The Book of Judges

The Book of Judges continues the story of Israel's conquest and gradual occupation of the whole land. It tells the stories and legends of Israel's time of tribal life in Palestine, which lasted about two hundred years, from 1250 down to a little after 1050 B.C.

Altogether, the book follows the exploits of twelve judges during this period. Six are hardly more than names attached to a single incident only barely remembered: Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon. As a result these are usually called the "Minor Judges." The other six are the "Major Judges": Othniel, Ehud, Barak (with Deborah), Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. They were renowned for their brave exploits in battle and were really not legal judges primarily but warlords. They were leaders who arose in times of great need and led the tribes to victory in one or more battles. Because God had marked them out charismatically, they stayed on to guide the tribes during the rest of their lifetimes. Because of their recognized authority as war leaders, they also exercised power in legal disputes between tribes and in political quarrels.

The Book of Judges can be divided into three major parts. Chapters 1-2 set the stage by describing the situation of Israel after Joshua dies. Chapters 3-16 tell the stories of the twelve judges. Chapters 17-21 give some extra legends about the two tribes of Dan and Benjamin. All three sections illustrate the same lesson for Israel, namely that God stood by them when they were faithful and obedient to him, but allowed them to fall into disaster when they turned from his covenant and disobeyed.

Outline of the Book

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The opening two chapters make clear what we have already suspected from the Book of Joshua-that the tribes did indeed fail to conquer many of the cities and people who dwelt in Palestine (cf. 3.1-6). They settled down instead to a long period of co-existence and only very gradually gained control over the Canaanites. In fact, it was not until the days of Saul and David, after the Book of Judges ends, that Israel began making really significant gains again as they had under Joshua.

Introduction (1.1–3.6). The book's introduction is complex. All of 1.1–2.5 is prologue, summary recapitulation at the outset of the era following Joshua's death and burial which is now told again (2.6–10) in a text strikingly similar to Josh 24.28–31.

The next segment (2.11–23) sets forth the pattern of the period, beginning with a formula that regularly introduces each of the "savior" judges: "Israelites did what was evil in Yahweh's sight" (2.11; 3.7; 4.1; 6.1; 10.6; 13.1), "they prostrated themselves to other gods," the Baals and the Ashtaroth. Such ehavior was followed invariably by the victory of oppressors, as Yahweh had promised (2.11–15). It was, equally, an era which also experienced the compassion of Yahweh, who raised up a leader to rescue them. Yahweh was motivated to do so by the sound of their suffering. Yet at the death of the leader, they "turned and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, following other gods," so that at last Yahweh let the enemies remain "without evicting them at once" (2.16–23).

Chap. 3 begins with the ironic explanation that the peoples which Yahweh allowed to remain (Philistines, Canaanites, Sidonians, Hivites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, and Jebusites) were to be there for one purpose: that the future generations of Israelites might have direct experience of warfare and thus be covenantally tested (3.1–4). An ominous side effect, however, was intermarriage and apostasy (3.5–6).

History of the Judges

1. Othniel (3.7–11).

In the story, Othniel versus the oppressor Cushan-rishathaim. Othniel ben Kenaz's origin is in the south hills around Hebron. Cushan's base was probably Armon-harim ("Hill-country Fortress") not Aramnaharaim (Mesopotamia); the latter would result from a common scribal lapse, with the introduction of word-dividers and spacing in written texts. The story displays the exemplary relationship between a local leader activated to display Yahweh's spirit and a populace petitioning
Yahweh for collective relief. In this example story, "to judge" is to mobilize and successfully lead the people in defensive warfare, which in this case produced "40 years" of pacification, till Othniel died.

2. Ehud (3.12–30)

The second of the savior judges is a left-handed Benjaminite. Lefthandedness, considered peculiar and unnatural, was notably frequent in this tribe (see Judg 20.16; and cf. 1Chr 12.2). The left-handedness may have been artificially induced (binding the right arms of the young children) so as to produce superior warriors. Left-handed persons have a distinct advantage in physical combat, especially in regard to ancient armaments and defenses. Ehud is activated by Yahweh in response to the Moabite incursion and oppression from field headquarters at the City of Palms (probably the Jericho oasis). Eglon ("young bull") was famed for his obesity, and is slain by Ehud in a single-handed act of diplomatic treachery. Eglon's forces were stampeded and men from the highlands of Mount Ephraim joined in the pursuit. The result was "80 years" of peace.

