

THE BOOK OF JUDGES

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THE BOOK AS HISTORY

The book of Judges forms part of that second main section of the Old Testament which we refer to as the Historical Books. To that extent, then, the book of Judges tells part of the story of Israel's history. But the books of the Old Testament are at the same time theological books. They are written from a particular point of view, namely that all history is controlled and guided by God. They are theological interpretations of history, and to that extent we must often go behind what the books themselves actually say to try to discover what might be called objective historical truth. The attempt to discern behind the theological interpretation of the historical facts these historical facts themselves will be one of the tasks of the commentary that follows.

The book opens with an account of the settlement of the Israelites in Palestine (1: 1 – 2: 5). This account is composed of different elements of varying ages, and it presents a picture of the settlement which is often very different from the one presented by the book of Joshua. The main body of the book consists of a series of stories about individual heroes called 'judges' who delivered their people from oppression by various neighbouring foreign powers (2: 6 – 12: 15). Slightly apart from these is the figure of Samson (chs. 13–16). He is described as a Nazirite rather than as a judge, and his exploits are often more in the nature of practical jokes than of heroic acts of deliverance. The book ends with two appendices. The first (chs. 17–18) is concerned with the migration of the tribe of Dan from the western foothills to the far north and

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with the establishment of a sanctuary there. The second (chs. 19–21) deals with the punishment of the tribe of Benjamin for a terrible breach of the laws of hospitality committed by the Benjamites in Gibeah and with the means whereby Benjamin is enabled to survive as an Israelite tribe. The final sentence of the book (21: 25) looks forward to the institution of the monarchy as a means of bringing to an end the anarchy which was at that time prevalent in the land.

Thus the book of Judges appears to present a sweep of history from the days of the settlement until the advent of the monarchy under Saul. On closer examination, however, the book is more complex than that. One of the best examples of the theological interpretation of history is to be seen in the main body of the book which deals with the activities of the judges themselves. We shall return later to the problem that there are two different kinds of judges dealt with in the book. The first are those deliverer figures, usually referred to as the 'major judges', whose activities occupy the main part of the section. The others, the so-called 'minor judges', occur in a list which is in two parts, split by the story of Jephthah (10: 1–5 and 12: 8–15). It is with the 'major judges' that we are for the moment concerned.

Their activities are presented within a framework of a cyclical scheme of history. The scheme is expounded in 2: 11–19 and consists of the following elements: abandonment of the worship of their own God and turning to the worship of other gods; punishment by God by means of subjection to oppression by foreign neighbours; the people's cry for help; God's answer in providing a 'judge' to save them from their enemies; deliverance by the judge and peace for a period of forty years; renewed apostasy on the death of the judge. This cycle, with its emphasis on divine punishment and divine deliverance, is clearly a theological interpretation of historical facts. What actually happened was a series of confrontations between Israelite population elements and other, non-Israelite elements in the surrounding areas. There was no doubt a

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variety of reasons why these confrontations took place. One reason may have been a conflict of interests in the areas which were being occupied. That they were due to divine punishment is clearly a theological interpretation of the events. It is part of a commentator's task to go behind the theological interpretation and to try to discover what actually happened. This is, of course, an ideal, and at this distance in time it is not always possible to realize such an ideal.

Part of the cyclical scheme was the notion that, after the deliverance, the land was at peace for forty years. In this way a chronological scheme was imposed on the whole period of the judges. Since, however, these periods of peace are usually of forty years, it is clear that this is a stereotyped round number. The figure 'forty' is commonly used in the Old Testament to denote 'a substantial period of time'. It is, therefore, quite impossible to construct an accurate chronology for the period covered by the book. The figures given for the tenure of office of the 'minor judges' are not round figures, and some attempt has been made to draw chronological conclusions on that basis. But this question partly depends on how we conceive of the role of the judge in Israel, a point to which we shall return later, and there is, in fact, no certainty that these 'minor judges' succeeded each other quite in the way the list suggests that they did. The events described in the book of Judges are probably not even arranged in chronological order. The migration northwards of the tribe of Dan, which is described towards the end of the book (chs. 17–18), probably took place relatively early in the period covered by the book, since it seems to be presupposed not only by the Samson stories in chs. 13–16 but also in the Song of Deborah (5: 17). Indeed, it is probably true to say that there is only one episode in the whole book which can be dated with any degree of accuracy, that is the battle between Israelite forces under Deborah and Barak and a combined Canaanite coalition under Sisera (chs. 4–5). Even here there is dispute as to the precise date of the event, with views varying between 1150–1125 B.C. on the

