

## Toward Understanding Judges

### Introduction:

- This book is part of the historical books within the Former Prophets.
- It is a sort of sequel to the book of Joshua.

### Title:

- Hebrew—*Shophetim*
  - Verb (substantive participle) *shaphat* is used 19x—2:16-19; 3:10; 4:4; 10:2-3; 12:7-9, 11, 13-14; 15:20; 16:31
  - Yahweh is the Judge—11:27
  - These people are elsewhere referred to as judges: Ruth 1:1; 2 Sam. 7:11
- Greek—*Kritai*
- Latin—*Liber Judicum*

### Background:

- The author is unknown, but some claim Samuel the prophet.
- Judges were a blend of civil and military duties, with occasional legal duties.

### Timeframe:

- The book takes place over 300-350 years (Judg. 11:26), roughly 1400-1050 BC, from the death of Joshua up to the time of King Saul. Apparently, some of the judgeships overlap.
- While the original writing was early in David's era (cf. 1:21), the final editing seems to have occurred after the Exile of the northern tribes. (cf. 18:30)

### Characteristics: (illustrating Deut. 28:15-68)

- Progresses from Israel as a fragile unity to increasing disintegration.
- Increasing violent cruelty
- Discouraging (disobedience) and encouraging (obedience)
- Few books portray so complete a picture of human depravity as does Judges. (Herbert Wolf, EBC)
- Demonstrates the need for competent, godly leadership, while paving the way for the next part of the story in Samuel-Kings. (Robert Chisolm)

### Overall outline: [Dale R. Davis]

- Prologue: describes and evaluates [the failure of the second generation]—1:1-3:6
- Main body: the twelve judges [the salvation of a long-suffering God]—3:7-16:31
- Epilogue: Israel's depravity [the confusion of a depraved people]—17:1-21:25



(Adapted from the *New Moody Atlas of the Bible*)

Possible Timeline of the Judges (based on Robert Chisolm)  
 (other conservative timelines differ slightly)

<b>Cycle #</b>	<b>Passage</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Years BC</b>
1	3:8	<i>Cushan-Rishathaim</i> oppresses Israel	1336-1328
	3:11	Land rests after deliverance through <b>Othniel</b>	1328-1288
2	3:14	<i>Moab</i> oppresses Israel	1288-1270
	3:30	Land rests after deliverance through <b>Ehud &amp; Shamgar</b>	1270-1190
3	4:3	<i>Sisera</i> oppresses Israel	1190-1170
	5:31	Land rests after deliverance through <b>Deborah the prophetess &amp; Jael</b>	1170-1130
4	6:1	<i>Midian</i> oppresses Israel	1334-1327
	8:28	Land rests after deliverance through <b>Gideon</b>	1327-1287
	9:22	<b>Abimelech</b> rules after Jotham's curse	1287-1284
	10:2	<b>Tola</b> leads Israel	1284-1261
	10:3	<b>Jair</b> leads Israel	1261-1239
5	10:7-8	<i>Philistines and Ammon</i> oppress Israel	1239-1221
	12:7	<b>Jephthah</b> leads Israel	1221-1215
	12:9	<b>Ibzan</b> leads Israel	1215-1208
	12:11	<b>Elon</b> leads Israel	1208-1198
	12:14	<b>Abdon</b> leads Israel	1198-1190
6	13:1	<i>Philistines</i> oppress Israel	1190-1150
	15:20	<b>Samson</b> leads Israel	1150-1130
	1 Sam. 4:18	<b>Eli's</b> 40 years of leadership	1130-1090
	1 Sam. 4:11	<i>Philistines</i> capture ark	1090
	1 Sam. 7:2	Ark at Kiriath-Jearim	1090-1070
	1 Sam. 7:3-12	Samuel's victory over <i>Philistines</i>	1070
	1 Sam. 7:13-14	<i>Philistines</i> oppress Israel	1070-1050
	1 Sam. 10	Samuel anoints Saul	1050

**Three-fold purpose of the book (Robert Chisolm)**

- 1) Defend Yahweh's reputation.
  - a) Yahweh (LORD) occurs 178x; Elohim (God) occurs 62x.
- 2) Warn Israel of the dangers of assimilation to their environment.
- 3) Demonstrate Israel's need for competent, godly leadership.

