

# JUDGES

## Introduction

The core of the Book of Judges (Parts Two and Three in this commentary) is a compilation of epic stories of people who were significant in one or other of the tribal areas during the two hundred years from the death of Joshua to the emergence of the monarchy (the twelfth and eleventh centuries BC). The Prologue (1:1 - 3:6) and Epilogue (17:1 - 21:25) and the framework within which the various stories are told are supplied by writers of the Deuteronomistic School. Deuteronomistic influence is especially evident in the angelic judgment speech (2:1-5); the prophetic judgment speech (6:7-10); and the divine judgment speech (10:6-16).

These were, for the most part, difficult years during which those who espoused the religion of Yahwism had to struggle with the tension of resisting old Canaanite habits which they continued to find attractive, as well as having to fight for their survival against the city-states of the plain of Esdraelon, the Philistines in the coastal districts, and Bedouin invaders from the south and east. The stories of local 'heroes' were told to entertain, but more importantly to encourage people to continue the struggle. Folklore would be a better way of characterising these stories than history, though there is an historical background to the stories. As with the stories of Moses and Joshua, these stories do not set out to give accurate information about the past. As was noted in the Introduction when speaking of story (see pages 10-12), the aim is to form people's consciousness. The stories portray the past in ways that will encourage fidelity to YHWH in the present. In this context it is interesting that the so-called 'judges' are not idealised but portrayed in all their human frailty. This is above and beyond anything else the story of YHWH's presence and action in the life of his people.

The term 'judges' is not a very helpful category for the motley group of leaders that feature in this anthology. When they are first introduced it is as people raised up by YHWH to save the people who cry out in their distress (see 2:18). YHWH is described as 'one who judges' (šāpat, 11:27). Perhaps this is the point. These historical romances are primarily about YHWH, and YHWH's judgment revealed in history. Only secondarily are they about the way in which the people of Israel, including the 'judges' whom God raises up to reveal his judgment, are faithful or unfaithful to the covenant.

The emergence of Israel in Canaan (see the Book of Joshua) was, indeed, revolutionary. It included a social and political experiment that was incomprehensible to the traditional power groups in Canaan, or to the enterprising Philistines who settled along the Mediterranean coast shortly after Israel emerged in the hill country. It is no surprise that the Israel movement met constant resistance. As is clear from the Book of Joshua, it was restricted to the highlands and the Negeb, and its survival even there was precarious until the time of King David.

The Deuteronomists are critical of the failure of political leadership, but they are not against having a monarch so long as it is a monarchy faithful to the covenant. One of the lessons of Judges is the anarchy that prevailed in the pre-monarchy period. What is needed is strong leadership that is faithful to YHWH. This kind of leader was raised up by God in Judah in the person of David, and was realised (in the opinion of the Deuteronomists) in a limited way of Hezekiah and Josiah, but the rest of the kings of Judah were unfaithful, a fact that contributed significantly to Judah's tragic history.

**SETTING THE SCENE**  
**JUDGES 1:1 – 3:6**

## Introduction to Judges 1:1 – 2:5

These opening verses appear to have been added by the final editors who were keen to preserve whatever snippets of ancient material they had available to them concerning the early years of Israel's emergence in Canaan. They also wanted to provide a historical background to the earlier and more general theological introduction that follows (2:6–3:6). These verses illustrate how various tribes were at fault in failing to completely wipe out the non-Israelite inhabitants. This failure was a fundamental threat to their covenant with YHWH. The Deuteronomists are setting the scene for YHWH's response to this failure: namely, the raising up leaders filled with his 'spirit' (the 'judges') to put things right.

When we compare these opening verses with the story as we find it in the Book of Joshua, the latter is seen to be painting the picture of Israel's emergence in general lines, drawing on ancient material but writing from the perspective of a much later period. These opening verses of Judges, because they do little more than preserve ancient material, give a somewhat more realistic picture of the position of Israel in the early years.

