

The Book of Judges: Its Structure and Paradigmatic Figures

WAYNE S. NELSON

For the average reader of the Old Testament, the book of Judges is probably little more than an unhappy (and unedifying!) parenthesis between Israel's victorious conquest of the land of promise and the establishment of the monarchy. From the very first verses of the book, it is made clear that the exclusive possession of the land of Canaan by God's people was never realized. And as events unfold, the dramatic liberation of the various tribes from foreign oppression and domination through charismatic leaders invariably gives way to only greater confusion. Finally, the book concludes with Israel's involvement in idolatrous worship and inter-tribal warfare of unparalleled destructiveness.

In the midst of all these traumatic events it is possible to lose sight of, indeed never adequately comprehend at all, the structure of the book, or how certain key figures presented in it contribute to its essential and vital message. The purpose of this study is to consider these very issues, in order to arrive at an understanding of the book that allows its theological meaning to be clearly discerned. First, we will survey its structure.¹ Then we will examine how the author used the central figures in the narrative as vehicles for the communication and illustration of those themes and

¹We will consider Judges in its canonical form and not concern ourselves with any of the various theories regarding possible documentary sources or hypothetical redactions of the text prior to its inclusion in the Hebrew Bible.

emphases that he regarded as most significant. Finally, we will attempt to define more precisely what the author wished to communicate of lasting value through his account of this transitional phase of the nation's history.

I. STRUCTURE

Scholarly opinion is divided concerning the structure of Judges. Gooding² sees a carefully developed chiasmic pattern which finds its center in Gideon, while Radday states that "the very composite character of Judges precludes anything more than a rough chiasm."³ In our view, the book of Judges is carefully organized into five parts, each of which is positioned and elaborated so as to clearly reinforce its fundamental themes: The prologue; the first cycle of judges; the parenthesis of an experiment in monarchy; the second cycle of judges; and the epilogue. In what follows we offer a brief elucidation of this understanding of the book.

The prologue (1:1-3:6) begins with a rehearsal of Israel's continuing efforts to dispossess the various Canaanite peoples. It emphasizes the several collective and individual initiatives of the Israelite tribes to make good their claims on those regions that had earlier been apportioned to them.⁴ This account is in contrast to (but we do not believe it contradicts) the list of victories contained in the book of Joshua, as it documents the frustrated offensives of Israel. The divine perspective on these events emerges in chapter two, as the Angel of the Lord utters a strong reproof of the compromises made by the nation.⁵ The people's reaction of weeping (Hebrew: *bokim*) is not only immediate but also memorable as

²D.W. Gooding, "The Composition of the Book of Judges," *Eretz Israel* 16, Jerusalem, Israel Exploration Society, 1982, 70-79.

³Yehuda T. Radday, "Chiasm in Joshua, Judges, and Others," *Linguistica Biblica* 27/28, 1973, 13.

⁴See Joshua 13-21.

⁵Note the presence of the definite article. The Angel of the Lord, who appears for the first time in Genesis 16:7 (after Hagar has been forced to flee from Sarah), consistently acts in relation to, or for the benefit or protection of, Abraham's descendants. In Judges there are more references to him than in any other Old Testament book (followed by Zechariah), principally in connection with the call of Gideon and the announcement of Samson's birth. On the common evangelical identification of the Angel of the Lord with the pre-incarnate Christ, see the reservations expressed by W.G. Macdonald in "Christology and the 'Angel of the Lord,'" in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. G.F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975, 324, 35).

it is immortalized in the name of the place where the revelation occurred (2:2-5).

The rest of the prologue describes the spiritual spiral which characterized the nation's experience throughout the period: Apostasy; oppression; repentance (strangely minimized in the subsequent narrative); and eventual deliverance. Thus the prologue orients us to the basic direction charted by Israel: hardly a line arrow-straight toward the Kingdom of God but rather a vicious circle drawing God's people dangerously close to self-annihilation. Yet this initial forward look does not eclipse a significant, twice-mentioned past event—the death of Joshua (1:1; 2:6). Add to this reflection the emphasis on the faithfulness of the preceding generation (2:7, 22) and the law of God through Moses, and it becomes evident that the prologue is deeply rooted in and oriented around Israel's heritage—the past blessings and responsibilities it has inherited and against which its future conduct will be measured.⁶