## Prologue: incomplete obedience—1:1-3:6

- 1) Israel's **MILITARY** failures—1:1-2:5
  - a) Setting—1:1
    - i) The miracles are done, and the strong leadership is gone.  
(1) Joshua's death is noted 3x: Josh. 24:29-31; Judg. 1:1; 2:8
  - b) Faithful Judah and Simeon (southern tribes)—1:2-20
    - They had a common *inheritance* (Josh. 19:1-9), a common *ancestor* (Leah; Gen. 29:33-35), and a common *enemy* (the Canaanites).
    - By this time Simeon was the smallest tribe. (cf. Num. 2:23; 26:14)
  - i) Incomplete obedience [generally in the hill country] (1:2-7) (cf. Deut. 7:24)
    - (1) The time has come to punish the Canaanites. (cf. Gen. 15:16)
    - (2) Note how they interpret Judah as "Judah and Simeon." (1:3)
    - (3) How quickly they adopt Canaanite moral principles (ethics).
  - ii) More success against the Canaanites [generally in the lowlands] (1:8-18)
    - (1) Capture of three important cities, from north to south (1:8-15)
    - (2) Capture of lesser cities and territories (1:16-18)
      - (a) The Kenites were distant relatives to Moses. (cf. 4:11)
  - iii) Summary (1:19-20)
  - c) Failure of seven northern tribes, especially Benjamin—1:21-36
    - This hints toward King Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin.
    - This hints toward the Exile of the northern tribes in 722 BC.
  - i) Moves progressively from positive to negative, and from south to north: Benjamin (1:21), Joseph, Manasseh, and Ephraim (1:22-29), Zebulun (1:30), Asher (1:31-32), Naphtali (1:33), and Dan (1:34-36).
  - ii) "Forced labor" (1:28, 30, 33, 35) was disobedience. (Cf. Exod. 23:33)
    - (1) How easy it is to tolerate evil, only to pay for it later.
    - (2) How dangerous it is to edit God's commands to make it easier for us.
  - d) Israel mourns their difficult circumstances—2:1-5
    - The superior military technology (iron chariots) of the Canaanites was not the biggest problem Israel faced.
  - i) God the Son (cf. Exod. 14:19; 23:20; Judg. 6:22; 13:21-22) takes the initiative to communicate with Israel (2:1), reports His past work (2:1-2a), condemns Israel (2:2b), and warns them (2:3).
  - ii) The people respond with remorse (not repentance) and sacrifice. (2:4-5)

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It is to be noted that ancient Israel failed to settle three important areas. Curiously, modern Israel now occupies all three areas.

- The northern southern coastal plains and the Jezreel Valley.
- Part of Golan (east of the Sea of Galilee) and the Huleh Valley (north of the Sea of Galilee).
- The main corridor from the Coastal Plain to Jerusalem.

- 2) Israel's **SPIRITUAL AND THEOLOGICAL** failures—2:6-3:6 (based on Dorsey's outline) [illustrated as spiritual adultery]
- a) **A positive beginning:** during lifetime of Joshua and elders, Israelites set out to take their inheritances and they *serve* Yahweh. (2:6–9)
    - i) Cf. Josh. 24:28-31, thus linking the two books.
    - ii) Joshua died without naming a successor.
    - iii) Joshua is honored with the title “the servant of Yahweh” reserved for devoted men of God such as Moses (18x), and David (2x).
  - b) **The sin of next generation.** (2:10–13)
    - i) Contrasted with their *fathers*
    - ii) Did “the evil” (namely, serve the Baals); *worshipped* other gods  
(1) Cf. 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1)
    - iii) *Forsook Yahweh, went after other gods*
    - iv) Occurred once; and they had an excuse (“they did not know”)
  - c) **Judgment:** military defeat from surrounding nations (2:14–15)
    - i) Begins: *Yahweh was angry with Israel*
  - d) **CENTER: Yahweh's gracious intervention.** (2:16)
    - i) Yahweh's gracious help has little moral effect on Israel. (Dorsey)
  - e) **Even worse sins of each successive generation.** (2:17–19)
    - i) Contrasted with their *fathers*
    - ii) *Served* the Baals; *worshipped* other gods
    - iii) *Went after other gods*
    - iv) Not just once, but repeatedly; and no excuse given
  - f) **Even worse judgment:** Yahweh will no longer enable Israel to take their own land. (2:20–3:4)
    - i) Begins: *Yahweh was angry with Israel*
    - ii) The purpose of learning holy war (3:2) walks with the purpose of testing (2:22; 3:4).
  - g) **A disheartening conclusion:** Israelites, having failed to take their land, settle among the Canaanites, intermarry, and *serve* their gods. (3:5–6)

