

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 24 – Part 1

Judges – Introduction

As you wound down 2010 and prepared for 2011, what New Year’s resolutions did you make (if any)? New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson had an interesting issue: whether or not to pardon the Old West gunslinger, Billy the Kid.

Gov. Richardson was not considering this pardon because of doubts about Billy’s guilt or innocence. Rather he is trying to determine whether over 100 years ago territorial Governor Lew Wallace (who authored *Ben Hur*) failed to keep his promise of amnesty and pardon to Billy in return for voluntarily turning himself in and testifying in a key investigation over the Lincoln County Wars.



Reading the news accounts is somewhat jolting. It is a bit hard to realize that just over 100 years ago, things were so rowdy in America. The corruption, the thievery, the need to take justice into one’s own hands, all amounted to a time that makes it difficult today to even start unraveling the truth. Killing people and stealing property seems almost unthinkable by today’s standards.

Justice itself was also questionable. Allegations of corruption at the highest levels leaves one questioning whether the days of frontier justice in America should properly be called “justice.”

In Texas a nearby contemporary of Billy was changing his own reputation from that of an outlaw to a lawman: Phantly R. Bean, Jr. Phantly was known more by his middle name, “Roy” – Judge Roy Bean.



Judge Roy Bean was, by his own proclamation, the “Law West of the Pecos.” History records some bizarre judgments issuing forth from Judge Bean and his courtroom (his saloon, the “Jersey Lilly”). Bean actually held official titles of “Judge” at various times, ruling on criminal cases, performing marriages, and divorces. In criminal cases, he made up the law as it fit his needs or desires, generally fining people for all crimes. The fine amounts were typically equal to the money in the criminal’s possession, and Judge Bean always kept the money himself, rather than forwarding it to the state. When performing weddings, Judge Bean typically ended the service with the proclamation “and may God have mercy on your souls,” using the phrasing

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typically pronounced at the end of a death sentence. (Marriage had not been a good personal experience for Judge Bean.)

These two characters from America's recent past introduce our study of Judges for several reasons. Like Governor Richardson, many of us use the New Year as a time for decision making, setting things right. These characters also remind us how different even the United States was a mere century back. This should precaution us to understand that life on a semi-civilized frontier does not always comport with 21st century sanitized life in highly civilized areas of the globe, especially one 3,000 years ago half-way around the globe. Finally, we note from these characters that our image of a "Judge" is not always what a Judge may have been!

These issues surface in our study of the Biblical book "Judges." The stories encompassed in the book are so far removed from today's civilization that some are hard to understand. Similarly also, the title "Judge" as used in the book of Judges does not comport to what we understand a Judge to be within our modern court system.

Over the next three weeks, we study this book first in general, setting out the stories in a rhythm in which they appear. In the second and third parts of our study, we will focus on understanding issues of authorship and on the archaeology presented by the book.

JUDGES - BACKGROUND

"Judges" sounds like it could be a new courtroom drama on television. The scene would include cliffhanging jury verdicts against a backdrop of the personal lives and office drama of the women and men in black robes. But that is not the story of the Biblical book Judges. The book draws its name from the Latin title, *Judices* that in English becomes "Judges."

The Hebrew for Judges is *Shophetim*, and while it does not mean "judge" in the sense of a modern judicial function¹, with black robes and a courtroom, it does denote one who decides, who vindicates, who delivers, or one who leads or governs.² These leaders were not governors of all Israel. They were mainly local heroes who led certain Israelite tribes to freedom over foreign oppressors. In this

¹ We should note the exception of Deborah (Jdg 4:4) whose role included quasi-judicial work.

² For the various meanings associated with the Hebrew, they derive from the root consonants *sh-p-t*. See Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*.

sense the Jewish Publication Society typically translates the title as “chieftains” rather than “judges.”³

The book itself is not a twenty-first century history book (nor even a twentieth century history book!). That is *not* because the events are not historical. (That issue we will address in coming lessons). It is, rather, that the events are not recorded in a strictly chronological fashion like we typically see in most history books today.⁴ The book has a complicated and interesting structure that we will consider next week. This week, we look more specifically at the stories of the various judges within the framework of what Webb calls “variations” on a theme.

