Chaos and Anarchy in Judges: What Is the Message?

The introduction to the book of Judges in the English Standard Version (ESV) states: “Judges is named after an interesting collection of individuals who led Israel after Joshua’s death”. To call this an understatement would itself be an understatement! But what do we make of this seemingly erratic collection of tales about the exploits of these, well, ‘interesting’ individuals? Many commentators scratch their head and surmise it may be a book on leadership (it is not).

You can also watch this content as a VIDEO PODCAST *or listen to it as an* AUDIO PODCAST

I have a better proposal to make: The structure of the book, the way its material is arranged, provides the key to its message and purpose. (And again, it is *not* lessons in leadership!)

Judges tells about 12 judges, 6 major ones and 6 minor ones. Reports on the minor ones are short, at the most three verses. They are not evenly spread out; five out of six occur immediately before or after Jephthah. The book is framed by an introduction and by two concluding – and shocking! – narratives.

Introduction (1:1-3:6)

The Bible never gives us straightforward history (indeed, there is no such thing). Every telling of history is selective and is shaped by the underlying worldview and its purpose or point of view. There are very different ways to tell about the same events, in order to make different points or bring out different lessons or applications.

This is important here, at the beginning of Judges. Obviously, the book is deliberately linked to Joshua and there is even some overlap when dealing with Caleb and when dealing with Joshua's death. Chapter 1 gives us a "continuation of conquest" story, which obviously goes beyond Joshua and yet includes some of the same information. Nevertheless, the material is used to make a very different point.

In Joshua, above all, we learn about God's faithfulness in fulfilling the promise and about how Israel could therefore be successful in battle and take possession of the land. Now we get the other side of the coin: the *un*faithfulness of Israel.

There are two aspects to this: unfaithfulness in conquest in chapter 1 and unfaithfulness in worship in chapter 2.

In Judges 1, Israel is off to a good start. They ask God, two tribes work together; the spirit of Caleb and Achsah is admirable, God gives victory like in Joshua. In verse 19 comes the first shadow: Judah could not drive out the inhabitants of the plains. This phrase becomes a refrain: the Israelites did not drive them out but lived among Canaanites. The last tribe in the list, Dan, is even pushed back.

What we want to know, of course, is why the narrator has selected these events and why he has arranged them in this way. What is the point he is trying to make? A good reason to retell the story of Othniel and Achsah would be to set an example of courage. This is the mentality all the Israelites should have had. In deliberate contrast to Joshua, the refrain is part of documenting Israel's failure in conquest.

Judges 2:6 is a second beginning in the book. It starts at a much earlier time when Joshua was still alive. It documents the religious unfaithfulness, the result of the failure in chapter 1.

The introduction concludes with a description of the highly precarious situation that resulted:

So the people of
Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods. (Jdg. 3:5-6 ESV)

Israel settled in the midst of the Canaanites and adopted their way of life. The result can be described in one word: Canaanization. That is the core of the historical setting of Judges.

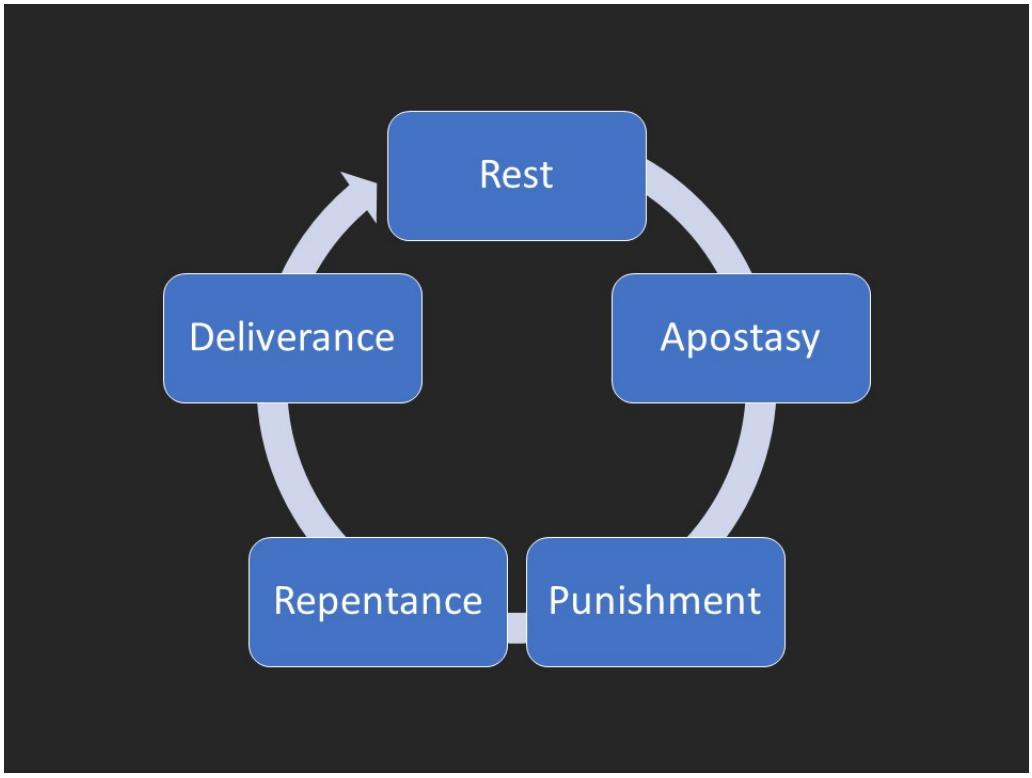
Cycle (Othniel)

