

Mass Chaos

A Study of the Book of Judges

Chapter 2: Cycle of Disobedience and Rescue

Introduction

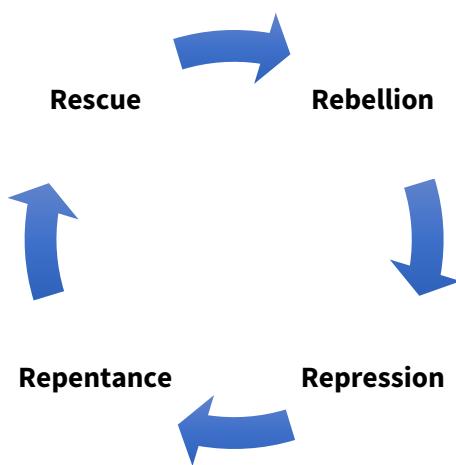
Imagine a society where everyone could do whatever they wanted. No rules. No consequences. No barriers. Complete freedom. Nothing to hold anyone back. What would this utopia be like? Explore this in your small groups.

The Israelites & the Canaanites

2:6–3:6

Literary Structure

Chapter 2 forms the outline for the entire rest of the book. It describes the cycle that will repeat, over and over again, throughout the book. Each of the judges serves as a vignette that illustrates this cycle. The book of Judges could be summed up with the “four R’s”:



A common axiom is, “We’re only one generation away from losing it all.” In the generation after Joshua, that proved true. What factors make people so (spiritually) forgetful?

Imagine if you were an Israelite parent at this time. You tell your children about the Exodus from Egypt and entrance into the Promised Land. They respond, “I don’t care.” How would you respond?

Read the article below about Canaanite worship of Baal. What made this such an offense to God?

BAAL (בעל, *ba'al*). The Canaanite storm god and bringer of rain. Chief of the Canaanite pantheon.

Introduction

As the storm god and bringer of rain, Baal was recognized as sustaining the fertility of crops, animals, and people. His followers often believed that sexual acts performed in his temple would boost Baal’s sexual prowess, and thus contribute to his work in increasing fertility.

Baal was a part of the religion of virtually every culture of the ancient Near East. ...

Baal in the Old Testament

From the time prior to the conquest of Canaan until the Babylonian exile, Baal worship was a constant temptation for the Israelites, particularly when it was endorsed by the king. The prophets preached against it and some kings sought to abolish it, but other kings practiced it. Although God’s punishments brought temporary repentance, it took the drastic measure of the exile to finally end Baal worship for good among Israelites (Archer, *Old Testament Introduction*, 384).

Baal Worship prior to the Monarchy

Upon coming in contact with Canaanites, some Israelites began to worship Baal—a behavior that recurred many times, and always with calamitous results. Numbers 25:1-9 records the first incident of Israelites turning away from God and worshiping Baal. This passage lists him as “Baal-Peor” because Mount Peor was located in the vicinity of Israel’s camp. A number of men pursued the enticements of nearby Moabite women, devotees of Baal who followed up sex with offerings to their god. The men not only participated in that ritual, but they popularized it among the other Israelites. God, who had already forbidden the Israelites from practicing idolatry (Exod 20:4; Lev 19:4; 26:1), punished them with a plague.

The book of Judges describes the repetition of a cycle, beginning with apostasy from God in favor of “the Baals” (Judg 2:11–13; 3:7; 6:25–32; 8:33; 10:6), which resulted in oppression by some foreign power. After the people repented of their idolatry, God sent a judge who liberated them and steered them away from Baal worship (Young, *Introduction*, 166). ...

Baal Outside of the Bible

Most knowledge about Baal outside of the Bible comes from two archaeological sites: Ugarit and Ebla. Both of these sites held numerous clay tablets containing, among other things, information about the religion of their time. ...

Baal at Ugarit

The tablets at Ugarit show Baal interacting with other deities, particularly in attempts to demonstrate his superiority. The Canaanites, on the whole, maintained an agricultural economy, which was dependent on the cooperation of nature, the fertility of the field, and the welfare of the support animals needed to raise crops. They lived in a land, where drought was a much greater threat than excessive rain. Thus, its religion focused on rain, nature, and fertility—which invariably implied an additional focus on sexuality. In Ugaritic texts, Baal is often surrounded by a group of gods, most of whom were pictured as promiscuous. Temple prostitution, both male and female, was a part of their worship.

Gods included in the Canaanite pantheon include:

- El, the father of the gods. His name is also the generic Semitic word for “god” or “deity.” In Babylonian it occurs as *ilu*. In the Ugaritic mythology, El’s power and influence had greatly diminished. Eventually, Baal displaced him as the chief of the gods (Archer, *Old Testament Introduction*, 150n2).
- Asherah, El’s wife, with whom he fathered 70 minor gods. She was also known as “The Lady Asherah of the Sea,” but devotion to her was not limited to coastal areas. People worshiped her with “Asherah poles,” which may have been made of wood, explaining why they have not endured. Asherah represented sexuality and fertility.
- Ashtoreth, one of Baal’s wives and the goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality. She is frequently referred to with the plural “Ashtaroth.” Her Akkadian name was *Ishtar*, and her name was transliterated as *Astarte* in Greek. In Babylon she became known as *Ashtar*. Ashtoreth was also referred to as Elath, “the goddess,” where the first part of the name, *El*, shows that in some way she was considered to be the counterpart to El, although she was usually associated with Baal. Her standard portrayal included two horns on the top of her head.¹

¹ Winfried Corduan, “Baal,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

Read the article below on the Hebrew term, “judge.” What do Americans think of with that term? What would be a better way to explain who these people were?

שָׁפָט (šāpat) *judge, govern.*

The primary sense of *šāpat* is to exercise the processes of government. Since, however, the ancients did not always divide the functions of government, as most modern governments do, between legislative, executive, and judicial functions (and departments) the common translation, “to judge,” misleads us. For, the word, judge, as *šāpat* is usually translated, in modern English, means to exercise only the judicial function of government. Unless one wishes in a context of government—civil, religious, or otherwise—consistently to translate as “to govern or rule,” the interpreter must seek more specialized words to translate a word of such broad meaning in the modern world scene. For the participle NIV uses “leader.”

The meaning of *šāpat* is further complicated by the fact that although the ancients knew full well what law—whether civil, religious, domestic or otherwise—was, they did not think of themselves as ruled by laws rather than by men as modern people like to suppose themselves to be. The centering of law, rulership, government in a man was deeply ingrained. “The administration of justice in all early eastern nations, as among the Arabs of the desert to this day, rests with the patriarchal seniors.”²

Evaluate the theology of God’s testing the Israelites in 2:20–23: “It makes it sound like God is leading them into temptation.”

Conclusion

As noted last week, the book of Judges is quite depressing. Read the quote below. Then use the cycle noted above to demonstrate, “This is a book about God’s grace.”

There is no doubt that 3:7–16:31, “The Book of Deliverers,” represents the core of the book. But such a title deflects from the author’s real concerns: Israel’s apostasy and Yahweh’s [the LORD’s] grace. The farther one reads in the book, the more one realizes that far from being the solution to Israel’s problems, the judges are increasingly part of the obstacle. At the same time one becomes increasingly aware that far from responding to his people’s conduct on the basis of some mechanical deuteronomistic formula (obedience brings blessing; disobedience yields the curse), Yahweh deals in grace.³

² Robert D. Culver, “שָׁפָט,” *TWOT*, 947.

³ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 118.