

## ADVICE FOR READING JUDGES

### JUDGES

**S**o that you keep focused as you read Judges, you need to know three things in advance. First, the word traditionally translated “judges” (shophetim) does not in this book refer primarily to judicial officials (although the word does carry that sense; see, e.g., Exod 18:13). Rather they were military leaders and clan chieftains whom God used to deliver Israel from enemies who threatened parts of Israel over a long period of time. Hence the NIV compromises by translating the noun in the traditional way, but uses “lead/led” for the verb.

Second, even though such terms as “led Israel” and “the Israelites” regularly appear, you should not imagine that each (or any) of these judges was the leader of all Israel in the same sense that Moses and Joshua were. In fact, as the stories unfold, you will recognize that part of the concern of the narrator is that precisely the opposite is true—that one or several tribes are oppressed and call on other tribes for help, which sometimes comes and sometimes doesn’t, often resulting in intertribal strife. The irony of the narrative is that only at the end, in a case of intertribal disciplinary warfare, are all twelve tribes “united,” as it were. Note, for example, the stinging words in Deborah’s song about Reuben (5:15–16), who in a time of crisis and after “much searching of heart” stayed home “to hear the whistling for the flocks.”

Third, and related to this, is the matter of overall chronology. You will note that chronological language is frequently employed (“after the time of...” and “the land had peace for... years”) and that the overall scheme reflects the history of the times, beginning with sporadic oppression (Moab in the east) and concluding with Philistine oppression, which is where the Samuel narrative picks up. Even so, you should not think of all of this as happening in chronological order. Peace in one place does not mean peace in another. And the parenthetical note in 20:27–28 sets that story very early on in the period (the priest at Bethel is Aaron’s grandson). The point is that the narrator is not as interested in a time line as such, as in the overall picture of the times he is portraying. But the one chronological matter that is crucial to his narrative is the gradual but unrelenting deterioration of things in Israel down to the time of Samuel. This is portrayed first of all by the structure itself, with its concluding stories in chapters 17–21. It is also reflected in the portrayal of the six major judges.

The portrayals of Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah are basically positive, despite some subterfuge on the part of Ehud and Jael (4:18–21). But beginning with Gideon, things begin to tilt. The Gideon story begins well, but turns out badly in the form of an idolatrous ephod (8:24–27) and a murderous son, Abimelech (ch. 9). The Jephthah and Samson stories paint a picture of God’s Spirit using less than exemplary leaders. Another way this theme is carried through is the use of “in the eyes of.” Watch how each of the cycle stories begins: “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD.” At the end we are told what this means: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (17:6; 21:25 [NRSV]). The hinge point of this theme is an idiom that is usually expressed differently in English translation,

where Samson rebelliously desires a young Philistine as his wife because (literally) “she is right in my eyes” (14:3, 7). Yet despite all this, God’s care for his people holds the story together. This is especially discernible in the repeated notice that “the Spirit of the LORD [Yahweh]”—mentioned in the opening Othniel story but absent in the Ehud and Deborah episodes—does come upon Gideon (6:34), Jephthah (11:29), and Samson (13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14). Even so, what is noticeably absent from Judges is any mention of, or even any sense of, the presence of the Lord in the midst of his people. The Tent of Meeting that Joshua set up at Shiloh (Josh 18:1) reappears there in 1 Samuel 2:22. In Judges we are told that the idolatry of the tribe of Dan continues “all the time the house of God was in Shiloh” (18:31), but Israel never consults with Yahweh there to hear from him. Israel is a people who have lost their way and their primary identity, and only God in mercy can bring order to this chaos.

How to Read the Bible Book by Book (pp. 72-73). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.