

Judges 1:1-3:6 The Lord the Judge

by Grant Thorpe

This book gains its name from the twelve people who led Israel between the times of Joshua and Saul. We have the stories of only six of them—together with an introduction and an appendix.

These judges did not all reign over the same territory and may have sometimes overlapped. Strictly they did not judge but led. But by them, God declared his judgment in favour of his people when they called to him, and in chastening when they ignored him. He was the Judge (11:27), so that, although there was no Moses or Joshua to appeal to as before, or David as there would be later, God was very much present. This had been the faith of Abraham (Gen. 18:25). In fact, every generation must have direct dealings with their God (Acts 17:31).

The book is the story of Israel learning to live in the land of promise. It is largely the story of their appalling failure and could be depressing because of their monotonous turning from God to idols. However, the Bible is not the story of man's faithfulness to God but of God's faithfulness to man. It may therefore be justly subtitled '*Grace Abounding*'.

When this book begins, the name of the Lord is revered because of the decisive conquests already gained under Joshua. But ground remained to be taken after his death.

1:1-36 The first judgment - in Israel's favour

1:1-18

The story begins well with Israel seeking the Lord. Judah was given their prophesied prominence and promised victory. With the Simeonites who lived adjacent to them, they attacked and gained Bezek, Jerusalem, Hebron, Debir, and then, Hormah, Gazah, Ashkelon and Ekron. These towns are all in the South and (with the exception of the last three on the coast) in the hills.

In all of this, there is the interesting story of Caleb's family (formerly Edomites descended from Esau, but now, well integrated with Israel). Caleb's action shows that marriage is rightly linked with the fulfilment of the vocation given to us by God. Mention is also made of Moses' father in law who has a place in Israel—though connected with the Amalekites. This southern town—had already been subdued by Moses (Num. 21:1-3) but is now settled .

1:19-36

As promised, the Lord was with Judah, but we are introduced to the limits of their victory. On the plains, where the Amorites could negotiate their chariots, Israel could

gain no territory. The Benjamites could not gain the central stronghold (cf. 1:8) of Jerusalem. This awaited David's victories.

The Lord was also with the tribes in the North. Joseph includes Manasseh and Ephraim. Their defeat of Luz seems to come at a price—another city is established to preserve their culture among the Hittites (Asia Minor area). Separately, neither the tribe of Manasseh or Ephraim, major holders of the midlands, was able to occupy (same word for inherit) their inheritance except to repress and use their enemies. The same was true for other tribes in the North: Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali and Dan—though the tribes of Joseph assisted with this latter tribe. This fact leads to a second judgment.

2:1-19 The second judgment - in compassion

2:1-5

Israel has broken covenant—in not expelling the enemy, but especially in covenanting with them (perhaps in negotiating with the spies and in settling with other inhabitants to be labourers—and later, in intermarrying with idolaters; see 3:6). God would not break covenant but how would he keep covenant with a non covenant keeping people? He will leave the Amalekites and their gods as a thorn in Israel's side (a trap—not as a temptation but a trial). This is the story behind the whole story of Judges. How does this work out?

2:6-19

God will keep an inheritance for a people who will not take their inheritance. So we are told that after Joshua's death—and without his leadership—each went to their own inheritance. But the people did not heed Moses' warnings in *Deuteronomy*. They thought possession of inheritance was enough—not remembering that they lived by every word from God's mouth. Given that there was no listening to God, Baals 'served' far better as gods for them.

So the order was changed. Instead of God being for them, he would be for their enemies, bringing them distress.

Israel's hope then rested with God's compassion (Deut. 32:36)—his raising up judges and them listening to those judges. They were not only warriors but people with a word to be heeded. Yet even this enticement to listen went unheeded. A third generation—who witnessed this rescue—would be more rebellious again.

2:20-3:6 The third judgment - to teach his people to battle

God's anger now burned against Israel for violating his covenant—already shown to be a covenant of mercy. But his anger was still directed to giving Israel their inheritance. He would leave nations among them now so that those who did not see the battles of God under Moses and Joshua would have first hand experience of them. Each generation would have to rely on God for victories.

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Judges 3:7-31

by Grant Thorpe

Othniel

We know little of this man and his exploits but he provides a pattern for coming stories.

