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### The Period of the Judges

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THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES

A Paper Presented to

<sup>1</sup>Professor William Elder

Ouachita Baptist University

In Fulfillment of

Honors Work Requirement

by

Katherine Dame

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## INTRODUCTION

The Judges ruled Israel during a period which is sometimes referred to as the "Dark Ages" of Hebrew history. It was a time of decline in all areas of life, economic, political, social, moral and religious. It was also a time when the children of Israel began to compromise their beliefs and accept the ideals and standards of their pagan neighbors. The book of Judges relates the stories of these heroic figures in narrative form and generally follows one set formula which may be presented as follows: (1) "The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1); (2) "the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel" (3:8; 10:7); (3) "he sold them into the hand of ..." (3:8; 4:2; 10:7; cf. 2:14; 3:12; 6:1); (4) the duration of the bondage (3:8,14; 4:3; 6:1; 10:8; 13:1); (5) "the people of Israel cried to the Lord" (for help) (3:9,15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10); (6) "the Lord raised up a deliverer" (3:9,15); (7) the death of the judge (3:11; 8:32; 12:7; 16:30); (8) "the land had rest...years" (3:11,30; 5:31; 8:28; cf. 12:7; 15:20; 16:31).<sup>1</sup>

Although the Judges are represented as national images it is generally felt that they were, in fact, merely local heroes that formed temporary heads in particular centres of power over particular tribes. Whatever the case they were accepted by the people for some reason. It is the purpose of this

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<sup>1</sup>Dalglis, Edward R., "Judges" The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. II, (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 379.

paper to explore the period of the Judges in an effort to determine some of the possible reasons they were followed and what impact they had on their historical settings. Section I will simply contain a biographical sketch of each Judge. Section II will compare and contrast the Judges; their background, their methods and their personalities.

## SECTION I

Othniel Judges 3:7-11

Because the children of Israel had turned to worshipping foreign gods, Yahweh had delivered them into the hands of the far off Mesopotamian king, Cushan Rishathaim. After eight years of this oppression the people called upon Yahweh and He raised up the first of the Judges, Othniel, the nephew of Caleb. In 1:11-15 Othniel had already been introduced as the one responsible for the conquest of the city of Debir, so this experience probably helped when he organized the army that crushed the invaders. Verse 11 says "So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died." In contrast to what is commonly accepted, George Douglas feels like there is no evidence that Othniel ruled the people during this forty years or even that he lived through them. In his argument he states "certainly such living could not be supposed in the eighty years after Ehud's victory" (3:30).<sup>1</sup>

Ehud Judges 3:12-30

After Othniel's death the Israelites again fell out of fellowship with Yahweh. This time it was the king of Moab, in a confederacy with the Ammonites and Amalekites, who served as the instruments of punishment. The Moabites crossed the Jordan, captured Jericho and for eighteen years forced

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas, George C.M., "The Book of Judges" Handbooks for Bible Classes, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, no date given), p. 24.

the people of Israel to pay tribute. Kitto, in his History of the Bible, says that this subjection was even more oppressive than that of the Mesopotamians. He also indicates that it was particularly heavy upon the tribe of Benjamin because it was their territory to which Jericho belonged and which held the court of the conqueror.<sup>2</sup> It was from the tribe of Benjamin, then, that the second deliverer, Ehud, was raised.

Ehud, a member of the Gera clan, was a left handed man who was entrusted with the task of presenting the tribute to the court. It was on such an occasion that he carried out his plan to assassinate the king. When he had left the court and dismissed his people, Ehud returned to the presence of the king requesting privacy on the pretense of having a secret message to convey. When the king rose upon hearing the message was from God, Ehud drew a dagger which had been hidden on his right side and thrust it into the king. The Benjamite then very calmly and quietly left, closing the doors behind him and drawing no suspicion from the court attendants.

I feel I would be wrong if I did not insert the fact that all of my sources questioned the validity of this action. The Interpreter's Bible reminds us that "The whole episode must be interpreted in the light of the times. Ehud, like Jacob (Gen. 30-31), was regarded as a clever fellow because he succeeded in deceiving Eglon and his servants."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Kitto, John, History of the Bible (Hartford, Conn: S. S. Scranton Company, 1904), p. 241.

<sup>3</sup>Myers, Jacob M., "The Book of Judges" The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 710.