3. Shamgar

Shamgar was another single-handed deliverer, versus an entire Philistine brigade (3.31). That he was an Anathite may point to a hometown Beth-Anath in Galilee. Defeat of the Philistines was deliverance for the Israelites. No specifically Yahwist claims are made for Shamgar.

4. Deborah and Barak

In other words "Honey Bee" and "Lightning" (4.1–24) display collaboration of a "judge" and a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth. Deborah's oracular activity and leadership of the militia makes her the heroic one, in a story told at the expense of Barak. Oppression is blamed on "Jabin, king of Canaan," mentioned as such only in the introductory and concluding verses. Verse 17 refers in a flashback to "Jabin, king of Hazor." Opposition in the field is headed by Sisera who commands 900 especially sturdy chariots constructed with iron fittings. Sisera's name is non-Semitic, probably of Anatolian origin, as was the knowledge of iron technology. Prodded and accompanied by Deborah, Barak musters forces from Naphtali

and Zebulun at a northern Kedesh, and on Mount Tabor, while Sisera's force assembles near Tabor, at the Kishon river. Yahweh confounds the opposition, and Sisera flees north on foot, with Barak in hot pursuit. If the narrative implies that Heber's clan had changed sides (4.17), Jael was an exception. She slew Sisera while he was enjoying her hospitality; and so Deborah's taunting prophecy (4.9) was fulfilled. Barak arrives at the scene too late to take any credit, but returns in time for the celebration.

5. Gideon

Gideon (means "Hacker,") gets proportionately far more attention than any other figure in the book (6.1–8.35). He was a savior who nearly became king. Pillaging by Midianites and other easterners at harvest time was an annually recurring one, which left the Israelite peasantry desolate. These Midianites probably represent a later wave of immigration from Anatolia (as distinct from the earlier Midianites of Mosaic tradition), who brought with them the domesticated camels which made them such effective tax collectors. When the people petition Yahweh for relief, Yahweh sends a prophet, the only one to be mentioned in the book, who brings Yahweh's indictment, a warning for breach of covenant. The story of Gideon's authentication as leader is noteworthy. A recruiting angel appears in human form to confront Gideon under an oak at Ophrah, which belongs to his father Joash (a Yahwist name), while Gideon is beating out wheat in a winepress so as to conceal his activity from Midianites in the neighborhood. In the interview that follows, Gideon demands a sign that he is in fact dealing with Yahweh, and is convinced by the sign that he must soon die! Reassured to the contrary by Yahweh, Gideon promptly builds an altar for Yahweh at Ophrah and sacrifices a bull upon it, according to Yahweh's instructions. He names the altar: "Lord of peace/Well-Being" (6.11–24). Only now does the reason for Gideon's initial reluctance, and his nickname "Hacker," become clear. He is to be a reformer, charged with dismantling his father's Baal-altar and chopping down the Asherah alongside it. When the townsmen object after the fact, Joash the apostate advises it will be better to let Baal press his own case, thus ironically legitimating the given name of his son, Jerubbaal, "Let Baal Sue" (6.25–32). The reader is thus reminded of Yahweh's indictment brought by a prophet at the beginning of the Gideon stories. This story explains how Judge Hacker, son of the apostate Joash, could properly wear a Baal-name, which occurs with increasing frequency in Judg 7 and 8.

The remainder of chap. 6 describes the opposing forces: Midianites, Amalekites, and easterners versus the peasants' militia from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, mustered by Gideon, who is now clothed with Yahweh's spirit (6.33–35). Gideon will then hold out for another confirmatory sign. The fleece test, when Yahweh is also able to do it in reverse, convinces Gideon that God has told him the truth (6.36–40).