In this context, the basic cycle that shapes the book of Judges is introduced:

The Othniel narrative is short, but it has all the phases of the cycle in it:

- Vs. 7 apostasy
- Vs. 8 retribution
- Vs. 9 repentance
- Vs. 10 a deliverer
- Vs. 11 rest

Now we have the pattern for the rest of the book. It will be repeated. Judges has a cyclical structure. But, as we will see, one with progression.



Chiasm

Here is another way to look at the structure of Judges: the book is a chiasm. Elements are introduced and then repeated in reverse order:

A. Judah and Israel against the Canaanites

B. Idols worshipped

C.
Othniel: Israelite wife

D.
Ehud: has a message, kills Moabites at fords of Jordan

E.
Barak & Deborah: Jael slays Sisera

F.
GIDEON

E'. Abimelech: woman slays Abimelech

D'. Jephthah: has a message, kills Ephraimites at fords of Jordan

C’.
Samson: foreign women

B’. Yahweh treated as an idol

A’. Israel and Judah against Benjamin

This places Gideon at the centre of the book. The Gideon narrative shows what Israel, however weak and wavering, could accomplish with God.

Ehud, Shamgar, and Deborah and Barak

The story of Ehud is a straightforward cycle as well, like Othniel’s. The one-sentence reference to Shamgar is puzzling. What he does makes him look like a precursor of Samson. Anath is not a location but the name of a Canaanite goddess of war, Baal’s sister.

With the next narrative, we come to a highly unusual occurrence (unusual for that time and that part of the world): a female judge and prophet. Women play a surprisingly prominent role in the book of Judges. Important here is the location: Mount Tabor, a hill at the edge of the Valley of Jezreel. Barak was trapped on Tabor by 900 chariots. What happened? Why was Sisera's army "routed" (4:15) so that he had to leave his chariot behind and flee on foot? The victory song in chapter 5 gives an important clue:

> From heaven the stars fought,
>
> from their courses they fought against Sisera.
>
> The torrent Kishon swept them away,
>
> the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
>
> March on, my soul, with might! (Jdg. 5:20-21)

Presumably, heavy rain made the Kishon overflow, rendering Sisera's chariots useless; they had to be left behind in the mud.

This narrative is the first one that has at least a hint of a shadow: Barak does not straightforwardly obey the word of the Lord through Deborah. In the next cycle, there is quite a bit more that serves as a departure from the ideal cycle.

Gideon

Now we come to the central narrative. Look at 6:7 and following:

> When the people of Israel cried out to the Lord on account of the Midianites, the Lord sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery.And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. And I said to you, ‘I am the Lord your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.’ But you have not obeyed my voice.” (Jdg. 6:7-10 ESV)

This time, when the people cry out to God, he sends a prophet with a rebuke. The word does not state that he won’t save them again, but neither does it promise deliverance; the issue is left open. Nevertheless, in the next verse, we find that God is responding.