The stories take on a specific rhythm that reverberates over and over. It is this rhythm we consider as we open the book up to examine first the basic story line.

THE RHYTHM OF THE STORIES

If you were a Hebrew student seeking to translate the book of Judges, there are certain words and phrases you would quickly grow to know:

- *vaya'asu v^ene-yishrael et-hara' b'eyney yhwh*

(Then the sons of Israel did evil in the eyes of the LORD)

This phrase is found first in Judges 2:11. It is then repeated in Judges 3:7. After that, it changes slightly from “Then the sons of Israel did evil...” to “*And again* the sons of Israel did evil...” as the phrase is used over and over again (Judges 3:12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).

- *vayimc^erem*

(And he [the LORD] sold them [the Israelites]...)

This phrase, frequently placed after noting the anger of the LORD as “burning” against the evil-doing Israelites, is found repeatedly after the above phrasing

³ Jewish Publication Society, *The Jewish Study Bible*, (Oxford 1999).

⁴ Even a casual reading of the first two chapters demonstrates that the book is not written chronologically. The book begins, “After the death of Joshua...” (1:1). Yet in chapter 2:6ff, we read of the death of Joshua and his burial. Australian Old Testament scholar Barry Webb, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Judges, has likened the book’s structure to a symphony, setting out the overture (1:1-3:6), the variations on a theme (3:7-16:31), and the coda (17:1-21:25). See the book version of his dissertation, *The Book of the Judges, An Integrated Reading*, (Wipf & Stock 1987).

(“Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD.”) We find the Lord selling the Israelites in Judges 2:14; 3:8; 4:2; and 10:7.

- *vayiz ‘aku v^ene-yishrael el-yhwh*

(And the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD)

As with the other phrases, this one generally follows in succession. First the sons of Israel do evil. Then the LORD sells them to a foreign power. Then the sons of Israel cry out. We read this in Judges 3:9, 15; 4:2; 6:6, 7; and 10:10.

- *vayakem yhwh mosheya ‘ ... vayoshey‘em*

(So the LORD raised up a deliverer who delivered them)

We read repeatedly of the LORD raising up a deliverer who then delivers the Israelites from the oppression. We find this in Judges 2:16, 18; 3:9, 15 (the LORD “raises”) and Judges 2:16; 3:9, 15, 31; 6:15, 36, 37; 7:7; and 10:12 (all passages referencing God’s delivering).

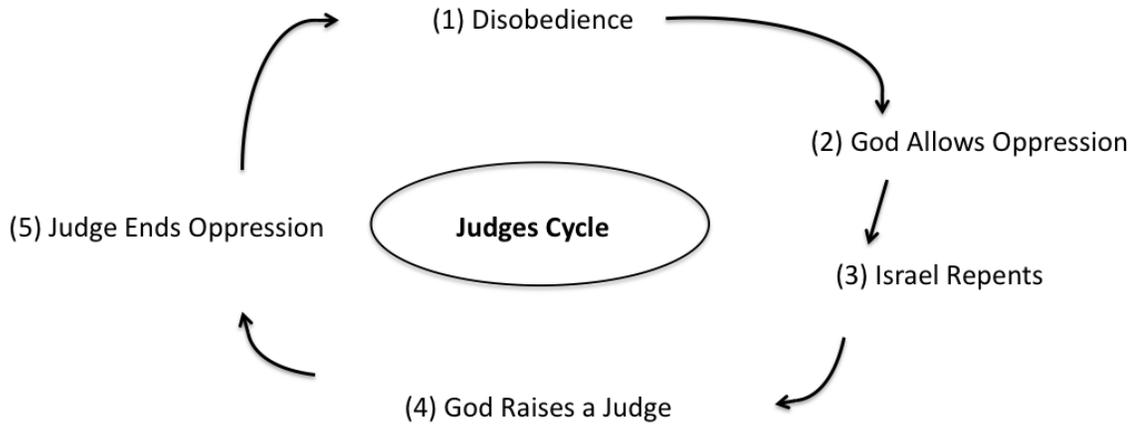
This cycle or rhythm repeats itself over and over. The book of Judges, as set out in its theming opening chapters, is one where Israel did evil (2:11) provoking the LORD to anger (2:12). God then sold or delivered the Israelites to their enemies (“plunderers”) (2:14). The people would cry out and God would deliver them by raising up judges (2:16). Yet that would never last. For after the Judges died, the people went back to the start of the cycle doing evil against the LORD (2:17-21).