In chap. 7, "Jerubbaal" (= Gideon), according to the text, stations the troops, and Yahweh readies his force by drastically reducing their numbers. Now it is Yahweh who tests the warriors, selecting from the 22 muster units 300 of the less alert, those who incautiously lap at the water like dogs. The initial victory will be Yahweh's alone (7.1–8). With the force thus drastically reduced, Gideon is advised by Yahweh to conduct a nighttime reconnaissance, from which Gideon learns that the outcome of battle is adequately foreseen in the Midianite camp (7.8–15). The 300 men are divided into three units, for a nighttime surprise attack from the camp's perimeter. Each warrior is heavily laden with a trumpet in one hand and a flaming torch inside a heavy ceramic jar in the other. With simultaneous blowing of trumpets and shattering of jars, the opposition is stampeded by the sound and light terror, turning first upon one another and then to disorganized flight. Gideon and the militia had not yet done any fighting, and Yahweh had won, as promised (7.16–22).

Israelites rallied from Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh give chase. Gideon now sends "envoys" (6.11) throughout all of Mount Ephraim. The tardily mustered Ephraimites capture and execute two Midianite kings, Oreb and Zeeb, bring their amputated heads to Gideon in Transjordan, and voice their

indignation at not being summoned at the outset. They are appeased by Gideon's explanation that it was Yahweh's prerogative to give them Oreb and Zeeb (7.23–8.3).

The bulk of chap. 8 concerns Gideon in Transjordan. The men of Succoth and Penuel are not persuaded that Gideon's business deserves their provisioning; and Gideon, notably, makes no reference to Yahweh's legitimating. This is Gideon's war; the victory this time will be Gideon's (8.4–9). The two kings Zebah and Zalmunna are taken alive at Karkor and brought to Succoth and Penuel which are, as Gideon had promised, terrorized before the kings are executed. Gideon had taken the Israelite militia into Transjordan in pursuit of blood vengeance; there was also rich booty (8.4–21). The final narrative segment tells how Gideon, for a good Israelite reason, declined the offer of dynastic rule. He requested instead contributions of the valuables taken as booty, out of which he made an ephod, an elaborate priestly vestment worn (or displayed to be consulted) as having divinatory value. "And all Israel" [its only occurrence in the body of the book] "prostituted themselves there." Still, the land had been pacified for 40 years (8.22–28).

In a few compact editorial verses (8.29–32), the reader is introduced to the house of erubbaal: numerous wives and 70 sons plus Abimelech, whose mother was a slave-wife from Shechem. Finally we read that Gideon died at a ripe old age, to be buried in the tomb of his father. With Gideon dead, the good that he had done was quickly forgotten, along with Yahweh's acts of salvation. According to the stories which follow, Israelites prostituted themselves to a deity called "Baal of the covenant" and worshiped at Shechem.

Story of Abimelech

Unlike the achievements of his father Gideon, which are entertainingly narrated with sustained tension between favorable and unfavorable valuations, Abimelech's story is told by an extremely hostile narrator. The name Abimelech, "My Father is King," is ambiguous, the referent of "Father" being either Gideon or the God of Israel.

Abimelech's path to power as king of the Shechem city-state is rapidly recounted: negotiations through his mother's connections with the Shechem elite, appropriation of funds from the Shechem temple in order to hire mercenaries, liquidation of the 70 brothers with the exception of Jotham, the youngest, who hid away, and coronation near an oak at the Shechem fortress (9.1–6).

Jotham's fable addressed to the Shechem elite, telling about the trees who set forth to anoint a king over them but who could only persuade the worthless bramble to accept the office (9.7–15a) is followed by Jotham's statement of readiness to let the rightness of their action be proved or disproved by appropriate blessing or curse, whereupon Jotham flees, not to be mentioned again in Scripture outside the chapter (9.15b–21).

In addition to being king at Shechem, Abimelech also became, like his father, field commander of the Israel militia, for three years. The split loyalty is presented as his undoing: God sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the Shechem elite. Gaal ben Ebed ("Loathsome, son of Slave"), a full-blooded Shechemite, undermines Abimelech's kingship, objecting to Abimelech's half-Shechemite genealogy. The coup is thwarted when Abimelech's appointee as Shechem commandant, Zebul ("Big Shot"), gets wind of the matter and sends word to Abimelech. Gaal is enticed out of the city for open combat and Gaal escapes, but there are many casualties (9.26–41).

Abimelech retaliates for the Shechemite support of Gaal by ambushing and slaughtering Shechem's peasants in the fields, following up the slaughter by seizing the city, razing it, and sowing it with salt, presumably thus laying it under another curse (9.42–45).

