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Judges from a Messianic Perspective

To Levi, my great-grandson, although you are only nine-years-old right now, I pray that you will grow up and honor your namesake in the Bible by drawing close to God, discovering and using your spiritual gift(s), living a godly life, and being a godly man and leader for your family.

Judges

Title: The traditional name of the Book, *Shophetim*, is as early as the Talmudical period (B. B. 14b), and has the support of the LXX (the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the TaNaKh), Sophateim (Origen), and of the Latin Vulgate, Sophtim (Jerome). The Greek title, as found in the Septuagint, is Kritai, meaning judges. The Greek name is simply a Greek translation of the Hebrew word. The greater part of the book deals with the exploits of a series of national leaders who, by their victories over Isra'el's enemies, brought her independence from the yoke of oppressive foreigners. The term *shophet* has a wider connotation in Hebrew than has the English word "judge" or the corresponding nouns in Greek and Latin. It denotes both *judicare* and *vindicare*, the latter in the double sense of *defending, delivering, and avenging, punishing*. The *shophet* was both **judge** and **governor**.

As related in Arnold Fruchtenbaum commentary on **Judges**, the office of **judge** was

first mentioned by **Moses (Deuteronomy 16:18, 17:9, and 19:17)**. The **judge** was to stand by the side of the high priest as the supreme **judge**, or leader, in **Isra'el**. The **judge's** function included much more than just civil services. It also included responsibilities of leadership, in both military and religious affairs. The office of **judge** carried the judicial sense of administering justice, but it also included being a military leader. The **shophet** was inspired by **the Spirit** and summoned directly for **His** work by divine appointment (**3:15, 4:6, and 6:12**).

The nature of a **judge** in the book of **Judges**, then, was not just civil, but military and religious as well. The usual order as found in this book is as follows: A **judge** would first serve as a military leader and deliver **Isra'el** from some foreign occupation. Only after the military deliverance would the **judge** serve as a civil leader. These **judges**, therefore, should not be confused with those appointed by **Moses** in **Exodus 18:21-26**. Those were civil judges, appointed to decide issues of case law. However, the ones in the book of **Judges** were to deliver **Isra'el** from foreign oppression, usually by war, and then to rule in peacetime.

Author: The actual author of this book is unknown. **In rabbinic tradition, the Talmudic tractate Babba Bathra 14b-15a states that Samuel wrote the book (First and Second Samuel were originally one book) that bears his name and also the books of Judges and Ruth. It is certainly possible that Samuel did write portions of Judges. But outside of rabbinic tradition, the actual writer of the book of Judges is unknown.**

Date: A total of twelve **judges** are identified in the book of **Judges**, with **Debrah** being the only female **judge** (**Abimelech** was not actually a **judge**, and **Eli** and **Samuel** do not appear in this book). The dates of the **judges** from the death of **Joshua** until the rise of **Sha'ul**; in other words, from 1380 to 1043 BC. **Judges** covers a period of transition, archaeologically speaking, from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age – the period of arrival and settlement of the Philistines. The actual period of the **Judges** includes not only what is found in the book itself, but also what is found in **Ruth**, and the first twelve chapters of **First Samuel**.

Date of composition: The question is: What was the composition of the book of **Judges** itself? The history within the book covers a period of 350 years, and so whoever wrote the book in its final form had to put together a history that covered three-and-a-half centuries.

The first clue in dealing with the date of the book is this phrase: **In those days**

there was no king in Isra'el, which appears four times in the last five chapters: **17:6, 18:1, 19:1, and 21:25**. What this phrase shows is that the book of **Judges** was written **there was no king in Isra'el**, and each case contextually gives that reason why **a king** was necessary.

The second clue concerning the date of the composition is, according to **1:29**, that the city of **Gezer** was still in **Canaanite** hands. This shows that this book was written before **Solomon** became **king**, because **Solomon** had acquired **Gezer** by marriage (**First Kings 9:16**).

The third clue, according to **1:21**, is that **Jerusalem** was still in **Jebusite** hands. This shows that the book was written before **David's** capture of **Jerusalem** (see the commentary on [the Life of David, to see link click Co - David Conquers Yerushalayim](#)).

The fourth clue is the statement that **Sidon** was the chief deity of the Phoenicians. Before the twelfth century BC, **Sidon** was dominant over **Tyre**; after the twelfth century, **Tyre** was dominant over **Sidon**.

