

INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES

by
George Bush

Note: Author's introduction in *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Judges* (New York: Newman and Ivison, 1852). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

1. *Title, its Origin and Import*

The seventh book in the received order of the Hebrew Scriptures is termed שופטים *Shopetim*, *Judges*; a name derived from שפט *shaphat*, *to judge, to determine causes, to do justice, to vindicate*; and also, in general, *to rule, govern, regulate*; and applied here to the chief rulers who governed the Hebrew Republic from the days of Moses till the time of Saul because *ruling* and *judging* are so intimately connected in the East that sitting in judgment is one of the principal employments of the oriental sovereign.

From this it will be seen that the title, as thus applied, is to be taken in a wider sense than the same term conveys with us, viz., persons appointed to determine litigated questions and to pronounce the sentence of the law in criminal cases. Here, on the other hand, it is used to denote those occasional leaders and chief magistrates of the Israelites who led out the people to war against their enemies, and after having delivered them from the oppression of the neighboring nations, exercised each during peace the office of chief ruler and judge of Israel. Still the predominant idea conveyed by the term is rather that of military commanders, or more properly *avenging deliverers*, than of judicial officers, as this latter function came more within the province of the priests.

As the government of the Hebrew nation was strictly a Theocracy in which Jehovah himself was the chief magistrate, no provision was made for the appointment of any permanent or general ruler of the people. The High Priest was a kind of prime minister of Jehovah who exercised a general superintendence over all the great interests of the nation when there was no civil or military ruler especially chosen for the purpose. Each of the tribes had also their respective chiefs clothed with the primitive patriarchal powers, and in the ordinary state of things these arrangements were sufficient for the due administration of the affairs of the people.

But when peculiar emergencies arose, in consequence of the hostilities provoked by the apostasy and rebellion of the Israelites, extraordinary officers were called into requisition on whom was bestowed the appellation of *Judges*. They arose from time to time as their agency was needed, and for the most part when the tokens of a public repentance induced God to compassionate their calamities and afford them deliverance. They were sometimes called by God himself to the office they sustained and sometimes elected by the people. The authority with which they were clothed on their first appointment was in some instances surrendered

when they had achieved the objects to which it was owing, and in others was continued during life. They were not all, however, military leaders, and some of them appear to have ruled simultaneously over different tribes; and this is one of the circumstances which render the chronology of this period so perplexing.

Says Mr. Kitto,

They did not transmit their dignity to their descendants, neither did they appoint successors. They could not enact laws or impose taxes on the people, though they made peace or war, and in their judicial capacity decided causes without appeal. Yet all this power seems to have been rather the result of character and influence than of any authority recognized as inherent in the office. No salary or income was attached to it, nor did they receive emoluments of any kind. They had no external marks of distinction; they were surrounded by no circumstances of pomp or ceremony; they had no courtiers, guard, train, or equipage. They were, in general, men of moderate desires and content to deserve well of their country, without seeking to aggrandize or enrich themselves. They always considered and conducted themselves as specially called of God, relying upon him in all their enterprises, and making it their chief care to bring their countrymen to acknowledge, worship, and obey him. Though evincing in some melancholy instances the infirmities of human nature, yet they were on the whole models of true patriotism and of moral worth, and eminently free from the public crimes, which in all ages have so notoriously flown from the possession and the lust of power.

It is worthy of remark that the Carthaginians, who were descended from the Tyrians and spoke Hebrew, called their chief magistrates by the same name. But the Latins, whose language lacks the *sh* of the ancient Hebrews and Carthaginians, wrote the word with a sharp *s* and, adding a Latin termination, denominated them *Suffetes*, a class of functionaries very nearly resembling the *archons* of the Athenians and the *dictators* of the Romans.

2. Author and Age

The authorship of the book cannot be determined with absolute certainty. Some ascribe it to Samuel, some to Hezekiah, and some to Ezra, who is supposed to have compiled it from the memoirs furnished by the respective judges of their own government. This hypothesis is founded mainly on what is said, "He and his son were priests to the tribe of Dan, until the day of the captivity of the land" (18:30), from which it has been imagined that it was not written till after the Babylonish captivity. But this conjecture is evidently erroneous; as upon comparing Ps. 78:60,61 and 1 Sam. 4:11 with that passage, it appears that the captivity intended by the historian was a particular captivity of the tribe of Dan, or of that part of it which was settled in the north and which took place about the time the ark was taken by the Philistines. Besides, the total absence of Chaldee words sufficiently proves the date of the book to have been several centuries anterior to the great Babylonish captivity. Such words are of frequent occurrence in books known to have been written posterior to that event.

Most of the Jewish and Christian commentators assign the authorship to Samuel, probably

because internal evidence places it pretty clearly about his time; and in his time he is the most likely person to whom the writing of it could be ascribed. That it was written after the establishment of the real government appears from the habit the author has of saying, that such and such events happened in the time when "there was no king in Israel," which renders it evident that there *was* a king when he wrote. But that it was written very soon after the establishment of kingly government is no less clear from other passages. Thus we see from 1:21 that the Jebusites were still in Jerusalem in the time of the author; but this people were expelled from that city early in the reign of David (2 Sam. 5:6). So also in 2 Sam. 11:21 there is a distinct reference to a fact recorded (Judg. 9:53) which affords another proof that this book was written before the second of Samuel.

On the whole, there is little doubt that the book of Judges was composed in its present form either in the reign of Saul or during the first seven years of the reign of David. And this renders it more probable that it was compiled from the public registers and records by Samuel, than by any other other prophets, priests, or kings to whom it has been attributed.

