

## **CRITICAL ISSUES IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES**

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### **Introduction**

Judges is one of the historical books of the Bible. It narrates Israel's journey and the difficulties faced during the occupation of the land after the death of Joshua and before the rulership of kings. The nation went through ups and downs as shall be indicated in this article. There were a lot of challenges as they were trying to cope with a new world of different types of religions, cultures and political situations. This article is discussing these issues focusing on how Israel reacted to them and how these affected their relationship with Yahweh. The article is also looking at critical issues that include authorship, sources, dating, the role of women and the targeted audience.

### **The Book of Judges**

The book of Judges is a story, according to Lawrence Boadt, that tells the legends and the tribal life of Israelites in Palestine which lasted for two hundred years from 1250 BCE to about 1050 BCE.<sup>1</sup> The book covers the story of settlement of the Israelites in the Promised Land after the death of Joshua (Judges 1:1, 2:8), which David Hinson also places between 1200 BCE and 1050 BCE.<sup>2</sup> The book is also the history of Israel during the period of government by judges. Matthew Henry notices how God would raise leaders to occasionally deliver Israel from their enemies and oppressors; reform their state of religion; and administer justice to the people.<sup>3</sup> This is the period when Israel had no king as stated in several verses in the book (18:1; 19:1; 21:25). It is with this background that we explore this book to get an insight of some critical issues in the life of Israel during this period.

### **Dating, Authorship and Sources**

The book narrates the period between Joshua and Samuel, and because of this reason, Georg Fohrer says that the Talmudic tradition considers Samuel the author. He further says however this tradition is contradicted by a gradual growth of the book which can be traced to the

compilations of the first Deuteronomist materials and later additions.<sup>4</sup>

Most scholars have established that the Bible's Old Testament has been written from four major sources; the Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Priestly (P) and Deuteronomist (D). Etienne Charpentier places (J) around 950 BCE during the time of King Solomon, and (E) in the Northern kingdom around 750 BCE after the United Kingdom of King David when we are seeing the split of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Hinson says the book of Judges is made up from a number of legends well known in the tribes of Israel, recorded in two separate groups, (J) and (E). He says these were later combined to an interpretation that displays a Deuteronomistic view, as the book's final version shows some thoughts of an author influenced by beliefs in the book of Deuteronomy.<sup>6</sup> According to Nancy Bowen's comment in "The Discipleship Study Bible", the book of Deuteronomy is linked to the account of King Josiah's major reform of Israel's institutions, which places the reforms to have taken place around 622 BCE. Although the book of Judges contains legends in the (J) and (E), the author could have been a later writer of the Deuteronomistic period or someone in a much later period influenced by the reforms of King Josiah, as shown in the arguments by the above scholars. Fohrer thinks the book might have been revised probably in the period of the Babylonian Exile.<sup>7</sup>

### **Audience**

Many theories have arisen as to who and why the author wrote the book recounting the stories of Judges. Edisio Sanchez, in "The Discipleship Study Bible", suggests that if the book was written by the beginning of the monarchical period, then what comes to fore is its pro-monarchical attitude. He says, to defeat the main enemies who are in this case the Philistines, Israel needed a strong leadership that would unite the nation, which could only be achieved by having a monarch government. As the book is thought to have been edited during Josiah's reforms, there is suggestion by Sanchez that the redaction was done to consolidate King Josiah's position and place him as a king who was faithful to God like King David. This would encourage Israel to keep God's precepts and rally behind their monarchs.

Hinson has a different view as he sees the book of Judges as targeted

at all the tribes of Israel who are not united at this time. He says the author is trying to explain why the land is not quickly coming into Israel's full control; it is because of Israel's disobedience to Yahweh and God is sending enemies to punish them. If they repent, God would then send a judge to deliver them. It is a message for obedience and faithfulness.<sup>8</sup> Anderson says the story of Judges is important in that it shows how Canaanite cultural conceptions have infiltrated Israelite culture but in time of crisis "Israel's strength is connected with a revival of a vigorous faith in Yahweh".<sup>9</sup> If the book is placed during Josiah's reformation, then it fits well with the intentions of the author to reform and unite Israel in line with Josiah's ideology.