The first judges' cycle (3:7-8:35) recounts the activities of Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, and Gideon. Two other individuals—though not judges per se—should be added to this list of saviors, Barak and Jael, due to their close association with Deborah that is emphasized in the text.⁷ Interestingly, this brings the number of this first group to seven, which corresponds to the number found in the second judges' cycle (10:1-16:31).⁸

Besides the number and identity of the judges, the result of their activity is consistently described by the term “rest” (3:11; 5:31, 8:28).⁹ Additionally, at least in the case of Ehud, Deborah, and Gideon, a

⁶This theological purpose of the prologue of Judges means that it cannot be accused of chronological confusion. Judges 2:6-10 does not mean that Joshua was present at the meeting convened by the angel (2:1), but introduces the second half of the prologue which contrasts Joshua's faithful generation with the successive, unfaithful ones. Note the following parallel structure evident in the prologue:

1:1 the death of Joshua

2:6-10 the death of Joshua

1:2-36 Israel's incomplete conquests

2:11-19 Israel's inconsistent conduct

2:1-5 the declaration of divine dissatisfaction and discipline

2:20-3:6 the declaration of divine dissatisfaction and discipline

⁷Barak: 4:6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14(2), 15, 16, 22; 5:1, 12, 15. Jael: 4:17, 18, 19, 21, 22; 5:6, 24.

⁸Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibsan, Elon, Abdon, Samson.

⁹An especially important term in the Old Testament, and the object of reflection by the author of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament.

definitive and lasting victory against foreign oppressors is affirmed.¹⁰ And in the midst of this first cycle, it is surely significant that we find a celebration of God's deliverance in song—the first one since the miraculous passage of the Red Sea centuries earlier (5:1-31; cf. Exodus 15:1-21 and note in both cases a victory over chariots).¹¹ More could be said regarding this first cycle, but we will reserve any further comments for our discussion of the second cycle and some of its paradigmatic individuals.

The central parenthesis, an experiment in monarchy (9:1-57), separates the two judges' cycles (as we have defined them) and directs our attention to Abimelech, the unscrupulous semi-legitimate (or semi-illegitimate) son of Gideon with political ambitions. This account of violence, confusion, and destructive judgment documents an early Israelite experiment in monarchical government, modeled on that of the surrounding Canaanite city-states. Beginning with an appeal to the self-interest of the inhabitants of Shechem which borders on selfishness, the reign of Abimelech ends in the slaughter of that town's citizenry, the destruction of the city itself and the virtual suicide of this self-styled “king.” Before the absence of the monarchy is ever noted as an apparently negative thing,¹² the brief (and geographically limited) rule of this self-serving politician is portrayed in a singularly unflattering light.

The second judges' cycle (10:1-16:31) begins immediately after the report of Abimelech's disastrous political experiment. The following contrasts between the first and second judges' cycles seem worthy of note: 1) Whereas in the earlier cycle the activities of several judges are considered in some detail, in this cycle only two receive close attention. 2) While in the first cycle “rest” was the result of the judges' ministry, in the second cycle this is never achieved. 3) In the first cycle Israel's conflict is almost exclusively with foreign enemies, but in the second her hand is turned increasingly against herself.¹³ 4) Only in the second cycle

¹⁰In the case of Deborah and Barak, note the victory over the “iron chariots” (4:3, 7, 12-16) which formerly had been such formidable adversaries (1:19). In the case of Ehud (3:21, 22), Deborah, Barak, and Jael (4:21, 24) and Gidon (8:21) the death of enemy leaders or kings is emphasized.

¹¹Between these two spontaneous expressions of praise for victory come, it must be added, the song of Moses regarding Israel's future unfaithfulness (Deut. 31:19).

¹²On the phrase “In those days there was no king in Israel, every man did that which was right in his own eyes,” see Wm. J. Dumbrell, “The Purpose of the Book of Judges Reconsidered,” *JSOT* 25 (February, 1983), 23-33.

¹³In the case of Gideon the cities of Succoth and Penuel refused to lend desperately needed aid to him and his followers and as a result became the objects of his vengeance (8:13-17).

do vows come to the fore in relation to the judges. 5) In the first cycle Israel dominates her enemies, at least eventually, but in the second the enemies clearly have the upper hand.

