

OUTLINE STUDIES IN THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

Prof. William G. Moorehead

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CHAPTER NINE

JUDGES

The book of Judges occupies a special place in the canon of Scripture. It describes the condition of Israel during the interval between the conquest of Palestine and the time of Samuel. It is the record of a remote and turbulent age. **“In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”** This sentence, so often repeated in the book, expresses the freedom and independence, the license and disorder, of the time.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to fix the chronology of the Judges. Paul’s word in Acts 13:20, does not settle the disputed points. First Kings 6:1 must stand until more light is had than we now possess to justify its rejection, **“And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month Zif, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the LORD.”** Acts 13:20 states: **“And after that he gave unto them judges about the space of four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet.”**

According to this, the 450 years run out at the allotment of the inheritance by Joshua, and do not cover the time of the Judges. The most satisfactory explanation of the period of the Judges is that the years of Israel’s oppression by their heathen neighbors are not reckoned in the 480 years of First Kings 6:1. The structure of the book is peculiar. The historical succession of events is regular till the close of Samson’s judgeship (1-16), where it is broken off abruptly, and then follows the theft of Micah, the raid of the Danites, and the war between Benjamin and the other tribes, 17-21.

The history reopens with First Samuel. The book, accordingly, is divided into two parts:

Part I, chapters 1-16;

Part II, 17-21.

The key word is *disobedience*; the key verses, 2:11, 12, 15, 16.

Why does this sacred writer drop the story of the Judges with 16, and turn his attention to the robbery of Micah and the wickedness of the men of Gibeah?

These chapters (17-21) are not a mere appendix. They form an essential part of the design of the Spirit in this Scripture.

In the first part, (1-16) we have the disastrous consequences of Israel's disloyalty to the Lord as to the corrupt heathen in the land. They departed from God, and practiced idolatry. God's protection was then withdrawn from them, and they fell under the power of their heathen neighbors, whom, in violation of an expressed command, they not only tolerated, but formed alliances with. Then they cried to the Lord, and He sent the Judges for their deliverance. Apostasy, punishment, repentance, mercy and deliverance; this was the round Israel went for centuries.

In the second part (17-21) the internal consequences of unfaithfulness are portrayed; the degradation, the savage cruelty, the lawlessness and profound immorality of the people.

Interspersed with this mournful account is the beautiful story of Ruth, which chronologically belongs to the time of the war with Benjamin, Ruth 1:1. Dark as the general record is, it is a joy to find it relieved by examples of faith and self-sacrifice, such as the book of Ruth discloses.

1. *Character of the Jews at the death of Joshua*, Judges 1; 2:6-10; cf. Joshua 24:31.

The men of the conquest were distinguished for faith and courage. They were free in great measure from the unbelief and pusillanimity which dishonored their fathers of the wilderness. The generation that took Canaan was one of the noblest that Israel ever had. They were so because of their training in the wilderness, and the splendid qualities and example of their great leader, Joshua.—Note:

- (1) One devoted and faithful man may induce his followers to serve the Lord: *Joshua did so.*
- (2) But a man to do this must himself be a true servant of the Lord: *Joshua was such.*
- (3) The removal of great leaders is often followed by a falling back from the vantage gained.

It was so in this case. Israel did not long remain in the place where God under Joshua had set them.

2. *Apostasy of the succeeding generation*, 2:11-23.

There is something startling in the swiftness with which the Israelites degenerated, 3:9 (Caleb's nephew was raised up for their deliverance).

The declension began among the children of the first occupiers of the land. Singular that those who must have remembered God's mighty deeds at the Jordan, at Jericho, and Bethhoron, should so soon forget their Deliverer and King, ignore the covenant so solemnly made at Joshua's death, and shut their eyes to the stone witness under the oak, Joshua 24:26. Surprising as it is, it is, alas! perfectly human. Men naturally gravitate toward evil. Placed in a position of responsibility, they always fail. The history of the race is a series of falls and recoveries.

Seven times, it is recorded, they “**did evil in the sight of the Lord,**” 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 8:33-35; 10:6; 13:1. Seven apostasies, seven servitudes to the seven heathen nations, seven deliverances! The most wonderful thing is God’s infinite patience and mercy.

Note: Mercies despised, and pledges to God broken, become the foundation for towering iniquity. “The depth of a man’s fall is in proportion to the momentum acquired in bursting the bonds which held him.” The children of godly parents, the children of prayers and holy teaching, who despise their birthright, become the Esaus of the world. Nothing is more fatal to the Christian calling than alliance with the wicked. He who makes the experiment of such entangling alliances, will speedily discover that his power is lost; that what he builds with the one hand, he pulls down with the other. Separation, this is God’s call, II Corinthians 6:17, 18.