### **The State of Religion**

Several authors agree that Israelites are no longer obedient to the precepts of God during this period. Sanchez notices how "Israel has sunk into covenant disobedience" as he compares the actions of Israel in the book of Joshua and the book of Judges. He notices that in Joshua the people have One God, are united, worship in one place and are obedient to God's precepts, while the opposite is happening in the book of Judges where there are many gods, scattered tribes, disobedience and many sanctuaries and alters. Israel do not seem to act as expected of the chosen people, just as pointed out by Henry that; although there are many believers among them and the tabernacle service attended to, their religious character does not meet the standards expected of them.<sup>10</sup>

Chapters 17 and 18 indicate Israel falling into idolatry. Micah who lives in the hill country of Ephraim has a metal idol god which he has received from his mother and hires a young Levite wonderer whom he appoints as his priest. The Danites, who by this time are still looking for a territory to settle in, visit Micah's shrine where they consult the Levite priest who purports to speak for God and promises them the success of their mission (18:1-6). Such actions are seen going against God's precepts, and are a breach of the covenant between Israel and Yahweh that they shall have no other god before Him (Ex.20:3).

Bernhard Anderson brings up a strong argument that might make us understand the bad religious actions of Israel. He notices that Israel

is moving into a territory with different groups of people of very strong religious beliefs where idolatry is a norm. Canaan is strong with Baal religion, Egypt has the Isis cult based on the worship of the god Osiris (Horus) and in Babylonia there is the Tammuz cult which dramatizes the relations between god Tammuz and goddess Ishtar. Anderson says this has encouraged a lot of borrowing back and forth amongst these religions as they have some similarities in man's relation to his natural and cosmic environment (139-420). In such situations Israel is found to fall in one way or another, for Boadt sees in the Israelites, the spirit of compromise with the local pagan culture of the land. This however brings them to sin, thereby bringing down the wrath of Yahweh. <sup>11</sup>

### **The Women in Judges**

Women have played different roles in the book of Judges. There is a display of heroism by women when Deborah becomes a woman judge and priestess alongside Barak where Israel romps to victory against Jabin's army. Sisera the commander of Jabin's army escapes but falls prey to Jael, a woman of Israel, who kills him with a tent peg, claiming total victory for Israel against the Canaanites (Judg.4:1-22).

Delilah is used by the Philistines as she is enticed to sell the secret of Samson's strength to them in Chapter 16. Samson is eventually killed and this displays an evil act performed by a woman. Jephthah's daughter is sacrificed by her father upon his promise to God and suffers a terrible death (11:34-40). A Levite offers his concubine to the tribe of Benjamin who rape her for the whole night until she dies. He cuts her corpse into twelve pieces that he sends to all the tribes of Israel in Judges 19. This is total disregard for human dignity performed upon a woman.

Men of the tribe of Benjamin are allowed to raid girl dancers at the festival at Shiloh and each take a wife for himself (Judg. 21). They abduct the women who they make their wives, probably largely against the women's wishes. Women in this case are treated as if they should have no right of choice. Although women are pictured as heroines in the early chapters of the book, we later notice a shift that displays women as assets that men can use to achieve their goals.

### **The Themes in Judges**

The people of Israel were torn between Yahweh and Baal. Anderson sees Israelites following their God Yahweh whom they look up to during military crisis times and Baal the god of the land to whom they turn for success in agriculture. They would then worship Yahweh and Baal side by side, bringing to themselves the guilt of idolatry. Apart from idolizing Baal, we have seen earlier how the Israelites themselves went against Yahweh by creating unsanctioned shrines and self-appointed priests like in the case of Micah. Sanchez sights two main themes in the book of Judges, which are idolatry and violence. Hinson sees this as the disobedience that cost Israel's firm and full control of the Promised Land as God would send enemies to punish them.<sup>12</sup>

On the issue of violence displayed in the book in Chapters 19-21, the nation is not united as tribes fight one another, where Benjamin is nearly put into extinction (20:40-48). Boadt points out the violent story of Abimelech in Judges 9 as another picture that shows tribes in open conflict with one another.<sup>13</sup> These sins would happen, but as long as Israel repented and cry to Yahweh, He would raise up men and women as deliverers for them. This, according to Sanchez, is a show that the grace of God is never overcome by any overwhelming presence of evil.