At the same time there are notable parallels between the first and second cycles: 1) At the end of both cycles there are references to idolatry (the idolatrous ephod of Gideon—8:27—and Micah’s graven image—17:3, 4), and also to the slaughter of numbers of people (the execution of Gideon’s sons by Abimelech—9:5—and Samson’s slaughter of the Philistines—16:28-30). 2) In both cycles Israel is clearly within God’s sovereign control, as He repeatedly “gives over” and even “sells” the nation into the power of her enemies.¹⁴ These contrasts and parallels indicate that a serious deterioration of Israel’s condition and situation occurred, and the book’s epilogue does little to mitigate this bleak perspective.

In contrast to the prologue’s emphasis on general characteristics as well as particular events, the epilogue (17:1-21:25), apart from the statement “In those days there was no king in Israel . . . “ found in full or partial form four times,¹⁵ is entirely dedicated to two series of events.¹⁶ In the first of these, one man’s theft issues ultimately in the idolatry of an entire tribe, while in the second, one woman’s flight and subsequent murder results in the near extermination of another tribe.

What are the distinctive emphases of these chapters? The following seem most important: 1) Whereas the prologue looked back to the past (evident in the references to Joshua’s death), the epilogue, with its several references to the institution of the monarchy, is clearly oriented to the future. 2) While the prologue summarized the external conflict of Israel (the tribes’ wars of conquest individually) and her internal conduct (obedience or lack of it to the provisions of the covenant), the epilogue concentrates entirely on internal conflicts¹⁷ and conduct (disobedience to the provisions of the covenant). In this respect it closely parallels the Abimelech pericope of chapter nine. 3) The prologue recounts God’s leading Israel (specifically Judah 1:1, 2) against the enemy, while the

¹⁴“Giver over”: 2:13; 6:1; 13:1. “Sell”: 2:14; 3:8; 4:2; 10:7.

¹⁵“In those days there was no king in Israel . . . “(17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

¹⁶On this section, see D.R. Davis, “Comic Literature—Tragic Theology: A Study of Judges 17-18,” *WTJ XLVI/1*, (Spring, 1984), 156-63.

¹⁷Though there is a reference to the Danite conquest of the town of Laish in 18:7-10 and 27-29, the dimensions of this exploit seem deprecated by the author of Judges himself (v. 7 and v. 28).

epilogue presents God’s leading Israel (again, specifically Judah 20:18) against herself (the tribe of Benjamin),¹⁸ with terrible consequences for the nation as a whole.

This brief review of the structure of Judges indicates the various directions in which the movement of the book flows: From past to future; from faithfulness to unfaithfulness; from incomplete conquest to inconsistent conduct to foreign oppression to individual and national suicide. The following interpretive outline represents our summary of the various parts of Judges:

The past PROLOGUE (1:1-3:6). The fading paradigm of the past: Israel leaves her first love.

The present (I) THE FIRST JUDGES’ CYCLE (3:7-8:35). Israel’s rebellion, ruin, repentance, restoration, and rest.

The present (II) ABIMELECH’S AMBITIONS AND ABOMINATIONS (9:1-57). The centrality of the covenantal curse in the life of the nation.

The present (III) THE SECOND JUDGES’ CYCLE (10:1-16:31). Israel’s suicidal sacrifices.

The future EPILOGUE (17:1-21:25). Future kingship’s midwives: Criminal confusion and civil conflict.¹⁹

Throughout the book certain spiritual principles receive special emphasis. Positively, Israel is strong only when she is separated from the surrounding Canaanites. This separation must be both religious and social (specifically, no syncretistic worship or mixed marriages). Negatively, Israel’s identification with the surrounding peoples leads inevitably to her being dominated by them, and that by the very will of God. Positively, the only sufficient guarantee of Israel’s wellbeing is her obedience to the covenant. In the case of disobedience, sincere repentance and a return to covenant faithfulness brings liberation externally and rest internally. Negatively, no mere political form is perfect, nor can any such form in and of itself guarantee the nation’s spiritual faithfulness

¹⁸The attack of Judah against Benjamin and the defeat of Judah represent among other things an ironic reversal of Genesis 44, where Judah had offered himself as a substitute for Benjamin to Joseph, so as not to cause Israel’s (Jacob’s) death through sorrow.