3. *Israel’s enemies*, 3:1-6.

Besides the remnant of the Canaanite nations, whom the Jews failed (or refused) to expel from the inheritance, and who now sore vexed them, a new and formidable enemy appears in the history—the *Philistines*.

Like Israel, they seem to have entered Palestine at a comparatively late date; so their name would indicate “*strangers*” or “*aliens*.” They oppressed the Hebrews longer than any of the other heathen nations, viz., forty years, 13:1. They were distinguished for the strength and the variety of their armor.

The most complete vocabulary of arms in the Old Testament is taken from the panoply of a Philistine warrior, First Samuel 17:5-7. They seem to have amalgamated with the remnant of the giants—at any rate, men of gigantic stature and strength were found among them.

Their chief deity was the grotesque idol Dagon, which had the trunk fashioned as a fish, and the hands and head of a man. No believing reader of the book can question the hand of a wise and just God in the troubles Israel endured at the hands of the Philistines. These enemies were used as a scourge of Israel. The chosen people found, as all backsliders must find, that God is as true to His threatenings as He is to His promises. They deserted the arm of strength; of necessity their arms became powerless. God’s justice could not tolerate their sin; His love would not cast them off entirely. “**Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though thou tookest vengeance of their doings,**” Psalm 99:8.

4. *The Judges*, 3-16.

Fifteen different persons, including Deborah, acted in this capacity during the period of the book. These officers are not to be confounded with the ordinary judges of the Theocracy, cf. Exodus 18:21-26. They were men raised up for a specific purpose and endowed with extraordinary powers. Their duties were political rather than judicial. Most of them were military leaders, who rescued the people from the oppression of the heathen. They were not a regular succession of governors, but extraordinary officers who were roused by the inward impulse of God’s Spirit to deliver their countrymen from the thralldom of their enemies.

The judge had no power to make laws, for these were given by God; nor to explain them, for that was the province of the priest; they were upholders of the law, defenders of religion, avengers of crimes, particularly of idolatry and its attendant vices. They governed Israel as the subordinate agents of Him who was the supreme Ruler of the people, by whom also they were called to their high office. The most prominent of the judges were Othniel, 3:9; Deborah and Barak, 4; Gideon, 6; Jephthah, 11; Samson, 13:25.

5. Moral features of this period.

The book of Judges is the history of Israel's failure as the witness of the Lord. Joshua sets before us the energy of faith, which, grounding itself on the promise of God, and trusting Him, loyally addressed itself to the appointed task.

In Judges we see the miserable state of the nation now become unfaithful; and at the same time the gracious interventions of God for their deliverance from the calamities into which their unfaithfulness had brought them.

These interventions correspond with revivals in the history of the Christian church. The Hebrews found it more convenient to use the heathen people than to expel them; and so these became "thorns in their sides, and snares for their feet." Note some of the bad effects.

(1) Idolatry, with its licentious accompaniments, was largely practiced, 17. We read often of the Baalim, Ashtaroth, of the groves, of idols and idol-worship. These plural names (Baalim, Ashtaroth) are significant, one general object of worship, but idols without number of that object. Just as in Italy there is but one Madonna, but she has a hundred different images and shrines.

(2) Frequent and rash use of vows was another feature of this age. It was contracted mainly from the heathen, particularly the Phoenicians. At Carthage, old Hamilcar exacted of his son Hannibal, the vow, so solemn in its origin, so grand in its consequences, of eternal undying war with Rome. By the way, the name Hannibal points to Baal, as also Asdrubal, Maherbal, etc. So hasty and disastrous vows were common in the times of the Judges.

Witness that of all Israel against Benjamin, 21:1; of Jephthah, the most tragic of all, 11:30, 31; of Saul, which almost cost Jonathan his life, 1 Samuel 14:24.

(3) Lawlessness, amounting almost to anarchy, prevailed. "**The highways were unoccupied and the travelers walked through byways,**" 5:6. How vivid the picture! The thoroughfares were abandoned, because infested, no doubt, by highwaymen, who robbed as they listed, and there was no strong government to restrain. Travelers had to creep through byways to escape the dangerous roads. (See 17:6; 18:1, 7; 19:1, etc.)

(4) Crimes seem to have been common. Witness the raid of the Danites, 18; the awful wickedness of the men of Gibeah, 19; and the fierce slaughter of Benjamin by the other tribes, 20.