We see this story of Judges, sometimes in abbreviated form (i.e., Shamgar in 3:31) and sometimes in expanded form (i.e., Deborah in 4:1-5:31; Gideon in 6:1-8:35; and Samson in 13:1-16:31). But whether using the exact wording noted above, or something similar, the pattern is repeated over and over.

Typically the evil involved the worship of Canaanite idols, Baal (used also in its plural form “Baalim”) and Ashtaroth (Jdgs 2:11-13). Baal, which meant “master” or “lord” was one of the head gods in the Canaanite pantheon. Ashtaroth was one of Baal’s consorts, the goddess of love and fertility. Between these two idols were, supposedly, control of weather, crops, and offspring.

Victor Matthews, who authored *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary on Judges*, set out the following diagram⁵:

⁵ Redrawn based upon Matthews, Victor, *Judges and Ruth (The New Cambridge Bible Commentary)*, (Cambridge 2004) at 8.



Comparing this cycle to that observed in Egypt and other ancient near eastern cultures, Egyptologist Ken Kitchen labels this a “DPCD” cycle.

The Israelites *disobey* their deity’s requirements, he *punishes* their disobedience, then they show *contrition* and he *delivers* them (through a “judge”) from their affliction (oppressors).⁶

THE JUDGES

These stories continue the journey of the Israelites after Joshua led them into the Promised Land. As Joshua recounted, some cities were captured, some leaders were conquered, and some lands were settled. But while Joshua laid out the various divisions of Canaan among the tribes of Israel, much work was to be done to fully subjugate the people and the country. Into this time period come the stories of Judges.

As mentioned earlier, these judges were typically chieftains, local rulers of various tribes of Israelites raised up for specific times against specific enemies. Some took the role of military leader (Othniel, Ehud, Barak, Gideon,, and Jephthah). The LORD used others to deliver the people in roles as singular warriors (Shamgar and Samson). These chieftains were at times prophets (Deborah) and one took a

⁶ Kitchen, K. A., *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 2003) at 217. Kitchen is writing an offensive attack against the scholars who use this cycle as a basis for supposing late authorship of the Judges account. These scholars frequently cite the cycle as a manifestation of thought by late Jewish writers who are of a “Deuteronomistic” school in the 6th and 7th century BC. By showing the form existed in contemporary cultures at a time that pre-dates the exodus, Kitchen puts the rationale of these “redaction critical” scholars into question. More on this next lesson!

Nazarite vow (Samson). For several of the chieftains, we are not told the specifics of their roles (Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon). In the book that follows the history of Judges (1 Samuel) we read of two more judges who were priests (Eli and Samuel). (It was during the time of Samuel that Israel left the days of judges and became a monarchy with a ruling king.)

Some of the stories are sensible and convicting. Others seem outrageous and difficult to accept.

Othniel (3:7-11)

We know little of Othniel beyond his lineage from the tribe of Judah) and his calling. Born as the grandson of Caleb's younger brother, Othniel lived at a time when Israel was doing evil in the sight of the LORD, worshipping the idols of the Canaanites. For eight years the evil Israelites were subjugated to the king of Mesopotamia, King Cushanrishathaim. This king's unusual name has been translated as "Dark double-wickedness."⁷ He subjugated Israel until they cried out to the LORD and he placed his Spirit upon Othniel. Going to war, Othniel defeated the King Dark Double-Wickedness and the land of Israel had peace for the duration of Othniel's life (forty years).