¹⁹The first judges’ cycle reaches its climax in the endeavors of Gideon, which illustrate the cyclical nature of Israel’s experience, while the second cycle of Judges reaches its climax in the exploits of Samson, which likewise picture this cyclical experience in the life of God’s people.

or material prosperity. All of the judges were at best only temporary deliverers of the people, and at worst those who led the tribes into new forms of unfaithfulness. Further, the prophetic glimpse of the monarchy furnished by the Abimelech episode indicates the possible (if not probable) negative consequences of this alternate form of government. Positively, Israel's God is able to save His people from their oppressors in any number of ways, and through any number or kind of persons. Divine power remains undiminished throughout this period, as evidenced by the implicit contrast between the exploit of Shamgar and those of Samson (3:31 and 15:15). Negatively, a small group of people or even a single individual can deflect many others or even the nation as a whole from the straight and narrow path that the Lord had clearly marked out for His own.

Having considered the structure of the book we now turn to the principle characters whose acts are the subject of its central narrative in order to better understand the unique contribution of each one to the message of the work as a whole.

II. THE PARADIGMATIC FIGURES OF JUDGES

EHUD: A "lefty" liberates by the sword of the Lord

The first judge of whom a detailed account is given is Ehud. As a result of its sinful conduct Israel found herself under the heel of an oppressive trio: Moab, Ammon, and Amalek. After eighteen years, the cry of Israel brought forth a divine response in an unlikely form: a left-handed Benjaminite who, it seems, was an enemy collaborator to boot. The text notes, however, that Ehud was clumsy neither in word nor deed. Carefully fashioning a double-edged sword, he hides it under his mantle and then gains access to Eglon, the Moabite king. After presenting the gift of tribute, he leaves the monarch's presence only to return shortly thereafter and requests a private audience with his foreign overlord. The promised divine word to which he makes reference, though, turns out in reality to be the sharp weapon concealed under his cloak. As Ehud approaches him, Eglon stands, only to find himself fatally pierced by a sword.²⁰ Ehud's dexterity by no means ends with the death of the pagan king, as he carefully disguises his tactical retreat so as not to arouse suspicion. Then, while Eglon's servants engage in an expectant but futile vigil outside their

²⁰Certainly the promise of Ehud of a divine word when he is ready to extract a double-edged sword gives "point" to a familiar biblical metaphor!

master's chamber, Ehud puts himself safely out of their range and then gathers a force with which he cuts off the enemy's withdrawal.²¹ Not only can Israel's God use a left-handed person to liberate, but through this one man can strike down the enemy king in his own royal residence!

The theme of the destruction of a pagan king, prominent in the book of Joshua (8:29; 10:22-27; 28-40; 11:10-12; 12:1-24) is thus introduced in Judges and continues through what we have called the first judges' cycle (4:21-24; 7:25; 8:21). The destruction of the king, of course, is more than simply the death of an individual, since it represents as well the eclipse of his kingdom and the ascendancy of Israel. Thus, after the death of Eglon, Moab never returns to dominate the people of God. Moreover, this recurring motif of the destruction of foreign kings which we find in both Joshua and Judges should have alerted Israel to the fact that her own security and survival could hardly be guaranteed by a monarchical form of government. In fact, as the books of Kings make only too painfully apparent, the monarchy played no small role in the ultimate subversion of Israel as an independent political entity.

Deborah, Barak, and Jael: ". . . out of weakness, strength"

The narrative dedicated to Deborah commences with a mention of Israel's renewed sin and subsequent domination by Jabin of Hazon. In stark contrast to the army of the Canaanite king led by Sisera with his 900 chariots, the hosts of Israel have a woman at their head, whose sole weapon is the word of God. Deborah, speaking in the name of the Hebrews' divine King, issues a summons to Barak to take to the field against the enemy. God Himself has promised deliverance! Yet the designated leader hesitates and makes his compliance conditional upon Deborah's presence. She consents, but informs Barak that though the victory is secure, its glory will elude him. So, in the description of the ensuing battle, while the Canaanite army and the previously invincible chariots of iron (1:19) are routed by God before the advancing Israelites, it is the wife of a nomadic herdsman who quite literally nails the foreign commander to the ground. Sisera slipped through Barak's fingers only to fall at the hand of an unarmed woman. The deliverance prophesied by Deborah was thus completed by Jael—surely a powerful testimony to the sufficiency of Israel's God and to His sovereign choice of the most varied

²¹Just as the sword could not be extracted from Eglon's body, so the Moabites could not extricate themselves from Canaan (3:26-29).

human instruments through which to judge and liberate His people.

