

Judges, Period of ISBE

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Introduction

This entry (Judges, Period of) comes from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE). My comments are this introductory section, footnotes and enhanced (marked up) words.

One thing I'm very interested in is the contrast of the legal status for the citizenry of the ancient Kingdom of Israel. How did this change from when they entered the promised land to foolishly decided to have Kings like the Canaanites? It seems clear to me that you have more freedom the way it was under the judges then when they were under these Kings. I say this because 1) God warned them of this and 2) that's exactly happened. Where there any righteous kings ruling the House of Israel.

The problem is when you swap the King who operated from the Heavenly realm with ones who operate from the earthly realm, you have to *turn in your sovereignty card*. Assuming you can handle the freedom that comes from living under the judges then judgments greatly diminishes but when you delegate these things to a centralized place like the King's court, any judgments made against him from YHVH will also fall on you. A corrupt King corrupts his subjects. How many righteous kings ruled the House of Israel? How did that work out for you Ephraim?

Regarding the time line I point out in [Sceptre-shall-not-depart-from-Judah-until-Shiloh-come-Gen-49-10](#), article #685 I suggest that from Mt. Sinai when Israel entered the promised land, until they went with the Canaanite type of kings they were sovereign.

I. Sources.

Our chief sources of information are the **Book of Jdg** and **1 Sam 1 through 12**. The material contained in these is not all of the same age. The oldest part, by common consent, is the **Song of Deborah (Jdg 5)**. It is a contemporaneous document. The prose narratives, however, are also early, and are generally regarded as presenting a faithful picture of the times with which they deal. The Book of Ruth, which also refers to this period, is probably in its present form a later composition, but there is no adequate ground for denying to it historical basis (Konig, *Einleitung*, 286 ff; Kent, *Student's Old Testament*, I, 310 f).

II. Chronology.

The period of the Judges extends **from the death of Joshua to the establishment of the monarchy**. How long a time elapsed between these limits is a matter of wide difference of opinion. The chronological data in the Book of Jgs, i.e. omitting Eli and Samuel, make a total of **410** years. But this is inconsistent with [1Ki 6:1](#), where the whole period from the Exodus to the 4th year of Solomon is reckoned at **480** years. Various attempts have been made to harmonize these divergent figures, e.g. by eliminating the 70 years attributed to the Minor Judges ([Jdg 10:1-5](#); [Jdg 12:7-15](#)), by not counting the 71 years of foreign domination, and by theory that some of the judges were contemporaneous. It is probable that the 480 years of [1Ki 6:1](#) was a round number and did not rest on exact records. Indeed, it is doubtful if there was any fixed calendar in Israel before the time of the monarchy. The only way then to determine the length of the period of the Judges is from the date of the Exodus. The common view is that the Exodus took place during or just after the reign of Merenptah in the latter half of the 13th century BC. This, however, leaves hardly more than 150 years to the period of the Judges, for Saul's reign fell in the 2nd half of the 11th century BC. Hence, some, to whom this seems too short, assign the Exodus to the reign of Amenophis II, about 1450 BC. This harmonizes with the 480 years of [1Ki 6:1](#), and is supported by other considerations (*POT*, 422-24). Still others have connected the Exodus with the expulsion of the Hyksos about 1580 BC (G.A. Reisner); and this would fit in very well with the chronological data in the Book of Jgs. The objection to the last two views is that they require a rather long period of subjection of the Israelites in Canaan to Egypt, of which there is no trace in the Book of Judges. See, further, JUDGES, BOOK OF, IV.

III. General Political Situation.

The death of Joshua left much land yet to be possessed by the Israelites.

1. The Canaanites:

The different tribes had received their respective allotments ([Jdg 1:3](#)), but the actual possession of the territory assigned each still lay in the future and was only gradually achieved. The Canaanites remained in the land, and were for a time a serious menace to the power of Israel. They retained possession of the plains and many of the fortified cities, e.g. Gezer, Harheres, Aijalon, Shaalhim, and Jerusalem on the northern border of Judah ([Jdg 1:21](#), [Jdg 1:29](#), [Jdg 1:35](#)), and Bethshean, Ibleam, Taanach, Megiddo, and Dot along the northern border of Manasseh ([Jdg 1:27](#), [Jdg 1:28](#)).

2. Foes Without:

Besides these foes within Canaan, the Israelites had enemies from without to contend with, namely, the Moabites, Midianites, Ammonites, and Philistines. The danger from each of these quarters, except that from the Philistines, was successfully warded off. The conflicts in which the Israelites were thus involved were all more or less local in character. In no case did all the tribes act together, though the duty of such united action is clearly taught in the Song of Deborah ^[Jdg 5], at least so far as the 10 northern tribes are concerned. The omission of Judah and Simeon from this ancient song is strange, but may not be so significant as is sometimes supposed. **The judges, who were raised up to meet the various emergencies, seem to have exercised jurisdiction only**

over limited areas. In general the different tribes and clans acted independently of each other. **Local home rule prevailed.** “Every man did that which was right in his own eyes” ([Jdg 17:6](#)).

