

The Book of Judges: A Spiritual History?

The paper addresses two fundamental questions raised by this remarkable and enigmatic text, a book which one commentator has recently described as “rough and raw and confronting.”¹ The first question is are we at risk of misunderstanding the work if we approach it principally as a “book of judges” and/or as a historical chronicle of the Settlement era; and second, the related question: what was the author’s purpose in writing it?

For a much fuller discussion, see: *Hollow Men, Strange Women: Riddles, Codes and Otherness in the Book of Judges* (BINS 143; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016).

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The book of Judges is best known for its profound and haunting character portrayals, which have proved a source of inspiration for countless artists, writers, and composers. More than the theology espoused in the book, or even its account of the period in the life of Israel between wilderness wandering and monarchy, it is the characters who stand out vividly from the text for the modern reader. This perception of the work seems to have existed also in the early Christian church. The only explicit reference to the contents of Judges in the New Testament is found in the letter to the Hebrews where the writer refers to some of the book’s heroic figures and their exploits: “How much further shall I go? Time does not permit me to cover Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, [...] who through faith ...” (11:32-33a).² The Acts 7 synopsis of Israel’s religious history from Abraham to Solomon passes over the Judges era entirely. Tantalizingly, then, the New Testament leaves us hanging regarding its exegesis of Judges, and the sparse commentary it does offer, evaluates (some of) the main characters only from the perspective of their faith.

The episodes recorded in Judges are not much rehearsed in the Old Testament either. Events and/or characters described in Judges are found in often similar, but

sometimes considerably different, forms in Joshua in its rendering of the Settlement story. There is an elusive list of judges in 1 Sam 12:11, which does not correlate closely, from a Judges point of view, with the adversaries given in vs. 9 of the same chapter. Apart from these, the references to episodes narrated in Judges are Hos 9:9 and 10:9 (the atrocity at Gibeah - Judg 19), 2 Sam 11:21 (Abimelech at Thebez - Judg 9:50-56), Ps 83:9-10 (the inflicted deaths of Sisera and Jabin - Judg 4 and 5),³ Ps 78:55-59, (ubiquitous idolatry and provocation), and, arguably, Isa 9:4 (the ending of Midianite oppression - Judg 8:28). In addition, Ps 106 (34-46), an exilic psalm, describes the pattern of egregious sin perpetrated by Israel in Canaan, the divine judgment that this behaviour provoked, repentance by the people in their affliction, and Yahweh's mercy towards them. What is striking about all these texts is that, in contrast to the New-Testament and modern appreciation of Judges, it is not the characters and feats of the heroic figures described in the book which are discussed. In fact, none of the judges is mentioned.

This realization prompts two questions. The first is are we in danger of misunderstanding the work if we think of it primarily as a "book of judges?" It is true that since its earliest recorded mention (by Philo), it has been known as "Judges,"⁴ but it is very unlikely that this was its original title. After all, it is only in the work's central section (3:7-16:31) that the judges are treated. Furthermore, in keeping with ancient literary practice derived from Mesopotamia, the composition, in all probability, would have originally been known by its opening words ("after the death of Joshua").⁵ The second question, which leads directly from the first, is what was the point of the book or, put more elegantly, what was the writer's purpose in composing it? I believe that the Judges-era episodes which are referred to in Hosea, Isaiah, 2 Samuel and Psalms 78 and 83, and the way they are discussed in these sources, help us find the answers. They are all concerned with divine judgment being visited upon those who defy Yahweh and his law. The most explicit statement of divine retribution found in Judges itself relates to the non-judge Abimelech and his erstwhile accomplices, the men of Shechem. They are cursed and God brings about their violent deaths (Judg 9:56-57). It is Abimelech's dishonourable demise that is the subject of Joab's words in 2 Sam 11:21. In Hos 9:9 and 10:9-10, the subject is judgment on Israel for sins perpetrated since, and like, those committed at Gibeah in Judges. Psalm 78, which provides a generalized portrayal of the Settlement period, tells of God's retributive abandonment of his people.⁶ In the passages in Isaiah and Psalm 83, the focus is on deliverance effected by

Yahweh as He executes judgment on the impious foreign overlords of Israel. In other words, what engaged Israelite prophets and writers about the Settlement era in the milieu in which Judges was composed was Yahweh's exercise of judgment against those who opposed him. These they identified as the people of Israel as a whole who provoked him with idolatry, specific subsets of them like the Benjamites of Gibeah, who violently transgressed His laws, and Abimelech, who, in addition, attempted to usurp His power,⁷ as well as alien oppressors such as the Midianites and Jabin and Sisera. Even Psalm 106, although produced considerably later than the other texts, presents the Judges period as an illustration of Yahweh's retribution (and mercy).