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one hand and 1050 B.C. on the other. For a discussion on this see below on 5: 11b–18.

From a historical point of view, the book of Judges describes the continuing process of settlement, the beginnings of which have already been described in the book of Joshua. We read of the attempt of the Danites to find a place of settlement in the far north of the country because they have been driven from the area of their first settlement by hostile pressures. Similar hostile pressures are felt from Canaanite coalitions in the Plain of Jezreel and are broken by the forces commanded by Deborah and Barak. So the story goes on. As the Israelites continue their attempts to settle in central Palestine, so these attempts are resisted from time to time by other racial elements who also have interests in the land. Gradually the attempts of these non-Israelites are frustrated, and the Israelites are able to strengthen their hold on Palestine and to extend their area of settlement. Late in this period particularly strong pressure is felt from the Philistines, who have settled in the south-west and are trying to extend their power into the central hill-country. The confrontation between Israelites and Philistines forms the theme of the Samson stories and may well also have been one of the main reasons for the Danite migration. This confrontation remains unresolved at the end of the book. It gradually came to be realized that the loose organization of single tribes under a judge was no match for Philistine pressure, and from this realization the idea of the monarchy arose. Not until the time of David was the Philistine threat finally broken. If we think, then, of the settlement in Palestine having begun somewhere in the region of 1250 B.C. and of Saul having become king about 1000 B.C., then the most that we can say of the book of Judges as a historical work is that it tells us something of what was happening in Palestine within these 250 years.

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LITERARY SOURCES AND COMPOSITION

The book of Judges, then, is made up of various sections each with a different topic as its main concern. If we now approach the book from a literary rather than from a historical point of view, we must ask what the origins of these various sections were and how and by whom they were put together. As with most books of the Old Testament there can be no question here of a single author at work from beginning to end of the book. There are too many differences in style for that to be the case. Needless to say, various theories have been put forward over the centuries of scholarly study of the Bible as a solution to the question of the origins and authorship of the book of Judges. Here we can do no more than sketch which one is the most likely.

There is nowadays a fair consensus of opinion which would suggest that the book of Judges is part of a larger whole. That larger whole comprises the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings with the book of Deuteronomy as its preface. (The book of Ruth did not originally belong where it now stands in the English Bible; see *The Making of the Old Testament* in this series, p. 119.) This is considered to be a unified work of history written from the standpoint expressed in the book of Deuteronomy, and the name usually applied to it is the Deuteronomistic History. (The adjective 'deuteronomistic' is used to refer to this historical work; the adjective 'deuteronomistic' refers to the style, content, thought, etc., of the book of Deuteronomy.) It seems fairly clear that the deuteronomistic historian, who made his final compilation about the year 550 B.C., did not compose his story from beginning to end but made use of various sources and earlier compilations which he found to hand. On these he very often imposed his own point of view or his own particular theological ideas. We have already seen an example of this in the cyclical view of the history of the period which is a feature of the central section of the book (2: 6 – 12: 15).

