

Reading Judges

First, it is important to erase your definition of what a judge is and adopt the understanding that the original audience of these individual stories had. Judges in the Ancient Near East were not legal officers. Judges were **MILITARY LEADERS**. Judges were called and appointed by God to lead the people of the tribes of Israel into battle. That authority was recognized by the people.

It is also significant to note that the judges were not necessarily good or moral or decent people. They were chosen by God because they could do the job, not because of their virtue. Reading the stories of the judges, you can see their character flaws and questionable behavior. That is irrelevant to their ability to fulfill the mission assigned to them.

Questions:

--how does reading the full text of these stories differ from the versions you may have heard about these characters in the past?

--Why do you think the versions you have heard have been used?

I admit that Judges is one of my favorite books in the Old Testament. As a literary critic, the stories give me a rich assortment of texts to explore on a variety of ways. There is also an opportunity to delve into feminist interpretation, as well as many ways to use anthropology to do social science criticism. I will do my best to curb my enthusiasm and not overwhelm you with my fascination with the book of Judges,

It is easy to get dizzy reading Judges because the stories are all composed in cycles; things are going well, the people turn to idol worship (one of the two sins God punishes the people for committing), God allows the enemy to be victorious to punish the people, the people repent and cry to God for help, God raises up a judge to lead the people in battle, the enemy is overcome, peace (rest) reigns in the land for a period of time, the people turn to idol worship....

The cycles are accompanied by formulaic language;

The Israelites (again) did what was evil in the sight of the Lord....

The last verse of Judges: *There was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own sight.* The editor of these ancient stories is getting us ready to read the books of Samuel

Deborah

Yes, a female judge! And a woman whose story is told not once, but twice. Chapter four is prose and chapter five is poetry. The poetry is the older text, one of the oldest preserved texts in the Bible.

Cast of Characters:]

Deborah, a prophetess, judge and wife

Canaanites, enemy God allows to conquer Israel

Jabin, Canaanite king

Sisera, Jabin's general

Barak, called by Deborah to lead the Israelites against Jabin

Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite (an ally of Jabin)

Sisera's mother and princess (poetry only)

Plot:

Deborah tells Barak to lead the Israelites into battle against Sisera and God will provide victory. Barak says he will not go into battle unless Deborah goes too. Instead of calling Barak a coward or arguing with him, Deborah agrees to go, **BUT**, Barak will not be the victor/hero. God will deliver Jabin to a woman. An insult to any man. It is *logical* to presume that the woman will be Deborah, but the story takes a twist, and out of nowhere comes Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, a tent-dweller (nomad).

Jael is standing at the door of the tent and invited Sisera inside. Jael is exhibiting hospitality, but Sisera immediately violates the code of hospitality by asking for water to drink. He should have waited for something to be offered. Jael overlooks his boorish behavior and offers him milk, not just water. Note that the poetry noticed this upgrade! Sissra falls asleep after the milk and Jael hammers a tent peg through his head (temple, the thinnest area of the skull). Jael is the woman God uses to conquer Sisera, the last of Jabin's army.

In the poetry we meet Sisera's mother who is waiting for him to come home from battle. He is late and she is worried. A princess suggests the son is delayed, taking booty/spoils of war, like slave women and cloth—as if these had equal value.

Gideon

Midian is the enemy God uses to punish the Israelites this time. The Israelites are hiding in caves in the hillside because when they plant their crops, the Midianites destroyed them. Enter Gideon, son of Joash. God tells Gideon he will be a leader. The first task is for Gideon to use his father's bull to tear down his father's altar to Baal, along with destroying the ashers/sacred poles. Then Gideon is to build an altar to the God of Israel and offer the bull as its first sacrifice. When the people realize what has happened, they want to kill Gideon.

Gideon gathers an army from the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, but as insurance that it is really God's will, he used a test of the fleece, twice! Gideon wins the battle (short version) and the people wanted to make him the ruler, and his sons after him—setting up an inherited line of rulers, but Gideon declined. He said the Lord must rule over the people.

Gideon asks for gifts of gold and used it to make an ephod which then becomes a problem, but there are 40 years of rest. Gideon had 70 sons by his many wives and a son by his concubine from Shechem. That son's name was Abimelech—which in Hebrew means “my father is king”. After Gideon's death the people returned to idol worship.

You were not asked to read Chapter nine, but this is where the Gideon story actually concludes.

Jephthah

Cast of characters:

Jephthah, the son of a prostitute and Gilead

Jephthah's daughter

Plot:

Jephthah had been driven out of his father's house by his father's wife. He becomes a brigand, leading his followers on raids. But when the Ammorites attacked Israel, the people wanted Jephthah to be their military leader. Jephthah works a deal that if he is victorious, he will be the leader of the people. Before going into battle Jephthah makes a vow that if God delivers the Ammorites to him, on his return home, the first thing coming out of his house will become a burnt offering to God.

It was his daughter who came out first to greet him, his only offspring.

When he sees her Jephthah realizes his problem and reacts by blaming his daughter for the situation he created! His daughter tells him he must keep his vow, but she asks him to delay for two months, allowing her and her friends to go to the mountains to mourn her virginity—that she will never have children.

Question: did Jephthah actually offer his daughter as a sacrifice? Deuteronomy 23:22 says that there must be no delay in fulfilling a vow. Did the daughter's request for a two month delay give Jephthah the "out" he needed? What about the law against human sacrifice? As I said in the beginning of my comments, the stories are masterfully written!

Samson

Cast of characters:

Samson, son Manoah, a member of the tribe of Dan, and his wife.

Samson's wife from the Philistines

Prostitute from Gaza

Delilah

Plot

Samson was designated by God before birth to be dedicated to the Lord's service and to be a Nazarite—the reason he never cut his hair. The Philistines were the enemy God used to punish the people. Samson was interested only in foreign women. His parents asked him if there was not a woman from his own people he would have, but he not only refused, he spoke crudely and said of the Philistine woman he desired: get her for me!

The story of Samson is filled with riddles that he uses to move the plot forward as a means of destroying the enemy. Is it God's mission or Samson's revenge for not getting the wife he wanted? The Philistines know Samson's weakness is women and they try to capture him through this weakness, but he escapes. Samson's final victory is also his personal defeat. In tearing down the Philistine's temple he kills all those inside, more than he killed in battle. But Samson dies also.

For a man dedicated as a Nazarite, Samson is a man owned and driven by the passion of his flesh, a desire for foreign women. Delilah is not evil. Samson had no right to expect loyalty from her. She had every right to make a deal with the Philistines.

The judges, except for Deborah, had serious flaws, but God was able to use them, regardless. Does that bother you?

And what about all the women we meet in Judges? Only Deborah, Jael and Delilah are named, yet they all play a significant role in the stories. What are your thoughts on Judges? Little from Judges is in the lectionary readings so most Catholics do not know these stories. Is that good or not?

Enjoy this session. My family and I are well. I hope the same is true for each of you. May the Lord watch between us while we are apart from one another. Shalom! Teresa