

Judges and Messianic Hope

By Tim Mackie

The Book of Judges is one of the most violent and bloody books in the Bible. This may excite certain teenaged, male readers, but it's off-putting for most people. Aren't these the kinds of stories that motivate religious violence, showing ancient religious heroes slaying their enemies in the name of their god? Shouldn't we move past this kind of thing? Why do we need to hear stories of violent people from the past?

Not a Children's Tale

Any answer to those questions forces a person to ask even deeper questions about what the Bible is in the first place and what these stories are designed to accomplish.

For example, if you think the Bible is a divine behavior manual dropped out of heaven, then you will read most of its stories looking for moral examples. It may even be unconscious, but people with that concept of the Bible usually end up justifying the behavior of biblical characters, even when they act in ambiguous ways (remember Jacob stealing from his brother in Genesis 27?) or even when they're downright horrible. Samson is a great example of this. Go survey the available children's books about the story of Samson, and you'll discover that they all portray him as an ancient "Captain America" who was given divine power to conquer Israel's enemies in the name of their God.

To read the stories of the Bible this way, and especially the Book of Judges is to completely miss what the author is trying to communicate through these narratives. This Book is not offering Ehud, Gideon, or Jephthah as people you should aspire to be like. Some of these characters have their bright moments, but in the mostly dark atmosphere of these tragic stories, they're extremely rare.

And that's what they are. In fact, that's what the Book of Judges is as a whole: tragic literature. To see this, all you have to do is look at the Book's introduction and its conclusion. You'll begin to see the literary design and message of the entire thing.

The Book in a Nutshell

Chapters 1–2:5: Israel fails to drive out the Canaanites from the land.

Chapters 2:6–3:6: Narrator's Prologue: This is a story about Israel's utter moral failure and the catastrophic results.

Chapters 3 – 16: Twelve stories (six short, six long) of Israel's "judges" that get progressively more violent and disturbing.

Chapter 3: Ehud: The slick assassin who's good with a dagger.

Chapters 4 – 5: Deborah, Barak, and Jael: A tent peg ends up getting hammered through someone's head. Need I say more?

Chapters 6 – 9: Gideon and Abimelech: A coward who overcomes by faith leads Israel into idolatry and starts an inter-tribal Israelite civil war.

Chapters 10–12: Jephthah: A hill-top thug who's so unfamiliar with the God of Israel he thinks that sacrificing his daughter will please God.

Chapters 13 – 16: Samson: A violent, sex-crazed maniac with absolutely no conflict-resolution skills dies in blood and glory getting vengeance on his enemies.

Chapters 17 – 21: Two stories of the people of Israel hitting bottom

Chapters 17 – 18: The tribe of Dan slaughters the peaceful people of Laish and builds a pagan temple in their new city.

Chapters 19 – 21: An Israelite woman gets sexually abused by the Israelites in Gibeah, who are then destroyed by the other tribes, who regret their violence and make the young women of the Benjaminite tribe pay the price.

NOT a Story on Role-Models

Are you disturbed yet? Do you notice the stories keep getting worse as you get further along in the Book? Have you pondered the literary effect of the strategically placed introduction of Chapters 1-2? None of the people in these stories are being offered as moral examples. Just the opposite--the introductory chapters are telling you that the behavior of all these characters is the disastrous result of Canaanite influence. When Israel stops being faithful to the God who rescued them from slavery in Egypt, the Book of Judges is what happens. The end of the Book's introduction told us as much.

When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land. The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the Lord which He had done for Israel. Then Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of one hundred and ten... and all that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel. Then the sons of Israelite did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD... ”

There you have it! Judges 2-21 contains stories of people who have lost their way and make destructive choices that do not correspond to God's will. Now there are a few rare, bright moments. Deborah, in Chapters 4-5, is awesome. She's full of faith and power in Israel's God and led the people to a great victory over the Canaanites who allied together to wipe the Israelites off the map. Gideon also has some glimmers of faith and courage, especially when he decides to enter a battle armed with empty clay pots and a torch! But his angry streak gets the best of him in the end, and he makes a ritual object that the Israelites end up worshiping after his death. What about Gideon's son? Let's just say you would never want to meet him in a dark alley (Judges 9).

All of these stories raise the question: why would an author subject us to this?

The Point

Here are two ways to think about it that may prove helpful.