The reference to the environment in which Judges was written reminds us that it was not originally received as a work of historiography. It acquired the designation "history book" centuries after its composition. This is not altogether surprising: biblical Hebrew has no word for "history;" the closest term it offers for this concept is *tôlēdôt* "generations." Reading Judges, it quickly becomes evident that its treatment of the past does not conform to the post-Enlightenment notions of historiography which generations of commentators have sought to impose on it and assessed it against. The chronologies it supplies are "impossible;"⁸ the numbers it cites, whether they be year attributions or casualty figures, are for the most part determined by the symbolic value of the numbers rather than their literal meaning.⁹ It introduces characters whose improbable names suggest them to be figments and whose role is artful - for example, the first of Israel's foreign oppressors, Cushan-rishathaim ("Cushan the twice wicked") (Judg 3:8)¹⁰ - and it presents accounts of the same event which are, in certain respects, contradictory - the battle against Sisera (Judg 4 and 5). These are only some of the features of Judges which militate against defining the book as an objective chronicle of an epoch in Israel's national life. These characteristics, while limiting the value of Judges as a historical record of the Settlement, are entirely consistent with the approach to recording the past in the dominant literary tradition in Syro-Palestine at the time when the work was written, namely, the Mesopotamian tradition. For the Assyrians, as demonstrated in their royal inscriptions and epics, "letters to the god," and mythological explanatory works, it was not historical verisimilitude in the recording of data, but the theological message conveyed by, and sometimes concealed within, the narrative, which gave such works their purpose and value. I submit that Judges merits appraisal as an outstanding model of the ancient Near Eastern genre of theological commentary on the

past. My reading suggests that it is a carefully constructed composition of prophetic intent, layered with esoteric meanings for sacred purposes. This assessment gains support from the fact that, for all its earthy idiosyncrasy and a structure which, on superficial acquaintance, seems haphazard, not to mention its presentation of two of the most shocking episodes in the entire biblical corpus – the holocaust of Jephthah’s daughter and the gang-rape and dismemberment of the Levite’s concubine - the work was recognized by the Jewish divines who compiled the biblical canon as a venerable prophetic text.

Just as other Hebrew biblical writers seized on episodes from the Settlement era to illustrate their belief in the righteous judgment of God and His involvement in the affairs of His people, theodicy is a preoccupation of the Judges author also. He gives us just one datable reference, and it is pregnant for the book’s interpretation: “the day of the exiling of the land” (Judg 18:30, in literal translation), that is, the Assyrian deportation of the northern tribes which took place in two major waves, in 732 and 722 BC.¹¹ The Bible invariably interprets this event as Yahweh’s judgment on the northern kingdom for its idolatry and unremitting violation of both the divine covenant and law. In the ring structure that frames Judges, 18:30 corresponds with 2:1, the angelic proclamation at Bochim: “I caused you to go up from Egypt and I brought you into the land which I swore to your fathers ...”¹² These two verses encompass the complete history of the twelve tribes as a composite entity from their beginnings in the escape from Egypt and entry in Canaan (when Judges picks up the narrative) to their end, caused by the removal of the ten tribes from the land, and the scattering of these people to the farthest reaches of the Assyrian empire. The biblical record and historical evidence agree that the assimilation of the Israelite deportees to their conquerors was swift and thorough.¹³

By describing their spiritual deterioration after the death of Joshua and his contemporaries, the Judges author aims to illuminate the process by which “the sons of Israel” fell from the promise they showed in the initial phase of the Settlement to the catastrophe of 722 BC. What he provides, then, is not a chronicle, whose *raison d’être* is the provision of objective historical data, but a theological commentary that charts the relationship between Yahweh and his chosen people during the Settlement period. In this endeavour, his focus is not primarily on the judges, but on the tribes.¹⁴ If his book represents a form of historiography, it is as a *spiritual* history of the tribes of Israel during a defining epoch of their existence. But it is more. Embedded in its account is a prophetic

element that concerns the southern kingdom of Judah, which still endured, albeit as an Assyrian vassal state, when Judges was composed.¹⁵ Just as Ezekiel excoriated Judah for out-sinning Israel (Ezek 23:4-12), so Judges indicates that a similar punishment to the reckoning visited on Samaria awaited Jerusalem because it, too, rebelled against and was unfaithful to Yahweh.

Judges is remarkable in its literary virtuosity. It occupies a unique place in the Hebrew Bible for the diversity of literary devices it employs: song, riddle, parable, aphorism, even a password and a tongue-twister. The writer distorts the semantic boundaries of words, makes extensive use of layering, multi-perspectives and mirror-imaging, and introduces an array of other literary techniques to amplify his theological message. A notable case in point is his use of doublets. We have already come across an example in the Cushan-rishathaim segment (3:8-11). Not only does the phrase “Cushan the doubly wicked, king of Syria of the Double Rivers” emphasize doubling semantically, and morphologically, by its repeated application of the grammatical dual number, but the fact that, at a significant juncture of the book, this phrase occurs twice, as does the shorter variant “Cushan the doubly wicked,” draws attention to the theme of twoness. Not content with even this, the writer mentions Cushan precisely twice as many times as Othniel, the segment’s “hero.”

