

THE BOOK OF JUDGES

The book of Judges describes a cycle that repeats 12 times :

Idolatry → captivity → repentance → salvation

The general pattern in Judges is -

- A. The people turn to other gods --> captivity / invasion / being conquered.
- B. The people repent --> a saviour --> conquers enemies and sets people free

This pattern is repeated each generation because the people forget their previous salvation. The book of Judges describes 12 such cycles with 6 minor judges and 6 major judges.

A. The first stage of the cycle relates to the cause of oppression

Why did the Israelites suffer oppression? Why couldn't they simply merge and blend with other peoples? They would only become oppressed if the oppressors saw them as a threat or as different and incompatible with them. In Moses time, the Egyptians certainly saw the Hebrews (Habiru) as a political threat, and also as neglecting traditional Egyptian gods.

But why could the Israelites not simply merge and intermarry and blend with the other nations? They tried to do so 12 times, and each time they failed. Why?

They Were Feared (Chosen people)

A possible reason is that they were a militant people – they were recent invaders and were feared by the other nations. They viewed themselves as God's chosen people, and inheritors of a Promised Land. They were viewed as foreigners and usurpers. Even if they wanted to blend with other peoples, those other peoples did not want to blend with them. They let down their defences, but the other nations still feared them. This led to a one-sided relationship of exploitation and captivity.

They Were Separate (Holy)

Another reason might be that the Israelites had a strong ethnic identity that could not be compromised or blended. Their beliefs and religion set them apart as a distinct, holy people. They had strict rules concerning morality and purity – and a strong historical belief that they were chosen by GOD as a special people - they kept themselves separate so as to preserve their identity. Perhaps it made them intolerant of aspects of other nations. Perhaps it caused them to hold together and not intermarry.

They were Different (Literate)

The Israelites were a literate people compared to all other nations. They could all read and write and were taught to question and debate. So they became administrators, bankers and doctors. This set them apart from other peoples. They were feared because their literacy gave them positions of power and influence.

B. The second stage of the cycle is the effect of oppression

The second stage of this cycle is a psychological process. Oppression of an ethnic minority will naturally lead to an US-THEM attitude, so the oppressed will develop a strong ethnic identity, and a desire for asserting that identity and separating from their oppressors. If this persists then it is natural that militants and warriors will arise and may defeat the oppressors and set their people free.

Such a process depends upon-

1. The degree of oppression
2. The strength of their ethnic identity
3. The strength of their militant resistance

Oppression --> US-THEM attitude --> formation of an ethnic identity --> desire for asserting their identity and separating from oppressors --> the rising up of a warrior who defeats oppressors and sets his people free.

C. The Mosaic Covenant

These elements are all present in the Mosaic Covenant –

- A. To be the Chosen People
- B. Submitted to the One God only
- C. To be Separate and Holy
- D. To be the People of the Book – literate – a nation of Priests
- E. To be dedicated to Law, to Purity, to Worship

Even when they wanted to embrace other cultures, you can see how their essential identity and history as a people might make such a union incompatible – giving rise to separation, hostility and persecution.

D. Israelite and Canaanite Religion

In the Bible, Yahweh is very clear that the Israelites should not intermarry with any of the surrounding nations. Also, the Israelites were instructed to drive out all the foreign nations from the promised land.

A question arises, therefore, as to why Yahweh commanded these things. Was the religion of Yahweh so completely different from the religion of the Canaanites that it required this complete separation? Or were the religions broadly similar, like different brands of the same thing, and the only difference was the name?

An additional question is why the religion of the Canaanites was viewed as so seductive that it would inevitably lead the Israelites astray if they were exposed to it?

An answer to these questions can be found in looking at the similarities and differences between Canaanite and Israelite culture. The best references I have found that identify the differences are

1. Web site : [What Is The Difference Between A Canaanite and an Israelite](#)
2. Web site : [Four Differences Between Canaanite Religion \(mbci.mb.ca\)](#)

The table below summarises the main differences.

Canaanite	Israelite
Polytheistic	Monotheistic
Natural	Transcendental
Ritualistic focus	Legalistic focus
Driven by passion / appetite / selfish / animalistic /law of jungle / might is right	Righteous / ethical / impartial / divine
Informal	Formal
Appeasement	Obedience
General revelation	Special revelation - Covenants
Defining characteristic : Trade : Traders and craftsmen (materialistic culture)	Defining characteristic : Religion : A nation of priests (puritanical culture)

E. Israelite Identity

The Israelites defined themselves by their religion – it was the defining characteristic of their identity – it was what they were renowned for.

The centrality of religion to the Israelites can be seen in the structure of their society. The 12 tribes were all descended from a single family, and were ruled over by judges – a theocracy.

Their religion required more than ritual observance – there had to be an ongoing obedience to the laws and commandments of God.