**<sup>1</sup>After the death of Joshua, the Israelites inquired of YHWH, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" <sup>2</sup>YHWH said, "Judah shall go up. I hereby give the land into his hand." <sup>3</sup>Judah said to his brother Simeon, "Come up with me into the territory allotted to me, that we may fight against the Canaanites; then I too will go with you into the territory allotted to you." So Simeon went with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Judah went up and YHWH gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand; and they defeated ten contingents of them at Bezek. <sup>5</sup>They came upon Adoni-bezek at Bezek, and fought against him, and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. <sup>6</sup>Adoni-bezek fled; but they pursued him, and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and big toes. <sup>7</sup>Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has paid me back." They brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there. <sup>8</sup>Then the people of Judah fought against Jerusalem and took it. They put it to the sword and set the city on fire.**

That the first episode concerns Judah should not surprise us when we recall that the Deuteronomists are writing from a Judah perspective (compare 20:18).

For the territory allotted to Judah by YHWH see Joshua 15. The territory allotted to Simeon is within the Judah area, in and around Beer-sheba (see Joshua 19:1-9, page 269, and map page 263).

There is no scholarly consensus to help us identify the 'Perizzites'. It may mean those living in the countryside and unwallled villages as distinct from those (called here by the general term 'Canaanites') living in walled towns. Here again (see Joshua 4:13) 'elep seems better translated 'contingent' (rather than 'thousand'). Ten contingents could be something between 150 and 200 men.

The removal of the thumb and big toe made fighting impossible. The reference to Jerusalem is obscure. Did they dispatch him maimed to instill fear into the inhabitants of Jerusalem? Verse eight is either an editorial comment remembering David's action at a later period, or it is referring to the unfortified southwest hill (see Joshua 15:63).

In Joshua 15:14 it is Caleb who is said to have defeated Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmai, who are described as ‘descendants of Anak’. The story of Othniel and Achsah is included also in Joshua 15:15-19.

Linking Judah with the Kenizzites (see Genesis 36:11) is another indication of the age of the piece and gives a realistic picture of the kinds of alliances that were part of the emergence of Israel in Canaan.

Othniel will feature as the first of the ‘judges’ in 3:7-11.

‘Gulloth’ in verse fifteen seems to refer to springs that were a secure source of water even when the wadi was dry.

The Greek Version of verse fifteen reads: ‘Caleb (kālēb) gave her her heart’s desire (kelibbâ)’. The repetition of sound is a common feature in oral tradition, and the words ‘her heart’s desire’ seem to have slipped out of the accepted Hebrew text by mistake.

Verse sixteen mentions two other groups that inhabited the area allotted to Judah. One was a friendly group of nomads, the descendants of Hobab the Kenite. Hobab is mentioned in Numbers 10:29 as the ‘son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses’ father-in-law’. Perhaps the Hebrew should be pointed ḥatan (‘son-in-law’) rather than ḥoten (‘father-in-law’). The consonantal root speaks of kinship through marriage. There is yet another nomad group in the area: the Amalekites – traditional enemies of Judah (see Exodus 17:8-13).

‘Devote to destruction’ (ḥāram) is a recurrent theme in Joshua (see pages 236-237). In Judges it is found here as an explanation of the name ‘Hormah’ (see also Numbers 21:3). Otherwise it is found only in 21:11. There is less Deuteronomistic editorial comment in Judges than we find in Joshua.

<sup>9</sup>Afterward the people of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who lived in the hill country, in the Negeb, and in the foothills.

<sup>10</sup>Judah went against the Canaanites who lived in Hebron (the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-arba); and they defeated Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmai.

<sup>11</sup>From there they went against the inhabitants of Debir (the name of Debir was formerly Kiriath-sepher).

<sup>12</sup>Then Caleb said, “Whoever attacks Kiriath-sepher and takes it, I will give him my daughter Achsah as wife.” <sup>13</sup>And Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, took it; and he gave him his daughter Achsah as wife. <sup>14</sup>When she came to him, she urged him to ask her father for a field. As she dismounted from her donkey, Caleb said to her, “What do you wish?” <sup>15</sup>She said to him, “Give me a present; since you have set me in the land of the Negeb, give me also Gulloth-mayim.” So Caleb gave her Upper Gulloth and Lower Gulloth.

<sup>16</sup>The descendants of Hobab the Kenite, Moses’ father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negeb near Arad. Then they went and settled with the Amalekites.

<sup>17</sup>Judah went with his brother Simeon, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath, and devoted it to destruction. So the city was called Hormah.

<sup>18</sup>Judah took Gaza with its territory, Ashkelon with its territory, and Ekron with its territory. <sup>19</sup>YHWH was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain, because they had chariots of iron.

