



Judges

Judges 1: The Historical Idea and Setting of the Judges Cycle

Israel According to Judges

The Book of Judges presents a very different account of Israel's origins than the one we are left with at the end of Joshua. It is possible that the stories in Joshua developed later, which gave the storyteller(s) more creative latitude because they were less accountable to local memories of historical events. By contrast, the stories in Judges likely developed in more localized contexts.

Judges does not paint a picture of a united, nationalized Israel as Joshua does. Rather there are smaller tribes in different pockets throughout the land. After mapping out what is described in Judges, it appears the Israelites mostly occupied the highlands and never actually dislodged any of the cities — Jericho or otherwise. The Israelites in fact seem to be the ones getting pillaged and conquered in the Book of Judges most of the time, not the other way around.

Theological Threads

The storyteller provides an explanation for Israelites' struggle to defend themselves at the beginning of Judges, stating that Israelites began to worship *Baals* (Canaanite gods), which led YHWH to give them over to their enemies. This explanation includes few specifics about which gods they were worshiping or which enemies were doing the plundering. Introducing all of the stories in this generalized way again places the Deuteronomistic Historian's theological perspective at the center of the text as a whole: when Israel suffers, it is because they are not being loyal and obedient to YHWH.

Individual stories in Judges, however, do not seem to emphasize Deuteronomistic theology. This suggests that these stories may have already existed in a collected written form prior to the Deuteronomistic Historian's intervention. The Deuteronomistic Historian was likely a skilled redactor whose interest was not in changing these stories. Instead, they strategically wove a unifying theological thread through the pre-existing collected stories of Judges in order to imbue them with a shared meaning.

The Tribes of Israel

The story of Deborah in Judges 4 is one of the few places in this text where the tribes of Israel act together as a collective whole against an explicitly Canaanite aggressor. Interestingly, though, the tribes of Israel listed in this story do not align with those outlined in Genesis and elsewhere. This could indicate shifting alliances among different tribes. It also raises questions about whether Israel was truly a union of tribes that worshiped YHWH.

Although these stories ought not to be read as literal history, the origins of Israel may have looked more similar to the loose confederation of tribes depicted in the Book of Judges than it did to the portraits painted in other biblical texts. The Book of Judges indicates that tribal identity was far stronger and more important to early Israelites than the Book of Genesis, for example, would have us believe.