What does the writer want us to pick up about Gideon? The author does not describe Gideon’s character; he shows it to us through Gideon’s actions. Gideon asked for a sign, and this won’t be the last time. This suggests weak faith that needs to be propped up by confirmations.

In a sense, it is comforting and encouraging that Gideon is so weak. In modern psycho lingo, he has a low self-image and displays low self-confidence. This does not prevent God from using him dramatically. Perhaps it is even what makes this possible; after all, God could surely have found stronger leaders than Gideon. It must be deliberate that this central narrative in the book presents such a weak and wavering “hero”. It tells us, and Israel, that we are not strong because of our strength, that the strength of God’s people is not their strength but God’s.

Gideon will be able to do what God is telling him to do, but not because of any resources of his own. It is not that Gideon simply does not know who he truly is. The key is in 6:16: God promises to be with him; that is what will make the difference.

The night action that follows in 6:25-27 confirms the initial impression we get of Gideon. He was afraid. This time, it is stated explicitly. Asherah was a Canaanite goddess, here probably the wife of Baal. The cult object representing her was a tree, grove, or pole. We get to see here how deeply Baal worship had penetrated this particular community in Israel.

Then comes what is perhaps the most famous element in the story, in 6:36-40. This is not intended to authorize a doubtful technic of obtaining guidance. Gideon is not recommended for doing this. In fact, this too illustrates his weakness. If we put out some sort of fleece, God may honour it, and he may not. We cannot use this passage to twist his arm. The point is that after all that had happened, Gideon was still doubtful enough to seek further support and confirmation.

Incredibly, it happens yet again:

> That same night the Lord said to him, “Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant. And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.” Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp.

(Jdg. 7:9-11 ESV)

In 7:9-11, God’s time for the attack has come. But God anticipates the possibility that Gideon still is afraid, still in need of more supernatural confirmation. “If you are afraid”… What does Gideon do? So he still feared.

Gideon hears a dream that emboldens him for action. Following the victory, Gideon is offered kingship, but refuses:

> Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.” Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you.” (Jdg. 8:22-24 ESV)

In principle, this is the right answer, but the continuation of Gideon’s life does not quite match this; to some extent, Gideon lives the life of a king even though he has refused the title:

> Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. (Jdg. 8:30 ESV)

It is important to keep this in mind. This is the earliest hint or reference to kingship and the Israel’s tendency in this direction both in judges and in the OT, and it is not a positive one.

The story takes a sad turn. In a scene that reminds us of Israel's sin with the golden calf in Exodus 32, Gideon asks for golden earrings. The material is used to fashion what is called an ephod, normally a term for a priestly garment, here perhaps more like a statue. It obviously becomes an object of idolatrous worship.

The cyclic system of Judges is beginning to come undone. The aftermath of Gideon's life is bad.

Abimelech obviously understood Gideon's function in monarchical terms:

> "Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh." (Jdg. 9:2 ESV)

Abimelech means my father is king.

He kills all 70 sons but one to make sure there is no rival. In 9:6, the people of Shechem make him king. His kingdom is very small, but still… Here is the first person to become king, and it does not put the idea of kingship in a positive light.

Jephthah

The narrative about Jephthah is framed by two and three minor judges. We hardly know anything about Tola, but of Jair it is said that he had 30 sons who wrote on 30 donkeys:

> And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities, called Havvoth-jair to this day, which are in the land of Gilead. (Jdg. 10:4 ESV)

Something similar is said of Ibzan:

> He had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he gave in marriage outside his clan, and thirty daughters he brought in from outside for his sons. (Jdg. 12:9 ESV)

The report on
Elon is minimal again. Of Abdon said:

> He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys, and he judged Israel eight years. (Jdg. 12:14 ESV)

What is this
about? First, notice that having this many children implies having several wives. Ibzan builds his relational network through strategic marriages, a common royal strategy. Then, there are hints later in the Bible that riding on a donkey marked the Hebrew king. This is the reason Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. In other words, these judges show royal pretensions.

The Jephthah cycle itself again includes a prophetic word in response to the people of Israel crying out. We first had this additional element with a

Gideon. This time, God states that he will not save them again. It is only when the people truly repent and put away their idols that God is moved to save them after all.

That the cycles are deteriorating also shows in the fact that Jephthah is not chosen by God but selected by the elders of Israel. He is an outlaw and the son of a prostitute. He is also an effective warrior and leader of a small band of desperados.

