Judges

Judges is, in the Hebrew tradition, counted as the second of the four books of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). These books cover the history of Israel starting from the death of Moses and ending with Judah’s deportation to Babylon. Judges recounts Israel’s history from the eve of the conquests led by Joshua, into the establishment of the rule of Israel through special persons raised up for a season who were known as judges, with this situation extending into the beginning of the book of Samuel. However, the judges raised up in Judges are better thought of as military heroes rather than righteous religious leaders, although it appears that some of the judges were also legal adjudicators as well as military leaders, and these would have brought at least some measure of moral re-centering to Israel during their judgeship, even if it was only related to having some assurance of justice under the law. The priesthood ministry was located in Shiloh during this time, having been set up during Joshua’s conquests (see Josh 18:1ff).

The narrative structure of Judges divides rather nicely into three main sections: A prologue (1:1 to 3:6), a main section (3:7 to 16:31), and an epilogue (17 to 21). The prologue and epilogue each contain two narrative subsections. The main section contains the stories of the judges, twelve of whom are mentioned, although only six accounts contain any substantial detail about a judge, while six “minor judges” are mentioned only in passing. There is also considerable detail given to the would-be king Abimelech, Gideon’s son, even though he was not one of the judges.

The prologue recounts some final conquests of Israel under Joshua, and relays a final warning by the Angel of Yahweh that because the Israelites did not succeed in destroying all the inhabitants of their land, the indigenous peoples of the land will not be driven out and will prove to become a snare for them (2:1-3). Then after the death of Joshua and the leaders of his generation die, “…there arose another generation after them who did not know Yahweh or the work that he had done for Israel. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh and served the Baals…” (2:10-11). This sets the stage for the numerous cycles of apostasy, judgment, repentance, and salvation through judges that follow in the main section.

The cyclical flow of the main section is stated initially in verses 2:12-20, and is tidily captured in the narrative of the first judge, Othniel: 1) The people fall into apostasy (3:7); 2) Yahweh hands the people over to bondage under an oppressive regime, in this case Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia, for eight years (3:8); 3) The people of Israel cry out to Yahweh, who then raises up a deliverer, Othniel (3:9); 4) Othniel then defeats the oppressor and ushers in a forty year Sabbath for the land under his judgeship, and until his death (3:10-11). This basic pattern is repeated with more or less detail in the remaining five major judge stories. Hendrickson offers a helpful pneumatic to recall this cycle using the letter R: a) Relapse; b) Retribution; c) Repentance; and d) Rescue. The epilogue contains two stories that heighten the sense of decline that has overtaken the land of Israel, namely, the story of the tribe of Dan and the idols of Micah (17-18), and that of the men of Gibeah, the Levite’s concubine, and the war with the tribe of Benjamin (19-21).
If one follows the main narratives of the main section, the book of Judges can be arranged according to the following chiastic structure:

A: Prologue (1-3:6): Israel didn’t act dutifully; falls into rebellion.

B: Othniel (3:7-11): Clean and tidy

   C: Ehud (3:12-30): Victory through deception
      Minor judge: Shagmar (3:31)

| RISE | D: Deborah-Barak (4-5): Illegitimate backer (righteous Deborah);
|------| Killer-woman, part I (Jael kills Sisera)

   | E: Gideon (6-8) -->|--| Middle: GLORIOUS VICTORY!
   | | |-- Late: Dualistic tension: hypocritical

| D': Abimelech (9): The anti-judge. Illegitimate backer (heightened);
| Minor judge: Tola and Jair (10:1-5)

   | C’: Jephthah (10:6-12:7): Victory through very costly deception
| Minor judges: Ibzan, Elon, Abdon (12:8-15)

B’: Samson (13-16): Compromised, messy

A’: Epilogue (17-21): Examples of the consequences of Israel’s carelessness and rebellion

This arrangement requires a little explanation. The “rise” and “decline” are meant to somewhat reflect the character of the judges, although not perfectly, but it also shows that the peak narrative of Judges is clearly that revolving around Gideon. After his rise from humble beginnings, Gideon not only leads the most glorious military victory recounted in all of Judges, but he even shows some zeal for Yahweh - when offered the kingship, he replies, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; Yahweh will rule over you.” (8:23). However, the very next verse becomes a turning point in the book as Gideon betrays the spirit of his own words by asking for spoil, usurping the priesthood by making an ephod, and essentially living like he was a king (8:24-31). Judges makes a downturn from this point on as it narrates a decline into decay and chaos, and includes the story of the evil would-be king Abimelech, the horrible story of Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter because of his foolish vow (and despite the many attempts to whitewash this account, make no mistake – Jephthah killed his daughter), and the morally bankrupt Samson, whose unbridled lust for foreign women becomes a parody of Israel itself. Then the bizarre narratives included at the end of Judges leaves one feeling displaced and confused, with the now factional tribes existing in a state of utter dysfunction.
One striking feature of Judges is the large role that women play in the narratives, whether actively or passively. This is especially true in the account of Deborah, who stands as one of the greatest female characters in all of Scripture. Also, the two men who are killed by women (Sisera and Abimelech) were leaders whose deaths marked an end to their existential threat to Israel. And then at the beginning of Samuel, when Israel was still ruled by judges, we have yet another important woman appear in the narrative, namely Hannah. So it becomes rather clear that women are considered to play an important role during the era of the judges, especially as they prove to challenge the failed male leadership of the times.

An eschatological lesson to be learned from Judges can be discerned from the repeated refrain, “In those days, there was no king in Israel.” This is repeated four times in the epilogue, and twice contains the following phrase, “Every man did what was right in his own eyes.” (17:6, 18:1, 19:1, and 21:25 – the last verse of the book). A decent case can be made that Judges was composed during the Davidic monarchy, and was meant at the time to be an apologetic to justify David’s legitimacy. And indeed, David did unite the peoples of Israel and helped usher in a glorious golden age that endured through the reign of his son Solomon. However, in retrospect, we know that no human king was ever successful in ushering in a kingdom where people retained the staying power to follow Yahweh steadfastly. In Judges, this reality is prefigured in the accounts of the near-kings Gideon and Abimelech. And even though Israel eventually had a lot of kings, they all failed in this regard, until the emergence of the New Israel’s king, the Lord Jesus Christ. Unlike Gideon, He is the one who leads God’s people to true righteousness through the efficacy of the gospel and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Unlike Gideon and Micah, He is the true priest who ever makes intercession for us. Unlike Samson, He is the king who fought for his people to free them from religious oppressors in A.D. 70, and He continues to fight battles for his people. The empty hole one feels at the end of Judges can only be filled by Jesus, as indeed, there now IS a king in Israel, and there ever will be. Judges displays just how bad people do get when they lack godly direction from a faithful leader, so it forces us – us who know we would be no different if we lived during this era, to look to that one true righteous king who was appointed to “save His people from their sins.”