Ehud (3:12-30)

Ehud presents an intriguing story as the Israelites were again practicing evil before the LORD. As a result, Eglon the Moabite king subjugated the Israelites for eighteen years. The people repented and cried out to the Lord who sent the chieftain/judge Ehud to the rescue.

Ehud was left-handed and was able to go into the king's presence with a sword fastened under his clothes to his inner right thigh. Finding a moment alone with the king, Ehud used his left hand to get the sword and bury it deep into the king's belly (the king was a rotund man and the sword notably went all the way into the belly including the hilt!). Following this many Israelites coalesced around Ehud and followed him into the clean-up battles destroying the king's forces. Again the tribes had peace for a time.

Shamgar (3:31)

Shamgar gets only one verse in Judges. After recounting the work of Ehud we are told,

⁷ *Jewish Study Bible* at 514.

After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.

Deborah and Barak (4:1-5:21)

After the death of Ehud, the people returned to their evil deeds before the LORD. Punishment came in the form of a king of Canaan named Jabin who was reigning in Hazor.⁸ Jabin was seemingly impossible for the Israelites to handle because he had 900 chariots of iron! His oppression had lasted twenty years when the Lord began to deliver the people through the hands of the prophetess Deborah and her chosen military leader Barak.

Barak and Deborah saw victory over the chariots in the battlefield, but the opposing general fled. The general fell victim to a housewife who drove a tent peg through his head while he was hiding under the covers.

After this astounding victory, Deborah and Barak sang a victory song recounting the victory of the LORD and the ultimate demise of the opposing general at the hands of “Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed.” Peace ensued for forty more years, but it did not last.

Gideon (6:1-8:34)

The evil of the people drove the LORD to give them in bondage to the Midianites for seven years. Year after year the Israelites would plant their crops, only to have the Midianites come pilfer all the harvest. As the people cried out to the Lord, he came to another man to make him judge/deliverer of the people. This man was Gideon, the “least” in his father’s house, which was also from the “weakest clan” of Manasseh.

The LORD came to Gideon while he was hiding from the Midianites attempting to beat out wheat in a winepress. (The winepress would be sunk into the ground or rocks as opposed to a threshing floor, which would be in the open.) After verifying that the messenger was in fact from the LORD, Gideon took instructions to destroy the altars his father had built to the idols Baal and Asherah. The local Israelites were offended by Gideon’s actions and demanded the father hold him to account. The father replied that Baal and Asherah could do that themselves if they were genuine. They did not need the father’s help!

⁸ Some will note that the Israelites defeated a king Jabin at Hazor earlier under the leadership of Joshua. The possible conflict between these accounts will be discussed in the coming lesson on the archaeology of Judges.

As the foreign oppressors were gathering, Gideon set about gathering Israelites to his side to fight. Needing some reassurance, Gideon sought God's affirmation of his mission:

"If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said."

The next morning, things were exactly as Gideon had asked. Not satisfied with a one-time verification, Gideon sought confirmation:

Then Gideon said to God, "Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew."

Again, the next morning things were just as Gideon had requested.

That was sufficient and Gideon set about preparing his men for battle. The LORD told Gideon he had too many men for the battle and the numbers were whittled down time and again. Finally Gideon had 300 men and was ready to do as God told him – almost! It seems Gideon was *still* trying to get satisfied that God really would come through. So in fear, Gideon snuck down to the enemies' camp at night. Gideon was able to overhear their fears about what the LORD was doing through Gideon and his perceived massive army!

Finally confident Gideon returned in worship to the LORD and instructed his men with the battle plan. The 300 men were spread out around the enemies' camp, each with a jar and a lit torch. In the middle of the night, all 300 men broke their jars and held their torches up high. It gave the illusion of thousands and thousands of men surrounding the Midianites.