3. *Structure and Division*

The book is not constructed with reference to the precise chronological order of the events narrated. It is clearly divisible into two leading parts: the first embracing the history of the Judges from Othniel to Samson and extending to the end of the sixteenth chapter; the other, occupying the rest of the book, forms a sort of appendix narrating certain memorable transactions which occurred not long after the death of Joshua, but which are thrown together at the end of the book [in order] that the continuous thread of the preceding narrative might not be interrupted. What relates to the two last Judges--Eli and Samuel--is related in the following book.

4. *Chronology*

The Chronology of this book is exceedingly embarrassed and difficult, and there is little agreement among learned men respecting it. This arises chiefly from the facts related being reckoned from different eras, which cannot now be exactly ascertained, and also from judges being thought by some to be *successive* whom others consider to have been *contemporary* in different parts of Palestine. Without reciting the details of the different hypotheses proposed to solve these difficulties, it may be sufficient to state that Dr. Hales makes the whole period from the death of Joshua to the death of Samson to be 400 years while Usher and Lightfoot make it not far from 300. After all it is doubtful whether, from the nature of the book, it is possible to adjust the narrative into a regular chronological series. It appears, for the most part, to have been composed of loose historical memoranda having little relation to each other and put together by the compiler, like the narratives of the Evangelists in the New Testament, without the least view to a methodical arrangement. Accordingly in our remarks on the book we purposely leave all chronological questions untouched.

5. *Scope and Character*

The book of Judges forms an important link in the history of the Israelites and is very properly

inserted between the books of Joshua and Samuel, as the Judges were the intermediate governors between Joshua and the kings of Israel. It furnishes a lively description of a fluctuating and unsettled people, a striking picture of the disorders and dangers which prevailed in a republic without magistracy, when "the highways were unoccupied and the travellers walked through by-ways," when few prophets arose to control the people and "everyone did that which was right in his own eyes." It exhibits the contest of true religion with superstition, displays the benefits that flow from the former and represents the miseries and evil consequences of impiety, affording in fine [briefly] a complete verification of the warnings and predictions of Moses--that the children of Israel should be prosperous or unfortunate according as they obeyed or violated the divine commands.

From the scenes of discord and violence which darken this history, Paul has presented us with some illustrious examples of faith, in the instances of Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. And Dr. Graves remarks, that

by a superficial reader, the whole period under the Judges may be easily mistaken for an uninterrupted series of idolatries and crimes, from his not observing that the lapses which incurred punishment, and the divine deliverances which attended repentance, are related so fully as to occupy almost the whole narrative; while long periods, when, under the government of the Judges, the people followed God and the land enjoyed peace, are passed over in a single verse, as productive of no events which required a particular detail.

The whole period is distinguished by a display of extraordinary events, and by the most glaring and miraculous proofs of divine interposition. The history of God's government must necessarily be characterized by the demonstrations of his immediate agency, and the selected instruments of his will may well be expected to exhibit a succession of unprecedented exploits. It should, however, be observed that some of the actions here recorded were justifiable only on the supposition of a divine warrant, which superseded all general rules of conduct. Without this, the deeds of Ehud and of Jael might be pronounced censurable for their treachery, however commendable the motives by which they were prompted.

In respect too to some other incidents, it is obvious that the sacred writer by no means vindicates all that he relates; and that the indiscriminate massacre of the people of Jabesh-Gilead and the rape of the virgins at Shiloh, stamped as they are with the evident marks of injustice and cruelty, cannot possibly be justified on the principles which the Scriptures elsewhere furnish. In all such cases, and in the recorded characters of God's ministers in general who are brought before us in this book, we perceive the traces of human infirmity. And while we discriminate between the lights and shades that mark the picture, it cannot be questionable what parts of their conduct we are called to imitate and what to avoid.

6. *Chronological Arrangement of Contents*

We have already remarked that the book consists of two distinct portions, of which the latter is to be regarded as a kind of appendix to the former. This portion, which is composed of the last five chapters, embraces the narrative of events that occurred much earlier in the thread of

the history than would be inferred from their position in the order of the book. The following tabular synopsis gives the entire contents according to a just chronological arrangement.

Part I -- *Interregnum after the death of Joshua*

1. The Israelites destroy several cities of the Canaanites and make others tributary to them (ch. 1)
2. The people reprov'd by the Angel for not exterminating the Canaanitish nations (2:1-5)
3. The character of the people after the death of Joshua (2:6-10)
4. Introduction of idolatry among them (chs. 17, 18)
5. History of the Levite of Ephraim, the murder of his concubine by the Benjamites of Gibeah, and the war of the other tribes with them (chs. 19-21)
6. The corruption of religion and manners among the Israelites and their intermixture with the Canaanitish nations (2:11-3:7)

Part II -- *The History of the Oppressions of the Israelites and their Deliverances by the Judges*

1. The servitude of the eastern Israelites under Cushan Rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia, and their deliverance by Othniel (3:8-11)
2. Servitude of the eastern Israelites under Eglon the king of Moab, and their deliverance by Ehud (3:12-30)
3. The western Israelites delivered by Shamgar (3:31)
4. Servitude of the northern Israelites under Jabin king of Canaan, and their deliverance by Deborah and Barak (ch. 4)
The triumphant song of Deborah and Barak (ch. 5)
5. The eastern and northern Israelites enslaved by Midian, and their deliverance by Gideon (chs. 6-8)
6. The usurpation and death of Abimelech (ch. 9)
7. The history of the administration of Tola and Jair (10:1-6)
8. The oppression of the Israelites by the Philistines and Ammonites, and their deliverance by Jephthah (10:7-12:7)
9. The administration of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15)
10. The oppression of the Israelites by the Philistines, and their deliverance by Samson (chs. 13-16)

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