

Adam Clarke:

Preface to the Book of Judges

The persons called Judges, שופטים (Shophetim), from שפוט, (shaphat), to judge, discern regulate, and direct, were the heads or chiefs of the Israelites who governed the Hebrew republic from the days of Moses and Joshua till the time of Saul. The word judge is not to be taken here in its usual signification, i.e., one who determines controversies, and denounces the judgment of the law in criminal cases, but one who directs and rules a state or nation with sovereign power, administers justice, makes peace or war, and leads the armies of the people over whom he presides. Officers, with the same power, and nearly with the same name, were established by the Tyrians in new Tyre, after the destruction of old Tyre, and the termination of its regal state. The Carthaginian Suffetes appear to have been the same as the Hebrew Shophetim; as were also the Archons among the Athenians, and the Dictators among the ancient Romans. But they were neither hereditary governors, nor were they chosen by the people: they were properly vicegerents or lieutenants of the Supreme God; and were always, among the Israelites, chosen by Him in a supernatural way. They had no power to make or change the laws; they were only to execute them under the direction of the Most High. God, therefore, was king in Israel: the government was a theocracy; and the judges were His deputies. The office, however, was not continual, as there appear intervals in which there was no judge in Israel. And, as they were extraordinary persons, they were only raised up on extraordinary occasions to be instruments in the hands of God of delivering their nation from the oppression and tyranny of the neighboring powers. They had neither pomp nor state; nor, probably, any kind of emoluments.

The chronology of the Book of Judges is extremely embarrassed and difficult; and there is no agreement among learned men concerning it. When the deliverances, and consequent periods of rest, so frequently mentioned in this book, took place, cannot be satisfactorily ascertained. Archbishop Usher, and those who follow him, suppose that the rests, or times of peace, should be reckoned, not from the time in which a particular judge gave them deliverance; but from the period of the preceding deliverance, e.g.: It is said that Othniel, son of Kenaz, defeated Cushan-rishathaim, Judges 3:9, and the land had rest forty years. After the death of Othniel the Israelites again did wickedly, and God delivered them into the hands of the Moabites, Ammonites, and Amalekites; and this oppression continued eighteen years; Judges 3:14. Then God raised up Ehud, who, by killing Eglon, king of Moab, and gaining a great victory over the Moabites, in which he slew ten thousand of their best soldiers, obtained a rest for the land which lasted forty years: Judges 3:15, Judges 3:30; which rest is not counted from this deliverance wrought by Ehud, but from that wrought by Othniel, mentioned above; leaving out the eighteen years of oppression under Eglon king of Moab: and so of the rest. This is a most violent manner of settling chronological difficulties, a total perversion of the ordinary meaning of terms, and not likely to be intended by the writer of this book.

Sir John Marsham, aware of this difficulty, has struck out a new hypothesis: he supposes that there were judges on each side Jordan; and that there were particular wars in which those beyond Jordan had no part. He observes, that from the exodus to the building of Solomon's temple was four hundred and eighty years, which is precisely the time mentioned in the sacred writings; (1 Kings 6:1); and that from the time in which the Israelites occupied the land beyond Jordan, to the days of Jephthah, was three hundred years. But in reckoning up the years of the judges, from the death of Moses to the time of Ibzan, who succeeded Jephthah, there appears to be more than three hundred years; and from Jephthah to the fourth year of Solomon, in which the foundation of the temple was laid, there are again more than one hundred and fifty years; we must, therefore, either find out some method of reconciling these differences, or else abandon these epochs; but as the latter cannot be done, we must have recourse to some plan of modification. Sir John Marsham's plan is of this kind; the common plan is that of Archbishop Usher. I shall produce them both, and let the reader choose for himself.

Who the author of the Book of Judges was, is not known; some suppose that each judge wrote his own history, and that the book has been compiled from those separate accounts; which is very unlikely. Others ascribe it to Phinehas, to Samuel, to Hezekiah, and some to Ezra. But it is evident that it was the work of an individual, and of a person who lived posterior to the time of the judges, (see Judges 2:10, etc.), and most probably of Samuel. The duration of the government of the Israelites by judges, from the death of Joshua to the commencement of the reign of Saul, was about three hundred and thirty-nine years. But as this book does not include the government of Eli, nor that of Samuel, but ends with the death of Samson, which occurred in A.M. 2887; consequently, it includes only three hundred and seventeen years; but the manner in which these are reckoned is very different, as we have seen above; and as will be more particularly evident in the following tables by Archbishop Usher and Sir John Marsham.