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It is in this central section of the book, too, that we can see what the deuteronomistic historian's sources were and how he went about fitting them together. We have already noted the fact that in this part of the book two different kinds of judges are referred to. There are the figures who delivered the people from the recurring experiences of foreign oppression, and there are those who are merely listed in 10: 1–5 and 12: 8–15 and of whom nothing is said beyond the fact that they 'judged' Israel. It seems probable that the Deuteronomist had in front of him, for the history of the period between the settlement and the rise of the monarchy, two blocks of material. On the one hand there was a collection of stories about tribal heroes of the past and on the other a list of people who had held some kind of office of 'judge' in pre-monarchic Israel. The fact that Jephthah appeared in both of these blocks gave the Deuteronomist the idea of combining both blocks into one. This seems likely in the first instance because, in the present form of the book, the Jephthah story (10: 6 – 12: 7) occurs half-way through what must surely have originally been a continuous list. The second reason for such an assumption is that the Jephthah story ends in 12: 7 with a note about the length of his tenure of office as judge and about his burial in a specific place. These two pieces of information are given for all of the 'minor judges' but not, generally speaking, for the 'major judges'. It is highly likely, then, that the list of 'minor judges' included a section on Jephthah in terms similar to the others. Of that section only the concluding note about length of tenure and place of burial survives. The collection of hero sagas also included material about Jephthah, all of which has been preserved in 11: 1 – 12: 6, and this was used by the deuteronomistic historian to replace more general material of the 'minor judges' type. The Deuteronomist placed these stories about past tribal heroes within his cyclical framework of apostasy, punishment and deliverance. As these stories are now told, they involve 'all Israel' on the one hand and the foreign oppressor on the other. The 'judge' becomes judge

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of 'all Israel'. As we shall see in the commentary, however, these stories involve usually only one or, at the most, two tribes, and their sphere of action is usually fairly local. It is not certain whether this 'all Israel' context was given to the stories by the deuteronomistic historian or whether this aspect was already part of the collection of stories as he found it. So by the fusion of two different blocks of source material the deuteronomistic historian compiled the central section of the present book of Judges and made it part of his larger work.

The Deuteronomistic History was originally a continuous narrative. Only at a later stage was it broken up into the individual books which we now know. It is probable that only the central section of the present book of Judges (2: 6 – 12: 15, possibly to 13: 1) originally formed part of this continuous narrative. Judg. 13: 1 was probably followed immediately by 1 Sam. 1: 1, the beginning of the story of the next 'judge', Samuel. When this continuous narrative was being broken up, the opportunity arose for the insertion of various blocks of material of different kinds. Although Samuel is referred to as a 'judge', he is perhaps primarily thought of as 'the kingmaker'. He is the immediate forerunner of the monarchy and the point where his story begins was felt to be an appropriate point for the insertion of those two appendices which lay so much emphasis on the idea that the anarchic state of the country is due to the absence of a monarchic form of government (17: 6; 18: 1; 19: 1, 25). The second of the two appendices is, as we shall see, the product of very late editing after the exile. There are no definite signs one way or the other which would determine the date of the first appendix, but those verses which emphasize the absence of monarchic rule link it closely with the second, and the two must be considered to be of a piece.

The Samson stories, as we shall also see in the commentary, are of a different kind from the stories about the old tribal heroes. They are strongly influenced by sun mythology, and it is doubtful if there are any historical facts of any significance

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behind this cycle of stories. The suggestion has also been made that the Samson cycle is an attempt to collect local folklore from the original area of Danite settlement before it became lost forever at the time of the northward migration of the tribe. The background of the Samson stories is that of Philistine oppression. This was the main issue of the Samuel–Saul period, so the story of the beginnings of that oppression could be conveniently fitted in at this point before the story of Samuel began.

The situation at the beginning of the book of Judges is slightly more complex. In Judg. 2: 6–9 we have a note about the death and burial-place of Joshua. An almost identical note is to be found in Josh. 24: 28–31. In a continuous narrative such as the Deuteronomistic History there would be no need for this to be noted twice, and it looks as if one is a simple repetition of the other. The question is why this repetition occurred and which of the two is the original occurrence. A reference to Joshua's death and burial-place follows naturally on the end of his final speech to the Israelites, that is, as a sequel to Josh. 24: 27. But the same note also serves naturally as an introduction to the Deuteronomist's cycle of apostasy, punishment and deliverance, that is, as a prelude to Judg. 2: 10ff. It is difficult to decide where the priority lies, but on balance it appears to be with the occurrence in Judges. The sequel in Judg. 2: 10ff. is a natural one. The cycle of apostasy, punishment and deliverance has its beginning after the death of Joshua, just as it recurs after the death of each successive judge. Judg. 1: 1–2: 5 contains two accounts of the settlement in Palestine, the first a pro-Judaean one (1: 1–21), the second orientated towards the north (1: 22–2: 5). The insertion of these *before* the note about the death of Joshua seems most likely. The settlement of the Israelites in Palestine took place under the leadership of Joshua and must therefore have been completed before he died. The opening words of the book are then most probably editorial, perhaps even modelled on the opening words of the book of Joshua, 'After the death of