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- This section helps the reader to interpret the remainder of the book correctly.
  - This section seems to be summarized in Ps. 106:34-40.
  - God may be the Father, but He is no one's Grandfather.

## The main body of the book—Judges 3:7-16:31

(Dorsey's basic outline)

- 1) **Othniel** of Judah (3:7–11; 1:11–15) [against Cushan-Rishathaim (“doubly evil” or “of double wickedness”)]
  - **evaluation:** positive
  - procures a *good Israelite wife* by obeying Yahweh
  - drives Canaanites from the land and settles there
  - *wife presses him* for a good thing: to extend their territory
  - *good judge*, leading a *united* Israel
  - blessed by his brave *Israelite father-in-law*
  - Israel's “crying out to Yahweh” (3:9) is not a cry of repentance, but a cry of pain. (cf. 3:15; 4:3; 6:6-7)
  - “The Spirit of Yahweh came upon him” (3:10) is not salvation but God's enablement for a specific task at a specific time (cf. 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14)
  
- 2) **Ehud** (the left-handed, or ambidextrous; cf. 20:16; 1 Chron. 12:2) of Benjamin (“son of the right hand”) (3:12–30) [against Eglon (the fattened calf) of Moab, Ammon, and Amalek]
  - **evaluation:** positive
  - *Transjordanian king* oppresses Israel *eighteen years*; occurs in *Benjamin*
  - Ehud has a secret *message* and *message* from God for enemy king
  - *captures fords of Jordan* and with help of *Ephraimites* kills thousands of enemies attempting to cross
  - Israelites united
  - This is a story that makes many people uncomfortable.
  - The “city of palm trees” (3:13) was destroyed and cursed @ 100 years ago by God through Joshua (cf. Josh. 6).
  - His unique sword/dagger was made for this situation. (3:16)
  - A “message from God” (generic use of Elohim, not Israel-specific Yahweh) (3:20)
  - Note “behold” used 3x (3:24-25)
  - The “fords (shallow crossing) of the Jordan” (3:28). Remember the Narnian *Fords of Beruna*.

- 3) **Deborah** of Ephraim and **Barak** of Naphtali (4:1–5:31) [against General Sisera of Hazor, Canaan]
- **evaluation:** positive
  - *woman crushes Sisera's skull* in a careless moment
  - Israelites united
  - Prose (4:1-24) and poetry (5:1-31)
- a) The beginning of oppression (4:1-3)
- i) Israel sins and is *oppressed by King Jabin* (a title?) of Canaan
    - (1) Did “the evil” (namely, serve the Baals)
      - (a) Cf. 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1
    - (2) Hazor is the most important northern Canaanite fortress. It is @ 9 miles north of the Sea of Galilee.
  - ii) **Negative chronological note:** oppression lasts 20 years.
  - iii) Israel has been out of Egypt for a little more than 200 years by this time.
- b) Deborah's prediction about a woman killing Sisera (4:4-9a)
- i) Interaction between a brave woman (Deborah) and a weak military man (Barak)
  - ii) Other prophetesses: Miriam (Ex. 15:20); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14); Anna (Luke 2:36)
  - iii) Qualified male leadership is lacking in Israel at this time.
- c) Troops gather (4:9b-13)
- i) Barak *goes up*, with his troops *at his feet*
  - ii) Sisera gathers his troops for battle
  - iii) Note how Heber's tent is introduced. (4:11, 17; cf. 5:24-26)
  - iv) The land near the river Kishon is swampy, unsuited for chariots. (4:13)
- d) **TURNING POINT:** Yahweh gives victory (4:14-15a)
- e) Troops disperse (4:15b-16)
- i) The word “routed/threw into confusion” is also used of Yahweh's work against Egypt in Ex. 14:24.
    - (1) Perhaps an unseasonal storm is involved. (cf. 5:20-21)
  - ii) Sisera *goes down* from his chariot and flees *on foot*
  - iii) Barak pursues fleeing enemy troops
- f) Deborah's predication comes true: Jael kills Sisera (4:17-22)
- i) Interaction between a brave woman (Jael) and a weak military man (Sisera)
  - ii) This fulfills 4:9.
  - iii) Being a woman, Jael was well-experienced in driving tent pegs.
  - iv) Jael violates several social customs: she invited a man into her tent, she used hospitality as a cloak for murder, she violated a peace agreement.