<sup>20</sup>Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said; and he drove out from it the three sons of Anak.

<sup>21</sup>But the Benjaminites did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem; so the Jebusites have lived in Jerusalem among the Benjaminites to this day.

<sup>22</sup>The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel; and YHWH was with them. <sup>23</sup>The house of Joseph sent out spies to Bethel (the name of the city was formerly Luz). <sup>24</sup>When the spies saw a man coming out of the city, they said to him, "Show us the way into the city, and we will deal kindly with you." <sup>25</sup>So he showed them the way into the city; and they put the city to the sword, but they let the man and all his family go. <sup>26</sup>So the man went to the land of the Hittites and built a city, and named it Luz; that is its name to this day.

<sup>27</sup>Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and its villages, or Taanach and its villages, or the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages; but the Canaanites continued to live in that land. <sup>28</sup>When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labour, but did not in fact drive them out.

There is no doubt that verse nineteen is an accurate description of the situation (see Joshua 13:2-3). 'Took' in verse eighteen must mean 'intended to take', or 'tried to take'. The Deuteronomists are trying to defend Judah from any guilt in failing to dislodge the Philistines.

Verse twenty is inserted as offering an alternate version of the capture of Hebron to that given earlier in verse ten.

When the Deuteronomists move away from Judah to record bits and pieces of information from the records of the other tribes they begin to apportion blame. Notice the dramatic difference between Judah '*could not*' drive out the inhabitants of the plain (1:19), but the Benjaminites '*did not*' drive out the Jebusites. The implication is that they could have done so, but failed to carry out their obligation.

The capture of Bethel by the tribe of Joseph is recounted in a way that reminds us of the capture of Jericho (see the story of the spies and Rahab in Joshua chapter two). As with Rahab (Joshua 2:12), they offer the man *hesed* ('deal kindly', 'keep faith'), and they are shown to have been faithful to the covenant that they entered into with him. 'Luz' means 'deception'. There seems to be some confusion in the sources. Verse twenty-six talks of a city that the man built and called 'Luz'. All other references to 'Luz' (including verse twenty-three here) give it as an earlier name for Bethel (see Genesis 28:19; 35:6; 48:3; Joshua 18:16).

Obviously Manasseh was not able to defeat the cities of the plain (1:27; see map page 266). As will become clear shortly, they are blamed for not doing so (compare verse 21 above). Verse 28 refers to the time of King David.

Ephraim and the tribes of Galilee join the list of those who ‘did not drive out’ the non-Israelites. The result was that even though later (in the time of the monarchy) the Canaanites became slaves, they were still present in the land against YHWH’s command (see below). Things were different for Dan who were unable to take over their allotment in the plain west of Benjamin.

The aim of this introductory chapter becomes clear in the Deuteronomic judgment speech of the ‘angel of YHWH (2:1-5) – a way of speaking of YHWH while preserving YHWH’s transcendence. In our human experience, God’s communication is always mediated.

YHWH has not broken his covenant with them ‘but you have not obeyed my command’ (2:2). The fact is that not all the inhabitants of Canaan espoused the religion of Israel. The explanation of the Deuteronomist is that God allowed this as a punishment because Israel did not carry out its part of the covenant. The unconverted local inhabitants would remain a constant temptation to Israel to worship the gods of the land (the Baals) instead of their own God, YHWH (2:3; compare Joshua 23:13).

The weeping of the people is expressed in the name ‘Bochim’ (weepers, from *bākâ*, to weep). The Greek Version has ‘to Bochim and Bethel’ (and see Genesis 35:8).

**<sup>29</sup>And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer; but the Canaanites lived among them in Gezer.**

**<sup>30</sup>Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahalol; but the Canaanites lived among them, and became subject to forced labour. <sup>31</sup>Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon, or of Ahlab, or of Achzib, or of Helbah, or of Aphik, or of Rehob; <sup>32</sup>but the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; for they did not drive them out. <sup>33</sup>Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh, or the inhabitants of Beth-anath, but lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; nevertheless the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and of Beth-anath became subject to forced labour for them.**