Probably v 45 refers only to the poorer quarters of the lower city. For the next scene has the Shechem elite crowding into the "stronghold of covenant-El's temple." Abimelech's force sets fire to the place and the elite perish in the building's destruction (9.46–49).

Abimelech fought his final campaign at Thebez called "Strong's Tower" and died an ignominious death—he drew too close to the structure and "a certain woman" threw down an upper millstone which crushed his skull (9.50–54).

The summary is brief. Seeing that Abimelech was dead, the Israelites "went away, each to his own place" (9.55), a statement adumbrating the disbanding of the militia at the end of the era (21.24). Abimelech had experienced justice, as had the Shechem elite; Jotham's invocation of historical process had been the right word at the right time (9.57).

6-7. Two Minor Judges

Two minor judges follow Abimelech. First, "in order to save Israel" arose Tola ("Worm"?), a man of Issachar who lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. Tola is the first of five who are said to have "judged" Israel, but about whom very little information and no warfare stories survive. Was their activity strictly local? Were they also saviors? Perhaps Tola was thought to have saved Israel by presiding over disputes in such a way that violence was mostly avoided. With Jair the Gileadite, second in the minor-judge sequence, the center of attention shifts to Transjordan. The political effectiveness of Jair is represented in genealogical metaphor: he had 30 sons in 30 towns,
still called "villages of Jair" at the time of composition and redaction.

8. Jephthah

Jephthah's family is well-to-do but he is the son of a prostitute, driven out by the sons of his father's wife. His military prowess comes to be certified by activity of a mercenary band, which rallies around
him at Tob, near the modern border between Syria and Jordan (11.1– 3). Ammonite expansion in central Transjordan mounts to the point where Jephthah is summoned by the elders to take charge of the militia as *Qatzir* (chief, ruler, or a ranking officer in Joshua's organization, Josh 10.24). Jephthah, however, holds out for highest rank, in covenanting at Mizpah, a Yahwist sanctuary in central Transjordan (11.4–11).

Jephthah first acts vis-à-vis the Ammonites as ambassador of Yahweh to earthly courts, in this case a foreign court under the supposed sovereignty of Chemosh, the god of Moab. The dispute is over territory north of the recognized Moabite border at the Arnon, territory with a long history of rival Ammonite/Moabite/Israelite claims. In two embassies Jephthah is presented as making every effort to settle the matter by diplomacy before taking to the field, where Yahweh would be the judge (11.12–28). Only now, in relation to Jephthah's tour to muster the militia, is there reference to Jephthah's manifestation of Yahweh's spirit (11.29).

Also Jephthah was not flawless. The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter in literal fulfillment of a vow shows Jephthah and his family marked for tragedy. The cultural background of the women's annual lamentation on the hills, legitimated by the story, remains obscure.

As the next and final Jephthah units show, the tragic dimension of Jephthah's career was not confined to his family. Here there is a briefaccount of intertribal war, Jephthah's force versus Ephraimites west ofthe Jordan, precipitated by jealousy of Jephthah's Transjordanian achievements, to which the Ephraimites claim not to have been invited. Negotiations quickly evolve into violence, with heavy Ephraimite casualties (12.1–4), followed by the execution of Ephraimite fugitives at the Jordan crossings, fugitives recognized by a dialect difference: Ephraimites cannot produce the sibilant in "Shibboleth" to the satisfaction of the Gileadite sentries. Jephthah is not mentioned in this final unit, however (12.5–6). The long section closes with a rubric familiar from the "minor judge" list, according to which Jephthah had "judged Israel six years."

9-11. Three Minor Judges

They exercise leadership west of the Jordan river: Ibzan of Bethlehem for 7 years, Elon of Aijalon for 10 years, and Abdon of Pirathon for 8 years (12.8–15). No warfare stories are told.

