

41. The Twelve Judges

Judg 3-16

Modernism begins with the transition from priest (sacred) to king (secular). In the Bible, that moment comes in the priesthood of Samuel. His sons are corrupt; the people seek a king. Samuel tries to dissuades them, but they reply:

1Sam 8:19 . . . Nay, but we will have a king over us, [20] . . . that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.

The Book of Judges imagines an alternate modernity, where rule is not defined by lineage, but passes from one local judge to another. The high court moves with the judges; there is no political center. The challenge for that society is, Who leads in war? The Judges model says that the judges *themselves* can lead.

Judges echoes the Books of Samuel and Kings, the system to which it offers an alternative. The first three chapters also contain links to the Book of Joshua; they were added when the historical books were edited into what we call the Promise Narrative. There are twelve judges, plus an uncounted thirteenth: Abimelech, “Son of the King.” He represents the other option, hereditary rule, and demonstrates, by violent contrast, the virtues of the non-lineal system.

#1. Othniel

He is one of several one-exploit judges. Here is his whole story:

Judg 3:9. And when the children of Israel cried unto Yahweh, Yahweh raised up Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb ‘s younger brother. [10] And the spirit of Yahweh came upon him. and he judged Israel, and he went out to war, and Yahweh delivered Cushan-rish-a-thaim, king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed against Cushan-rish-a-thaim. [11] And the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

#2. Ehud

Judg 3:14. And the children of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years. [15] But when the children of Israel cried unto Yahweh, Yahweh raised up a saviour, Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man left-handed. And the children of Israel sent tribute by him unto Eglon the king of Moab [16] And Eglon made him a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length, and he girded it under his raiment upon his right thigh . . . Now Eglon was a very fat man. [18] And when he had made an end of offering the tribute, he sent away the people that bare the tribute. [19] But he himself turned back from the quarries that were by Gilgal, and said, I have a secret errand unto thee, O king. And [the king] said, Keep silence And all that stood by him went out from him. [20] And Ehud came unto him . . . And Ehud said, I have a message from God unto thee. And he arose out of his seat. [21] And Ehud put forth his left hand and took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his body, [22] and the haft also went in after the blade, and the fat closed upon the blade, for he drew not the sword out of his body, and it came out behind.

[23] Then Ehud went forth into the porch, and shut the doors of the upper room upon him, and locked them. [24] Now when he was gone out, his servants came, and they saw, and behold, the doors of the upper room were locked, and they said, Surely he is covering his feet in the upper chamber. [25] And they tarried till they were ashamed, and behold, he opened not the doors of the upper room; therefore they took the key, and opened them, and behold, their lord was fallen down dead on the earth.[26] And Ehud escaped while they tarried, and passed into Seriah. [27] And it came to pass, when he was come, that he blew a trumpet in the hill-country of Ephraim, and the children of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he before them. [28] And he said unto them, Follow after me, for Yahweh hath delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hand. And they went down after him, and took the fords of the Jordan¹ against the Moabites, and suffered not a man to pass over. [29] And they smote of Moab at that time about ten thousand men, every lusty man, and every man of valor, and there escaped not a man.[30] So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest fourscore years.

So far we have heroes, not judges. But at least they are *nonlinear* heroes.

#3. Shamgar

Judg 4:1. And after him was Shamgar the son of Anah, who smote of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox-goad; and he also saved Israel.

Here is an early version what later became part of the Samson lore (p157).

#4. Deborah

At last, a real judge, under her sacred tree. And from the spirit of that tree, she knows what should be the verdict in the cases before her.

Judg 4:4. Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, she judged Israel at that time. [5] And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill-country of Ephraim; and the children of Israel came up to her for judgement.

Then comes her warlike moment, in which she retains her spirit function:

Judg 4:6. And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedesh-naphthali, and said unto him, Hath not Yahweh, the God of Israel, commanded, Go and draw unto mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphthali, and of the children of Zebulun? [7] And I will draw unto thee, to the river Kishon, Sisera the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude, and I will deliver them into thy hand.

She knows the will of Yahweh, but she also has her own spirit power. She can not only predict *where* Sisera will die, *she can compel him to go there*.

This power links her with figures like the Witch of Endor, the seer whom Saul consulted. Deborah belongs to an old tradition, still alive in modern times, in which women have special access to the higher spiritual powers.

¹The fords of the Jordan will figure again in the story of Gideon, which follows.