Unique to this narrative in the book of Judges is the poetic celebration in chapter five of the events recorded in chapter four. Regarding this passage, two general comments are in order. First, it should not be expected that from it one could reconstruct an additional (or alternate!) description of the conflict, any more than one could use the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” for a critical study of the campaigns of the American Civil War. Second, we should expect to find an emphasis on the crucial theological motifs that Judges was written to communicate. In our understanding of the song, it exhibits a sevenfold structure which is roughly symmetrical in its proportions. Three major sections (vv. 2-9, 12-18 and 23-30) develop the major themes while two intermediate sections (vv. 10, 11 and 19-22) contain subordinate ones. Finally, the opening and closing verses identify the singers and present the concluding supplication/affirmation:

Superscription (v. 1)

Israel’s divine Lord blessed for the willing among His people (vv. 2-9)

The exhortation to testify of Yahweh’s triumphs (vv. 10, 11)

The tribes of Israel: The obedient, the undecided, and the indifferent (vv. 12-18)

The conflict: Kings against the cosmos (vv. 19-22)

The cursed, the blessed, and the deluded (vv. 23-30)

Concluding supplication: The desire for God’s vindication in history (v. 31)

In the first major section, God is praised for Israel’s volunteers, an almost identical refrain indicating the boundaries of this portion of the poem (vv. 2b, 9b). These verses focus on the Lord, to whom the poem is addressed (v. 3), and whose going forth convulses creation (vv. 4, 5). Especially the mention of Sinai relates this song to Israel’s past and the awesome and gracious revelation it was her privilege to receive.²² The thought then turns to more recent experiences in the nation’s history. No matter how glorious her God, her daily life in this period had proved unbearable. In fact, the dangers to which her social intercourse and free communication were subject (vv. 6, 7a) threatened her very existence.

²²Is it possible that the references to torrential rains (v. 4) indicates one of the factors involved in Sisera’s defeat, and explains why he abandoned his chariot and fled on foot (4:15)—because the battle plan had been turned into a muddy field by a sudden downpour?

These verses document just how low God’s people could fall when they did not cling fast to their divine King.²³ Next, the importance of God’s chosen instruments is underscored; the divine answer to Israel’s plight is not an angelic host, but a human being, even a woman! And against an aggressive enemy the only effective weapons at the nation’s disposal are those of its people who willingly respond to His call through her. By means of such as these God will grant a glorious liberation. These emphases on the Lord’s sovereign choice of the most unlikely individuals—whether a left-handed Ehud, a woman, an insignificant Gideon, or an illegitimate Jephthah, and the faithful minority who freely follow Deborah and these others—constitute one of the fundamental dimensions of the message of this book.

In the second major section (vv. 12-18), which might be regarded as the central portion of the poem, the opening and closing verses (vv. 15, 18) enumerate and celebrate those willing ones at whom the earlier verses had hinted. The courage of Ephraim, Benjamin, part of Manasseh, Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali is highlighted not simply by their ready response to Deborah’s and Barak’s summons, but even more by the absence of other tribes through indecisiveness (Reuben) or plain-out indifference (Gilead, Dan, and Asher). In the face of a pressing need, barely half of the nation answered the call. Once again is underlined the fact that, as in so many other periods of Israel’s history, during this time of the judges “never was so much owed by so many to so few.”

The last major section of this poem (vv. 23-30) tells the tale of one city and two women. These three could be labeled respectively as the cursed, the blessed, and the deluded. Against at least one town, whose citizens were conspicuous by their absence in the struggle with Sisera, a curse is uttered in the name of the Lord. While it may be true that history often repeats itself, it is equally true that to no one who misses an opportunity to obey, to serve, is vouchsafed a second chance. The inhabitants of Meroz had missed their only opportunity to be “co-workers with God” in the realization of His kingdom during that generation.²⁴

In contrast to them, on Jael, who was at best a cousin of the people of Israel, is invoked the highest blessing. For her courageous action against the enemy captain her praise is higher than that accorded to Barak or even, it seems, to Deborah herself. Her reception, deception, and destruction of

²³See also 3:8, 14; 6:1-6; 9:1ff.; 10:7, 8.

²⁴Their failure adumbrates the later refusal of Succoth and Penuel to assist Gideon (8:4-9).

Sisera²⁵ reinforces another of the fundamental themes of Judges—Israel could pitch her tent securely in the land of promise only by utterly destroying Canaan’s original wicked inhabitants. To fail to do this would only insure her own demise.

