

Grace Lutheran Biblical Studies – Old Testament: Judges & Jeremiah

Rev. Andrew Borden

PREFACE

Monotheism, the adherence to, worship of, a single “creator god” actually began in Africa somewhere around 10,000 BCE, predating the Abrahamic relationship with YHWH as the knowable, Most Holy whose name cannot be uttered: the I AM WHO I AM, by almost 8,000 years.

From the very beginning of sentient thinking (arguably 2 million-plus years BCE), rational sense-making minds worldwide noted positive and negative conditions affecting them and sought the source of outcomes to somehow influence things in their favor. Thus, the creating of deities related to agricultural, sexual, weather, etc. related outcomes.

The “pantheon” of deities many-times crossed cultural barriers; the pagan god, Baal, for example was basically the same in attributes and worship around the eastern Mediterranean basin and various parts of Africa. However, individual cultures had gods particular to their geographic milieus/needs.

In every tradition people noted good and bad outcomes prevalent and sought to influence for the good which led to offerings lifted up to please the human imagined entities.

The bad, or as we generally refer to in our generation as “evil” tendencies, was acknowledged as a reality within the bounds of creatures with rational thought: definitely humans, but also noted in other species such as (but not limited to) elephants and big cats whose response to perceived cruelty from various humans could trigger a like response, though their nature was not generally “evil”: aggressive when hunting for basic survival needs or in warding off other aggressors, but not for “sport”.

Code words for those conditions which test our patience, loyalty and the such became objectified in terms of “devil”, “evil spirit” and more recently, “Satan”, though the underlying implication when used was in emphasizing one’s watching out for aggravations of our life-balance. What happened, though, was people could neglect to qualify use of these simplified terms for dis-balancing conditions so that the terms, themselves, took on a life of their own. And when this became widespread it could be easy to assign blame outside of oneself for evils committed, not taking responsibility for one’s life’ choices, but blaming an evil spirit, Satan of a devil of some kind.

The milieu of the Abrahamic peoples through not only trading relationships, but in residing within close-proximity regionally, rubbing up and against Egyptian, Midianite, Akkadian, Philistine, Hittite, Perizzite and numerous other cultures meant learning about their religious ideals so that attributes of evil and good were recognized in the regional myth and legend structures. These concepts and characterizations could bleed over into the Abrahamic people’s consciousness and sense-making even as they were generally oriented with the monotheistic tradition of YHWH.

Thusly, we enter into study of the Hebrew, “Israelite”, story recognizing the swirl of influences competing for the attention of the general populace. Surely many people were able to sustain a rootedness in the Grace and Mercy that is YHWH. However, many others had a blended YHWH/pagan perspective or simply gave up the YHWH angle and lived as ethnic members of Israel without regard for the Law and Grace.

What we find in the books under consideration in this study align with the good and the bad of free-will and people’s choice “back in the day”, though not so different from our present world condition.

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If we don't learn from the past, we can be doomed to repeat it with consequences that are unpleasant.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Arrival of a people into the region around Canaan who could be the tribes of Israel appears to have been in and about 1400 BCE: first non-biblical acknowledgement of people known as "Israel" ~1213-1204 BCE through Egyptian records. Of course, the land was not devoid of other peoples and so the challenges of remaining in the region ensued.

The Old Testament (OT) record in the book of Deuteronomy reports how God's hope is that the tribes coming out of Egyptian captivity will just settle into the area around Canaan (where, due a warning from dream, Abraham's father, Terah, and family had moved to in escaping a rival-warring invasion of peoples from across the mountains to the East against their home in Sumer, thus aligning with the Abrahamic/promise tradition). However, following Joshua's death (whom Moses had appointed to lead the people into the Canaan region since God supposedly wouldn't allow him access due to a reported transgression against the Almighty) the tribal leaders weren't satisfied with the oversight of the Judge-system that had been established and so are reported to have gone the prophet Samuel, pressing him for a monarchical system like the other peoples lived under. Against Samuel's advice to work harder at making the existing setup thrive, he is pressed into having a conversation with God who gives the people what they ask for, even after warning them regarding the demands of a monarchy upon those governed: taxes, conscription, encroachment upon personal property/family members, etc.

