

## JUDGES SHORT VERSION

The Book of Judges continues the story of Israel's conquest and gradual occupation of the Promised Land, a task that would not be completed until the reign of David. The period of judges extended for two hundred years, roughly from 1200-1000BC—from the time of Joshua's death to the time of Samuel. Politically, it was a time when Israel was ruled by a loose tribal confederacy. "*In those days there was no King in Israel; everyone did what he thought best*" (17:6). Each tribe was autonomous in most of its dealings, but all were responsible for the protection of all the tribes from foreign invasion. The vacuum of leadership and of a central government left Israel very vulnerable to attacks by their Canaanite neighbors.

The Book of Judges is the seventh book of the Bible and the second book in the so-called deuteronomistic (D) history of Israel. (See introduction to Joshua for more on this.)

The book received its name from the main characters in the text called Judges. As we shall see, judges in this book do not refer to black-robed officials sitting behind a bench with a gavel in hand and making decisions on matters of law. Rather, judges in this book are charismatic military leaders raised up by God to deliver the Israelites from oppression by their Canaanite neighbors.

### Deuteronomistic principle in Judges

In our introduction to Joshua, we saw that the term deuteronomistic history (D) referred to the six books of the Bible, namely, Joshua, Judges 1 and 2, Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. These books are called D-History because most scholars believe that they came from the same school of writers who were deeply influenced by the Book of Deuteronomy and used it to judge Israel's behavior prior to the Exile.

The core or central teaching of Deuteronomy is that obedience to the *Torah* or God's law leads to welfare and peace, while *disobedience* leads to hardship and defeat (see Dt 30:15-20). This core teaching which flows through the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, is sometimes called the *deuteronomistic principle*. In the Book of Judges, this principle is

expressed in a five-fold pattern that repeats itself several times.

- The people do evil in the sight of God. They forsake the God who delivered them from Egypt by worshipping the gods of their neighbors.
- God's anger flares up against the Israelites. He allows their Canaanite neighbors to oppress them.
- In their affliction, the Israelites cry out to God.
- Moved to pity for his oppressed people, God raises up a judge or military leader to deliver them. As long as the judge lives, Israel enjoys peace and rest.
- When the judge dies, the people revert to worshipping false gods. God becomes angry and the people are allowed to fall into the hands of their neighbors again (see Jgs 3:7-11).

### Temptations of the Canaanite culture

The Book of Joshua leaves us with the impression that when Joshua died, Israel had captured nearly all of the land of Canaan. As we shall see, that is not true. So, as we move to the Book of Judges, Israel has only taken possession of a portion of the land and, in most cases, they live side by side with the Canaanites. As a result, they get to see first-hand the way the Canaanites farm the land and worship their gods. As they intermingle with their pagan neighbors (in defiance of Moses' instruction), they leave themselves wide open to embracing the ways of pagan worship. This was always the case when "*a new generation arose that did not know the Lord, or what he had done for Israel*" (2:10-12).

To give some idea of the challenge that the Canaanite culture and religion presented to the Israelites, consider the following. The Canaanites are good farmers while the Israelites, formerly a desert people, do not know much about farming. In the eyes of the Canaanites, a good harvest is almost guaranteed by worshipping the fertility god, Baal, recognized as lord of the earth, giver of rain, and source of grain, wine, and oil. "*To ignore Baal Rites in those days would have seemed impractical and even reckless*" (Bernhard Anderson).

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that many Israelites turn to their neighbors, especially when it comes to harvesting the land.

In turning to the Canaanite gods, the Israelites may not think that they are rejecting the God of the Exodus and the Sinai covenant, but simply paying allegiance to *both* God and Baal.

Slowly but surely, the Israelites start to adopt the pagan ways of their neighbors and integrate them with their faith in the God of Sinai. In a military crisis, they look to God, and in an agricultural crisis, they look to Baal. Slowly but surely, they *accommodate* their faith to their new cultural milieu. It is this adjustment that starts Israel's fall from grace.

They should have known better. They very well understand from the first commandment of the Decalogue that their God is a jealous God who tolerates no rivals. In his book *Understanding the Old Testament*, Bernhard Anderson writes: "Therefore, to suppose that God was Lord in one sphere (history) and Baal in another (fertilization of the soil) was a fundamental violation of the meaning of the covenant. Later Israelite prophets saw clearly the basic conflict between the two faiths and threw down the challenge: either God or Baal. Joshua's appeal at Shechem resounded from generation to generation. 'Choose whom you will serve!' (Josh 24:15). There could be no compromise, for God claimed sovereignty over the whole of life and demanded devotion of the whole heart" (pp 172-3).

**Other temptations.** Besides the temptation to worship Baal, the Israelites are also vulnerable to embracing other Canaanite practices that are abhorrent to the Lord, e.g., temple prostitution and child sacrifice.

The period of Judges was a harsh and ruthless time when the Israelites and their pagan neighbors engaged in bloody conflicts for survival. In this book, we will hear tales of intrigue and assassination (3:15-30), deceit and murder (ch. 3), war (chs. 6-8), treason and fratricide (ch. 9), rash vows (ch. 11), civil conflict (ch. 12), vandalism, treachery, and suicide (chs. 13-16). There is an appendix of stories about the tribes of Dan and Benjamin (chs. 17-21) which are even more gruesome than those in Chapters 1-16. The book paints a dreadful picture of what happens when people turn away from God. Left to itself,

humanity degenerates into a frightful caricature of what it ought to be. We have seen examples of this in the last century when some leaders sought to construct a godless society and ended up in war and self-destruction.

**What is the story?** The Israelites continue their conquest of the Promised Land. But the Canaanite natives who had not been driven out by the Israelites regroup and counterattack. In addition, the Israelites begin to adopt the customs and idolatrous worship of their pagan neighbors. A series of 12 leaders, each in a time of grave national crisis, arises to rouse the people and lead them against the threatening enemy. And every time, in response to the people's repentance, the Lord has mercy and rescues Israel.

### Division of chapters

**PART 1:** Conquest of Canaan (1:1-3:6)

**PART 2:** Stories of the Judges (3:7-16:31)

**PART 3:** Complete deterioration and terror (17-21)

### Suggested texts to read

**CHAPTER 1:** Israel's failure to take possession of the land

**CHAPTER 4:** Judge Deborah

**CHAPTERS 6-9:** Gideon, the reluctant judge.

**CHAPTERS 13-16:** Samson, the "Great Colossus with feet of clay."

See articles 20 and 21 for commentary on Judges.