All the components are here but not all components are mentioned in other stories.

Israel quickly (Othniel is Caleb's nephew) moved to evil and idolatry and attracted God's anger. Their foe was from part of Syria and had links with Babylonian culture.

Their cry was heard and the first deliverer (same word as saved—used 20x) was given. He was identified by the Spirit of God coming on him—and this became a mark of God's appointment, especially up until the time of David. Although the Spirit was not given enduringly, as to the church (he could be taken from someone like Saul) Israel had clear evidence that their life depended on the immediate and personal presence of God among them. Compare Jeremiah 13:11, or John 15:1-8.

The first and second commands at Sinai were emphatic: no other gods were to take the place of Yahweh who brought Israel out of Egypt; no likenesses were to be interposed to keep God at a distance—God was jealous of their immediate affection and trust. By saving them, God had established them as his witnesses—to stand against the affrontery of the nations' false trusts and to bring the world to true worship. The awfulness of idolatry is that these roles are reversed—Israel 'needed' the strength of other nations, represented in the false worship they had generated for themselves. If God did not intervene, the world would be without an immediate word of God for her life.

Ehud

Israel may well have been surprised by this next experience. They had been told that each generation would have the trying experience of battling a new opponent, and so, of learning to rely on God alone (3:1-2). But the source of the trouble and means of deliverance bore little resemblance to previous experiences.

King Asa was to learn from the period of these judges. He was to seek the Lord in the context of his trial; God would heed him and reveal himself as the true God. (II Chron. 15:1-8; 16:7-10).

Israel's enemy was Moab, but this nation was not among the inhabitants of the land which were to be destroyed. They were relatives of Israel, albeit resentful ones. When Israel was coming to her inheritance, Moab felt threatened. They hired Balaam to curse Israel, and, when that failed, seduced them into committing idolatry (Num. 25:1-3; 31:16). But now, with assistance, they had ventured across the Jordan and occupied

Jericho. They controlled East-West trade by holding the fords across the Jordan. (Cf. Naomi who was later able to migrate to Moab.)

Israel may also have been surprised with the manner of God's help. Ehud could have been disabled (left-handed actually reads as right hand bound). It was expected that warriors fought with their right hand. If he was recognised as harmless, this may be why he was sent as a messenger with tribute and why he was trusted to stay alone with the king of Moab.

We are not told that the Spirit of the Lord came on Ehud, but he was given by the Lord as a deliverer, so we have no reason to doubt the Spirit's agency in his life, even though the man seems to have operated out of his own desperation. He knew, prophetically, that 'the Lord has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands'. And Israel recognised in him the answer to their cry and followed him.

Shamgar

Shamgar, son of Anath may mean—like Anath who was a Canaanite goddess of war. He may have ruled at the same time as Ehud because the story continues with Ehud's death rather than Shamgar's. If he used an ox goad to kill Philistines, it suggest that the Philistines had begun to disarm Israel. But he, along with Ehud, saved Israel. God continued to go with Israel, even though they were a stubborn people.

Philistines continued to harass Israel—during the days of Jephthah (10:6) and Samson (13:1).

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Judges 4:1-5:31

by Grant Thorpe

Why people call on the Lord

Israel's sin is tiresome in its repetition; God's deliverances are unexpected—a work of grace.

For the first time now, it is local inhabitants—those given up to destruction—that oppose and trouble Israel. Jabin had been routed by Joshua (Josh. 11:1-15). But either another of the same name, or the same man in a revived state (cf. Rev. 13:3), now rose up against Israel. In their aggressive pursuit of superiority and resistance of the approach of God's people, they utilised the latest technology—chariots of iron.

(The period lies between the bronze age and the superior technology of the iron age.)

Humanity thinks it has the initiative when it chooses for itself. However, it is the providences of God that sustain life, and the judgments of God which provoke its direction.

Deborah and Barak

Barak seems to have lacked courage but may have simply acknowledged that God was with Deborah (cf. Exod. 33:12-17). The writer of Hebrews (11:32) acknowledges Barak rather than Deborah as the person of faith—though obviously, she was. Barak did what he was given to do even if he got 'tarnished' glory for it.

We are not told that the Spirit of God came on her, but her saying that 'the God of Israel commands you' (4:6, 14) and her song of triumph giving glory to God both suggest a person on whom the Spirit of God had come.