That Canaan was not during this period subdued and kept in subjection by one of the great world-powers, Egypt or Babylonia, is to be regarded as providential (*HPM*, I, 214 f). Such subjection would have made impossible the development of a free national and religious life in Israel. The Cushan-rishathaim of [Jdg 3:7-10](#) was more likely a king of Edom than of Mesopotamia (Paton, *Early History of Syria and Palestine*, 161-62).

IV. Main Events.

1. Struggles of Individual Tribes:

Much of what took place during this period is unrecorded.^A Of the struggles through which the individual tribes passed before they succeeded in establishing themselves in the land, little is known. One interesting episode is preserved for us in [Jdg 17:1-13](#); 18. A considerable portion of the tribe of Dan, hard pressed by the Amorites ([Jdg 1:34](#) f), migrated from their allotted home West of Judah to Laish in the distant north, where they put the inhabitants to the sword, burnt the city and then rebuilt it under the name of Dan. This took place early in the period of the Judges, apparently during the first generation after the conquest ([Jdg 18:30](#)).

2. Civil Strife:

At about the same time also ([Jdg 20:28](#)) seems to have occurred the war with Benjamin (Jdg 19 through 21), which grew out of an outrage perpetrated at Gibeah and the refusal of the Benjamites to surrender the guilty parties for punishment. The historicity of this war has been called in question, but it seems to be attested by [Hos 9:9](#); [Hos 10:9](#). And that civil strife in Israel was not otherwise unknown during this period is clear from the experiences of Gideon ([Jdg 8:1-3](#)) and Jephthah ([Jdg 12:1-6](#)), not to mention those of Abimelech (Jdg 9). It is a current theory that the tribes of Simeon and Levi early in this period suffered a serious reverse ([Gen 49:5-7](#)), and that a reflection of this event is to be found in Gen 34; but the data are too uncertain to warrant any confidence in this view.

3. The Six Invasions:

Six wars with other nations are recorded as taking place in this period, and each called forth its judge or judges. ^B **Othniel** delivered the Israelites from the Mesopotamians or Edomites ([Jdg 3:7-11](#)), **Ehud** from the Moabites (Jdg 3:12-30), **Deborah** and **Barak** from the Canaanites (Judges 4; 5), **Gideon** from the Midianites (Judges 6 through 8), and **Jephthah** from the Ammonites ([Jdg 10:6-12](#), [Jdg 10:17](#)). In the strife with the Philistines, which was not terminated during this period, **Samson** (Judges 13 through 16), **Eli** (1 Sam 4 through 6), and **Samuel** ([1Sa 7:3-14](#); [1Sa 9:16](#)) figure. Of these six wars those which brought Othniel, Ehud and Jephthah to the front were less serious and significant than the other three. The conflicts with the Canaanites, Midianites and Philistines mark distinct stages in the history of the period.

^A In the modern world, when things are going good it's not worthy, but is news worthy when it's bad (#IfItBleedsItLeads). Is the same pattern in Scripture?

^B A Biblical judge (Hebrew: שופט *shofet*, pl. שופטים *shoftim*) was "a ruler or a military leader as well as someone who presided over legal hearings." [1] These judges appear most often in the Book of Judges, which is named after them. Kenneth Kitchen argues that following the conquest of Canaan by Joshua until the formation of the first Kingdom of Israel and Judah (ca. 1150–1025 BC), the Israelite tribes formed a loose confederation. No central government existed in this confederation; in times of crisis, the people were led by ad hoc chieftains, known as judges (shoftim). [2]...https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_judges see also Judges-Period-of-ISBE, article #1315.

After the first successes of the Israelites in Canaan a period of weakness and disintegration set in. The Canaanites, who still held the fortified cities in the plain of Esdraelon, banded themselves together and terrorized the region round about. The Hebrews fled from their villages to the caves and dens. None had the heart to offer resistance ([Jdg 5:6](#), [Jdg 5:8](#)). It seemed as though they were about to be subdued by the people they had a short time before dispossessed. Then it was that Deborah appeared on the scene. With her passionate appeals in the name of Yahweh she awakened a new sense of national unity, rallied the discouraged forces of the nation and administered a final crushing defeat upon the Canaanites in the plain of Megiddo.

But the flame thus kindled after a time went out. New enemies came from without. The Midianites invaded the land year after year, robbing it of its produce ([Jdg 6:1](#), [Jdg 6:3](#)). This evil was suddenly put an end to by the bold stroke of Gideon, whose victory was long treasured in the public memory ([Isa 9:4](#); [Isa 10:26](#); [Psa 83:9-12](#)). **But the people, at least of Manasseh and perhaps also of Ephraim, now realized that it was no longer safe to depend upon such temporary leadership.** They needed a permanent organization to ward off the dangers that beset them. **They therefore offered the kingship to Gideon.** He formally declined it ([Jdg 8:22-23](#)),^C but still set up a government at Ophrah which the people looked upon as hereditary ([Jdg 9:2](#)). He was succeeded by his son Abimelech, who, after slaying all but one of his 70 brothers, assumed the title of king.^D The new kingdom, however, was of short duration. It ended after three years with the ignominious death of the king.^E

4. Need of Central Government:^F

A great danger was needed before the people of Israel could be welded into unity and made to see the necessity of a strong central government.^G This came eventually from the Philistines, who twice defeated the Israelites in battle, captured the ark,^H and overran a large part of the country (1 Sam 4 through 6). In the face of such a foe as this it was clear that only a strong and permanent leadership of the whole people would suffice ([1Sa 9:15](#); [1Sa 10:1](#));^I and thus the rule of the Judges gave way to the monarchy.

