

C. A Survey Study of the Book of Judges

1. An overview:

Judges is an anonymous composition, assigned by tradition to Samuel. There is no proof of this although internal evidence points to the early reign of Saul for its composition. It seems that even though the author was using earlier materials from which to reconstruct this history it is not necessary to say that he was far removed from its events. The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) was a unit written at the time of the events it describes (this is recognized by nearly all scholars) and the Samson cycle (13-16) seems to have been a complete literary unit. The author used these sources carefully, putting them within the framework of his own philosophy of history without destroying their accuracy. The date of composition therefore must have been in at least the early monarchy since kingship was seen as a positive and desirable state (18:1; 19:1) and Shiloh fell after the battle of Aphek (8:31, compare with 1 Samuel 4). It seems that Judges was written during the early reign of Saul (about 1020 BC) and that Samuel may have had a hand in writing it (the note in 8:31).

Judges is basically prose narrative with occasional poetic sections (5; 9:8-15-Samson's riddle).

Judges is simply outlined in the following fashion.

- I. The Reason for Israel's sin 1:1-3:6
- II. The Cycle of Israel's sin 3:7-16:31
- III. The Results (some) of Israel's Sin 17:1-21:25

Regarding the history of redemption, Judges is more on the negative side...showing how God did not give up on His people although they were constant in their failure. Our theme for Judges.. "God's Ways" (p. 24) is built upon the methods used of God to restore and correct His people and that is beneficial in the redemptive cycle.

Israel was to have been under the rule of the Lord as her King (Joshua 24:18-24). The cycle of apostasy, judgment, repentance, and deliverance shows her inability to remain true to her covenant with the Lord. God's wrath against and judgment upon this recurring sin is evident (Judges 2:11, 14; 10:10-15), but so is his faithfulness toward them and his mercy when they repent (2:16--3:1-4). Judges demonstrates the inability of even God's chosen people to do right, yet because the Lord is faithful to his covenant promises and to himself he did not forsake them. The encouragement from the book of Judges from this perspective is enormous for the church of our day.

A few key questions in the book are these: What exactly was a "judge?" Should Christians depend on external signs for guidance (the fleece of 6:36-40)? Did Jephthah actually sacrifice his daughter (11:39)? What was the time period of the judges (compare 11:36 with Acts 13:20) and how is it figured.

In the case of archaeology the Judges account is supported on general grounds. The Philistines were part of the great Sea People invasion of Egypt about 1200 BC. After their defeat by Samses III, they were removed to the coastal plain of Canaan as local overlords for their Egyptian masters. As Egyptian power weakened they were able to expand their power base into Israelite territory--this shows up in their increasing prominence in the book of Judges (and in I and II Samuel).