



Mass Chaos

A Study of the Book of Judges

Chapter 1: Historical Background

Introduction

Watch the introduction to the Book of Judges on the [Bible Project](#). Reflect: “In our modern age, what’s the point of studying a depressing book filled with so much blood and brutality, chaos and crime, death and destruction?”

Brief Overview of the Book of Judges

- The Book of Judges is an Old Testament historical book that transitions Israel’s history for about 300–350 years from their entrance into the Promised Land under Joshua to the establishment of Israel’s kingship under Saul and David.
- The theme of the book is summed up with the last verse, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (21:25).
- Traditionally, Samuel is viewed as the author of Judges, but we don’t really know for sure. The multiple references to the lack of a king would seem to suggest Judges was written (or at least edited) in the time of the Davidic monarchy, possibly under prophets like Nathan and Gad (1 Chr 29:29–30).
- The book is not necessarily arranged chronologically, but it features stories and headlines centering on the various judges of Israel.
- These judges were more like local rulers and military heroes who delivered and saved the Israelites. Thus their lives are another example of typology, or how Old Testament people and events foreshadowed the life of Christ and taught Israel more what the ultimate Deliverer would be like. Just as Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit in his baptism, so these judges were empowered by the Spirit too (3:10, 6:34, 11:29, 13:25, 14:6, 14:19, 15:14).
- Judges does not shy away from portraying Israel in very unflattering terms, but this underscores the grace of God. As the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* says, “Judges contrasts most glaringly the unfaithfulness of Israel with the faithfulness and mercy of God.”¹

¹ *Concordia Self-Study Bible*, Robert Hoerber, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia), 324.

The Israelites & the Canaanites

1:1-2:5

Compare this chapter with the record of Joshua's conquest in Joshua 11:16–23. Correct this overly romanticized, Sunday-school view of Joshua: "Joshua was a mighty warrior who had success in every battle he faced. The Canaanites didn't stand a chance! He drove out every single one of them, and the Israelites inherited every square mile of the Promised Land."

Judges 1:8 and 1:21 is a famous example of an apparent contradiction that biblical critics like to point out. How would you reconcile the two passages? Did the Israelites take over Jerusalem or not?

The Old Testament's record of the conquest of the Promised Land is often viewed as genocide (and thus ethically immoral) by secular people. Look at the chart below.² Respond: "What's the big deal about the Israelites living alongside the Canaanites? Why did they have to attack them and drive them out? Why couldn't everyone live in one multicultural, pluralistic society?"

Key Differences Between Israel & their Neighbors		
Topic	Israel	Neighbors
Ultimacy of deity	The LORD is the ultimate power in the universe.	The gods have competing agendas and limited jurisdiction.
Manifestation of deity	The LORD cannot be represented in material form or things in nature.	Deities are represented in icons, people, or in nature.
Disposition of deity	The LORD is consistent in character & has bound himself by his attributes.	Deities are not bound by any code of conduct and can be inconsistent or unpredictable.
Autonomy of deity	The LORD is not dependent on people for his needs.	People provide food (sacrifices) and shelter (temples) for the gods.
Requirements of deity	Made known in detail in the law	Not revealed and could only be inferred from one's fortunes
Creation of the world	The LORD undertook and sovereignly accomplished a cohesive plan.	Accomplished by the procreation of gods in conflict with each other with no directing influence

² Adapted from Walther Kaiser & Duane Garett, ed., *Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 408, taken from *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament*, 84.

<i>Human dignity</i>	Based on being created in the image of God and their rule over creation	Humans are a bother to the gods and created as an afterthought, dignity came from providing for the gods' needs.
<i>Election</i>	Israel understood itself to be the elect people of God.	Sometimes a king or dynasty was considered chosen by the gods, but nothing sustained
<i>How history is recorded</i>	History is a means of the LORD's revelation and therefore is educational.	History is a means of propaganda and certification of the current regime.
<i>Divine intervention</i>	Directed toward an established & consistent goal in line with the LORD's intentions	Directed towards maintaining the status quo and is not consistent or permanent
<i>Omens</i>	Israel's worldview rejected them.	Indicate whether the gods bring favorable or unfavorable circumstances
<i>Incantations</i>	Israel's worldview rejected manipulation of deity by them	Used as a magical means of coercing the deity to respond directly

In the Old Testament, the “angel of the LORD” can be a created angel, but it can also refer to the pre-incarnate Christ, the Lord himself. In 2:1–3, how do you know it’s the latter?

As you look at the chapter as a whole, where’s the hopeful beginning for Israel? Where’s the sober foreshadowing of something bad to come?

Conclusion

Even if many people in secular America do not believe in Jesus, they usually appreciate the New Testament’s emphasis on Jesus’ message of peace, love, and compassion. “But the Old Testament ... that’s such a primitive message of war, genocide, racism, and conflict. We’re way past that as a society. It’d be much better if Christians would forget about a book like Judges.” Make the case to secular America for why we need to study Old Testament books like Judges.