The fifth clue is that **Judges** contains a series of parenthetical sections (**1:11, 1:23, 3:1-2, 19:10, and 20:27-28**) show that the book in its final form was written much later than when the particular events being described in the text. In other words, several times in **Judges** the author makes a statement, but the statement needed to be explained to his readers, who might not understand how things were done in earlier times.

The sixth clue is that the book contains seven chronological notes that conclude: **until this day (1:21, 1:26, 6:24, 10:4, 15:19, 18:12, 19:30)**, meaning until the time of the writing. It doesn't mean any particular statement was still after the writing of the book, but at the time **it** was written, these things were still true.

The seventh clue is that it had to have been written after the 1051 BC because that was the year **Samson** died. **He** was the last person named and dealt with in the chronological sequence of the book of **Judges**.

Putting all those clues together, **Judges** was written approximately 1000 BC. It was written in the early days of **David**, when **he** was king over **the tribe of Judah** only (see [the Life of David Ce - David Anointed King Over Judah](#)), before **he** became **king** over all **Isra'el**.¹

Place in the canon: The Jewish Bible has three main divisions: the Torah, the Prophets, and the writings. *Judges* stands second in the section known as the Nevi'im or the Prophets. It is also part of a subdivision known as the "The Former Prophets," consisting of the historical books which narrate the story of Isra'el from the entry into Canaan to the destruction of the First Temple (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Gb](#) - [The Destruction of Solomon's Temple on Tisha B'Av in 586 BC](#)). In the Septuagint, *Ruth* is attached to *Judges*, either under the one name Kritai (from the Greek translation for the Hebrew word meaning judges), or under its own name. In some Greek MSS, *Judges* and *Ruth* are combined with the Torah and *Joshua* to form a separate manuscript - The Octateuch, which continues the story of Isra'el's rise to nationhood and deals with the death of *Joshua* to the birth of *Samuel*.

Canaanite gods: (1) **El** was the head of the **Canaanite** pantheon and the father of **gods** and mortals. However, he tended to be weak in comparison to Ba'al. (2) **Asherah** was the wife of El and the mother of the **gods** and the goddess of the sea. Her role in the Bible is mentioned in **First Kings 15:13** and **18:19**; **2 Kings 21:7** and **23:4**; and **2 Chronicles 15:16**. Also mentioned are the wooden Asherah poles (**Deuteronomy 16:21**; **Second Kings 23:6**; **Judges 6:25** and **18:30**). (3) **Ba'al**, the storm god, became the most powerful god in the pantheon because of his connection with fertility. He was the dying and rising god of the **Canaanites** and is mentioned frequently throughout the Bible. (4) **Ashtoreth** was the female goddess of fertility and the goddess of love and war, closely associated with Ba'al and becoming his female consort. References to her are found in **Judges 10:6** and **First Samuel 7:4** and **12:10**. (5) **Anath** was Ba'al's sister and wife and the goddess of love and war, and she tended to be rather bloodthirsty. She does not appear in the Bible, except in a person's name (**3:31**).

Attraction and danger for Isra'el: The fertility of the land still held by the **Canaanites** compared with the less productive part of the land held by **Isra'el** would give the impression that the **gods** of the **Canaanites** seen above were better to their worshippers than the **God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob** were to **Isra'el**. In *Judges*, the **Jews** hold the high ground, the mountainous rocky regions, but the soil was a lot less productive. The **Canaanites** were able to hold on to the fertile valleys because of their chariots. The **Israelites** looked upon the fertility of those areas and could logically conclude that the **gods** of the **Canaanites** were superior. Secondly, the practice of **Canaanite** temple prostitution was a very strong

temptation. It was part of their worship and contrasted sharply with the sexual morality of the Torah (see the commentary on [Leviticus Db](#) - **Sexual Sin and Covenant Loyalty**).

Continuity between Joshua and Judges: The continuity between **Joshua** and **Judges** can be seen in **five ways**. **First:** the tribe of **Benjamin** was unable to conquer **Jerusalem** (**Joshua 15:63** and **Judges 1:21**). **Second:** **Caleb** gave his daughter to **Othniel** (**Joshua 15:15-19** and **Judges 1:11-15**). **Third:** **Caleb** drove out the sons of **Anak** (**Joshua 15:14** and **Judges 1:20**). **Fourth:** **Ephraim** was unable to drive out the **Canaanites** (**Joshua 16:10** and **Judges 1:29**). And **Fifth:** both record the death of **Joshua** (**Joshua 24:28-31** and **Judges 2:6-10**).