It was God alone that saved Israel. It was his word and power that roused the army and subdued the enemy—even though Israel was generally helpless against iron chariots (1:19). The reason for their victory appears incidentally in the song—there was a cloudburst which made the River Kishon overflow and bog the chariots (5:20-21)—which recalls God's victory at the Red Sea.

One part of Moses' family—Heber the Kenite—had defected to the Canaanite Jabin and informed him of Israel's intentions. But nothing could avert the intention of God to hear his people's cry and finish Sisera.

Did Jael see the shift in power coming? Was she a woman of faith? Whatever, her thrust serves the same end as God's in sending the storm (3:21 and 4:21 use the same word). Her treachery is paralleled by that of the left handed Ehud.

Deborah's song

The heart of this story is in Deborah and Barak's song.

Deborah was a mother of Israel (5:7). She delighted and fostered the leadership of Israel's princes (5:2, 9). She had, in her mind, both God's victorious leadership of them from Sinai (Deut. 33:2), but also, the craven fear of recent days in Israel—Shamgar and Jael had had to witness the tragedy to which idolatry had led the people (5:6). They had been left defenceless.

But now, there were volunteers again (5:9) to take up the cause of God. The righteous acts of God and his people were one (5:10). Deborah claimed Israel suffered until she took a lead (5:7) but then attributed her being stirred to the 'people of the Lord' (5:11-12).

For God's people taking captives, see [Psa. 68:18](#); [Eph. 4:8](#).

Each tribe except Judah is mentioned—as either being involved or not. Meroz, a city probably in Naphtali—central to the battle area—is cursed for non participation. Under Joshua, cities in that category were destroyed (8:15-17; 21:8-10). Clearly, Israel was far from united in this victory.

Canaan's kings could not subdue Israel now. The stars (perhaps rather than astrological help for Canaan's kings) assisted Israel, as did the river Kishon. The story began with God selling Israel to Canaan (4:2), but ends with those enemies sold to Israel (4:9).

The blessedness of Jael and desolation of Sisera's mother sets in stark relief the necessity to follow God with all one's heart (5:31). The story began with Canaan's confidence in her chariots, but conclude with the fact that her confidence is an illusion.

The whole account is punctuated with exhortations: 'Go!' (4:6, 14); 'Here this you kings!' (5:3); 'March on, my soul; be strong!' (5:21).

Same word for 'march on' in [Deut 33:29](#); [Jud. 20:43](#).

Isaiah 9:1-7

This story and the one to follow show that the places where deep sorrow have been felt are not forgotten by God; he will bring light where there has been darkness—to these Northern tribes. This was fulfilled in the coming of Christ to Galilee (Matt. 4:15-16).

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Judges 6:1-8:27

by Grant Thorpe

The occasion

Once again, Israel worshipped idols of the people whose witness they were meant to destroy. God sent camel riding Midianites—in league with others—with a scorched earth policy to utterly demoralise the people. This was not occupation—as done by the Moabites in Ehud's day, or conquest—as done by the Canaanites in Deborah's day, but denuding of the land with constant destruction of crops.

God sent a prophet first—before a deliverer—to call his people back into covenant. Numbers are important in this story—the enemy is 'too many' to count. Gideon will save them. Later, the battle ratio will be 1 to 450.

The angel of the Lord

This angel had appeared to Hagar, to Abraham regarding the offering of his son, to Moses and to Balaam. At the beginning of *Judges*, this angel called Israel to account regarding their forsaking their covenant with God in favour of making the best possible arrangement (a covenant) with local peoples. Now he appeared to Gideon and would later appear to Samson's parents. He seems to be equated with God in some cases (6:22; 13:21-22).

The strongman

Faith in God, of necessity, will always encounter opposition. Gideon was called 'mighty warrior' (6:12) and asked to go in his strength (6:14), to save Israel from Midian (6:14), to withstand his own people (6:27) and had to bear the name 'Let Baal contend [with him]' (6:31-32).

But the conditions of this battle were clear: God was Israel's God (6:8-10); the Lord would be with Gideon (6:14-16); the Spirit of the Lord came on him (6:34).