12. Samson

Samson ("Little Sun") belongs to a Danite family living in the region flanked by Judah and the Philistine frontier (Beth Shemesh). One group of stories (13.1–15.20) explain and display Samson's prodigious strength, recounting the young man's exploits on the western frontier, thus legitimating the claim in 15.20, where "judged Israel" refers to defeated Philistines. There is no indication that in Samson's case it had anything to do with management of intertribal conflict. In chap. 13, after the notice about the resumption of doing evil and the consequent 40 years of Philistine oppression, Samson's surpassing physical strength is explained as the result of a prenatal agreement between his mother and an angelic ambassador of Yahweh. The envoy gave her the news that she was bearing a son. The son would be a Nazirite (Num 6.13–21) from birth, who would begin the liberation of Israel from the Philistines; she was to begin at once observing the Naziritevow.

First there is the eye-catching Philistine woman whom Samson wheedles his parents into visiting as prospective daughter-in-law, "for she is the right one in my eyes" (14.1–3). This anticipates the formulaic cliché, which echoes at the end of the era (17.6; 21.25). En route to Timnah for the parental negotiations, Samson slays a young lion barehanded; on a subsequent visit he finds the carcass full of bees and honey. It was widely understood that honey held enlightening and courage- producing potential (1Sam 14.24–30). It might have thus been a sign which Samson either failed to recognize or else suppressed by not telling his parents where he found the honey. The story sets the stage for a seven-day wedding feast at Timnah, where Samson propounds a riddle and makes a wager with his "thirty friends" (public functionaries?). They, however, cheat by threatening the bride to extract the answer to the riddle. Their breach of faith brings on Samson a manifestation of Yahweh's spirit, so that the problematic marriage is providentially annulled, but not without the death of 30 other Philistines with whose garments and gear Samson pays his wager obligation. The bride, unbeknownst to Samson, becomes the wife of Samson's best man. The chapter makes it clear that Samson has the requisite physical prowess to be a deliverer; it is lack of civic commitment that will make him a tragic figure.

In chap. 15 Samson returns sometime later to visit his "bride," and is so enraged by the alternative offer of her younger sister that his fury is unleashed. He captures 300 jackals, ties them tail-to-tail with a torch between each pair, and turns them loose in fields, vineyards, and orchards.
Philistines retaliate by executing the bride and her father, to which Samson responds by smiting Philistines. Having in effect just announced his retirement, Samson retreats to Judah and hides out in a cave at Etam (15.1–8).

His retirement however was not to last. Philistines deploy themselves against Lehi in Judah, demanding Samson's extradition, to which Samson agrees, provided that the Judahites themselves do not try to harm him. As Yahweh's spirit empowers him, Samson promptly breaks free of the new ropes with which he is bound, picks up a donkey jawbone, lays low a whole contingent of Philistines, composes a brief poetic couplet on the subject, and is about to die of thirst when, at last, he addresses Yahweh directly in 15.18, and his prayer is answered. There are clearly etiological elements in the chapter, all subordinate or secondary to the characterization of "Little Sun," of whom it could at last be said that he "judged Israel"(15.9–20).

Chapter 16 adds two stories which underscore the tragic element: first a brief unit about a one-night visit to a prostitute in Gaza (16.1–3), followed by a prolonged love affair with Delilah ("Flirty") of Vineyard Valley (RSV "Valley of Sorek"; Nahal Sarar, which begins about 13 miles south west of Jerusalem, guarded in ancient times by the town of Beth-shemesh). It is implied that Judge Samson learned nothing from the near-fatal Gaza escapade, and nearly destroyed Israel as a result of

the Delilah affair.

The cutting of the Nazirite's hair was public recognition of release from a vow and discharge from active duty (Num 6.13–20). Israel was thus left for a while without the Nazirite judge during the Philistine crisis.Samson's hair would grow again, and Samson could voluntarily reenlist, to achieve a momentary settling of accounts with Philistines. Samson is thus presented as a tragicomic figure. While he ran afoul through his lusty self-interest, consequent suffering evoked a new confession, and he died honorably while effecting Yahweh's justice toward Philistine terror.

Micah's Place. Micah ("Who is like Yahweh?") is another prodigal, but one whose doting mother is a sponsor of divinatory equipment for Micah's shrine (17.1–5). In the sequel, Micah employs as his priest a young itinerant Levite from Bethlehem in Judah (17.7–13). The connective between stories is the first full statement of the assertion with which the book will end: "In those days, there was no king in Israel. Each one did what was right in his own eyes" (17.6). Here the assertion clearly describes a bad scene; it is a polemic aimed at a northern sanctuary.