The story begins pre-monarchical period. Eric Cline's, *Ancient Africa*, 2021, posits a collapse of empires/city states in 1,177 BCE across the entire region from Mesopotamia, Northern and Central Africa, Mediterranean region including Greco areas and Europe due to disease and political stressors (coups, warring). This aligns with a shift towards the biblical record of monarchy ~ 1,050 BCE and King Saul, made more easily possible in the absence of as many local powers.

In various places within the storyline God is identified as an antagonist against the tribes seeking to secure Canaan. This is denoted as retributive to various Israelite parties who had supposedly disrespected God's instructions: this can be understood as human anthropomorphic projection (creating rationale for why our human condition encounters challenges) being inserted into the narrative. One must remember that while there is some alignment to general history the text cannot be taken as literal history.

While the Hebrew people are identified as Semitic in origin, so are many OTHER peoples from the region the book of Judges portrays as looking to subdue for conquest in God's name. A problem at root in the entire OT storyline, existing within the wider global sense of world history, is justification of a minority opinion/view over and against any and all contenders without the provision for respectful negotiation of contentions in providing a solution workable for all parties. The current conflagration in the Holy Land against the Palestinian people (who were residents in the territory conscripted by the Allied Powers following World War II to become the current State of Israel are also Semitic in origin) makes clear the problems with human rationale attempting to speak for God (that, ironically, is called out as an abomination in the text).

Grace Lutheran Biblical Studies – Old Testament: Judges & Jeremiah
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JUDGES

OUTLINE (courtesy of Zondervan Archaeological Study Bible, 2005)

- 1) Introduction: incomplete conquest [of the “Promised Land”] and apostasy: chapters 1:1-3:6
- 2) Oppression by enemies and deliverance by Judges: chapters 3:7-16:31
- 3) Epilogue: religious and moral disorder: chapters 17-21

The text is a gritty account of ancestral lore, by unknown authorship, seeking to establish the Hebrew people’s (Israel’s) claim in God’s name upon the “Promised Land”.

- 1) We see in this text an account from a Hebrew perspective of struggles in the “Promised Land”; stories of skirmishes and battles with local peoples in that space God led them to live within, lack of Hebrew faith in God, justification for their attacks on other peoples, details of other religions corrupting Hebrew thought.
- 2) The generations of the Hebrew Judge/Leaders is laid out. Notables:
 - a. Deborah
 - i. Feminist leadership is front and center. Deborah and Barak, whom she accepts to help but who is identified as counter to God’s will and thus denied any glory in his service to her, overthrow the king of the Canaanite with help from 6 of Israel’s tribes.
 - ii. Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite slays a Canaanite general, Sisera, who upon escaping had sought refuge in her tent, and as he lay sleeping she drove a tent peg through his temple.
 - iii. Deborah’s song commemorates the victory for posterity.
 - b. Gideon
 - i. An angel appears to Gideon and calls him into service, whereby Gideon contends with the angel, asking for proof. Gideon asks to prepare an offering that is accepted. When placed upon a rock, fire consumes it, thereby affirming the Lord’s Presence.
 - ii. Gideon goes after the adherents of Baal, tearing down an altar that even his father had built and erecting one to God at Ophrah. This sets Gideon up as a champion for God.
 - iii. Gideon’s lead helps the Hebrew people subdue the Midianites (chapter 7) (who are relatives through Moses’ wife, Zipporah).
 1. A lot is made in this story for God being the reason for the “win” and not the tribes of Israel claiming they did it by their own wiles: a wonderful tale of whittling-down the number of men to bring about the victory from tens of thousands to a literal handful against thousands of Midianite troops.
 - c. Abimilech
 - i. Gideon’s son sees an opportunity to become a king, kills off his siblings (missing the youngest, Jotham) and is “crowned” a local monarch. This only lasts for 3 years when stirring against the atrocities he committed rise up, led by Jotham.

