

Judges and Ruth

When we think of a judge, we usually think of someone sitting at a bench and overseeing a court case. That's not what we are looking at in the biblical book, however. Instead, we are reading about "deliverers," those who were given strength for a time to defeat particular enemies. The period of the judges begins with the death of Joshua and lasts a little over 300 years, ending with the beginning of Saul's reign in ca. 1050 B.C. Since the judges worked more locally instead of nationally, it is likely that some of them overlapped each other in time. Bear in mind that at this time in Israel's history, there was still no centralized government, no capital, and no physical king.

While Joshua's conquests gave the Israelites the land initially, the process of weeding out the nations would take time. This should have been happening in the days of the judges, but sadly it did not. The period of the judges would be a picture of a people who lost their way. It became dismal and dark for the nation. What was supposed to be a theocracy with Yahweh as their king became rather more like anarchy, with no real leadership and little concern for righteousness. This is summed up both Judges 17:6 and 21:25.

"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own



eyes."

With no standard, no real purpose, and no sense of God's covenant, the people strayed horribly. They gave themselves over to idolatry and relativism, politically, religiously, and morally. There was

confusion, apostasy, and a spiritual wasteland that came from it all. To get the sense of this, consider Judges 2:11-19, which describes the situation and the general cycle of the judges period.

First, the sons of Israel did evil and went after false gods (Baals). In doing this, they forsook the Lord and provoked Him to anger, which is exactly what He had warned them about. Idolatry became one of their worst problems.

Second, because they provoked God, He gave them over into the hands of plunderers and enemies. God's hand was against them for their sins, "as the Lord had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed" (vs. 15).

Third, after a time, God would raise up judges, "who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them." Typically, after being severely distressed for a time, they would cry out to God for deliverance. He would listen and send them relief through a deliverer.

Fourth, they would refuse to listen and learn, and so after the judge was gone they would revert back into sin: “they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers” (vs. 19). As time progressed, the sins of the people were becoming worse. Each generation carried sin even further. Sadly, that is typically the way sin operates. However far one generation goes, the next will take it further.

Because of the sins of the people, what Joshua had begun in conquering the land was hindered. The nations were not, then, completely driven out, and they would become thorns in the side of Israel.

There are several deliverers mentioned in Judges, and a few that stand out. Sadly, even among the standouts, there are few that would be considered righteous overall. While God gave His Spirit to strengthen them to defeat the enemies, they didn't always exhibit great personal character. Think of men like Jephthah and Samson. They showed elements of faith, to be sure, but also greatly struggled with carnal attitudes. The only woman to be a deliverer was Deborah, a prophetess, and her contrast with Barak seems to demonstrate that Israel was lacking in serious male leadership at the time (ch. 4-5). Gideon, though scared at first, showed great promise and did some good, but then his wicked son tried to make himself king, which didn't end well.

One striking issue in Judges is the lack of worship for Yahweh, and precious little mention of the tabernacle. This silence highlights the depth of Israel's movement away from God at this time in their history. One might wonder how Israel could survive at all. The answer still lies with God, who, through all of this unfaithfulness, would still keep His promises to Abraham alive.

This is where the story of Ruth comes in. The amazing facet to this story is how God take's a Moabite woman and accomplishes His purposes of redemption through her. The Moabites had been forbidden from being in the assembly of Israel. Yet the evil in Israel at this time contrasts with God's will, and He uses a gentile woman to keep His plans alive.

While the story of Ruth is itself fascinating, showing the concept of the kinsmen-redeemer, the final purpose of the book is found in the genealogy. The last word in the book is “David.” This period was a time in which they recognized no king, doing what they wanted, and “David” contrasts with this as the man who would become the standard of the kings and type of the Messiah. In such a dismal period, God kept alive that great promise made to Abraham that through His seed all nations would be blessed.

Doy Moyer