Several commentators have remarked on the book’s predilection for pairs, pointing to the Gideon series (Judg 6-8) in which paired entities are especially abundant. This trait is found throughout the composition, however, as Cushan’s case illustrates. Indeed, the work begins with a report of the campaign of a pair of tribes, Judah and Simeon (not only Judah, as Yahweh had directed), against a pair of enemies, the Canaanites and Perizzites. The first detail supplied about the campaign deals with the paired items of thumbs and big toes, whose owners, Adoni-bezek and the kings whom he conquered, are themselves in a binary relationship (1:1-7). The book ends by repeating a phrase deployed once before, which also refers to paired body parts: “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (21:25; 17:6). Plainly, this is not due to happenstance; the writer is using the book’s structure, the development of its plot, the words and even the grammatical suffixes he selects, in order to highlight binary relationships. To merit this degree of emphasis, twoness has to be central to the meaning of the work. And so it is. This is a composition that, for all its brilliance in the portrayal of the heroic characters who give the book its modern title, takes as its essential

focus just two actors: Yahweh and “the sons of Israel.” It is the epic account of their relationship that forms the subject of the book; it is the progressive, inexorable breakdown in that relationship which it maps through its twenty-one chapters. The repercussions of the collision of Yahweh’s will with the contumacy of his people are graphically relayed in Judges. As Hosea declared, the same contumacy was seen in the behaviour of the northern kingdom, and led to its destruction and the removal of the people of Israel from their God-given land. This occurred conceivably in living memory of the Judges author, almost certainly within a few generations of him. For him, as for Isaiah, the Assyrians, in carrying out this deed, were merely the divinely appointed instruments of Yahweh’s judgment, no different in that regard from the “one woman” whom God used to cut short Abimelech’s life (Judg 9:53). Comparable contumacy characterized the southern kingdom when he wrote the book and, in his conception, the outcome could only be the same.

The Judges author, like the other Hebrew-biblical writers who drew on episodes in Israel’s Settlement story, perceived in it a lesson for his time. For him, it was a lesson of God’s omnipotence, the tragic disjunction of His commitment to His people and their rejection of Him, and His righteous judgment provoked by their rejection. Accordingly, embedded in his narration of those episodes, the writer prophesied the impending end of the six-hundred-year sojourn of “the sons of Israel” in the land promised to their fathers that began “after the death of Joshua,” and whose early stages his book explores.

¹ Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2012), xvii.

² The translation of Hebrew and Greek biblical texts is my own.

³ This text is approximately contemporary with the book of Judges (Baker 2016, 227-30).

⁴ Webb 2012, 4-8.

⁵ Frank M. Cross and D.N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 31; H.W.F. Saggs, *The Might that Was Assyria* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1984), 221.

⁶ The date of this psalm is controversial. William Schniedewind argues persuasively that it was composed at the end of the eighth century BC (*Society and the Promise to David: The Reception History of 2 Samuel 7:1-17* [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 66-69).

⁷ Robert G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 6A, Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1975), 185.

⁸ S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (8th edn [revised]; Edinburgh: Clark, 1909), 161.

⁹ Judges is rich in number symbolism. To give just three of many examples: seven named or designated kings are encountered in the book, plus seventy kings held in humiliating captivity “under [Adoni-bezek’s] table;” there are seven causes of Israel’s apostasy (listed at Judg 10:6, the literal centre of the book according to the Masoretic verse count); Abimelech’s name is cited forty times.

¹⁰ The artful role of Cushan in the narrative is also intimated by the fact that “Cushan-rishathaim, king of Aram-Naharaim” (“Syria of the Two/Double Rivers”) represents a rare instance of a rhyming couplet in Judges.

¹¹ Karen Radner, ‘Israel, the “House of Omri”’, *Assyrian empire builders*, University College London, 2012 [<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/sargon/essentials/countries/israel/> accessed 18 December 2015]; Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (2nd edn; London: SCM Press, 1960), 260–62.

¹² See Baker 2016, 121–56, for an analysis of the literary architecture of Judges.

¹³ Hos 8:8–9a; Isa 7:8a; Bustenay Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1979), 30–31, 85; Bob Becking, *The Fall of Samaria* (SHAN 2; Leiden: Brill, 1992), 93; Saggs 1984, 263–4.

¹⁴ Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *Die Bücher Josua, Richter, Ruth* (4th edn, ATD 9; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), 141.

¹⁵ Like Daniel Block (*The New American Commentary 6: Judges, Ruth* [Nashville TN: B&H, 1999], 66–67) and Alice Logan (“Rehabilitating Jephthah,” *JBL* 124 [2009]: 665–85 [668, 684–5]), I conclude that Judges was written during the reign of Manasseh, king of Judah (697–642 BC).