In fact, he was timid: he was among a defeated people; he pleaded the low estate of his family; he asked for a sign; he began his action at night; he asked for confirmation after the Spirit of God came upon him. He was given the further encouragement of overhearing an enemy conversation (7:9-14). All this only enhanced his being used by God. Given Israel's propensity to defer to other (idolatrous) powers, it was God's purpose to ensure that none could glory in his presence (7:2). The gathering point for battle was called 'Trembling Spring'.

About the sign . . .

Signs had been given by God from the rainbow onwards. Circumcision, God's miracles in Egypt, the Passover, his curses on covenant breakers were signs given by God. They are an act or phenomenon in the natural world which denotes a promise or gift of God because God has made it to be so. No human being can make anything a sign.

The request for a sign has both good (Isa. 7:10:17) and bad (Psa. 95:8-11) connotations. Later, Israel would ask Jesus for a sign and be told that they were idolatrous and that there would be no other sign than his death and resurrection. God discerns if the asker wants to obey or defer. He has granted signs already; his granting of more is an act of grace to encourage faith. Gideon's request for encouragement was in the face a clear call to duty, not to ask if this or that might be God's will for him. He is hesitant, not unbelieving.

A clear victory

The enemy turned upon themselves—as shall be at the end of history (Ezek. 38:18-21; Zech. 14:13-14).

For noise scaring God's enemies cf. II Kin. 7:6-7; for an enemy destroying itself, cf. II Chron. 20:17-23.

Other tribes—perhaps including those who had retired earlier—joined in. The powerful tribe of Ephraim was asked to head off those fleeing for the fords across the Jordan.

The sequel

This became the subject of dispute—which Gideon was able to defuse. (Ephraim will complain again in 12:1.)

He had further trouble while pursuing his enemy southwards on the far side of Jordan. Fellow Israelites would not provision the army on the grounds that they had not yet been successful! Only 15 out of 120 thousand enemy were left but they included the kings. When Gideon triumphed, he returned to discipline these two cities.

Unco-operative cities were to be disciplined. But compare David (I Sam. 25:32-33).

The kings Gideon had pursued were also cold blooded murderers—of Gideon's brothers. The once timid Gideon was now recognised as princely (8:18), but was he about revenge? His unusual request that his young son execute them may suggest this.

Gideon was sure that God was king and not his family. But he did seem to have an interest in some personal benefit (an ephod was worn by the priest especially in determining the will of God for the people—the real one was probably at Shiloh—18:31). He did not understand the propensity of Israel to idolatry. They came to worship the ephod and attention gathered around Gideon rather than the Lord.

The triumph of Gideon was remembered in Israel: by the psalmist (Psa. 83:9) and prophet (Isa. 9:4-7; 10:26).

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Judges 8:28-10:5

by Grant Thorpe

Location

At Shechem, where this story is centred, Abram first met the Lord in Canaan (Gen. 12:6f). Jacob also stopped here on his way back into Canaan, worshipped the Lord and, later, buried strange gods before going to Bethel (Gen. 33:18-20; 35:1-4).

It was from the hills (Ebal and Gerezim) on either side of this town that the blessings and curses were to be proclaimed when Israel entered Canaan.

More immediately, Joshua had summoned Israel here twice (Josh. 8:30-35; 24:1-28) and on the second of these occasions had called the people to serve him with truth and integrity (Josh. 24:14). It was a place of covenant making (Josh. 24:25). Now, in this story, it is a place of making a rival covenant, and then, of treachery.

After Gideon [or Jerubbaal]

A first generation of Israel in Canaan had said they would follow the Lord (2:7). A second generation forgot the Lord (3:7). Now, a third generation not only forgot God's saving of them but are ungrateful (8:28-35), suggesting the decline mentioned earlier (2:16-19).

Abimelech

Abimelech (9:1-6) did not save Israel (he is not called a judge) but chastened her from within. His father, Gideon, had 70 sons but one by a foreign wife in Shechem. This son exploited the division in this city and the desire of some for independence from Israel.

The instability of his own life is joined to the instability of this city—which, otherwise, could have capitulated to worship the Lord.