- v) But remember Sisera's own mother's assumption of her son's immoral activity with women in war. (cf. 5:30)
  - (1) Jael stops a murdering rapist from repeating his violent sin.
  
- g) End of the oppression (4:23-24)
  - i) God ends the oppression of *King Jabin of Canaan*, and Israel *oppresses* and finally destroys Jabin
  - ii) **Positive chronological note:** land rests 40 years
  
- h) The song of Deborah (5:1-31)
  - i) One of the earlier Hebrew songs. Similar in purpose to Exod. 15.



- 4) **TURNING POINT: Gideon** of West Manasseh (6:1–8:32) [against Midian]
- **evaluation:** positive/negative
  - Gideon’s account covers 100 verses in three chapters. Samson’s account will cover 96 verses in four chapters.
  - Gideon will fight three battles: Baal (6), Midian (7), and Israel (8)
  - Gideon’s stand *against idolatry* at Ophrah (6:1–32)
    - Gideon’s battle against Midianites (6:33–7:25)
    - Gideon’s battle against Israelites (8:1–21)
  - Gideon’s lapse *into idolatry* at Ophrah (8:22–32)
- a) The **beginning** of the seasonal oppression by Midianites (6:1–10)
- A **negative** chronological note
  - A partial fulfillment of Deut. 28:29, 31
- i) The seemingly hopeless situation. (6:1-6)
- (1) Did “the evil” (namely, serve the Baals) (6:1)
    - (a) Cf. 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1
    - (2) The Midianites were descendants of Abraham (Gen. 25:2) who dwelt in the northern Sinai Peninsula and western Arabia.
      - (a) Tied in with the account of Joseph. (Gen. 37)
      - (b) Tied in with the account of Moses. (Ex. 2:15-25)
    - (3) The Amalekites were descendants of Esau. (Gen. 36:12)
    - (4) With few fortified cities, they can only “run for the hills.”
- ii) Part **one** of Yahweh’s response: an anonymous prophet. (6:7-10)
- (1) He recounts Yahweh’s previous grace. (6:7-9)
  - (2) He reminds and rebukes them concerning exclusive loyalty. (6:10)
- b) **Positive:** Gideon’s divine call; his destruction of idolatry at Ophrah (6:11–40)
- Gideon’s family’s good involvement
  - Gideon’s fleece laid on the ground to collect dew (which encourages Gideon to lead Israel to victory)
  - Gideon pleases Yahweh, opposes the people
  - good results: Yahweh in control
- i) Part **two** of Yahweh’s response: the Angel of Yahweh (6:11-24)
- (1) Our interpretation of our circumstances is not always right. (6:11-16)
  - (2) Yahweh’s gracious response to Gideon’s lack of faith. (6:17-24)
- ii) Part **three** of Yahweh’s response: the destruction of Baal’s altar (6:25-32)
- (1) Gideon’s own family has been worshiping Baal and Asherah! (6:25)
- iii) Part **four** of Yahweh’s response: the Spirit’s enablement of Gideon (6:33-40)
- (1) Baal was the god of the rain and the dew. Is Yahweh sovereign over the dew?
  - (2) Note the title *God*, and not the name *Yahweh*. (6:36) (cf. 6:20-21)
- c) **Positive:** Israel’s troops **gather** for the battle at En-Harod (7:1–14)
- army is made smaller, “that Israel may not *boast*”