**<sup>34</sup>The Amorites pressed the Danites back into the hill country; they did not allow them to come down to the plain. <sup>35</sup>The Amorites continued to live in Har-heres, in Aijalon, and in Shaalbim, but the hand of the house of Joseph rested heavily on them, and they became subject to forced labour. <sup>36</sup>The border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akrabim, from Sela and upward.**

**<sup>2:1</sup>Now the angel of YHWH went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, “I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you.**

**<sup>2</sup>For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done! <sup>3</sup>So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you.” <sup>4</sup>When the angel of YHWH spoke these words to all the Israelites, the people lifted up their voices and wept. <sup>5</sup>So they named that place Bochim, and there they sacrificed to YHWH.**

## Introduction to Judges 2:6 – 3:6

This appears to be the earlier introduction to the Book. Verses six to nine repeat the conclusion to Joshua (24:28-31). Verse ten is enlarged in the later introduction (2:1-5). In verses eleven to twenty-nine, before recording the stories about the various ‘judges’, the Deuteronomists present an overview of apostasy, followed by hardship, followed by groaning, followed by YHWH’s rescue through the ‘judges’ (‘saviours’) whom he sends them.

**<sup>6</sup>When Joshua dismissed the people, the Israelites all went to their own inheritances to take possession of the land. <sup>7</sup>The people worshiped YHWH all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that YHWH had done for Israel. <sup>8</sup>Joshua son of Nun, the servant of YHWH, died at the age of one hundred ten years. <sup>9</sup>So they buried him within the bounds of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. <sup>10</sup>Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know YHWH or the work that he had done for Israel.**

**<sup>11</sup>Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of YHWH and worshiped the Baals; <sup>12</sup>and they abandoned YHWH, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked YHWH to anger. <sup>13</sup>They abandoned YHWH, and worshiped Baal and the Astartes. <sup>14</sup>So the anger of YHWH was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. <sup>15</sup>Whenever they marched out, the hand of YHWH was against them to bring misfortune, as YHWH had warned them and sworn to them; and they were in great distress.**

**<sup>16</sup>Then YHWH raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. <sup>17</sup>Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of YHWH; they did not follow their example. <sup>18</sup>Whenever YHWH raised up judges for them, YHWH was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for YHWH would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. <sup>19</sup>But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. <sup>20</sup>So the anger of YHWH was kindled against Israel.**

‘Moved with pity’ in verse eighteen translates *nāḥam* (‘to comfort, see Deuteronomy 32:36, page 200). On God’s anger see pages 40-42.



The fact is that YHWH's promise to drive out all the inhabitants of Canaan was never fulfilled. The Deuteronomists needed to provide an explanation. As one would expect they lay the blame on the failure of Israel to keep its part of the covenant, and they explain YHWH's decision to leave the Canaanites in place as being both a punishment, and a way of testing the genuineness of the people's commitment.

Chapter three verses one and two add a further idea. The generations of Israelites after Joshua and his contemporaries did not experience the wonderful deeds of YHWH in liberating the people from Egypt, bringing them across the wilderness and giving them the land (see 2:1). Neither did they experience the struggle involved in acquiring the land. They would have to learn about war the hard way. In black and white Deuteronomic terms, peace is associated with covenant obedience, and war is associated with covenant disobedience.

'Lebanon'(3:3) is included in the Promised Land in Deuteronomy 1:7; 11:24, and Joshua 1:4).

For the list of nations in Canaan see page 89. Living with these nations, including intermarrying with them, meant that there was a constant temptation to espouse their values in contrast to living according to the covenant.

<sup>20</sup>YHWH said, "Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their ancestors, and have not obeyed my voice, <sup>21</sup>I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died." <sup>22</sup>In order to test Israel, whether or not they would take care to walk in the way of YHWH as their ancestors did, <sup>23</sup>YHWH had left those nations, not driving them out at once, and had not handed them over to Joshua.

<sup>3:1</sup>Now these are the nations that YHWH left to test all those in Israel who had no experience of any war in Canaan <sup>2</sup>(it was only that successive generations of Israelites might know war, to teach those who had no experience of it before): <sup>3</sup>the five lords of the Philistines, and all the Canaanites, and the Sidonians, and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. <sup>4</sup>They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of YHWH, which he commanded their ancestors by Moses.

<sup>5</sup>So the Israelites lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; <sup>6</sup>and they took their daughters as wives for themselves, and their own daughters they gave to their sons; and they worshipped their gods.