There was a shrine there called 'The house of the lord of the covenant'—presumably a covenant with Baal. This rival covenant within the borders of Israel was invoked against the family of God's deliverer and Gideon's enormous family was all but destroyed. The people who had despised their covenant with God were given a taste of another covenant. Shechem, led by Abimelech's brothers, chose the immediacy of their local man rather than acknowledge the kingship of the Lord. He ruled for 3 years and seems to have gained wide acceptance (9:23).

Jotham

The surviving son became a prophet in a day (9:7-21). His terms suggest that he consciously recalled the covenant made at Shechem—it is only here (Jud. 9:16) and in the previous occasion (Josh. 24:14) that the words *truth* and *integrity* are joined together. In forsaking these, they invited treachery.

His parable contrasted the richness of a fruitful leadership with a thornbush—which would create problems for people trying to find shade under it and is more inclined to making a fire than shade.

The Lord keeping chaos in its bounds

God's power is revealed especially in saving his people. Here, his power was revealed in destroying the unity between those who shed the blood of Gideon's family (9:22-25). Elsewhere, God reveals his wrath in giving people up to their sin (Rom. 1:19-32; also Jud. 7:22). Citizens of Shechem were treacherous and there was no covenant to protect them from the forces unleashed. They hijacked the trade routes servicing Shechem—perhaps bating the absent Abimelech. Jotham's prophecy was at work (9:31 with 9:20.)

'It takes only the first tear in the fabric of good faith for the whole thing to begin unravelling' (Michael Wilcock on *Judges*, p. 99).

Gaal and his family moved into town and fostered this opposition to Abimelech (9:26-29). It became a matter of their god against 'Jerubbaal'—the name being taken in a different manner from its origin (6:32). Zebul—as the deputy of Abimelech—became the focus of this rivalry.

Zebul conspired to deliver the town into Abimelech's hand and succeeded (9:30-41).

The townspeople thought that the stoush was over, but Abimelech was now stirred and would have his full vengeance (9:42-45). Some went to a tower associated with the shrine of their covenant with Baal, but this and a 1000 people were destroyed.

Over-reaching himself, Abimelech sought out another city thought to be in the rebellion (9:50-57). They may have been guilty of this but, it would appear, not guilty of the crime the Lord was avenging, because the Lord foiled the rage by a woman who happened to have her grinding stone on the top of the tower, happened to be over the gateway and happened not to miss!

Tolah and Jair

The brevity of these accounts still reveals the kindness of God in giving deliverers to this declining Israel. Several of the words used to describe the leadership of Tola recall the days of Deborah. In all, the Lord gave Israel another 45 years of peace.

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Judges 10:6-21:25 - supplement

The stories of two Levites, one who served among Danites, and the other who instigated war against the Benjaminites, occur at the end of the book of *Judges*, but are not necessarily the last stories chronologically. They are undated and there are indications that they may have occurred in the earlier part of the period. (Comments in the lecture last week made the assumption that they represented conditions at the end of the period.)

However, they are located at the end of the book to convey a point. Both stories feature a Levite, whose duties probably included teaching the faith to Israel (cf. Neh. 8:7, 9; II Chron. 17:7-9; 35:3) and, instead, joined in the perversion of it. Here is the failure referred to at the beginning (2:10) that a generation grew up who did not know the Lord and so they served the Baals instead.

The author conveys to us that, though conditions in Israel were in such a state—whenever these stories occurred—God continued his purpose in spite of, and sometimes, through the abominations of his people. With the Lord's direction, they sought to purge the evil from Israel (as required in Deut. 13:12-18—Israel must have considered the act at Gibeah a sign of the depths of idolatry). Significantly, Israel offered sacrifices to the Lord—as they did under Gideon—to reaffirm their relation to Yahweh.

Because Benjamin rose to the support of their threatened city, the battle became a full scale civil war and Benjamin was all but wiped out. Again, Israel showed awareness of their destiny—to be the full tribed people of God. The threat signified by the dismembered body of the levite's concubine—that cities absent from the summons would pay with their lives—now found opportunity to be carried out. Jabesh Gilead sent no representatives and was annihilated—apart from the virgins needed to repopulate Benjamin (cf. Num. 31:17-18).

Both God, and Israel, later on, chose a Benjaminite as Israel's first king. But it was the days of David and Solomon that brought the much needed stability to Israel. From there, they looked back and saw what Israel did when they had no king. But, more especially, they looked back and saw what God had done to preserve an inheritance for them.