Grace Lutheran Biblical Studies – Old Testament: Judges & Jeremiah

Rev. Andrew Borden

- ii. In one of the skirmishes, he is trapped in a city tower by fire and a woman injures him (feminist spirit alive and well!). He allegedly has his servant run him through with a sword so his legacy isn't death at the hand of a woman.
- d. Samson
- i. Here we find the backstory for what many of us as products of Sunday School thought was a "good guy" in the OT history. It begins with his being born of a sterile mother and God intervening.
 - ii. The story reports he gets interested in a Philistine woman from outside the tribes of Israel and that God has done this to instigate a confrontation in resolving the situation through Samson. As he and his parents go to help him get the woman for his wife a lion threatens them, God empowers him with great strength so that he tears the lion in two as an opener for what is to come.
 - iii. Samson winds up not using the power for much good as the tale goes on.
 - iv. He becomes infatuated with a prostitute, allied with his detractors, who seduces him, whereupon his hair, supposed source of strength, is cut off and he is blinded while being taken captive.
 - v. His feat of taking down a bunch of "wicked" enemies of the Israelite people comes as he has a chance to rethink his life mistakes and ask God for chance of redemption in having his powers back one more time. That is when he takes down the temple of the pagan god, Dagon, by knocking over pillars to crash the structure down on top of the gathered crowd.

JEREMIAH

This text is attributed, in the majority, to the actual prophet who was concerned with accurate record-keeping of God's work. The record begins under turmoil in the remaining Hebrew state of Judah and continues through its fall and exile.

The "situation" of the text is the aftermath of Israel's exile, the time of tensions leading to the same fate for Judah, and the people's time in the initial period of exile.

Discussion of who Jeremiah has been established to have been and just what a prophet is: thoughts from John Bright's commentary of Jeremiah.

OUTLINE (courtesy of Zondervan Archaeological Study Bible, 2005)

- 4) Jeremiah's Call: chapter 1
- 5) Warnings and Exhortations to Judah: chapters 2-29
 - a. Chapter 2
 - ¹⁴ Is Israel a slave? Is he a homeborn servant?
Why then has he become plunder?
 - ¹⁵ The lions have roared against him;
they have roared loudly.
They have made his land a waste;
his cities are in ruins, without inhabitant.
 - ¹⁶ Moreover, the people of Memphis and Tahpanhes

Grace Lutheran Biblical Studies – Old Testament: Judges & Jeremiah

Rev. Andrew Borden

have broken the crown of your head.

17 Have you not brought this upon yourself
by forsaking the LORD your God,
while he led you in the way?

18 What then do you gain by going to Egypt,
to drink the waters of the Nile?

Or what do you gain by going to Assyria,
to drink the waters of the Euphrates?

19 Your wickedness will punish you,
and your faithlessness will convict you.

Know and see that it is evil and bitter
for you to forsake the LORD your God;
the fear of me is not in you,
says the Lord GOD of hosts.

20 For long ago you broke your yoke
and burst your bonds,
and you said, "I will not serve!"

On every high hill
and under every green tree
you sprawled and prostituted yourself.

The language reveals the truth for the demise of Israel and Judah: the ignorance of the people in following God's guidance that lead to a weakening of society and leadership to the point of being overrun. The God, through the prophet, is getting the people's attention to remind them of Godly persistence but their lack of appreciation and realizing blessing.

b) Chapter 3

6-10 GOD spoke to me during the reign of King Josiah: "You have noticed, haven't you, how fickle Israel has visited every hill and grove of trees as a whore at large? I assumed that after she had gotten it out of her system, she'd come back, but she didn't. Her flighty sister, Judah, saw what she did. She also saw that because of fickle Israel's loose morals I threw her out, gave her her walking papers. But that didn't faze flighty sister Judah. She went out, big as you please, and took up a whore's life also. She took up cheap sex-and-religion as a sideline diversion, an indulgent recreation, and used anything and anyone, flouting sanity and sanctity alike, stinking up the country. And not once in all this did flighty sister Judah even give me a nod, although she made a show of it from time to time."

6) Promises of Restoration: chapters 30-33

- a. Jeremiah is left in Jerusalem and writes the people to tell them to relax and establish lives in peace with their surroundings and captors. He warns against fortune tellers because they will lead the people astray. A warning is also given concerning people who say they speak for him, but are lying and not representing God and the Truth.