#5. Gideon

Yahweh had delivered the people “into the hand of Midian seven years.”

Judg 6:11. And the angel of Yahweh came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, and pertained unto Joash the Abiezrite, and his son Gideon was beating our wheat in the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. And the Angel of Yahweh appeared unto him, and said unto him, Yahweh is with thee, thou mighty man of valor . . . [14] And Yahweh looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and save Israel from the hand of Midian; have I not sent thee?

Gideon is reluctant:

Judg 6:15 . . . Oh, Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is the poorest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.²

He gathers an army, but twice asks for an omen of success. Here is the second:

Judg 6:39. And Gideon said unto God . . . let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew . . .³

And it was. Next, Yahweh advises him to reduce the size of his army:

Judg 7:2. And Yahweh said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me.

This he does, but he is still in still doubt. Says Yahweh,

Judg 7:10. But if thou fear to go down, go thou with Purah thy servant down to the camp; [11] and thou shalt hear what they say⁴ . . . [13] And when Gideon was come, behold, there was a man telling a dream unto his fellow, and he said, “Behold, I dreamed a dream; and lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came unto the tent, and smote it, so that it fell, and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat. This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: into his hand God hath delivered Midian, and all the host.”

And so it turns out. Gideon’s three hundred attack, and with the aid of others who are summoned at the last minute, the Midianites are destroyed.

Now we have a problem. Yahweh had reduced the size of Gideon’s army. But as Gideon and his men pursue the foe, he finds he needs more:

Judg 7:24. And Gideon sent messengers through all the hill-country of Ephraim, saying, Come down against Midian, and take before them the waters, as far as Beth-ba-rah, even the Jordan. So all the men of Ephraim were gathered together, and took the waters as far as Beth-ba-rah, even the Jordan. [25] And they took the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb, and they slew Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they slew at the winepress of Zeeb, and pursued Midian; and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon . . .

²He echoes Saul [1 Sam 9:21], “Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? and my family the least of all the families of the tribes of Benjamin?”

³Here as often, it is a dream or other omen, not any word of Yahweh, that is trusted.

⁴Another echo: the night visit of David to Saul’s camp in 1Sam 26.

The men of Ephraim complain that they were not called earlier; Gideon pacifies them by praising their achievement (8:1-3). This much makes narrative sense. But with the next passage, we are suddenly in a different world:

Judg 8:4. And Gideon came to the Jordan and passed over, he and the three hundred men that were with him, faint, yet pursuing. [5] And he said unto the men of Succoth, Give, I pray you, loaves of bread unto the people that follow me, for they are faint, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna the kings of Midian . . . [20] And he said unto Jether his first-born, Up, and slay them. But the youth drew not his sword, for he feared, because he was yet a youth. [21] Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, Rise thou, and fall upon us; for as the man is, so is his strength. And Gideon arose and slew Zebah and Zalmunna . . .

As has been seen,⁵ this is a personal agenda, with not one reference to Yahweh. It also pursues *two different* kings of Midian. The contradictions are extreme.

Following this interruption, 8:22 resumes and concludes the main story:

Judg 8:22. Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also; for thou hast saved us out of the hand of Midian. [23] And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: Yahweh shall rule over you . . .

Here, in one line, Gideon states the core theme of the Book of Judges.

By now we see the pattern of the book: it is a repeating narrative module. Israel is captive. A judge frees them by a military exploit, either personal or leading an army. He rules for forty years (the standard length of a generation). The people once more turn to local gods, and the cycle repeats, with variants.

We now see the pattern disrupted, by one not numbered among the Twelve.

[Abimelech]

Every story needs its villain. Abimelech's very name, "Son of the King," says that he is the opposite of Gideon's refusal to have his sons rule after him. Abimelech's power base was the northern sacred center, Shechem:

Judg 9:1. And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem unto his mother's brethren, and spake with them, and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, [2] Speak, I pray you, in the ears of all the men of Shechem, Which is better for you, that all the sons of Jerubbaal, who are threescore and ten persons, rule over you? Or that one rule over you?

They give him seventy pieces of silver. He hires a band of seventy ruffians, and slays the sons of Gideon. Only one, Jotham, escapes. He goes to the top of Mount Gerizim, and there presents a parable against the idea of a kingship:

⁵Niditch (2008) 103, "a shift in register characterizes some of the dialogue;" Butler (2009) 218, "Crossing the river marks a radical change in Gideon's military strategy and in his personality . . . the narrative now proceeds without mentioning God;" Smith (2021) 559, "shows little knowledge of the preceding events . . . The seams of the unit also show narrative disjunction . . . Thus it would seem that vv 4-21 did not originally belong to either the preceding or following subunits."

