



UNIT 1 - INTRODUCING THE OLD TESTAMENT

LESSON 9

THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES

The period described in the Book of Judges deals with the period between Joshua and Samuel. The book takes its name from the "judges" or "rulers" (Hebrew "shopetim"), who led Israel, during this period. These men are not to be regarded as judges in the judicial sense of the word. They were individuals whom God raised up for the deliverance of Israel, and Yahweh endowed them with His Spirit for this purpose (2:16-23). The office of the judge was not hereditary. Eight men are said to have judged Israel in this sense: Othniel (3:10), Tola (10:2), Jair (10:3), Jephthah (12:7), Ibzan (12:8f), Elon (12:11), Abdon (12:13f) and Samson (15:20, 16:31). One woman Deborah, also undertook the functions of a judge (4:4f).

Judges is divided into three major sections.

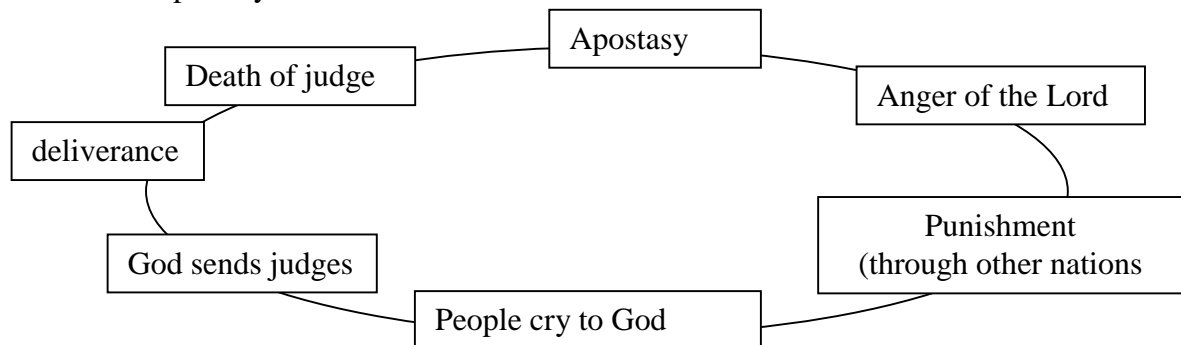
1. Introduction to the Book

The book commences with a brief survey of the way in which the tribes established themselves in the Promised Land. Two points should be noted:

- 1) The process was gradual.
- 2) The Canaanite population was not destroyed. Their presence was to cause problems in Israel's worship of Yahweh, for many Israelites would forsake Yahweh for the worship of Baal (2:1-5), or they would blend together different aspects of Baal and Yahweh worship. This is called syncretism, and as a result, there was a marked spiritual decline. There were also mixed marriages, which was expressly what God had forbidden (Exodus 34:11-16).

2. The Judges of Israel (2:6-16:31)

- 1) Religious characteristics of the period are first described (2:6 - 3:6). It is apparent that this is a period of apostasy, interrupted by times when the people turn back to Yahweh under the leadership of a judge whom He has chosen for this purpose. It was a cycle of apostasy.



We cannot think of Israel as acting unitedly in this period. Often the wars with all the neighbouring tribes were local, and involved only a small section of Israel.



An important point about this period is that there was no national ruler, in the sense that Joshua was ruler. The tribes of Israel were a loose federation bound together by their common past and their worship of Yahweh. This type of organisation was known amongst the ancient Greek states, and is called an amphictyony. Israel's period under the judges is, therefore, often called the period of the Amphictyonic League. They were held together around the central shrine of Yahweh, located at Shiloh. Regular sacrifices, festivals and covenant renewal ceremonies were held there. Also the law of their religion kept them together, as each Patriarchal system was based on the law of Moses.

