

Devotion, Week of June 4, 2023

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This summer and fall we are going to look at the judges in Israel's history, beginning with the first ones after the death of Joshua, who had entered Canaan at the instruction of Moses and conquered enough to provide land to all the 12 tribes of Israel. We will also study the demand for a king and the rise of Saul, ending with God's decision to set him aside and call David as king. This period is during the Iron Age, after the height of the Egyptian kingdom in the 1200 BCE era, and the arrival of the Philistines in Canaan. The judges rule the Israelites from about 1150-1025 BCE, with Saul's reign from about 1025-1005 BCE,

These stories in Judges and 1 Samuel show what happens when the people begin to accept the foreign gods of the Canaanites and forget their covenant with Yahweh. Once Joshua has made the land allotments for the tribes, they start refusing to come to the aid of the others and intertribal warfare begins.

The Promised Land becomes one of recurring warfare and disarray. There is repeated violation of the covenant with Yahweh. A judge is chosen, the Israelites win battles, there is peace, and then things fall apart, culminating in a repeated statement: "the Israelites did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord and worshipped the Baals." God then punishes them by having an enemy group defeat them, they repent, God delivers them by giving them a new, divinely inspired judge, and the cycle starts all over. The Israelites put away their foreign gods for a while and win battles, but then anarchy, civil war, and chaos take over again.

The judges are primarily military leaders, but some perform judicial functions, interpreting covenantal law. Some are charismatic leaders, and some are identified as those that Yahweh chooses for them. Most are from different Israelite tribes, as each tribe rises to power over the others. The stories of twelve judges are told in the book of Judges, with the rule of each usually resulting in a time of peace.

As these periods continue over time, we begin to read that "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." This desire for a king becomes more and more obvious, until finally, the Israelites insist on a king. The prophet Samuel warns them that this is not going to necessarily be a good thing, but they insist. God gives a big sigh and says to Samuel to let them have their way, and Saul is anointed. We will look at all these stories, as we examine this early period in Israelite history. I hope you will join us on Sundays as we explore what happens when these people freed from exile in Egypt finally get to the Promised Land, and then forget their part of the covenant.

Jeanne