

JUDGES 2

THE TEST OF ISRAEL'S FAITH

The second chapter of Judges opens with the angel of the Lord delivering a message to the children of Israel at Gilgal, where the Israelites had previously crossed the Jordan River and encamped in the early stages of the conquest of Canaan.¹ The message contained both positive and negative pronouncements. On the one hand, the messenger assured the people that the Lord was still with Israel, but he also affirmed that the Canaanite threat had not yet passed (Judges 2:1–3). In response, the children of Israel wept (*bakhah*), hence the name given to the site where they received the message: Bochim (“weepers”).

The narrative progression of Judges is suddenly interrupted at verses 6–10 with a sort of flashback to Joshua’s death, narrated previously at Joshua 24:29–33. The disjunction here suggests that Judges 1:1–2:5 was a later insertion and that perhaps Judges 2:6 was meant to pick up where Joshua 24 ended. In any case, the recap serves to mark a temporal transition from Joshua’s generation to the new generation now in the land of Canaan (Judges 2:10). As the narrator depicts it, the situation went from bad to worse with almost immediate apostasy after Joshua’s death. Verses 11–23 of chapter 2 articulate the central formula of the test of Israel’s faith in the book of Judges that frames the book’s narrative cycle. The formula goes like this:

1. The children of Israel serve false gods and break their covenant with Jehovah (verses 11–13).
2. This provokes God’s anger, and God allows the Israelites to fall into captivity (verses 14–15).
3. Out of His abundant covenant love and mercy, God raises up judges (*shoftim*) who deliver Israel from its enemies (verse 16).

¹ Judges 2:1–5; compare Joshua 4:19–20; 5:10.

4. However, Israel relapses into sin and apostasy, thus perpetuating the cycle and necessitating the calling of a new judge (verses 17–21).

The purpose of this cycle was explicitly said to have been to test Israel’s faith: “That through them [the Canaanites] I may prove Israel, whether they will keep the way of the LORD to walk therein, as their fathers did keep it, or not” (verse 22). According to the compiler or author of Judges, it was also a way to explain the Israelites’ apparent failure to subdue the Canaanites (verse 23). The formula of the test of Israel’s faith in the book of Judges was not unlike the so-called pride cycle depicted in the Book of Mormon,² and it is indeed tempting to consider whether Nephite chroniclers consciously modeled their own cyclical history of apostasy and deliverance after that of their forebears.

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² For more on the pride cycle, see Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did the ‘Pride Cycle’ Destroy the Nephite Nation? (3 Nephi 6:10),” *KnoWhy* #195 (September 26, 2016), available online at <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-the-pride-cycle-destroy-the-nephite-nation>.