Judg 9:8. The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them, and they said unto the olive-tree, Reign thou over us. [9] But the olive-tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith they honor God and man, and go to wave to and fro over the trees? [10] And the trees said unto the fig-tree, Come thou and reign over us. [11] But the fig-tree said unto them, Should I leave my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to wave to and fro over the trees? [12] And the trees said to the vine, Come thou, and reign over us. [13] And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my new wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to wave to and fro over the trees? [14] Then said all the trees to the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us. [15] And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.⁶

And Jotham proceeds to draw his own moral:

Judg 9:19 . . . If ye then have dealt truly and uprightly with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice ye in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you; [20] but if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the men of Shechem, and the house of Milo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem, and from the house of Milo, and devour Abimelech.

Abimelech reigned three years. First came banditry, then disaffection, then open warfare between him and the men of Shechem. Finally, as Abimelech was besieging the tower of refuge within the city of Thebez:

Judg 9:53 . . . a certain woman cast an upper millstone upon Abimelech's head, and brake his skill. [54] Then he called hastily unto the young man his armor bearer, and said unto him, Draw thy sword, and kill me, that men not say of me, A woman slew him. And his young man thrust him through, and he died . . . [56] Thus God required the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did unto his father, in slaying his seventy brethren. . .

So much for that. We now resume the story of the Twelve Judges.

#6-7. Tola, Jair

The next two faced no enemy, and simply judged. Their entire record is:

Judg 10:1. And after Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, a man of Issachar; and he dwelt in Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. [2] And he judged Israel twenty and three years, and died and was buried in Shamir. [3] And after him arose Jair, the Gileadite, and he judged Israel twenty and two years. [4] And he had thirty sons that rode on thirty ass colts, and they had thirty cities . . . [5] And Jair died, and was buried in Kamon.

⁶Another echo of the times of the kings. Said Solomon's incompetent successor Jeroboam, when asked by the people if he would treat them better [1Kgs 12:14], My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my rather chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.

#8 Jephthah

The “children of Israel” serve the Baalim. Yahweh gives them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites for eighteen years. The people cry to Yahweh but this time he refuses to help them:

Judg 10:13 . . . ye have forsaken me and served other gods; wherefore I will save you no more. [14] Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress. . . [17] Then the children of Ammon were gathered together, and encamped in Gilead. And the children of Israel assembled themselves together, and encamped in Mizpah. [18] And the people . . . said one to another, what man is he that will begin to fight against the children of Ammon? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

In answer, there appears a person previously rejected as the son of a “harlot,” but accepted when the Ammonites came. There was a war, and a victory:

Judg 11:33. And he smote them from Aroer until thou come to Minnith, even twenty cities, and unto Abel-cheramim, with a very great slaughter. So the children of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.

. . . but a victory with a complication. Jephthah had vowed, in return for victory, to sacrifice the first thing he would meet when he returned:

Judg 11:34. And Jephthah came to Mizpah unto his house and behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances; and she was his only child, besides her, he had neither son nor daughter. [35] And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me; for I have opened my mouth unto Yahweh, and I cannot go back. [36] And she said unto him, My father, thou hast opened thy mouth unto Yahweh; do unto me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth, forasmuch as Yahweh hath taken vengeance for thee on thine enemies, even on the children of Ammon. [37] And she said unto her father, Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may depart and go down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my companions,. [38] And he said, Go. And he sent her away for two months; and she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. [39][And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed; and she knew not man.

And it was a custom in Israel, [40] that the daughters of Israel wen yearly to celebrate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.

Near Jerusalem dwelt the god Molech, and to Molech, child sacrifices had long been offered. Such sacrifices are often disapproved of in the Biblical text,⁷ and this story of Jephthah’s daughter is an eloquent protest against the whole idea. It is not literarily necessary to the Jephthah story, but its reader appeal is obvious, its literary brilliance no less than that of the Song of Deborah (§40), and it was probably included for that reason.

⁷Lev 18:21, Lev 20:2-3, 1Kgs 11:7, 2Kgs 23:10, Isa 7:9 (“the King”), Jer 32:35.

#9-11. Ibzan, Elon, Abdon

Three more judges of whom nothing useful is known. An immense effort is being made to get the total number of “judges” up to the desired twelve.