The Migration of Dan

The polemic intensifies in chap. 18, which begins with a partial echo: "no king in Israel." Here Micah's place is "providentially" deprived of its divinatory equipment and priest, stolen and hired away by the Danites who, because of continued resistance to their settlement along the coast,
are moving to the far north. The town of Laish, peaceably isolated, is an unsuspecting sitting duck for the Danites, who promptly rebuild and rename it ("Dan") and install there Micah's image and the young Levite who is at last identified as Jonathan, grandson of Moses! Here ends a south version of the founding of what would become the other infamous northern royal sanctuary, controlled by a rival branch of the Mosaic priesthood (18.1–31).

The Anonymous Levite and the Gibeah Outrage

Chapter 19 begins with an echo of the anarchy formula "no king in Israel." Here it is a prosperous Levite from Ephraim, whose troubles begin when his concubine-wife becomes angry and runs off south to the home of her father at Bethlehem in Judah. When the Levite follows to reclaim her, he is feasted by her father for the better part of a week. Getting a late start for home on the fifth day, they are able to proceed only as far as Gibeah in Benjamin, where once again the Levite enjoys lavish hospitality as a sojourner, but thanks only to another prosperous Ephraimite who is likewise a "resident alien" in Benjamin. In a scene which echoes the story of Lot at Sodom (Genesis 19), protection of the stranger does not here extend to the concubine-wife, who is offered by the Levite to local hooligans who are terrorizing the place. The woman is found by the offended Levite next morning, raped and dead at the door. He transports the body home to Ephraim, carves the corpse into twelve pieces (cf. 1Sam 11.7 and 1King 11.30–39) and sends them off to all the tribes with the call to muster. Despite his own implication in permitting the rape and murder of the woman, he has in effect set himself up as "judge"—for civil war in pursuit of private vengeance.

In the warfare against Benjamin, it is specified, involved "all Israel" (20.1) for the first time since a similar specification about the harlotry at Gideon's ephod (8.27). The story perhaps originated in the suppression of a Benjaminite independence movement. Here, in contrast to 2.1–5 and chapter 17, the attitude toward Bethel is not polemical. The warfare left only 600 survivors hiding out, all males. When at the outset of the final scenes, the people inquire at Bethel to learn why it has come about that one tribe is nearly extinct, the oracle is silent. They are thrown back upon their own devices and conclude that another small civil war will be advisable, to slaughter the men of Jabesh-gilead, who had not rallied against Benjamin, and to capture virgins for the 400 Benjaminites. The expeditionary force returns, however, with only 400 women. Another 200 are secured by the Benjaminites, thanks to the reasoning of

Israel's elders, who propose a Benjaminite raid on Shiloh at festival time and offer a theologically foolproof rationale. If Shilioh's fathers and brothers come to complain, the elders will be able to say: "We did them a gracious deed. For we [the elders] did not take them; neither did you give in to them." And so it happened in the story. In response to the picture of tragic anarchy leading to the brink of national suicide, the final chapter of Judges draws upon the general vision: "In those days there was no king in Israel" (except Yahweh, that is); "every man did what was right, as he saw it."

The hand of the Deuteronomic editors is also apparent in the Book of Judges, where the message that God will be with Israel if they are faithful, but will abandon them to their enemies if they are not, is carefully noted by placing each separate story into an identical pattern whose
basic outline has five parts:

1. The people did evil in the sight of Yahweh.
2. God in his anger delivered them to an oppressor.
3. The people cried out to Yahweh.
4. Yahweh sent a hero to deliver them.
5. The land had peace all the days of the judge's life.