Grace Lutheran Biblical Studies – Old Testament: Judges & Jeremiah

Rev. Andrew Borden

- b. The language rolls out that God determined that Judah should be overrun and taken away by Nebuchadnezzar's forces to Babylon. QUESTION: was this God's actual work to make a point about "right" Godly following, or an anthropomorphic projection based upon human expectation of a wrathful God who effects punishment? LIKELY the latter, as we recognize our God is Love and Grace. THE PEOPLE themselves setup the conditions suitable for takeover with their neglect of the Law of Love and inward-turned nature that exposed the nation's vulnerabilities.
 - i. ***DO WE FIND A POSSIBLE PARALLEL IN OUR GENERATION? Eric Cline, of Princeton University, posits that 1,177 BCE was a MONSTER destabilization point for the entire Mediterranean region. So, while this is about 500 years earlier than Jeremiah's timeframe, the lasting effects were still lingering.***

7) Historical Insertion: chapter 34

- a. The three towns (Lachish, Azekah and Jerusalem) which had not been yet captured in former Judah were supposed to release any slaves and bonded people at God's request (they were also reminded that after 6 years of service EVERYONE was required to be set free); in emulation of God's Grace in setting the Hebrew people free from slavery in Egypt. But, after initially agreeing to do so, they relented. The language indicates this is the rationale for their final overthrow because God was angry with them.
- b. The Rechabite clan lived in tents just outside of Jerusalem. With the imminent overthrow, the Babylonians of Judah's hold-outs at hand, they were invited by Jeremiah into the Temple to talk about their situation and offered wine to drink as refreshment, which they refused: this clan was related to Moses' father-in-law, Jethro. God, through the prophet, explains how the Hebrew people have not followed God's requests (and see what came of that as their freedom was disappearing), but that this clan had followed this request for a long time: this was used as an example of blessedness for following in faith
 - i. ***It is a beautiful account of faithfulness, but again, I believe it has been used to account for Judah's demise at God's behest, rather than allowing the Hebrew people in accepting the blame directly.*** ISN'T THIS A COMMON PROBLEM WITH HUMANITY IN DENYING COMPLICITY WITH BAD DECISION-MAKING AND WANTING TO ASSIGN "SOMEONE ELSE" THE BLAME?
- c. Gedalia, through Nebuchadnezzar, is made governor of the Judah remnant. Jeremiah is allied with this leadership change. However, Ismael ben Nethaniel (of supposed royal descent) is angry and rises up with supporters and kills Gedalia. At this the governor's supporters take Jeremiah, against his will, and flee to the safety of Egypt as they are afraid of retaliation against them from Babylon over the murder.

8) Chapter 35

- a. Jeremiah is instructed by God predict Egypt, whom they have sought refuge within, will be subject to God's judgement over that nations' continued ignorance of God. Jeremiah predicts Nebuchadnezzar coming in and dealing with Egypt's apostasy: it turns out to be true, but not permanent as the Pharaoh continues following the "chastising take-over" and maintains a positive relationship with Babylon moving forward (Remember, that Egypt lost her domination as a major power in 1,177 BCE and had been trending downward in influence from that time).

Grace Lutheran Biblical Studies – Old Testament: Judges & Jeremiah

Rev. Andrew Borden

- b. Jeremiah's words chastising the Hebrew people who sought refuge in Egypt because they would not turn from pagan religion is rebutted by women who claim that when they stopped offering sacrifices to the Queen of the Earth in the time of Josiah (as he made reforms to prohibit pagan worship and return the people to worship and allegiance to God/Yahweh) everyone started going badly for them. So, they reasoned "the gods are angry" and they should return to cultic worship to turn things around.
- 9) The sufferings of Jeremiah: chapters 36-38
- a. Amidst his life being threatened, Jeremiah is asked to write-down instructions to King Jehoiakim to share with his leadership and people still left in-country. But as the king listened to what was being required of him, he, piece by piece, cut up the document and threw away the writings, effectively ignoring God and "incurring wrath."
- 10) Fall of Jerusalem and following events: chapters 39-45
- Three kings later than the leader we just considered, Nebuchadnezzar set up Zedekiah as king of what's left of Judah. But he also is reported to have disregarded God's teaching. Under his leadership Judah is totally eliminated.
- 11) Judgement against the nations: chapters 46-51
- 12) Historical appendix: chapter 52