Judg 12:8 And after him Ibzan of Beth-lehem judged Israel. [9] And he had thirty sons; and thirty daughters he sent abroad, and thirty daughters he brought in from abroad for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years. [10] And Ibzan died, and was buried at Beth-lehem.

Judg 12:11. And after him Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel; and he judged Israel ten years. [12] And Elon the Zebulunite died, and was buried in Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.

Judg 12:13. And after him Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. [14] And he had forty sons and thirty sons’ sons, that rode on three-score and ten ass colts; and he judged Israel eight years. [15] And Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died, and was buried in Pirathon in he land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

#12 Samson

Last comes the most famous, and the least judge-like, of the Twelve Judges. His part of the story is introduced this way:

Judg 13:1 And the children of Israel again did that which was evil in the sight of Yahweh; and Yahweh delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years.

In the story, the Philistines are ruling Israel, but it does not end with a battle in which they are defeated and Israel is freed. Samson several times raids or kills, but those exploits do not change the situation with the Philistines. They do not follow what is elsewhere the literary pattern of the Book of Judges.

Samson’s enemies include Philistine women, each of whom tries to get him to reveal a secret; in the last two cases, the secret of his strength. In the end, the women win, and Samson dies. The stages of the Samson story are:

- **Judg 13.** He is born to a barren woman, and raised as a Nazirite, one of great strength. To preserve his strength, he must not cut his hair.
- **Judg 14.** Samson sees a Philistine woman in Timnah, and gets her for his wife. At the feast, thirty guests try to guess Samson’s riddle, made by him when he saw a honeycomb in a dead lion:

“Out of the eater came forth food,
And out of the strong came forth sweetness”

His wife learns the secret, and shares it with the guests. In revenge, he kills thirty men of Ashkelon, and takes their clothing to pay the wager he had made with the guests. His wife is given by her parents to his best friend.

- **Judg 15.** Forbidden to see his wife, he sets fire to the Philistines’ fields. They demand that Judah release him to them for punishment; they deliver him bound. But he bursts his bonds, and with the jawbone of an ass, kills a thousand men. He thirsts, and Yahweh provides water for him.
- **Judg 16:1-3.** He lies with a harlot of Gaza. Philistines lie in wait outside the gates to kill him at dawn, but he tears up the city gates and carries them away.

• **Judg 16:4-31.** He loves Delilah, a woman of Sorek. They ask her to find the secret of his strength. He says, if he is bound with green withes. She binds him. The Philistines try to kill him; he breaks the withes. He tells her, with new ropes. Again he breaks them. He says, if you weave my locks into your web. This too fails. He says, if he is shaven, and this time he *does* become helpless. He is blinded, chained, and taken to labor in the prison. Years later, when his hair has regrown, he is taken to be mocked at a festival.

It would be too bad not to witness that climactic scene in full. Here it is:

Judg 16:23. And the lords of the Philistines gathered them together to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god, and to rejoice; for they said, Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand. [24] And when the people saw him, they praised their god; for thy said, Our god hath delivered into our hand our enemy, and the destroyer of our country, who hath slain many of us. [25] And it came to pass, when their hearts were merry, that they said, Call for Samson, that he may make us sport. And they called for Samson out of the prison-house, and he made sport before them. And they set him between the pillars. [26] And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand, suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house resteth, that I may lean upon them. [27] Now the house was full of men and women, and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport.

[28] And Samson called unto Yahweh, and said, O Lord Yahweh, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. [29] And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house rested, and leaned upon them, the one with his right hand, and the other with his left. [30] And Samson said, let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might, and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead that he slew at his death were more than they that he slew in his life.

[31] His father came down and took him, and brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the burying-ground of Manoah his father. And he judged Israel twenty years.

Are all these episodes really part of the story? The Delilah one is twice as long as the others, and it is intensely dramatic. Both these traits suggest it is later. Such literary doubts can be confirmed: Judg 16 ends with the usual formula, “And he judged Israel twenty years.” *But so does Judg 15:* “And he judged Israel in he days of the Philistines twenty years.” Then Judg 15 was the original ending of the group, and Judg 16 can only be a later addition.

But even if it spoils the older tradition, it makes a great ending to the story. No one who has seen the movie will ever forget it.

So ends the demonstration, the more convincing for its literary brilliance, that a system of non-hereditary judges works as well as a hereditary kingship. That conclusion will presently be refuted.