(1) There is moral value in tragic literature. People in the ancient world seem to have been far more comfortable telling long stories about deeply flawed people who ruin their lives than we are. And that's how the stories end. This is not Hollywood style storytelling, if you see what I mean. Westerners raised on Hollywood storylines have a short attention span for movies that don't end with some kind of redemptive resolution. And that's too bad. Whether it's a Book like Judges or the ancient Greek tragedies of Euripides, stories about people destroying themselves and those around them have immense value. Think of the epic *Godfather* trilogy of the 1970s or the grisly *Breaking Bad* TV sensation. These stories give us a close study of how a person slowly starts making choices of moral compromise that lead to greater and

greater consequences. Almost no one starts out in life planning on self-ruin. So how does one reach a place where destructive life choices become habit? It's not overnight. It's usually through a complex matrix of decisions and influences. We are often not aware that we're participating in our own demise. Tragic stories reflect how life actually works. Sometimes the bridges we burn can't be repaired. These kinds of stories stand as important warnings, allowing us to experience catastrophe through literature instead of real life. You walk away from tragic stories a bit more sober-minded, evaluating your own life habits and values. That's the real worth of the Book of Judges. Consider it a gigantic "STOP" sign that forces you to ask if you are like any of these characters and how you can make different choices.

(2) The Book of Judges plays a more positive role as well, and it's really cool to see how it works. If you glance back up at the outline of the Book of Judges above, you'll see that in Chapters 2:6-3:6 the story stops and the narrator speaks up and offers a prologue to all the stories that follow. This prologue actually plays an even more specific role. The author provides the basic plot outline for all of the stories in Chapters 3-16:

1. The Israelites "do evil" in the sight of the Lord (usually worshipping other gods).
2. God hands them over to be conquered and "oppressed" by their enemies.
3. The Israelites "cry out" for help.
4. God raises up a savior to deliver them.
5. There's peace for a time, until the Israelites once again "do evil" and the story starts all over.

This basic 5-part storyline is repeated six times in Judges Chapters 3-16 and here's what is fascinating: this entire plotline is modeled on the Exodus story found in Exodus 1-15. All the elements fit into the "Moses Model" of Exodus:

1. Pharaoh "did evil" to the Israelites
2. The Israelites are "oppressed" in slavery
3. They cry out for help
4. God raises up Moses to save the people
5. The people eventually make it into the promised land under Moses and Joshua's guidance, and then they are unfaithful to their God.

Rinse, Wash, Repeat

In Judges, every generation of Israelites experiences their entire history up to that point in miniature and each judge becomes a "mini-Moses" figure in the Book. None of them live up to his level of integrity. Most of the judges fall short of Moses' passion and devotion to Israel's God. However, they are faint images of him nonetheless, which makes the last detail on this topic really interesting. The final section of the Book, Chapters 17-21, contains two very disturbing stories of Israel's idolatry and injustice (Judges 17-18 and 19-21), and each story begins and concludes with an identical passage:

In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

We see this repeated again in the following examples:

18:1 In those days there was no king in Israel...

19:1 In those days, when there was no king in Israel...

21:25 In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

It becomes clear these stories are showing that the moral corruption within Israel is going to be solved by one thing alone: Israel needs a good king! Israel needs a really good one who is actually like Moses, not just a faint image of him like the figures we met in Chapters 3–16. And so we have hit upon the major contribution of the Book of Judges to the storyline of the Old Testament. The next Book of the Bible is 1–2 Samuel, which is all about the rise of King David. While David in many ways lived up to the “Moses Model,” he too proved unfaithful and unjust (Remember the Bathsheba incident?).

Thus, the Book of Judges points to David and beyond him, to the promised messianic King from the line of David. What God’s people mainly need isn’t a king who can rescue them from their political enemies, but a king who can rescue them from themselves. It’s that king the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel will point us to when we start reading their books. For now, it’s enough to realize that the Book of Judges is sowing the seeds of future messianic hope by showing us how the Israelites have hit rock bottom without such a king.

This Book will bother you and that’s not a bad thing. It should irritate you the same way a news report about child sex-trafficking should irritate you. These stories should arouse a holy impatience with human selfishness and sin. They should force us to take a deep look inside ourselves as we also look forward to the future hope of God’s kingdom here on Earth as it is in heaven. In that sense, the Book of Judges tells us stories from the past in order to arouse our hope for the future.