- intertribal cooperation assumed
- good results: Yahweh in control
- i) The importance of weakness: whittling down self-confidence (7:1-8)
  - (1) The armies are separated north-south by the Jezreel valley.
  - (2) It is curious that the tribe Issachar is not mentioned since this event takes place on their soil at the foot of Mt. Gilboa. (cf. 6:35)
  - (3) Perhaps the name of the spring is ironic, “spring of trembling.”
  - (4) The selection of the 300 appears to be arbitrary. They are outnumbered 120,000+ (cf. 8:10) to 300, over 400 Midianite soldiers for every Jewish soldier.
- ii) A supernatural dream of despair (7:9-14)
  - (1) Gideon admits he is afraid. (7:10-11)
  - (2) Barley was the staple diet of the very poor. (7:13)
- d) **TURNING POINT: Yahweh gives victory (7:15–22)**
  - i) Worship (7:15) is a good thing, even if delayed until this time.
  - ii) Grasp the distinction between Gideon’s *Yahweh* (7:15) and the Midianite’s *God* (7:14).
  - iii) Normally, only a few leaders blew trumpets and held torches. (7:18)
    - (1) Three hundred trumpets and torches would give the impression of a huge army.
  - iv) This battle begins @ 10 pm. (7:19)
  - v) Ironically, Israel has no swords. (7:20)
    - (1) Yahweh used the Midianite swords against themselves. (7:22)
    - (2) Gideon’s skepticism has turned into swagger. (Abraham Kuruvilla)
  - vi) General description (7:21)
  - vii) Specific description of the surviving Midianites as they flee to the east-southeast toward the Jordan River. (7:22)
    - (1) Yahweh disappears from the rest of the story.
- e) **Negative: Israel’s troops disperse after the battle (7:23–8:21)**
  - the pursuit; attempt to enlarge the army; *boasting*
  - intertribal bickering
  - tragic results: Yahweh not in control, Yahweh is not praised
  - i) Parenthesis about two Midianite captains (Oreb and Zeeb) killed and strife with Ephraimites (7:23–8:3)
    - a) Perhaps these reinforcements are part of the original 32,000? Does this violate 7:2?
    - b) Gideon spends time pacifying the men of Ephraim.
    - c) This is remembered centuries later in Ps. 83:11 and Is. 10:26.
  - ii) Return to the theme of 7:22: Succoth refuses to help Gideon (8:4–7)
  - iii) Penuel refuses to help Gideon (8:8–9)
  - iv) **CENTER:** Gideon’s victory (8:10–12)
  - v) Succoth punished by Gideon (8:13–16)

- vi) Penuel punished by Gideon (8:17)
- vii) Two Midianite kings (Zebah and Zalmunna) killed (8:18–21)
  - a) Gideon appears to be more lenient with these Gentile kings than with his own countrymen in Succoth and Penuel.
  
- f) **Negative:** Gideon’s call by Israelites and his lapse into idolatry at Ophrah (8:22–27)
  - Gideon’s family’s bad involvement
  - Gideon’s garment spread out (on the ground) to collect spoils (which leads to idolatry)
  - Gideon cooperates with the people, displeases Yahweh
  - tragic results: Yahweh not in control
  - i) Gideon refuses the offer to establish a dynasty, but ... (8:22-23)
    - (1) He had a princely appearance. (cf. 8:18)
    - (2) He accumulated wealth. (8:26)
      - (a) This amounted to @ 43 lbs. of gold. If one pound is @ \$22,220, this is just under \$1 million dollars.
    - (3) He accumulated royal robes. (8:26)
    - (4) He named one of his 70 sons Abimelech (“my father is king”). (cf. 8:31)
      - (a) In Gideon’s defense, he may have meant My Father, i.e. Yahweh. (cf. 8:23)
    - (5) He accumulated a harem. (8:30)
  - ii) Gideon unwisely lays a trap for the people to worship false gods. (8:24-27)
    - (1) This gold ephod (sacred garment) is like the silver ephod in Judg. 17-18.
    - (2) This is anti-Yahweh worship in the same place where Gideon had destroyed the anti-Yahweh worship earlier. (cf. 6:25-32) (Kuruvilla)
    - (3) This may have been a desire to be an additional vehicle of revelation from Yahweh.
    - (4) This also was a distraction from the Tabernacle in Shiloh.
  