### **Other issues of debate**

The first chapter of Judges seems to suggest that Israel is still struggling to gain control of the Promised Land, after Joshua. This contradicts the common belief that Joshua had delivered the land and allotments done for all the tribes. Judges 1:1 shows Israel crying to Yahweh for a leader to go against the Canaanites. The Lord replies them appointing Judah as their leader in verse 2. Tom Meyer notices how Judah is taking over from Joshua just as Joshua took over from Moses. According to Meyer, this seems as if humans and not God are now taking centre stage. It is not clear at this stage the method used to determine the will of the Lord. Meyer suggests it could be by way of urim and thumim.<sup>14</sup> The whole chapter is an account of how Judah is leading an offensive in the drive to gain control of the land for the tribes. In some cases Israel would make a compromise and live amongst the inhabitants (1:32). The Ashrites were

later unable to come to the assistance of Deborah (Judg.5:17) because of this compromise. Meyer suggests the Ashrites could have possibly been reduced to farmhands by the Canaanites and would not heed to the call by Deborah.

The call of Gideon also brings to the fore the real situation that Israelites are not in full control. Gideon is found by the angel of the Lord thrashing his wheat hiding in a wine press (Judg.6:11-13). They are under oppression as Medianites would raid them and take their produce. Chapter 18 also mentions of Dan still looking for a territory to settle in, which means that by the time of the judges, Israel is still in the process of trying to take over the Promised Land. Apart from their shortcomings and the punishments from Yahweh, the Judges period shows Israelites not fully independent economically, politically and religiously.

### **Conclusion**

An exploration of the book of Judges has shown us some hidden detail pertaining to the real conquest of Canaan. It brings clarity on the position in which Joshua left things after his death. The Promised Land had not been fully realised.

The book has given us an insight of how the nation of Israel battled with economic, political and religious forces in their endeavour to fulfil God's will and promise. As a people trying to catch on their new religion of Yahweh, it was not easy for them to triumph against opposing forces, most of whom were well organised. They were up against well organised inhabitants who had their own strong religious practices and strong military power. It would not have been easy for them as refugees to just come and take over Canaan just like that. The process would need time; in which time, influence from the local people interfered and derailed their plan of occupying the Promised Land.

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<sup>1</sup> Boadt, Lawrence. *Reading the Old Testament (An Introduction)*. New York: Paulist Press, 1984. 198

<sup>2</sup> Boadt, Lawrence. *Reading the Old Testament (An Introduction)*. 68

<sup>3</sup> Henry, Matthew. *Bible Commentary: Judges*. Google Application: googleplaystore. 2008. 1

<sup>4</sup> Fohrer, Georg. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. London: SPCK Publishing, 1970. 206

- <sup>5</sup> Charpentier, Etienne. *How to Read the Old Testament*. London: SCM Press, 1981. 27
- <sup>6</sup> Hinson, David F. *The Books of the Old Testament (Old Testament Introduction 2)*. London: SCPK Publishing, 1992. 69
- <sup>7</sup> Fohrer, Georg. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. London: SPCK Publishing, 1970. 229
- <sup>8</sup> Hinson, David F. *The Books of the Old Testament (Old Testament Introduction 2)*. 69
- <sup>9</sup> Anderson, Bernhard. *Understanding the Old Testament*. Eaglewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966. 115
- <sup>10</sup> Henry, Matthew. *Bible Commentary: Judges*. 1
- <sup>11</sup> Anderson, Bernhard W. *The Living World of The Old Testament* (Third Edition). London: Longman, 1978. 199, 144
- <sup>12</sup> Hinson, David F. *The Books of the Old Testament (Old Testament Introduction 2)*. 69
- <sup>13</sup> Boadt, Lawrence. *Reading the Old Testament (An Introduction)*. 200
- <sup>14</sup> Meyer, Tom (Prof.). *The Book of Judges: A Verse By Verse Commentary*. Amazon.com (Sales Rank:680846), 2014. 46, 287