It was sometime before the servants suspected something was wrong and found the body. Ehud, however, had already made his way back to his people and organized his army. They quickly blocked the retreat of the Moabites as they tried to return to their home land and "They killed at that time about ten thousand of the Moabites, all strong, able bodied men; not a man escaped" (3:30). This victory secured for Israel a peace which lasted eighty years.

Shamgar Judges 3:31

According to the Biblical account, Shamgar forced the Philistines, who were settled on the Southeast coast of Palestine, to let go their hold on the Israelites. He accomplished this by slaying six hundred of their men with an oxgoad, which is a metal tipped instrument used in the cultivation of their fields. Due to the lack of evidence it is hard to give the time period in which Shamgar delivered Israel, but because of his mention in the Song of Deborah (5:6) it is believed that he might have been contemporaneous with this event. Then, too, he might be placed as far back as the last part of the eighty years of rest, during the time that Ehud was Judge.<sup>4</sup> Some modern scholars tend, however, to believe that this verse is an insertion into the Deuteronomistic edition from one of the catalogues of the judiciaries. Their argument is based on the fact that 4:1 seems to ignore

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<sup>4</sup>Douglas, op. cit., p. 27.

this notice of Shamgar and is immediately connected to 3:30.<sup>5</sup>

Deborah and Barak Judges 4-5

The Canaanites, who occupied much of the valley of Esdraelon, were the next to oppress the Hebrews. Jabin, their king, with his forces threatened the life of Ephraim and tribes in central Canaan. This time the judge that was raised by Yahweh was a woman. Judges 4:4 introduces her saying, "Now Deborah a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time." It is fairly well agreed that this is used to refer to Deborah because she had insight and perspective far beyond average. She also possessed a sensitiveness which made her aware of the movements of God. It was most likely because people recognized her authority as a God-inspired seer, that they went to her for judgment and her decisions had the effect of law.<sup>6</sup>

Deborah called Barak to her southern home from his home in the north, Kedesh in Naphtali, and charged him with the task of gathering an army to fight Sisera, the commander of Jabin's forces. Barak accepted this task only on the condition that Deborah would accompany him. Deborah agreed but exercising her ability to prophesy, she told Barak that because of his lack of faith he would lose the glory of the victory to a woman. After gathering an army of

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<sup>5</sup>Dalglisch, Edward R., "Judges" The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. II, (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 402.

<sup>6</sup>Eichrodt, Walther, Theology of the Old Testament, Vol. I, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), pp.298-299.

ten thousand men, at the say of Deborah, they attack Sisera's nine hundred armored chariots. With the help of the flooding Kishon, Barak's foot soldiers destroyed the army, but Sisera escaped on foot. When the battle-worn commander arrived at the house of Jael, the wife of Heber, he was offered asylum. But after eating, when he fell asleep, his unsuspected hostess killed him. This brought the glory of the victory to Jael and Barak had lost it to a woman, as prophesied.

The story of Deborah is told two times in the book of Judges. Chapter four gives a narrative in prose and chapter five is the famous "Song of Deborah," a triumphant ode which was composed to celebrate the victory of Israel over their foe. The historical significance of the song consist of its integrity as an incontestable Hebraic document of the twelfth century B.C., which was composed shortly after the events it narrates. Therefore, it gives us political, social and economic data of the highest value.<sup>7</sup>

#### Gideon Judges 6:1-8:32

This case of oppression seems to be one of the most severe. When, once again, the children of Israel displeased Yahweh, He sold them into the hands of the enemy which this time consisted of the Midianites, the Amalakites, and probably other Arab tribes from the East. Under the leadership of Zebah and Zalmunnah with the two chiefs Oreb and Zeeb, the foe would attack with such might that the Hebrews would be

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<sup>7</sup>Here

<sup>7</sup>DalGLISH, op. cit., p.407.

forced to hide in the caves of the mountains, to keep from being carried off as captives. For seven years the attacks continued and when the raiders would come in they would completely destroy the Israelites' crops. When the people turned to Yahweh for help, a deliverer from the tribe of Manasseh was raised; Gideon.

