, in absence of something...
- shows us futility of all moral reform, the inadequacy of all merely human judges | 400 years, 12 judges

This shows us a new way to read the Old Testament

- typically read it as a book of heroes | moral examples to imitate – like Veggie Tales
- but primary message of the Old Testament is the gospel in negative relief

That is depressing enough that pattern keeps repeating | but Judges goes further

- because the pattern devolves and gets worse and worse

Another theme in Judges – God saves through weakness of judges, not their strength

- Ehud – left-handed, right hand is crippled
- Deborah – woman in a man’s world | Jael kills Sisera final blow
- Gideon – we meet him threshing wheat in a winepress, full of fear | 300 warriors
- Jephthah – son of prostitute, driven out of father’s house by brothers | despised and rejected
- Samson – movement from large army, 300, then a single man | saves through sacrificial death

Pattern devolves | people and judges get worse and worse

Gideon

- in aftermath of battle – back-biting and recriminations from Ephraim and two cities (Succoth and Peniel)
- first time, internal strife | Gideon responds w/ rage – flails skin of elders at Succoth and destroys tower at Peniel

We see Gideon descending into vengeance, pride and selfish ambition

- Gideon builds an ephod | special priestly clothing, made of gold, precious gems – discern will of God
- strict rules on ephod – to be used only at Tabernacle (in Ephraim) | builds rival religious center in Ophrah

Judges 8:24, 27 – ²⁴ And Gideon said to them, “Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil.” ... ²⁷ And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.

v. 27 is stunning in Book of Judges

- usually people fall into idolatry after the judge dies
- but for first time, people commit idolatry during judge’s reign | and judge is one leading people to do it!

Gideon begins acting like a Canaanite king

- kingship must come from God | king must be devout and humble
- but Gideon assembles a harem of women | names his son Abimelech (“my father is king”)

³⁰ Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. ³¹ And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. ³² And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

After Gideon dies, the people again whore after other gods and fall into oppression

- but don’t cry out to God for a deliverer but turn to Abimelech | pattern is breaking down
- Abimelech – first thing, kills his 70 brothers to consolidate power | makes himself king (of Shechem)
- short 3 year reign – civil war; Abimelech destroys Shechem; killed himself in battle
- pseudo-judge who mostly battles his own people and kills them
- picture of absolute darkness and despair – people are spiritually dead and leader is evil

Jephthah

- makes a vow to God – if you grant me victory, sacrifice first living thing come out of door of my house
- ends up killing his only child, his daughter
- like pagan religions – child sacrifice

Samson

- last and worse judge – completely morally compromised

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First – absence of repentance or crying out to God

- people are completely spiritually dead
- and, if read account, there doesn't seem as much conflict – meaning, almost peaceful occupation
- Samson has to fight alone – no one helps him | most profound enslavement – assimilation with paganism

Judges 14:1-2 – ¹ Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. ² Then he came up and told his father and mother, “I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife.”

Second – judge marries a pagan woman

- father objects, Samson – “get her for me, for she is right in my eyes”
- Samson doesn't want to fight the Canaanites, he wants to marry them!

In end, Samson fights the Philistines out of his sin | not obedience or to deliver Israel

- at wedding, Samson and Philistines guests make wager – solve riddle about lion
- out personal vengeance and pique, he kills Philistines
- then again, with Philistine woman Delilah | only captured and defeated, God grants his last wish
- Hebrews 11:32, heroes of faith – Samson was made strong out of weakness

The Book of Judges ends with civil war and darkest chapters in the Bible

Judges 19:1 – In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.

Story begins with a Levite with a concubine

- she leaves him and he comes to get her
- on his way home, he stops at Gibeah, a town in Tribe of Benjamin

Judges 19:22-25

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What story does this remind you of?

- echoes story in Genesis 19, Lot in Sodom
- what is implication? | Israel becomes Sodom, greatest symbol of evil and wickedness in Old Testament

Levite takes his concubine home

- takes his knife, carves her up into 12 pieces, sending pieces to tribes of Israel

Civil War

- Israel goes to war against Benjamin – virtually wipes them out
- reminiscent of how Israel was to war against Canaan – but this time, Israel does this to herself

600 Benjamite men survive, holding out in wilderness at rock of Rimmon | 4 month siege

- then Israel feels remorse and sorry for almost wiping out a tribe
- all taken vows never to allow daughters to marry into Benjamin

Decide to attack Jabesh-Gilead, which abstained from civil war

- massacre all inhabitants – men, women and children
- spare only marriageable virgins – 400 women
- these women are given as wives to 400 Benjamites
- remaining 200 Benjamites are allowed to kidnap women from Shiloh during festival

Story ends stunning portrait of apostasy, evil and civil strife

- never heard sermon from Judges 17-21, darkest chapters in Bible
- again, whole point of story is gospel in negative relief
- shows failure of Israel's leaders | therefore, longing for a true, righteous king

Judges 21:25

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Next book is Ruth – David's grandmother