

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

Judges and Ruth

What? The Bible's seventh book, Judges offers a rough history of Israel's early years in the land of Canaan. Its eighth book, Ruth tells a delightful story of personal loyalty and love during that period.

When? Roughly 1400 B.C. -1100 B.C., after the conquest led by Joshua (1:1; 2:7-9) and before the times of Samuel and Saul.

Who were the judges? A series of twelve military leaders — "mighty men of valor" (6:12; 11:1) — who roused various tribes in Israel to overthrow their foes with help from Yahweh. Israel was not well united then (18:1; 19:1), so most of the judges were regional leaders who impacted only a few tribes.

Their enemies were the idolatrous nations on all sides of Israel (Philistines, Midianites, Ammonites, Moabites) and remnants of the depraved nations (Canaanites) among Israel, not driven out in Joshua's conquest (1:19, 27-35).

Sad cycle, repeated a dozen times in Judges:

1. When Israel served Yahweh, they were at peace (2:6, 7).
2. When they forgot God, served idols, and did evil, God's anger brought judgment upon His people (2:10-15).
3. When they turned back to the Lord with groaning, He raised up judges to deliver them (2:16-18). Repeat Point 1.
4. When the judge died, repeat Point 2 (2:19-23). The cycle is also summarized in 10:6-16.

Five judges are familiar names:

Ehud: a left-handed swordsman who assassinated obese king Eglon to win deliverance for Israel (3:12-30)
Deborah: With her assistant, Barak, this "mother in Israel" led a few tribes to throw off the yoke of Canaanite king Jabin. Jael became the heroine of this story when she killed Jabin with a tent peg (chs. 4, 5).

Gideon: This reluctant warrior reduced his army from 32,000 to 300 and armed them with trumpets, pitchers, and lamps before routing a multitude of Midianites (chs. 6-8).

Jephthah: This judge is best known for his rash vow resulting in the sacrifice of his daughter, after he had defeated foes east of the Jordan (chs. 11, 12).

Samson: He became famous because of his great strength against the Philistines and his great weakness for women. Like Jesus, he slew more enemies with his death than with his life (chs. 13-16).

Seven judges are mostly unknown: Othniel, Shamgar (3:9-11, 31); Tola, Jair (10:1-5); Ibzan, Elon, Abdon (12:8-15).

Beyond these, Judges reflects the low moral condition at that time:

- murderous king Abimelech (ch. 9)
- idolatry of Micah and the tribe of Dan (chs. 17, 18)

- depravity and near-destruction of the tribe of Benjamin (chs. 19-21)

No book of the Bible illustrates the coarseness and cruelty of ancient culture and of unregenerate men more vividly than Judges. Most of the book's villains, and some of its heroes, lived by the iron rule of violence and vengeance: "As they did to me, so I have done to them" (15:11). The result was near anarchy, when every man did what was right in his own eyes (17:6; 21:25).

Amid all this action of a dimmer sort, the appearance of angels (2:1ff; 13:6-19) and of a few godly women refreshes us: Deborah, Jephthah's daughter, Samson's mother, then Naomi and Ruth. The Spirit of the Lord appears often (3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14).

Points of interest: Gideon's fleece (6:36-40); Gilead's Shibboleth (12:4-6); Jephthah's vow (11:30-40); Samson's riddle (14:10-20); left-handed persons (3:15-21; 20:16).

Who was Ruth? One of the Bible's holy women, Ruth was a foreigner who married an Israelite (1:1-4). When her husband died in Moab, Ruth followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to the Promised Land (1:5-22). There she met a wealthy landowner Boaz, appealed modestly to him as kinsman-redeemer, and became his wife (chs. 2, 3; 4:1-13). They became grandparents of King David, in the lineage of Jesus Christ (4:13-22).

Judges in a sentence: When the tribes of Israel forsook Yahweh to serve other gods, He brought great distress upon them; when they groaned under their calamity, God pitied them and raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of their oppressors.

Ruth in a sentence: A stranger to the covenant, Ruth demonstrated the steadfast faith and service of a true Israelite and was received as one by the noble Boaz.