Gideon experienced his call to slay the Midianites while he was threshing wheat. In spite of reassurance from the Angel of the Lord, he was a little hesitant and he requested a sign that would convince others that he was called of God. After granting this sign, the Lord came to Gideon in a dream and commanded him to destroy the alter of Baal and in it's place erect one to Yahweh. This mission was accomplished, but from fear of the peoples reactions it was done at night. It was because of this action that the people began refering to Gideon as Jerubbaal, meaning "let Baal contend."<sup>8</sup> Following this act the Lord instructed him to gather an army to fight the enemy. After the sounding of the trumpet, to tell of the coming battle, Gideon sent messengers out to enlist forces and they returned to him with thirty-two thousand men. He again became unsure of his mission, so Yahweh gave two more signs (the signs of the fleece, 6:36-40). The Lord informed Gideon that he had too many men, so after following the elimination processes that were told him, Gideon reduced his army to three hundred. While his company was encamped on the hillside over looking

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.417.

the Midianites, Gideon and his armour bearer slipped down to the Midianite camp and over heard two soldiers discussing a dream which they had and which they interpreted as a certain sign of their defeat at the hands of Gideon. With this encouragement Gideon planned an attack in which three companies would be dispersed to three sides carrying torches, pitchers and trumpets. At Gideon's signal all three companies, at the same instance, blew their trumpets, exposed their lamps, broke the pitchers which had concealed them and began shouting "The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon!" The Midianites apparently thought this great number was only the lamp bearing trumpeters, who came ahead of the guard to light the way for the attack, because they fled in all directions, through the openings of the three companies. Although the two kings and a large number succeeded in crossing the river they were, after a long chase, captured and their army defeated.

Following this it is recorded that Gideon was offered the kingship, which he refused saying "The Lord will rule over you" (8:23). Fleming James feels, however, that this is only legend "Because it represents all Israel as acting together to make king a man who after all was only a local hero, and also because Gideon's reason for refusing seems to belong to the same theocratic tradition which later tells how Samuel repudiated the idea of setting up another king than Yahweh (I Sam. 6:8ff).<sup>9</sup> As long as Gideon lived, forty

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<sup>9</sup>James, Fleming, "Gideon" Personalities of the Old Testament, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p. 71.

years, the land had rest(8:28), but "though he had refused to be ruler...he must have assumed something of royal state, in its worst oriental form, with a harem."<sup>10</sup>

Tola Judges 10:1-2

After Gideon died his son, Abimelech ruled as king for some time because of his leadership Israel became deeply corrupted and Tola was raised to deliver his country from this corruption. Being one of the minor Judges very little is known about Tola except that he was from Issachar and he ruled for twenty-three years. Dalgligh concluded that he must have been the leader of a Northern Israelite alliance, because the site of his activity, in the hill country of Ephraim, was somewhat removed from the hill country of Issachar.<sup>11</sup>

Jair Judges 10:3-5

Another one of the minor Judges, Jair seemed to have ruled during a relatively peaceful time. Jair was a Gileadite who ruled Israel for twenty-two years. His wealth is shown not only by the fact that each of his sons ruled one of the cities of Havvoth-Jair(i.e., the villages of Jair), but even more so because he could afford to mount them all on young asses.

Jephthah 10:6-12:7

Again the Hebrews defected from the worship of Yahweh and turned to idols and again they were "sold" into oppression.

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<sup>10</sup>Douglas, op. cit., p.51.

<sup>11</sup>Dalgligh, op. cit., p. 431

For eighteen years the Ammonites from the borderland of the desert east of Jordan crushed and persecuted Israel until they were forced to turn back to Yahweh for restoration. The deliverer, this time, was not raised from their midst, but instead, the elders of the tribes had to seek him. The man they called on was Jephthah, who was well known for his courageous and successful enterprises, even if they were outside the law. Jephthah was considered an outcast because he was the son of a harlot and had formed an outlaw band. In spite of all this, it was decided that he was the only one fit to lead Israel's troops against the Ammonites so through negotiations it was decided that Jephthah would accept this task with the understanding that if he was successful he would be made ruler over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

Jephthah organized his forces in Mizpeh while the Ammonites assembled in Gilead. In an attempt to forestall the war, ambassadors were sent to the Ammonite court, inquiring into the cause of the hostile relationship. The king in reply alleged that he came to recover the land taken from his ancestors by the Israelites on their way from Egypt. Jephthah's messengers returned to the king with a careful study of the situation in which Jephthah had decided "that the God of Israel was as well entitled to grant his people the lands which they held as was their god Chemash, according to their opinion, to grant to the Ammonites the