



## WHO WERE THE JUDGES OF ISRAEL?

Before Israel had a king, it had a series of tribal leaders called judges. God used these men and women to save the Israelites from their enemies and lead them back to him. The [Book of Judges](#) records this dark chapter in ancient Jewish history, noting each judge's deeds and the circumstances surrounding them.

After [Moses](#) led the Israelites out of Egypt, Joshua led them into the promised land. When Joshua and his generation died, so did the Israelites' knowledge of God ([Judges 2:10](#)). They began worshipping other gods. So the Lord handed them over to their enemies and used the surrounding nations to test them, seeing whether they would walk in his ways as their ancestors did ([Judges 2:22](#)).

That's when the judges came in:

"Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders." —[Judges 2:16](#)

But every time a judge died, Israel went astray again, returning to sinful practices and idolatry. It was a constant cycle of sin and deliverance. Israel rebels. God disciplines them. Israel repents. God delivers them.

## The cycle of rebellion



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So who were the judges?

The book of Judges lists twelve:

1. [Othniel](#)
2. [Ehud](#)
3. [Shamgar](#)
4. [Deborah](#)
5. [Gideon](#)
6. [Tola](#)
7. [Jair](#)
8. [Jephthah](#)
9. [Ibzan](#)
10. [Elon](#)
11. [Abdon](#)
12. [Samson](#)

**Bonus:** the book of 1 Samuel lists Eli the priest, Samuel the prophet, and Samuel's sons as leaders in this respect, too ([1 Samuel 4:18](#); [1 Samuel 7:15–8:3](#)). There are also a few other important leaders in Judges, like Barak. However, they're not usually grouped with the twelve featured in the book of Judges.

Some of the more well-known judges (like Gideon and Samson) get several chapters in the Book of Judges. Others only get a paragraph. Shamgar gets *a single verse*. In this guide, we'll look at each of the judges, exploring what the Bible says about them and the role they played in delivering Israel. But first, what does "judge" mean here?

## WHAT DOES “JUDGE” MEAN IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES?

The title “judge” makes us think of someone who determines guilt or innocence in a court case. But the Hebrew word here is *špṭ*, which has a much broader meaning. It also appears in [Psalm 2:10](#), [Psalm 148:11](#), and other passages where it refers to kings and means “rulers.”

To understand the full meaning of *špṭ*, scholars draw from related ancient languages which used the same root word:

“The Hebrew root of *špṭ* had a much wider meaning than the idea of simply “administering justice to,” or “to pass sentence,” “settle a case,” “do justice,” and “mete out justice.” Based on the usages of this same root in Ugaritic, Phoenician, and texts at Mari, the basic meaning could now successfully be established as meaning “to rule,” or “to command.” Especially significant was the Ugaritic cognate root *tpṭ*, with its meanings of “to do justice” and “to rule.”” —Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*

In the Book of Judges, the judges are *leaders*, chosen by God to deliver his people. Some Bible translations use the word “leader” instead in a few of these passages.

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