Jephthah sends a relatively lengthy message to the king of the Ammonites, providing arguments from history to show that the Ammonites are in the wrong. When these arguments are rejected, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him and he defeats the Ammonites.

However, Jephthah is less known for this significant victory then he is for his foolish vow. A number of interpreters have argued that Jephthah did not actually do what he vowed to do and that he appears to have done, that is, burn his daughter as a sacrifice, but that instead, he devoted her to perpetual virginity and she simply did not marry. However, it won't do to argue that the law forbade human sacrifice, especially of children. This is precisely the point: it shows how low Israel's knowledge of Yahweh and his laws had come.

Also, notice that the time of rest is getting shorter; with Jephthah, it is a mere six years. We should also notice that this cycle includes war between the tribes of Israel themselves.

Samson

And then comes Samson. I am still struggling to make sense of the last judge in the book of Judges. Great stories (many of us grew up on them, what boy doesn't like Samson the superhero?), but what is this about? What does the narrator want us to make of these incredible and heroic exploits combined with deep moral flaws? I'm still wondering.

Samson is unusual for several reasons. For one, Samson is the only judge with a birth narrative, one that shows some similarity with the later birth stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. But this tells us more about Jesus (the true ‘judge’ or deliverer) than about Samson, although it does put Samson apart from the others. Samson always operates on his own, never with other Israelites in the way of the other judges. Samson is significant in the context of Judges because of his obvious moral and spiritual failures and because he fails to bring deliverance. The Philistines continue to be a problem for a long time after Samson. Yet at the same time, there is this incredible strength. The narrator provides no direct comment.

Nevertheless, this much is clear. Samson is about as unworthy a Nazirite as one can imagine. As such, he parallels the people of Israel: chosen by God to be his but squandering that birthright and losing their strength. Imagine what Samson could have accomplished with focus and discipline! But it doesn’t come to much. As with Israel: God’s strength and ability to deliver is infinite, yet Israel suffers under oppression and will eventually go into exile.

So maybe these is the point. With Samson, there is no deliverance. The system is broken. This certainly finds confirmation in the concluding narratives in Judges 17-21. They are presumably placed at the very end for this reason because chronologically they certainly do not belong here; the events described took place early in the period of the judges, not late.

Concluding Narratives (17-21)

You may want to pause here and read Judges 17-18 with three questions in mind; an exercise in *narrative criticism* or analysis:

- What are clues that tell us about the point of view and the implied standards of the narrator (that is, what does he value as positive or negative)?
- What does God do in this narrative?
- When did this happen (the decisive clue comes shortly before the end)?

To start with the last question, in 18:30, we are told that the Levite in question is Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses. This is a shocking detail that the narrator keeps for the end. Things in Israel were this bad a mere two generations after Moses. These events therefore take place early in the time of the judges. This fits with the fact that the tribe of Dan was still looking for an inheritance.

Footnote: in the Hebrew text, there is an additional letter 'n' in the name, transforming it into Manasseh. The LXX and a few other ancient texts have Moses*. As shown here in a snapshot from Logos Bible software. It is unlikely anyone would have changed* Manasseh *to* Moses *but it is quite conceivable that a pious scribe, desiring to protect the reputation of Moses, changed his name to* Manasseh*.*

30 And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves, and Jonathan the son of Gershom, [t]son of Moses,[3] [u]and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Dan-ites until the day [v]of the captivity of the land. 31 So they set up Micah's carved

Or *Manasseh*

Surface	of	Moses,	•	and	his	sons
MSS	→	15 מְנַשֶּׁה	16 הֽוּא	17 וּ	19 ו	18 בָנָי
MSS Trl		mᵉnăš·šĕ(h)′	hû(ʾ)′	û	w	ḇā·nāy′

Reverse interlinear and footnote (Logos Bible Software)

The second narrative, by the way, is also early. Judges 20:28 mentions Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, as the high priest.

What does God do in Judges 17-18? The answer is: nothing. People refer to him but they are so obviously out of touch with what God wants that these references are without substance. In reality, God is absent in this narrative and does nothing. An astonishing fact. There are not many chapters in the Bible where God does nothing.

Remember that narratives simply record what happened. They often don't tell us why it happened, nor whether it was right or wrong that it happened. We frequently have to draw our own conclusions. But in the first narrative, it is not hard.