The Midianites fled in disarray and Gideon then called out his military support to pursue and defeat them.

The story of Gideon does not end there. He took an interesting turn and began to conduct himself in ways that seem contrary to that of the Lord. Gideon no longer is noted to have sought God's counsel or assurances. Instead he moved on his own and even took on some of the trappings of a king. Gideon died and left the

people with an evil and ambitious son who killed all his brothers (save the youngest named Jotham) and set himself up as king (“Abimelech”⁹).

For three years Abimelech ruled, claiming kingship until finally in a battle a woman hurled a stone that mortally wounded Abimelech. The self-proclaimed ruler was mortified that his death-injury was at the hands of a woman. So he called his armor bearer to finish him off lest it be said, “A woman killed him.”

Tola and Jair (10:1-5)

These two judges are, like Shamgar, given little press in Judges. They were judges that God brought forth to deliver Israel from oppression.

Jephthah (10:6-12:7)

A tragic figure in this time was the judge Jephthah. Like those before him, his calling came while the Israelites were crying out for relief from oppressors. This time the oppressors were Philistines and Ammonites. Judges specifies that the oppression came about because the “people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of God” worshipping the idols and gods *du jour*.

Jephthah was the lesser son of Gilead. His siblings were born of Gilead’s wife, while Jephthah was born to a prostitute. Initially Jephthah’s brothers and community sent him out as unworthy to live in their midst. But once it became apparent that they needed his leadership against the Ammonites, they recanted their harsh ex-communication and offered to follow his lead.

At first Jephthah tried to reason with the Ammonite king, but that got him nowhere. The Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah and he readied for battle. In zeal, Jephthah made a rash vow that upon returning victorious he would sacrifice the first thing to come out of his house (we should remember that houses typically kept livestock and other animals appropriate for sacrifice).

Jephthah was victorious in battle and upon returning, his only child, his daughter, came out first to greet him. Rather than confess his rash vow, Jephthah actually goes through with the sacrifice of his daughter.¹⁰ Importantly, Scripture does not condone this sacrifice. It was wrongly made.

⁹ The name of this son is most interesting and telling. “Abimelech” comes from two Hebrew words meaning, “My father is king.”

¹⁰ Because the passage notes that the daughter was allowed to go through the land for two months so that others could weep with her over her virginity prior to sacrifice, some believe that the actual sacrifice was not her life, but rather a sacrifice to perpetual virginity.

After battling with the Ephraimites, Jephthah judged for six more years before his death.

Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15)

These three judges get very brief mentions. No details of their work are given other than their roles as chieftain/judges.

Samson (13:1-16:31)

Perhaps the most famous of the judges was Samson. His birth came at a time when the Israelites were subjugated to the Philistines because the Israelites had again chosen evil before the LORD. Samson's parents dedicated him from the womb as a Nazarite. Pursuant to the LORD's instructions, Samson's mother abstained from alcohol while pregnant. Once Samson was born, he abstained from alcohol and no razor touched his head.

Samson had an unfruitful marriage with a Philistine woman who betrayed his loyalty in favor of her people. From this episode, Samson seemed to have developed a strong animosity for the Philistines. He repeatedly overcomes difficult numerical odds to battle and, by the strength of the LORD, defeats groups of Philistines.

Samson's downfall was a woman named Delilah. For 1,100 pieces of silver, Delilah agrees to ferret out Samson's secret and betray him to the Philistines. After several fake answers, Samson finally trusts Delilah with the secret of his uncut hair. To Samson, this hair and the Nazarite vow were the reason God empowered him so. While Samson slept, Delilah had his hair shorn. Once he awoke, he found himself vulnerable and the Philistines captured him, gouging out his eyes.

Samson worked as an animal at the grain mill until one day when he was brought out for public humiliation and display. Samson had a young man place him between the building's support columns and then called on the LORD to aid him one last time. Samson pushed the columns and brought down the house, killing himself and also more Philistines than he had previously killed in total.