The Israelites were a pastoral people living in small villages – a relatively humble and poor existence – their greatest love was to follow God

F. Canaanite Identity

In comparison, the Canaanites were traders and craftsmen, and were renowned for their economic savvy. This fits the stereotype of the Philistine – opportunistic and money-making. The Canaanites were renowned as traders, having shipping routes throughout the Mediterranean – which led to their amalgamation of many different beliefs and religions.

The Canaanites consisted of independent city states, with gods varying between each city, and held together by trade and agricultural alliances – an economy rather than a theocracy.

Canaanite religion was mainly to do with ritual observance to appease the Gods of nature - only requiring an occasional external ritual – rather than any ongoing behavioural change.

G. General vs Special Revelation

The gods of the Canaanite religion were the gods of nature, fertility, trade. They represented the natural forces. To this extent, we can think of Canaanite religion as a “general revelation” based on experience of physical creation.

In contrast, Israelite religion was based on special revelations of God to the Hebrew people. God had intervened into history – made covenants with the people and revealed Himself to them. This was so much the case that the Israelites attributed the origin of their nation to such an intervention and covenant – at the time of the Exodus. So, special revelation defined the origin and identity of Israel.

So we have the following dichotomies -

- Polytheistic vs Monotheistic
- Ritual vs Law
- General vs Special
- Materialistic vs Priestly

H. Materialism

The Canaanite religions were seductive because materialistic needs were always present – the need to make money, the need for trade and wealth. In comparison, special revelation was easily forgotten by succeeding generations. The Canaanites held out the lure of trade, riches, exotic travel, informal religion, sexual freedom.

The Canaanites were wealthy city dwellers, in contrast to the Israelites who were pastoral people mostly living in small villages. Whilst the Canaanites aspired to materialistic wealth, the Israelites valued a more puritanical lifestyle.

I. Ethical Monotheism vs

Ethical monotheism began with the Israelites. Ethical monotheism – means a belief in one supreme God, who commands love and justice. This contrasts with the Canaanite religion where there were many gods with human appetites who needed to be appeased. The Israelite religion was transcendent, whereas the Canaanite religion was natural / driven by animal passions.

Canaanite religion was relatively free of any requirements for behaviour change in terms of ethical codes of conduct. Sexual freedom was a characteristic of Canaanite society, as is evident from the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah.

J. Separation or Seduction

What made the Canaanite religion seductive was its appeal to giving in to natural passions, its informal nature, and its emphasis on wealth and success. In contrast, the Israelite religion feels transcendent – the imposition of a divine order upon the natural world – expressing God's will rather than human will.

Perhaps this is why Yahweh required the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites – because the Canaanite religion and way of life were far too seductive and corrupt.

Yahweh chose Israel to be a special nation of priests – to stand apart as pure and holy, and act as a mediator between God and the nations.

In Exodus 19:6, God said to Moses, **“And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”**. What does this mean? It means that the Israelites were called to be -

- Separate from sin – transcendence – separate / above the natural order
- One God : Devoted to God above all else –above money, wealth, desire, everything else., not having divided loyalties
- Righteous and just in all their actions and thoughts

This explains why the Israelites had to keep themselves separate. A strong monotheism implies an intolerance of and rejection of all the other gods.

K. Special Revelation

The imposition of an ethical code that goes beyond natural impulse suggests divine intervention. The birth of Israel was through a special intervention of God – as demonstrated by the Exodus. There were 5 such interventions throughout Israel's history. Each intervention of God was marked by a new covenant (an agreement between God and the Israelites). And each covenant is separated by the same time interval.

- Noahic Covenant (2348 B.C.)
then 427 years
- Abrahamic Covenant (1921 B.C.)
then 430 years
- Mosaic Covenant (1491 B.C.)
then 437 years

- Davidic Covenant(1055 B.C.)
then 430 years
- New Covenant (625 B.C.) announced by Jeremiah

The Israelites failed to drive the Canaanites out of the land, and instead adopted their religions and forgot about Yahweh. Solomon and the succeeding kings of Israel fell into idolatry. Curiously, exactly 430 years later the Israelites were removed from the promised land and taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

A Parallel ?

God had promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit a land of their own, but the sins of the Canaanites had not yet reached their full measure. After 430 years the Israelites were freed from Egyptian captivity, and started on their way to the promised land.

So its curious that when Solomon and his successors fell into idolatry, they were given 430 years until they were returned to captivity, this time under the Babylonians.

God had created the world, but was not the world. God preceded and transcended all the earthly creation.. The Book of Judges provides an interesting contrast between the nature ethic of the Canaanites and the transcendent ethic of the Israelites. It emphasises the importance of remaining separate from sinful peoples and adopting a strong stance against a "nature ethic" that is really an ethic of rebellion.

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