

## THE HEBREW JUDGE: WHAT IS IT

In the context of the Bible, a judge did not have the same role as a modern judge in a court of law. Rather, a judge in Hebrew culture was a charismatic leader who demonstrated courage and wisdom in delivering the people of Israel from their oppressors. The judges were raised up by God to perform this role during times of crisis. This concept of the Hebrew judge is unique to Judaism and is expressed in the Hebrew word "shofet," or, in plural, "shofetim," which means "judge" or "deliverer."

Here is a list of the judges in the Bible and where they are found:

Judge	Tribe	Years of Service	Biblical Reference
Othniel	Tribe of Judah	40	Judges 3:7-11
Ehud	Tribe of Benjamin	80	Judges 3:12-30
Shamgar	Unknown	Unknown	Judges 3:31
Deborah and Barak	Tribe of Ephraim and Tribe of Naphtali	40	Judges 4-5
Gideon	Tribe of Manasseh	40	Judges 6-8
Abimelech	Son of Gideon, Tribe of Manasseh	3	Judges 9
Tola	Tribe of Issachar	23	Judges 10:1-2
Jair	Tribe of Manasseh	22	Judges 10:3-5
Jephthah	Tribe of Manasseh	6	Judges 10:6-12:7
Ibzan	Tribe of Judah	7	Judges 12:8-10
Elon	Tribe of Zebulun	10	Judges 12:11-12
Abdon	Tribe of Ephraim	8	Judges 12:13-15
Samson	Tribe of Dan	20	Judges 13-16

While Eli and Samuel are considered judges, they are outside the book of Judges and also served as priests, unlike the traditionally understood list of 13 above.

In the context of Israelite society, the nation functioned as a theocracy, with God Himself as the ultimate authority. Following their settlement in the promised land, Israel was meant to be led by the priesthood. However, when the people disregarded God's laws and the priesthood failed to provide effective leadership, God allowed them to face the consequences of their actions, often resulting in foreign oppression. In response to their distress and cry for help, God would raise a "shofet" to rescue and lead them. Notably, the shofetim were not primarily religious leaders, as that role was reserved for the priesthood.

One of the most unique shofetim is Samson, a judge known for his extraordinary strength and peculiar birth. His narrative, which unfolds in Judges 13-16, stands out for his individual exploits and personal drama, shedding light on the complexities of these divinely-appointed leaders.

## THE PHILISTINE OPPRESSION

Before Judges 13, the Israelites had already experienced five major periods of oppression:

1. **Mesopotamian Oppression:** According to Judges 3:7-8, the Israelites were oppressed by the king of Mesopotamia for eight years.
2. **Moabite Oppression:** In Judges 3:12-14, the Israelites were oppressed by the Moabites, led by Eglon, for 18 years.
3. **Canaanite Oppression:** Judges 4:1-3 recounts that the Israelites were oppressed by the Canaanite king Jabin for 20 years.
4. **Midianite Oppression:** In Judges 6:1-6, the Midianites oppressed the Israelites for seven years.
5. **Ammonite Oppression:** In Judges 10:7-9, the Israelites were oppressed by the Ammonites for 18 years.

Judges 13:1 introduces us to the longest period of oppression that the Israelites faced, a 40-year subjugation under the Philistines.

The Philistines were a people who lived along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, in what is now modern-day Israel and the Gaza Strip. They were known for their military might and advanced technology, including iron weapons and chariots.

Prior to Judges 13, the Israelites had multiple encounters with the Philistines. In Judges 3:31, Shamgar, one of the judges listed in the table, killed six hundred Philistines using a simple farmer's tool, an ox goad. It is not specified whether this occurred in a single instance or over a period of years. In Judges 10:7-8, the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help against the Philistines and other oppressors, and in response, the Lord raised up Jephthah to deliver them.

👉 The Philistines are believed to have been part of the "Sea Peoples," a confederation of maritime raiders from the Aegean Sea area in the second millennium B.C. They settled in five key city-states along the southwestern coast of Canaan (Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza), which came to be known as Philistia.

The Philistines were distinct from other groups in Canaan due to their unique culture and advanced technology. They are often associated with superior iron-age technology, which gave them a military advantage over the Israelites who were still largely in the Bronze Age. They were also well known for their organized military ranks and chariot forces.

In the context of the Biblical narrative, particularly throughout the Books of Judges and Samuel, the Philistines are presented as a significant threat to the Israelites. They frequently clashed with the Israelites, and the oppression described in the Book of Judges is part of a larger narrative of conflict that extends into the books of Samuel and Kings. Notable figures, including Samson, Saul, David, and Solomon, all had pivotal interactions with the Philistines.

By the time of the prophet Samuel, the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines (1 Samuel 4), marking a low point in Israel's history. However, the Ark proved to be a curse to the Philistines and was eventually returned (1 Samuel 5-6). Later, under the leadership of King David, the Israelites were finally able to subdue the Philistines.

## RECONSIDERING THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES

An often-cited verse from the Book of Judges is Judges 17:6, which states, "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes." This phrase is repeated in Judges 21:25, signifying its importance in the Biblical narrative. Traditionally, this verse has been interpreted negatively, painting a picture of a society in moral and spiritual chaos, where everyone does as they please with no regard for God's law.

However, a different interpretation might consider the societal context and the unique governmental structure of the period of the Judges. This was a time when Israel was a loose confederation of tribes with no centralized authority—essentially a theocracy under God. The freedoms they had were enormous compared to the surrounding nations which were under the rule of kings or pharaohs. They were free to make decisions without the constraints of a human monarchy.

The phrase "everyone did what was right in his own sight" could therefore be viewed not as anarchy, but as a reflection of a free society where individuals have the autonomy to make their own moral decisions and are responsible for their own actions. This could be seen as a blessing, a period of relative liberty granted by God to His chosen people, a testimony to the fact that they were governed directly by God's laws rather than a human monarch.

However, this freedom also presented challenges. Without a centralized authority, there was potential for moral and spiritual decline, as seen in the cycles of apostasy, oppression, repentance, and deliverance that characterized the period of the Judges. The greater the liberty, the more the people had to be self-disciplined and dedicated to God's laws, which was not always the case.

Throughout history, there has been an ebb and flow between societal freedom and government control. As liberty increases, there is potential for chaos if it's not coupled with responsibility and morality. On the other hand, the greater the government control, the less personal freedom there is, leading to potential oppression and abuse of power. The period of the Judges offers valuable insights into this delicate balance, reminding us of the complex relationship between freedom, morality, and governance.

In this light, the phrase "everyone did what was right in his own sight" can serve as a potent reminder of the complexities and challenges inherent in governing a free society, and the importance of individual and collective morality and responsibility in such a society.