(5) Stubborn persistence in evil was another feature of the time, 2:17-19; Psalm 106:134-43. This is a world-picture. Sin abounds, but grace super-abounds. Human obstinacy and unbelief never defeat the gracious purpose of God.

Brief notes on some of the Judges are appended.

1. *Shamgar*, 3:31. The account of him is confined to this single verse. Yet it is enough to mark him as a hero. It reminds one of the mention of Jabez, I Chronicles 4:9, 10, or of the condensed histories in Hebrews 11. With an ignoble weapon, a paltry ox-goad, Shamgar wrought a deed of valor which set him among the Hebrew worthies. How much may be done by the most trifling means if one is working with God! Moses had only a rod, Samson a jaw-bone, Jonathan a spear, Esther her beauty and her tongue; but with them all was the power of God.

2. *Deborah and Barak*, 4, 5: Deborah appears in the line of Israel's deliverers. Although no warrior, she inspired with courage and enthusiasm the warriors of her people, and the victory was in reality hers. There had been no deliverance had not this woman lifted up her voice like a trumpet. "**A mother in Israel**," she named herself. *Mater patriae*, the mother of her country, her people might have called her. Woman's influence—who can measure it? Sarah, Rahab, Ruth, Deborah, Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary, Dorcas: Blandina the martyr, Monica the mother of Augustine, the mother of the Wesleys, the daughter of John Knox, Jennie Geddes—their names, and of scores more, will never be forgotten.

3. *Gideon*, 6, 7. Let us not attribute his hesitancy, his request for more proof that God had called him, to unbelief. It was his native modesty that held him back; the agony of uncertainty—his need of being sure and doubly sure. Then, forward!

It is thus with great souls.

- Luther shrank from the mighty task set him;
- Knox hid himself;
- Calvin sought to flee till Farel with his tremendous adjuration arrested him.

Gideon was fitted at length for decisive service. His three hundred were men of like faith and fearlessness with himself. Soldiers with conscience and convictions are the bravest. Cromwell wanted no other sort. He loved the "godly;" loved to lead those who went to battle from prayer and praise. Gideon's strategy has been called "inspired tactics," Very different from the charge of the Old Guard at Waterloo, and of the Six Hundred at Balaklava, it was even more notable. "**Lamps, pitchers and trumpets:**" the means were wholly inadequate to the end. But God fought with the three hundred; for He "works with minorities who work with Him." What an invincible thing faith is!

4. *Jephthah*, 11. This captain is mentioned with Gideon, Barak and Samson in the monumental chapter of the New Testament, Hebrews 11.

Notwithstanding his rashness, his wild roving life, the Spirit has given him rank among some of the noblest of the Old Testament worthies.

In spite of the strong arguments urged in support of the view that he actually offered his daughter in sacrifice to God, in accordance with his vow, there is enough ground in the somewhat ambiguous narrative to justify a more humane interpretation. It seems more in harmony with the place given Jephthah among the saints, and with her “**bewailing her virginity**,” that the father devoted his daughter to a life of celibacy and seclusion. Every such vow must be dangerous and sinful. To bind oneself by oath to do something unknown and unknowable is criminally rash. Besides, it is foolish to imagine we can buy the help of God by promising Him devotion in return. A hasty vow that involves one in wrong-doing is better broken than kept. Better still it is, not to contract such obligations at all.

5. *Samson’s riddle*, 14:14. Samson’s riddle is God’s riddle.

It shows us God and the Enemy at their several work—the enemy doing his work as the Strong and the Eater, and God in gracious and victorious power forcing him to yield both meat and sweetness. The riddle is the shortest and most graphic account of God’s ways with the world anywhere to be found, whether Samson intended it or not, he touched the secret of Providence.

God permits the Devil to assert his will and weave his toils and do his work up to a certain stage; and then God interferes, and out of the Enemy’s doings evolves His own blessed ends. That is the history of the Fall, of Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Israel, Job, and a hundred more.

The death of Christ is a most illustrious example of the truth of Samson’s riddle. That death transcends all other events. “A bygone eternity knew no other future; and eternity to come shall know no other past.”

In the midst, the Cross in lonely majesty; God on the one side with averted face; on the other Satan exulting in his triumph. What a seeming victory for the Eater—victory eclipsing all others. But again and more and more than ever before, he is compelled to yield meat and sweetness.

For by that Cross, Christ hath abolished death, destroyed him that had the power of death, and redeemed His people from a perpetual bondage. That Cross will yet be the destruction of the world’s evils, the expulsion of its sorrows, the overthrow of the kingdom of darkness, and the hurling of the Devourer into the Lake of Fire!

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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