In Judges 17:2f, Micah is blessed after stealing. In, 17:13, he mistakenly believes God will bless him because he has a Levite as his personal priest.

God is mentioned repeatedly but without any reality. People have their mouth full with “the Lord”, but his character is unknown to them and their deeds contrary to it.

So if we are shocked by the way the Levite treats his concubine in the second narrative (chapter 19-21), we should remember that the text doesn’t tell us “right” or “wrong”. It does not have to; it should be obvious. The narrator maintains focus on the one point he wants to make. Obviously, conditions in Israel fell far, far short of God’s standards.

Judges 19-21, about the abominable sin in Gibea, reminds us of Sodom. Israel’s response is the right response, although there are errors in the process (there is no second witness and no enquiry). But Israel is defeated twice. And the end is near disaster: Benjamin almost exterminated.

The narrator is very restrained in making comments. This makes the few he does make striking. There is a repeated phrase in a chiastic form: in those days, there was no king in Israel (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, and 21:25). The first and the last occurrence include
the phrase that everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

The combined weight of the cycles tells us not just that Israel failed (and it failed miserably), but that the theocracy had failed. Israel as God’s people, governed by God through the mediation of judges, it simply didn’t work.

So What’s the Point?

Often, the view is expressed: if only there would have been a centralized government, it would have been so much easier to deal with the

offenders. And it might never have happened. If only there would have been a king, if only there would have been a centralized government. Then this religious anarchy wouldn't have been permitted, and the right of the strongest wouldn't prevail (as Dan over Micah).

What is the point Judges wants to make? The theocracy didn't work. What would be a solution? A king? Is the author arguing the case for the monarchy?

Maybe, but maybe not – seeing that monarchical tendencies and presumptions are valued negatively in Judges (Gideon, Abimelech, the minor judges with their descendants on donkeys). Judges is not naïve. And when we look ahead to the books to come: The king came, Saul. But Saul failed. David was good, but not perfect. Solomon was good too, but towards the end of his life, he fell into idolatry. After that, the failure of the kingdom became painfully clear. The monarchy failed just as much as the theocracy. A king may bring improvements but cannot prevent this.

Nevertheless, and either way, it is this theme of a king that God takes up to reveal what his solution to man's dilemma will be. Indeed, a king, and even a son of David. A central theme in the prophets will be the seed and the throne of David. This is how Judges tells us about Jesus. It is not that we can see Jesus in every detail. Judges tells us about Jesus by showing us the need for a deliverer and the need for a king, a king who will be able to break the cycle of sin and the stronghold of depravity in the human heart. And that king is Jesus: a perfect king, who can reign from within (and break the cycle of sin).

The judges are hardly put up as positive examples to follow, except perhaps in their response of faith. I used superhero illustrations, but I hope you picked up the irony: the judges were not superheroes. The only superhero in the book is God himself. And with him, anybody can do amazing things, that is true. But we do them in spite of ourselves. The subject is not great leadership but the Canaanization of Israel and God's response.

We, too, get infected with the values and beliefs of the culture that surrounds us. One way Canaanization happens today is when we embrace political or national agendas as part of our faith and true Christian faith distorts into cultural Christianity. The Christian Right. Or the Christian Left. This happened in pre-war Germany, in Franco's Spain with the Catholic Church, to the Roman church under Constantine and in Byzantium. But it is always much easier to see it happen to others, in a different part of the world. So maybe, rather than point the finger at those other cases, I should ask: And how am *I* unduly buying into the idols and the ideological agenda of my age and my culture? That is a much harder question to answer.

Overall, Judges presents us with a portrait of human failure. It is a mirror! It shows us as we are (*us*, not them).

When we look around us, at humankind, there is no hope. When we look up at God, as his story unfolds in these books, there is. God is faithful; deliverance keeps breaking in and interrupting. God does not give up.

We noticed the book finishes with two longer narratives, two shocking and horrifying tales. There is a third story, immediately following these two. It begins, “In the days that the judges ruled”. It is set in the same dark time but offers a far more hopeful tale – one that leads into a better future.

Because
God will never give up.

Attribution

Photos are taken from Unsplash and Pixabay.

Bible
quotations are taken from: *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.
2001. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles)