

The “No King” Theme in Judges

(All References are from the Revised Standard Version)

Compiled by Dr. W. Wayne VanHorn

Statement A

Judges 17:6 In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

Statement B

Judges 18:1 In those days there was no king in Israel. And in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in; for until then no inheritance among the tribes of Israel had fallen to them.

Judges 19:1 In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.

Judges 21:25 In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

Observations about these verses:

1. Judges 17:6 and 21:25 form an *inclusio* encompassing everything in between, thus these verses contain both statements: a. there was no king in Israel and b. every man did what was right in his own eyes. We could call these two sides of one coin (need lacking/result of need not met).
2. Judges 18:1 and 19:1 utilize “statement a,” “In those days there was not king in Israel,” to introduce stories that served to demonstrate “statement b” “every man did what was right in his own eyes.”(Note in Judges 18:1 and 19:1 “statement b” does not appear in the verses, rather it is demonstrated in the stories.
3. The “no king” theme is introduced in the last segment of the Book of Judges as a segue into the books of Samuel (where the monarchy is adopted) and Kings (where the monarchy is shown to be an abject failure).
 - a. all 19 of Israel’s kings (Northern Kingdom) continue the sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat thus doing evil in the eyes of the Lord.
 - b. Only David and eight other kings of Judah did that which was right in the Lord’s eyes; all other kings of Judah were also evil.
4. The prophets (navi’ / nevi’ah) are conspicuously absent in Judges with only two exceptions:
 - a. Deborah is called a prophetess in Judges 4:4
 - b. God dispatched an anonymous prophet to remind the people the Midianite oppression they were experiencing was tied to their own disobedience to the Lord (Judges 6:8-10).
 - c. Compare this to the prominent roles of Samuel the prophet in 1 Samuel, to Nathan the prophet in 2 Samuel and to the approximately one dozen prophets who appear in the narrative at crucial junctures in 1 & 2 Kings, not least of whom are Elijah and Elisha.
 - d. Thus Judges identifies a need for a king, but the people erroneously think just getting a king will solve their problems. What happens when kings behave in a “covenant breaking” way?
 - e. The conspicuous absence of prophets in the Book of Judges is continued into the early part of 1 Samuel which has an inclusive statement reflecting the Period of the Judges: “And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.” (1Sam. 3:1)
5. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth*, described the prophets as “covenant enforcement mediators.” The role of the prophets is highlighted alongside the evaluation of the monarchy at selected points in the King’s material.