

# Introduction to Judges

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## Where is it in the Bible?

Judges is the seventh book of the Old Testament and the second of the historical books in Christian Bibles. In the Hebrew Bible, it is the second book in the Prophets or Nevi'im. It follows Joshua in both Bibles.

## Who wrote it?

Although Jewish tradition claimed that Samuel was the author of the book of Judges, there is no evidence to support this claim. The book itself is anonymous, and the author is not identified anywhere else in Scripture. It seems that various traditions were collected and edited by the writers of the Deuteronomistic History. Its final form was probably reached in the sixth or seventh century B.C.

## When was it written?

Judges contains some of the oldest texts in the Bible. Scholars have suggested that the Song of Deborah" in chapter 5 "may be as old as 1125 B.C.E., based upon the archaeological evidence of the destruction of Taanach and Megiddo".<sup>1</sup> Older traditional material like this has been put together and edited to emphasize the point that disobedience leads to both internal and external problems.

## What is it about?

The book of Judges consists of stories about events which occurred between the Israelites' settlement of Canaan and the birth of Samuel, a period of about 200 years. It deals with the struggles of the tribes as they developed into the nation of Israel. The name of the book comes from the title which was given to individuals who were called by God to deliver the people from oppression and lead them in faithful obedience to the Lord. The word used in Hebrew has a broader meaning than the English word *judge* and can be applied to military leaders as well as those who administer justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Throntveit, at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=27>

## How is it structured?

- I. Introduction (1:1-3:6)
  - a. Israel's Failure to Purge the Land (1:1-36)
  - b. Israel's Disobedience and its Consequences (2:1-3:6)
- II. Stories of the Judges (3:7-16:31)
  - a. Othniel (3:7-11)
  - b. Ehud (3:12-30)
  - c. A Minor Judge: Shamgar (3:31)
  - d. Deborah and Barak (4:1-5:31)
  - e. Gideon (6:1-8:35)
  - f. Abimelech (9:1-57)
  - g. Two Minor Judges: Tola and Jair (10:1-5)
  - h. Jephthah (10:6-12:7)
  - i. Three Minor Judges: Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15)
  - j. Samson (13:1-16:31)
- III. Other Stories (17:1-21:25)
  - a. Micah's Idols and the Sanctuary at Dan (17:1-18:31)
  - b. Civil War (19:1-21:25)

## What are some of its themes?

- **Character of the Judges:** Many of the judges show a mixture of good and bad character traits. This is true even of three who are described as being led by the Spirit: Gideon, Samson, and Jephthah. This demonstrates how God works out God's purposes through unexpected people.
- **Cyclic Nature of the Book:** Judges describes a cycle of apostasy, oppression, prayers for God's help, an answer to these prayers in the form of a judge who delivers the people from oppression, and a period of rest before the cycle begins again. This cycle is repeated seven times in the book. It emphasizes the fact that disobedience brings punishment, but repentance brings deliverance. The last verse of Judges (21:25) implies that things would have been better if Israel had been united under a king and paves the way for the establishment of the monarchy.
- **Women:** There are at least 22 women in Judges, including Deborah, Jael, Delilah, Jephthah's mother and daughter, and Samson's mother and wife. This is far more than usual in Old Testament books.