The Chronology of Rulers from the Exodus to Solomon's Temple: It was the **480th** year after the people of **Isra'el** had left the land of **Egypt**, in the fourth year of **Solomon's** reign over **Isra'el**, in the month of **Ziv**, which is the second month, that he began to build the House of **ADONAI** (see the commentary on [the Life of Solomon Ba](#) - **This New House**).

From the Exodus and Wilderness Wanderings **40 years**

The Conquest of the Land **7 years**

From the Division of the Land to the Conquest by **Cushan** **10 years**

The Oppression by **Cushan** **8 years**

Othniel and Rest **40 years**

The Oppression by **Mo'ab** **18 years**

Ehud and Rest **80 years**

Oppression by **Jabin** **20 years**

Deborah and **Barak** and Rest **40 years**

Oppression by **Midian** **7 years**

Gideon and Rest **40 years**

The Rule of **Abimelech 3 years**

Tola 23 years

Jair 22 years

Judges 10:7 implies that **Jephthah** and **Samson** ruled at the same time on two different sides of **the Jordan River**, with **Samson** battling the Philistines on the west side **Jephthah** battling the Ammonites on the east side. On the one hand, the west side suffered the loss of the Ark of the Covenant; but on the other hand, we read about **Samson's** deeds and the rule of Samuel. On the east side we learn about these **judges: Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon**, for a total of **59 years**.

The Reign of **Sha'ul 20 years**

David in Hebron **7 years**

David in Jerusalem **33 years**

Solomon until the construction of the Temple began **3 years**

Total number of years 480 years

The Results of the Era of the Judges: Chapters 17 to 21 serve to illustrate the tribal disorder of the period covered by the book of **Judges**. The first appendix describes the migration of **the tribe of Dan**, and the second appendix describes **Isra'el's** war against **the tribe of Benjamin**. But these two appendices are not chronological. The migration of **Dan** probably occurred after **Samson's** judgeship, but the war against **the tribe of Benjamin** occurred much earlier, especially if **Judges 20:28** is compared with **Joshua 22:13** and **24:33**.

Purpose: Two basic purposes come into play in the book of **Judges**. First, was to demonstrate that **Isra'el** was in need of **a king**. But more specifically, the second purpose was to support the claims of **king David** against the claims of **the House of Sha'ul**. As a result, in **Judges, Gibeah**, which later became the home of **Sha'ul**, is shown in a negative light; whereas **Bethlehem**, the home of **David**, is shown in a positive light.

Key Verses: There are three key verses in **Judges**. **But then ADONAI raised up judges, who rescued them from the power of those who were plundering**

them. Yet, they did not pay attention to their judges, but they made they committed spiritual adultery with other gods and worshiped them; they quickly turned away from the path on which their ancestors had walked, and failed to obey ADONAI's mitzvot (2:16-17). And at that time there was no king in Isra'el; everyone did whatever seemed right in their own eyes (17:6).

Themes: There are at least three basic themes in the book: First, **Isra'el's** struggle, or how **they** became more and more like **the Canaanites** and less and less **Israelite**, and **ADONAI's** faithfulness through it all. This first theme is that of military and spiritual struggles of **the Covenant people** as **they** tried to settle in **the Promised Land promised to them by the LORD**.

The second theme is the "Canaanization of **Israelite** society" during the period of the settlement. The book of **Joshua** ended on a positive note, when things were going well and there was rest for all the families of **the nation** settling into **their** inherited portion of **the Land**. But the book of **Joshua** also warns that not all of **the land** promised to **Isra'el** had been conquered. That failure, now becomes a full-blown crisis, and the warnings against spiritual adultery with **the Canaanites** and worshipping **their gods** are all ignored during the period of **the Judges**. The high spiritual level seen in **Joshua** collapses. Instead, the book of **Judges** begins with conflict in **the Land** against the enemies who should have already been destroyed (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Ag - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh**), and closes with **Isra'el's** apostasy and spiritual adultery that already should have been wiped out.

A third theme is the contrast between the covenantal faithfulness of **ADONAI** and **Isra'el's** covenantal spiritual adultery.²

With a total of twelve judges, there were actually twelve cycles, but the author does not detail all twelve cycles, he details only seven cycles.