- 2) The periods of oppression are described from 3:7-16:31.
- a) 3:7-11, Othniel delivers Israel from Cushanrishathaim of Mesopotamia. This gives 40 years of peace.
 - b) 3:12-30, Ehud delivers Israel from Eglon of Moab, resulting in 80 years of peace.
 - c) 3:31, Shamgar delivers Israel from the Philistines.
 - d) 4:1 - 5:31, Deborah and Barak deliver Israel from Jabin and Sisera of Canaan. This includes the famous song of victory which Deborah and Barak sang.
 - e) 6:1 - 8:35, Gideon delivers Israel from the Midianites. This more detailed story shows Yahweh's faithfulness in protecting His covenant people. Gideon had the opportunity to become King because of his leadership, but he refused the honour. In his view, Yahweh was the ruler of Israel (8:22,23). This incident is interesting as showing that some in Israel considered the institution of monarchy was a political necessity, if the state was to survive, while others regarded the institution of monarchy as a denial of Israel's theocracy (the rule of God). Samuel was later to express this viewpoint when Israel asked him to appoint a king.
 - f) 9:1-57, the episode of Abimelech. God's punishment of him is noted.
 - g) 10:1,2, Tola judges Israel for 23 years.
 - h) 10:3-5, Jair judges Israel for 22 years.
 - i) 10:6 - 12:7, Jephthah delivers Israel from the Ammonites and Philistines. This includes the famous incident of Jephthah's vow, which resulted in the sacrifice of his daughter. Some have tried to lessen the horror of this by suggesting that context requires us to see her burnt as a sacrifice. Jephthah's devotion was real though misguided.
 - j) 12:8-10, Ibzan judges Israel for 7 years.
 - k) 12:11,12, Ebon judges Israel for 10 years.



- l) 12:13-15, Abdon judges Israel for 8 years.
- m) 13:1-16:31, Samson delivers Israel from the Philistines. Samson seems to have broken all three of the Nazarite vows, the cutting of his hair, which led to his loss of strength, being the final broken vow. The weak character of Samson contrasts with his strength when the Spirit of Yahweh comes upon him.

3. Two Appendices

- l) 17:1 - 18:31, Micah the Ephraimite. This incident gives further evidence of apostasy. Its main purpose, however, is to emphasise the need for a king to order the life of Israel and prevent inter-tribal conflicts (17:6). This story is simply told with no judgements. But the moral is the unspoken question - is this what you want? False religion? Shame in the eyes of other nations?
- 2) 19:1 - 21:25, the crime of Benjamin and its punishment shows the need for control of Israel (21:25).

The message of this story is - you want no king ... but this is the result.

CONCLUSION

The period of the judges probably covered about 200 years, from the mid 13th century to the mid 11th century BC. This can be reconciled with the chronology within the book, when we remember that the judges were local rulers.

The purpose of the book was to show the necessity of a righteous monarchy for the well being of Israel. The anarchy of Judges where "every man did what was right in his own eyes" was not in the interest of Israel. However, it was not complete anarchy, in that each tribe was independent and had a patriarchal system for law and order and they also had a military power, despite having no state. There was not one army, but each clan had an army which would rally when needed but it was not made up of professionals, but of militia.

The book of Judges did, however, use stories to show the need for a king in times when the people resisted the idea of a king. They needed a good king to reign righteously and with justice.

Another purpose of the book is to illustrate the principle that obedience to Yahweh results in prosperity, but disobedience brings judgement and oppression (i.e. Deuteronomic Principle).

Judges also begins the long story of sin which leads finally to the destruction of the Northern Kingdoms. Israel has not yet reached its peak (under Solomon), but spiritually, the decline had started.



QUESTIONS

Question 1:

In the book of Judges, what is meant by a "judge"? How was he chosen and what did he do?

Question 2:

What is meant by an Amphictyonic League? How were the tribes of Israel an Amphictyonic League?

Question 3:

Look at the story of Jephthah (10:6 12:7). What can you learn from his strengths and weaknesses?

Question 4:

Read Judges 13:1 - 16:31. What 2 parts of the Nazirite vow did Samson break? What was the result (reread Numbers 6:1-21)?

Question 5:

Why do you think Judges was written?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY

What are the main lessons to be learnt from the life of Gideon (6:1 - 8:35)?