CLOSING STORIES

In addition to the stories of the judges, this book contains some other stories that occurred during this same time period (between the invasion of the Promised Land and the monarchy). These stories pulse with a refrain, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Jdgs 17:6; 18:1;

19:1; 21:25). It is readily apparent from reading these stories that what the people thought was “right” was often the furthest thing from right.

In chapter 17, a thief named Micah makes an idol and hires a Levite to be his personal priest. In chapter 18 a group of treacherous Israelites from the tribe of Dan hire the priest away from Micah offering him more money to service their needs. The Danites stole not only the priest, but the idols as well, setting them up to worship them in their self-named recently conquered town “Dan.”

Chapter 19 tells the tragic story of a man who chases down his cheating concubine. Once the man retrieved the woman, he started his return home. Finding himself threatened in a foreign town by some Benjaminites seeking sexual satisfaction, the man throws his unfaithful concubine out the door. The men sexually abuse the woman through the night and leave her unconscious or dead (the text is not clear) on the doorstep of the house where the man was staying. The man took her home and cut her up into twelve pieces that he sent around as a message of what had happened.

This precipitated a civil war between the tribes reported in chapter 20. The tribes rose up against Benjaminites and nearly destroyed them as a tribe. It took some work to figure out how to repopulate this portion of Israel, as set out in the last chapter (21).

CONCLUSION

What happened? How did the invading Israelites under the command of Joshua turn into such reprobates? Judges 2:10 gives the key:

And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.

These people fell into a common cycle. They rebelled against God, serving worthless idols rather than the divine Creator. This sin brought forth oppression, and while God was continually merciful, holiness lasted briefly at best. As we look into the New Year, it seems appropriate to take personal pulses on the choices we are making. While we are not likely falling prey to worshipping clay idols, we are daily faced with a question of valuing. What/whom do we value? To whom or what do we ascribe worth (the root meaning of our English word “worship”)? Do we set anything before God and his teaching of right and wrong?

These are not choices that exist in a vacuum. These are choices that have consequences. Perhaps we sometimes confuse the eternal forgiveness that we mercifully receive from Christ as a temporal forgiveness that will alleviate the predicament into which sin has placed us. We should not be so deceived!

Regardless of guilt or innocence, it is clear that Billy (a/k/a William Bonney and Henry McCarty) made some bad choices that led to disastrous results in his life (and death). Those results would have existed, even if Billy had given his life to the Lord. Not surprisingly, Governor Richardson decided against granting the posthumus pardon. Sin bears a temporal price and a consequence – even as the eternal penalty is paid by the sacrifice of Christ.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“There arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD”* (Jdgs 2:10).

One generation not knowing the Lord can lead to tragedy over and over again. So often we assume that our knowledge of the Lord will get passed on or absorbed by our children. We need to take to heart that an intimate relationship with God is individually made, not genetically passed on. The next generation needs to see and hear of our relationship with the Lord. They need to know its reality by how real it is to us. This is especially true because of the inherent human nature to seek something “new” or “greater” than that which we have already received. The temptation to chase the “newer” or “cooler” gods is never far away.

2. *“There arose another generation after them who did not know the...work that he had done for Israel”* (Jdgs 2:10).

The next generation needs to know not simply the Lord, but also the work of the Lord. Let us tell his story in our lives. Let us also commit to learning and teaching the works of the Lord conveyed in Scripture. Let us not be satisfied in 2011 with scratching the surface. Let us probe deeply into the workings of our God and give him praise for what he has done!

3. *“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap”* (Gal. 6:7).

Paul was never teaching a salvation by works. He cursed any such teaching in his Galatian letter. Paul did, however, recognize that on earth, sin has consequences. Paul added that, “one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:8). He knew and taught that we are to walk holy, reaping the blessings of being in God’s will rather than the distress of rebelling. In 2011, let us commit to seeking the power of God’s Spirit to better serve our King in holiness.