A sample of the full formula can be found in the story of the judge Othniel in Judges 3:7-11: 'the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, forgetting Yahweh their God, and worshiping the Baals and the Asherahs. And Yahweh was angry at Israel and delivered them into the hands of Cushan Rishtayim, king of Aram Naharayim. And the people of Israel served Cushan Rishtayim for eight years. The people of Israel cried out to Yahweh and he raised a deliverer for Israel, Othniel, son of Kenaz, the younger brother of Caleb, and he rescued them. The spirit of Yahweh came on him, he judged Israel, he went to war, and Yahweh gave Cushan Rishtayim, king of Aram, into his hand. His hand prevailed over Cushan Rishtayim so that the land had rest for forty years until Othniel, the son of Kenaz, died.' The editors have placed a long explanation of this pattern in Judges 2.10-23 to serve as a general introduction to the individual judges. It stresses the faithfulness and mercy of God to the people and to the judge, but points out that the people forgot quickly the lesson and turned back to their evil ways, following after other gods and sinning worse than earlier generations had done.

The picture of the society that emerges from the book is of an Israelite confederation of twelve tribes (cf. Judg 20.1ff.) still struggling tofind unity among themselves at the same time they fought for footholds in different parts of the Canaanite territory. It was also a time of small local wars and defensive fighting against desert nomads. Often one or more of the tribes would not come to the aid of others (cf. also Judg 5). The violent story of Abimelech in Judges 9 and the terrible incident of the Benjaminites in chapters 19-21 both picture tribes in open conflict with one another. Strife was the name of the game throughout the age of the judges: "every man did what was right, as he saw it."

The Twelve Tribes

The problem of the conquest's actual course of events raises questions about the different tribes involved. Biblical tradition consistently affirms that Israel was made up of twelve tribes. In Genesis these are named after the twelve sons of Jacob. Interestingly, the actual listings often
show variations, of which the most important are the omission of Joseph in most lists after the Book of Exodus, replaced by his sons Manasseh and Ephraim, and the omission of either Levi or Simeon to make room for the extra son. See for example three different lists in three books:

Gen 49.1-27	Num 1.5-15	Dt 33.1-29
Reuben	Reuben	Reuben
Simeon	Simeon	Judah
Levi	Judah	Levi
Judah	Issachar	Benjamin

Zebulon	Zebulon	*Ephraim*
Issachar	*Ephraim*	*Manasseh*
Dan	*Manasseh*	Zebulon
Gad	Benjamin	Issachar
Asher	Dan	Gad
Naphtali	Asher	Dan
Joseph	Gad	Naphtali
Benjamin	Naphtali	Asher

According to the story of Genesis 29-30, the twelve sons of Jacob came from four different mothers: Jacob's older wife Leah gave birth to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulon, while her servant girl Zilpah bore Gad and Asher; the younger wife Rachel was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, while her maid Bilhah bore Dan and Naphtali. These names were all relatively common in the patriarchal period. They are Semitic and properly belong in the Palestine area for their origin. As with so many biblical genealogies in the Book of Genesis, we must reckon that each "son" really represents a whole tribe or clan, and that the twelve-tribe family understood themselves as equals ("brother") in some form of federation. In a similar manner, Jacob and Esau as brothers also stood for how Israel and Edom were related and Isaac and Ishmael as half-brothers expressed the same relationship that Israel understood that it had with the Arab tribes to the east. The story of Jacob and Laban in Genesis 30-31 recognized that the Israelites were "cousins" to the people of Aram in Mesopotamia. The traditional story of the two wives and two maids may reflect some more primitive groupings of tribes before the final twelve.

On the question of differences in the lists of tribes, we need to note that it may have taken many decades for all twelve tribes to be united. The replacement of Joseph by Ephraim and Manasseh, named as his two sons in Genesis 47, may mean that these two powerful tribes were late additions to the "league." Simeon disappears in lists such as Deuteronomy 33 altogether, perhaps a sign that the tribe itself was wiped out or died out. Levi loses its status as one of the twelve but continues on in later Israelite life as a *class* of priests. These differences and what led to them help us know that the simple stories of Jacob and his sons mask a long history of groups and individuals coming together to form what emerges at the end of the period of the judges as the nation of Israel.

The Tribal League

Several scholars have suggested that Israel's twelve tribes were part of a league similar to several leagues that we know of from the Greek city-states many centuries later. The tribes would have formed a loose federation centered on the worship of Yahweh. Each year delegates would meet at a central sanctuary and offer renewed devotion and sacrifice to God, pledge themselves to one another and to God anew, and submit all disputes and problems of common concern to a decision there before God. The evidence for such a league, usually called an amphictyony, after the Greek models, is quite slim in the Bible, especially since the Book of Judges makes it obvious that most of the tribes did not cooperate with one another. The worship of Yahweh however set these twelve tribes off from the rest of the Canaanite population, and even if there was no formal league, they did recognize some central place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept (first at Shechem in Josh 23-24, later at Shiloh in 1Sam 1-4).