- g) The **end** of oppression by Midianites (8:28–32)
  - A **positive** chronological note
  - i) Positive: A summary of 40 years of quiet. (8:28) (cf. “the good” 8:35)
    - (1) This is the last period of peace in Judges. (cf. 3:11, 30; 5:31)
  - ii) Negative: A summary of Gideon’s family. (8:29-32)
    - (1) He returns home.
    - (2) He has many sons by many wives.
      - (a) He is the first Israelite leader to have a large harem.
      - (b) Infers political alliances with surrounding leaders.
    - (3) He names one of his sons Abimelech.
    - (4) He dies at a good old age. (cf. Gen. 15:15; 25:8; 1 Chron. 29:28)

In spite of all we see here, read Heb. 11:32.

- 5) **Abimelech** of West Manasseh (8:33–9:57)
- **evaluation:** negative
  - Israel's oppressor is one of Israel's "judges"!
  - *woman crushes Abimelech's skull* in careless moment.
  - Israelites fragmented; civil war.
- a) **Introduction:** How quickly Israel returns to Baal worship. (8:33-35)
- i) The replacement of Yahweh.
  - ii) The disloyalty toward Yahweh's deliverer.
- b) **Gideon's sons killed** (public execution) by Gideon's son, Abimelech. (9:1-6)
- i) Abimelech is not a judge, nor is he raised up by Yahweh. He insinuates himself into leadership.
- c) **Jotham's curse** upon Shechem and Abimelech. (9:7-21)
- i) Mt. Gerizim was once a place of blessing. (Deut. 11:20; 27:12; Josh. 8:33)
  - ii) Shechem was the place Israel had covenanted to never worship the false gods of the Canaanites. (Josh. 24:16-28)
  - iii) Jotham's parable/fable (9:7-15)
    - (1) From valuable and productive to worthless and dangerous: Olive tree, fig tree, vine, bramble/thorn bush
    - (2) His theme is the foolishness and peril of accepting clearly unqualified leadership. (D. R. Davis)
  - iv) Jotham's interpretation and curse (9:16-21)
    - (1) If ... , then ....
- d) **TURNING POINT:** God intervenes to help. (9:22-25)
- i) Three years later.
  - ii) God determines this division to bring about justice for Gideon's sons.
    - (1) "Evil spirit" (cf. Judg. 9:23; 1 Sam. 16:14, 15; 18:10; 19:9; 1 Kings 22:19-23) is not necessarily a demonic spirit. It is likely a holy angel who brings about what is perceived as disastrous or unpleasant.
- e) **Jotham's curse** upon Shechem fulfilled. (9:26-49)
- i) Gaal (a Gentile?) stirs up an insurrection (9:26-29)
  - ii) Zebul, ruling officer of Shechem, responds angrily and deceitfully. (9:30-33)
  - iii) Gaal is chased away from Shechem (9:34-41)
    - (1) The rising sun would cast deep shadows. (9:36)
  - iv) Abimelech partially destroys Shechem (9:42-45)
  - v) Abimelech destroys the leaders of Shechem (9:46-49)
- f) **Gideon's son**, Abimelech, is **killed**. (9:50-55)
- i) This takes place at Thebez, @ 10-12 miles northeast of Shechem.
  - ii) Abimelech is incapacitated by a woman dropping an upper millstone (25-30 lbs.) and then selfishly commits suicide by the hand of his armor bearer. (cf. 2 Sam. 11:21)
- g) **Conclusion:** God fulfills Jotham's curse. (9:56-57; cf. 9:20)
- i) God's providential justice (retribution) is accomplished. Evil destroys evil.