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Moses...’ When the separate books were being formed, it was felt appropriate that the book of Joshua should end with a note about Joshua’s death. So the notice about his death was repeated at the end of his final speech, in Josh. 24: 28–31.

Thus, it can be seen that from small beginnings the book of Judges has grown over the centuries until it has reached its present form. From the formation of two independent sources into the nucleus of 2: 6 – 13: 1 as part of the Deuteronomistic History, the process of literary accretion continued until at last we have the book in the form in which we now know it.

THE ROLE OF THE JUDGE IN EARLY ISRAEL

We have already noted how there were originally two completely independent sources dealing with ‘judges’ in early Israel and how the different kinds of judge are usually referred to as ‘major judges’ and ‘minor judges’. The questions we must now try to answer are ‘What exactly were these judges?’ and ‘What, if any, is the connection between the two different kinds?’

One fairly well-established theory about the function of the judge in early Israel is based on the notion that in the period immediately before the emergence of the monarchy the Israelite tribes formed a particular kind of association, for which the term ‘amphictyony’ is used. This term comes from Greek, and both in Greece and in Italy such associations are found. They were confederacies of tribes or peoples centred round a sanctuary. The principal function of these confederacies was the care and maintenance of that central sanctuary. This, it is argued, was the pattern in Israel as well. The Israelite tribes formed an amphictyony whose focus of amphictyonic activity was also a central sanctuary. It was the location of the Ark, that symbol of God’s presence with his people, which determined where the central sanctuary was. The central sanctuary in ancient Israel was in different places in succession. To begin with it was located at Shechem, and

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then it moved to Bethel and then Gilgal before finally being established in Shiloh which is the principal sanctuary during the time of Samuel. This argument goes on to lay considerable emphasis on the list of 'minor judges' (10: 1-5; 12: 8-15) where we have an unbroken succession of the names of 'judges' with their terms of office noted in exact numbers of years. The suggestion is that these 'judges' were the principal figures in the amphictyony and that the core of the amphictyony was 'law'. The 'judges' were, so it is argued, legal functionaries whose task it was to expound the law to the assembled tribes at the central sanctuary. This, of course, refers to the so-called 'minor judges'. The transference of the title of 'judge' to the old tribal heroes is due to the occurrence of Jephthah in both blocks of material. Since Jephthah, the Gileadite tribal hero, also figured as an 'amphictyonic judge', it was assumed that the other tribal heroes must have had similar functions. In this way the title of 'judge' was extended from those to whom by right it belonged to those whose functions betray no sign of any judicial activity.

Recently, however, this idea of the existence of an amphictyony in ancient Israel has come under increasing criticism. The sanctuaries which were said to have been 'central' sanctuaries are not now regarded as such with so much confidence. Certainly in the book of Judges there is little indication that any of the places suggested was ever a central sanctuary in this period. Shechem is actually a Canaanite city according to ch. 9. Judg. 20: 27f. connects the Ark with Bethel, and Judg. 21: 12 suggests that Shiloh was a place of assembly for the tribes, but the final appendix to the book of Judges (chs. 19-21) is difficult to evaluate as a historical source, and there is much to suggest that it is a compilation of a very late date. Both the passages mentioned have all the signs of being very late glosses on the place-names in question. The main, if not the sole, function of an amphictyony was for the tribes who formed it to care in turn for the central sanctuary. Of such activity in Israel there is no sign at all. Another sign