



Judges

The book of Judges picks up some, though not all, of the stories of the individual tribes who settled in Canaan. It is set between the death of Joshua (end of the book of Joshua) and the birth of Samuel (beginning of the book of 1 Samuel) and focusses in particular on some of the leaders – who were then called judges – of the individual tribes. At this point the tribes were far from being a nation; instead they were a loose (sometimes very loose) confederation of tribes. Judges tells the story of the ups and downs of their early life in the Promised Land.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 1 ¾ hours

Short of time? Just read 1.1-3.6; 5.1-31; 6.1- 40; 16.1-31;



Genre

History



Inspiring quotes

I struggled to find a verse or verses that could count as 'inspiring' – the stories are amazing but there aren't many quotable quotes.



Anything tricky?

Quite a lot. The two most important tricky elements are

- Like Joshua, Judges appears to support driving the current inhabitants from the land. If you find it difficult you are not alone. The challenge is to work out what you think is going on here. Did God really say this? If so why?
- Another tricky issue that emerges when you read Judges next to Joshua is the question of whether they contradict each other. Joshua appears to say that God's people conquered the land swiftly and with little opposition, whereas Judges seems to suggest that it was more drawn out and involved losing as well as winning.



About the Author

Jewish tradition attributes the authorship of Judges to Samuel but there is no evidence for this or any other author within the book itself. In style and theology it is very similar to Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, and so it is often thought to form a collection of writings with them named by scholars the 'Deuteronomistic histories'.

What do we know about him?

Next to nothing.

The name implies (and intends to imply a theological connection with the book of Deuteronomy, since the outlook of all these books seems very similar. It is suggested that the author or, more likely, authors of these histories were influenced by Deuteronomy and told Israel's history from that perspective. The key feature here is that Deuteronomy stresses that God's people will only stay in the land if they remain faithful. Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings tell the story of how God's people failed to be faithful and so, eventually, went into exile from the land right at the end of 2 Kings.



About the times

No one really knows when these books were written. It is thought that they reached their final form in the sixth century bc (in other words shortly after the Judeans went into exile) and were finalised then in order to explain why the exile had happened at all. It is clear, however, that these final documents were drawn together from already existing sources, many of which would have been written at or shortly after the events described.

Indeed Judges contains what are seen as being some of the oldest material in the whole of the Bible. For example the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 could be as old as the twelfth century bc.

What were people feeling?

If it is right that these histories are written to explain why the exile happened then it is clear that the people would have been feeling hurt, despairing and lost. For a sense of what people were feeling then have a look at the book of Lamentations which provides an accurate insight into their emotions.

The people who lived at the time that Judges was written may not have felt much better. They had arrived in the much longed for Promised Land but the going was tough and unrelentingly hard.

Other books set around this time

Joshua, Ruth



What kind of Book is it?

This is a history book but it falls into the category of what you might call theological history – history with a purpose. It is not telling the events solely so that you can know what happened but so that you can understand why they happened. Many of the historical books of the Bible are like this.



How is it structured?

- 1.1-3.6 Laying out the problems
- 3.7-16.31 Stories about various judges (including Deborah, Gideon and Samson)
- 17.1-18.31 The theft of Micah's idol and the relocation of the tribe of Dan
- 19.1-21.25 The outbreak of civil war.



Look out for...

The angel of the Lord appears 18 times in Judges. Look out for the occasions when the angel appears and notice what role the angel plays in the story.

In a similar way the spirit of the Lord falls on four of the judges – Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. Look out for these occasions and, most importantly, for what happens when the Spirit has fallen on the relevant people.

The judges were hardly pristine models of good leadership. Look out for examples of their leadership as you read and reflect what there is to be learned (for good as well as for ill) from what you see.



What could this mean for me?

The story that comes to the surface time and time again in the book is the disastrous mess God's people make of their living in the land and God's overwhelming grace in helping them. Reflect on this theme as you encounter it and reflect on our world today - has much changed?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did you think the book was about?
- What did you think of the different judges? Did you have a favourite? And a least favourite? What did you notice about how they led?
- Women play a surprisingly dominant role in the book of the Judges. Which of them did you relate to most strongly? Why do you think there are so many women in this book when there are so few elsewhere?
- God's people are not portrayed in the best light in Judges. Do you think the depiction of them is fair? If yes (it is fair), why do you think they behaved as they did? If no (it is not fair), why do you think they were they portrayed like that?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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