Significance of the Land for Israel

The story of the prophet Elisha and Naaman the Syrian general in 2King 5 recounts how the Syrian did not believe he could worship Yahweh unless he took some of the soil of Israel home with him to Damascus. In 2King 18.25, the Assyrian general tries to win over the citizens of Jerusalem to the idea of surrender by claiming that Yahweh was so angry with their stewardship of the land that he had handed

it over to Assyria as spoil. Still another aspect of this connection between Israel, its God, and the land is revealed in the terrible sense of loss and helplessness that exile from the land brings. Psalm 137 and the Book of Lamentations express this feeling in deeply moving poetry. Israel always understood the land as a gift from Yahweh. Before the conquest, the patriarchs in Genesis are regularly portrayed as *landless:* Abraham the sojourner from a distant country, Jacob and his family settling in Egypt by special grant of the pharaoh. The patriarchal narratives stress the *hope* of land as a promise given by Yahweh (cf. Gen 15). Yet, as God guides them toward the Promised Land after the exodus, the *conditional* nature of this gift is brought out. People must choose between slavery in Egypt or wandering in the wilderness (see Ex 16-18 and Num 11-20).

Again when they are poised at the edge of the new land, the Book of Deuteronomy insists that they must choose their course carefully. The land will be a gift of Yahweh, sacred, blessed, and made fruitful, but it will also be a source of temptation to forget Yahweh and follow Baal and other pagan deities when the people prosper there. The land will also be a sacred responsibility of *stewardship* under Yahweh. It is the land of the covenant, so that possession of the land and obedience to Yahweh's covenant law go hand in hand. Sabbath rest, care for the poor, protection of the widow and the stranger, and keeping the whole body of law found in Deuteronomy 12-26 come with the right to the land.

From the moment that Israel entered the land, however, the actual history was seen as a story of greed and progressive betrayal of Yahweh who was the owner of the earth and the gift giver. The Deuteronomic editors remember the time of the judges, for example, as a period of petty strife when tribes refused to bear the burdens of the covenant. The dismal picture of the other tribes warring against Benjamin closes the Book of Judges, and the author adds as a final, very negative summary: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was best in his own eyes" (Judg 21.25).

The same judgment would be leveled against the rule of the kings in the Books of Kings, and against the landowners, prophets, and priests in the prophetic books. The prophets even began to announce that Israel must lose the land and suffer severe punishment and exile before there could be any hope that God would restore it. Indeed, the Prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, writing near the final end of Judah in 586 B.C., already placed more emphasis on the holiness and justice of the people as a community than on their possession of the Promised Land. Books written in exile (586 - 539) stress the law and the purity of the people, and often speak of the restoration of the land only in the far-distant future.

The experience of the people's failure in the land because of sin led the religious leaders in the time of exile and after to steer a new direction. They emphasized the need for faith based on interior devotion to Yahweh and personal responsibility for keeping the law. Indeed it led to the development and establishment of a *written book* of revelation that would be a permanent guide for Israel, the Pentateuch *(Torah).* This was followed shortly by the addition of the prophetic books, and by the rest of the Old Testament books. This was to be the primary heritage of Israel, "The People of the Book," rather than the uncertainties of the land. Nevertheless, the tie between the law and the land was and is intimate. Even in post-exilic authors, the hope of a restoration of the land to its former glory was strong. The dream of an independent Israel led to strong currents of messianism which took one of two forms: either *political* overthrow of the pagan nations and a new era of empire such as David had ruled, or the *apocalyptic* hope of an end to the present world and the re-creation of a new world by God in which Israel would dominate.

The Pentateuch narrative leaves Israel not yet in possession of the Promised Land (cf. Deut). One reason why the Old Testament divides these five books from the following history in the land found in Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2Samuel and 1 and 2Kings is to show that Yahweh's saving grace and covenant law did not need Israel to be in possession of land in order to be binding and valid.