

The book of judges
theology religion
essay



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The book of Judges is headed in Hebrew Bibles with the word *shophetim* meaning “Judges” or “executive leaders”. This designation occurred in the Talmud and the Septuagint (LXX). The title is derived from the type of leadership which dominated the theocratic era in Israel’s history, spanning from the death of Joshua to the coronation of King Saul the beginning of the Monarchy.

The task of identifying the author and establishing a date of composition for the book remains somewhat enigmatic, as it is with all the historical books of the Old Testament. According to the Babylonian Talmud and early Christian tradition the authorship is assigned to Samuel although there is really no conclusive evidence that would lend credence to this theory.

In regard to the date of composition various theories have been proposed. Liberal critics and advocates of the documentary hypothesis consider the book to be deuteronomic in its present form, they trace the same putative pentateuchal sources that they see as underlying the Pentateuch into the book of Judges. Others reject this idea and hold to the view that the books of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings form a distinct theological and literary unit clearly the work of a single author-compiler. More recent scholarship has moved away from typical source-criticism and taken a more aetiological approach being for the most part concerned with issues such as characterisation and the place of tradition in the development of the narratives.

However internal evidence from the text of the book can help to provide us with a more accurate date. The recurring phrase, “In those days there was

no king in Israel” 17: 6, 18: 1, 19: 1, 21: 25, would indicate a composition after the establishment of the Monarchy. We are told in 1: 21 that the Jebusites were still in control of Jerusalem a situation that David altered when he became King and defeated them (2 Sam 5: 6). This evidence would imply that the book was written after the establishment of the Monarchy but before the days of King David, the reign of King Saul being a probable estimate. The Talmudic hypothesis which holds Samuel as the author would also fit well into this time scheme.

The purpose of the book is adequately expressed in the works of many scholars. Paul N Benware states: –

“ Judges was written to record the experiences of Israel during the era of the theocracy.”[1]

Another scholar R K Harrison describes it this way: –

“ The purpose of the work was to show that a centralized hereditary Kingship was necessary for the well-being of the Covenant theocracy.”[2]

Clearly the historical purpose of the book is to provide an account linking the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua to the establishment of the monarchy.

The environment that serves as a backdrop to the history recorded in Judges is crucial to a proper understanding of the book. The events recorded cover the turbulent period in Israel’s history between the conquest of Canaan to the beginning of the Monarchy, conservative dating giving us a time period of 1380BC to 1043BC.[3]Although the land had been generally conquered

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and occupied under the campaigns of Joshua many of the Canaanite strongholds had been bypassed which left the responsibility for their subjugation to the individual Israelite tribes. The bible describes the heterogeneous population who resided in the Land of Canaan at this time (Jud 3: 5). They consisted of six nations; they are the Canaanites, Amorites, Hivites, Perizzites, Hittites and Jebusites.[4]The book of Judges describes the Warfare between these groups as the tribes tried to complete their occupation of the Land. During this period the people of Israel did not obey the Lord and due to this a significant disintegration of political and social life began to put in an appearance among the Hebrew People. The peoples began to be seduced by the attractions of the Canaanite religions and ended up serving Baal (Jud 2: 11). The state of the nation is accurately described by the repeated phrase: –

“ Every man did what was right in his own eyes.” Jud17: 6, 21: 25

Due to the continued disobedience of Israel the lord gave them into the hands of foreign oppressors, among whom the Philistines were the most serious. The majority of the book details these oppressions and the exploits of the Judges whom God raised up to deliver them (Jud 2: 16). This can be seen in the literary structure of the book. Most scholars agree the book can be separated into three distinct sections usually outlined thus: chapters 1-2 the introduction, 3-16 the oppressions and judges, 17-21 the appendix. The middle section detailing the oppressions and Judges is usually described as the “ cycle of the Judges”. Paul Benware outlines the different stages of this cycle as follows: – 1.) Israel served the lord, 2.) Israel sinned, 3.)Israel became slaves, 4.)Israel cried to the Lord, 5.) A judge raised up and 6.) Israel

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delivered.[5]This cyclical composition outlined in Jud 2: 11-19 will contribute to understanding the theology behind the Book of Judges.

It is with this background that we can now look at the theological message purported by the Book of Judges. The key theme for the book of Judges as stated by Leon Wood is failure, the failure of Israel to live up to her God given obligation.[6]It documents the constituents that result in spiritual apostasy. Ultimately it contrasts the failure of Israel to keep its covenantal responsibilities with the overruling covenant faithfulness of God, it shows the principle established in the Torah that if they are obedient they will have peace in the Land (Deut 6: 19-19) and if they are disobedient they will be oppressed (Deut 7: 1-4). The book of Judges shows that God will keep His word and will not overlook disobedience, but also that He is always willing to forgive his people and rectify their transgressions. God will stay faithful to his promise but Israel must live in obedience to inherit the benefits of the promise.

It is this somewhat paradoxical problem that is behind the narrative contained in the book of Judges.