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COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE

Judges

by Matthew Henry

To the Students of the Words, Works and Ways of God:

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AN EXPOSITION, WITH PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS, OF

THE BOOK OF

JUDGES

This is called the Hebrew *Shepher Shophtim*, the *Book of Judges*, which the Syriac and Arabic versions enlarge upon, and call it, *The Book of the Judges of the Children of Israel*; the judgments of that nation being peculiar, so were their judges, whose office differed vastly from that of the judges of other nations. The Septuagint entitles it only *Kritai, Judges*. It is the history of the *commonwealth of Israel*, during the government of the judges from Othniel to Eli, so much of it as God saw fit to transmit to us. It contains the history (according to Dr. Lightfoot's computation) of 299 years, reckoning to Othniel of Judah forty years, to Ehud of Benjamin eighty years, to Barak of Naphtali forty years, to Gideon of Manasseh forty years, to Abimelech his son three years, to Tola of Issachar twenty-three, to Jair of Manasseh twenty-two, to Jephtha of Manasseh six, to Ibzan of Judah seven, to Elon of Zebulun ten, to Abdon of Ephriam eight, to Samson of Dan twenty, in all 299. As for the years of their servitude, as were Eglon is said to oppress them eighteen years and Jabin twenty years, and so some others, those must be reckoned to fall in with some or other of the years of the judges. The judges here appear to have been of eight several tribes; that honour was thus diffused, until at last it centred in Judah. Eli and Samuel, the two judges that fall not within this book, were of Levi. It seems, there was no judge of Reuben or Simeon, Gad or Asher. The history of these judges in their order we have in this book to the end of Judges 16. And then in the last five chapters we have an account of some particular memorable events which happened, as the story of Ruth did (~~in~~ Ruth 1:1) *in the days when the judges ruled*, but it is not certain in which judge's days; but they are put together at the end of the book, that the thread of the general history might not be interrupted. Now as to the state of the commonwealth of Israel during this period,

I. They do not appear here either so great or so good as one might have expected the character of such a peculiar people would be, that were

governed by such laws and enriched by such promises. We find them wretchedly corrupted, and wretchedly oppressed by their neighbours about them, and nowhere in all the book, either in war or council, do they make any figure proportionable to their glorious entry into Canaan. What shall we say to it? God would hereby show us the lamentable imperfection of all persons and things under the sun, that we may look for complete holiness and happiness in the other world, and not in this. Yet,

II. We may hope that though the historian in this book enlarges most upon their provocations and grievances, yet there was a face of religion upon the land; and, however there were those among them that were drawn aside to idolatry, yet the tabernacle-service, according to the law of Moses, was kept up, and there were many that attended it. Historians record not the common course of justice and commerce in a nation, taking that for granted, but only the wars and disturbances that happen; but the reader must consider the other, to balance the blackness of them.

III. It should seem that in these times each tribe had very much its government in ordinary within itself, and acted separately, without one common head, or council, which occasioned many differences among themselves, and kept them from being or doing any thing considerable.

IV. The government of the judges was not constant, but occasional; when it is said that after Ehud's victory *the land rested eighty years*, and after Barak's *forty*, it is not certain that they lived, much less that they governed, so long; but they and the rest were raised up and animated by the Spirit of God to do particular service to the public when there was occasion, to *avenge Israel of their enemies*, and to purge Israel of their idolatries, which are the two things principally meant by their judging Israel. Yet Deborah, as a prophetess, was attended for judgment by all Israel, before there was occasion for her agency in war, ^{<1040>}Judges 4:4.

V. During the government of the judges, God was in a more especial manner Israel's king; so Samuel tells them when they were resolved to throw off this form of government, ^{<1012>}1 Samuel 12:12. God would try what his own law and the constitutions of that would do to keep them in order, and it proved that when *there was no king in Israel every man did that which was right in his own eyes*; he therefore, towards the latter end of this time, made the government of the judges more constant and universal that it was at first, and at length gave them David, a king after his own heart; then, and not till then, Israel began to flourish, which should

make us very thankful for magistrates both supreme and subordinate, for they are *ministers of God unto us for good*. Four of the judges of Israel are canonized (~~8113~~ Hebrews 11:32), Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephtha. The Learned bishop Patrick thinks the prophet Samuel was the penman of this Book.