^C [Jdg 8:22-23](#) ²² Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian. ²³ And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: **YHVH shall rule over you.**

Good for Gideon.

^D Technically, Abimelech was the first king of Israel, at least for three years.

^E (4) A son of Gideon ([Jdg 9](#)) who aspired to be king after the death of his father, and did rule three years ([Jdg 9:22](#)). He first won the support of the members of his mother's family and their recommendation of himself to all Israel ([Jdg 9:3-4](#)). He then murdered all the sons of his father, seventy in number ⁷⁰, at Ophrah, the family home in the tribe of Manasseh, Jotham the youngest son alone escaping ([Jdg 9:5](#)). After this Abimelech was made ruler by an assembly of the people at Shechem. An insurrection led by Gaal the son of Ebed having broken out in Shechem, Abimelech, although he succeeded in capturing that city, was wounded to death by a mill-stone, which a woman dropped from the wall upon his head, while he was storming the citadel of Thebez, into which the defeated rebels had retreated, after that city also had been taken ([Jdg 9:50-53](#)). Finding that he was mortally wounded and in order to avoid the shame of death at a woman's hand, he required his armor-bearer to kill him with his sword ([Jdg 9:54](#)). His cruel treatment of the Shechemites ([Jdg 9:46-49](#)), when they took refuge from him in their strong tower, was a just judgment for their acquiescence in his crimes ([Jdg 9:20](#), [Jdg 9:57](#)); while his own miserable death was retribution for his bloody deeds ([Jdg 9:56](#)). Source ISBE

^F All of these scripture verses under this heading are found **after** the book of Judges. It's in 1st Samuel ch. 8 that they demand a replacement for YHVH as their King with a king like unto the nations.

^G Says who? It's only people who can't govern themselves that clamor for a strong central government.

^H How could this happen if Israel was in alignment with YHVH?

^I Go read the prior chapter, 1st Samuel ch. 8, where Israel lost faith in YHVH. Do you think that might be the problem?

V. Religious Conditions.

The Hebrew mind to which Moses addressed himself was not a *tabula rasa*,^J and the Palestinian world into which the Israelites entered was not an intellectual blank. Formative influences had for ages been at work on the Hebrew mind, and Palestine had long been inhabited by people with fixed institutions, customs and ideas. When then Israel settled in Canaan, they had both a heathen inheritance and a heathen environment to contend with. It should therefore occasion no surprise to find during this period such lapses from the purity of the Mosaic faith as appear in the ephod of Gideon (Jdg 8:24-27), the images of Micah (Judges 17 through 18), and the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter (Jdg 11:34-40). In the transition from a nomadic to an agricultural life it was inevitable that the Hebrews with their native heathen proclivities^K would adopt many of the crude and even immoral religious customs and beliefs of the people among whom they settled. But the purer Mosaic faith still had its representatives. The worship of the central sanctuary at Shiloh remained imageless. Leaders like Deborah and Samuel revived the spirit of Moses. And there can hardly be a doubt that in many a quiet home a true and earnest piety was cultivated like that in the home of Elimelech and Naomi.

VI. Theological Interpretation.

The Biblical historian was not content simply to narrate events. What concerned him most was the meaning lying back of them. And this meaning he was interested in, not for its own sake, but because of its application to the people of his own day. Hence, intermingled with the narratives of the period of the Judges are to be found religious interpretations of the events recorded and exhortations based upon them. The fundamental lesson thus inculcated is the same as that continually insisted upon by the prophets. The Divine government of the world is based upon justice. Disobedience to the moral law and disloyalty to Yahweh means, therefore, to Israel suffering and disaster. All the oppressions of the period of the Judges arose in this way. Relief and deliverance came only when the people turned unto Yahweh. This religious pragmatism, as it is called, does not lie on the surface of the events, so that a naturalistic historian might see it. But it is a correlate of the ethical monotheism of the prophets, and constitutes the one element in the Old Testament which makes the study of Israel's history supremely worth while.

Literature.

Josephus, *Ant.*, V, ii-vi, 5; Ottley, *Short History of the Hebrews*, 101-24; Kittel, *History of the Hebrews*, II, 60 f, 2nd German edition, II, 52-135.

^J Latin phrase for blank slate.

^K “the Hebrews with their native heathen proclivities” This is awfully biased choice of words. It’s like saying “Those foolish Torah thumpers and their backward ways...come on man get with the times”