Finally, the poet pauses to consider another woman—not Israel’s “mother,” but Sisera’s. The unexpected delay in her son’s return gives rise to disquieting thoughts. She is the personification of that corrupt, materialistic, and idolatrous culture that God’s people were called to root out of the land. Thus this poem concludes with the hope that evil and its proponents will be cut off, that God and His people may be glorified.

GIDEON: From the destruction of idolatry to the institution of “harlotry”

The three chapters dedicated to Gideon which stand at the end of what we have called the first judges’ cycle (from Othniel to Gideon) are surely an indication of his importance for the message of the book.²⁶ Chapter six opens with an account of the nation’s renewed apostasy and its subsequent reduction to an animal-like subsistence,²⁷ as Midianite and Amalekite invaders strip the land bare. Israel’s appeal to God brings initially only a prophetic rebuke, but then an angel appears to Gideon and reveals to him that he is to be the divine instrument of liberation. After his incredulity is overcome and his fear calmed, he constructs an altar and names it for the divine promise of peace that was communicated to him by the angel.

This initial act of worship in response to the revelation he had received is followed by his destruction of his father’s Baal shrine. Between Yahweh and the gods of Canaan peaceful coexistence is impossible. But for this act he finds himself threatened with death, evidently by his fellow-Israelites.²⁸ Nothing could more forcefully depict the “low” (6:6) condition of the nation spiritually than this attempt to inflict the punishment

²⁵Note the reference to the hammer and “tent peg” as the instruments that Jael used.

²⁶A. Cundall, *Judges* (Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 1968, 107), notes that more verses are devoted, respectively, to Gideon (100) and to Samson (96) than to any of the other protagonists in the book.

²⁷Israel’s existence in the caves is one of several indications of affinity to the patriarchal period that these times exhibit (cf. the experience of Lot—Genesis 19:30ff.). Another seeming allusion to patriarchal conditions is the construction and naming of an altar (Judg. 6:24), which recalls the practice of Abraham at crucial points in his life (Gen. 12:7; 13:14, 18; 22:9-14). Third, Gideon’s force of 300 reminds one of Abraham’s group of 318 with which he rescued his nephew (Gen. 14:14).

²⁸Note the contrast between the Lord’s reassurance to Gideon (“Peace be to you, do not fear, you shall not die”) and the threat of his fellow citizens (“Bring out your son, that he may die . . . !”).

for idolatry prescribed by Deuteronomy (13:1-18) upon one “guilty” only of covenant faithfulness. Saved by his father’s bold challenge to his accusers, Gideon is then invested by the Spirit when the foreign invaders return to ravage the land.

But after Gideon gathers Israel he finds that he must yet lay to rest his remaining doubts. So twice God confirms His promise to him, and then proceeds twice to reduce the number of his troops. In effect this eliminates Gideon’s army, for how could such a term be applied to a band of 300 men? Then, immediately prior to the decisive encounter, God once more encourages Gideon, this time by means of his eavesdropping on the enemy. Finally, after an act of worship and with final preparations in order, Gideon commands the torches to be lit and the trumpets sounded. Stricken with terror, the enemy flees and Gideon rallies the tribes to pursue the invaders. Later, when he is rebuked by the Ephraimites for not having summoned them earlier (8:1-3), he diplomatically redimensions his own exploits in comparison to theirs. However, when he is refused assistance by two Israelite towns during his pursuit of the enemy, he exacts a harsh revenge once his primary mission is accomplished (8:13-18).

But the author of Judges is by no means satisfied to leave the matter once the battles have been won. Gideon rejects a dynastic monarchy for himself or his family and reminds those who offered it to him that, as he is no king, they can be no king-makers: “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you” (8:23). In the very next breath, though, he makes an apparently innocent and reasonable request, but one that will ultimately undermine all that his victories realized for the nation. As if unconsciously imitating Aaron, he asks a percentage of the spoil taken by his men and with it fashions an ephod.²⁹ The consequences? “And all Israel played the harlot after it . . . , and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family” (8:27). Thus the downward spiral once more sucks Israel into its vortex. The irony this time, though, is that the very person who had earlier struck out against idolatry now unwittingly leads the nation into spiritual prostitution.

Thus concludes the first judges’ cycle, with Gideon himself closing the circle.³⁰ Yet there is one element that is unprecedented in these events: In

²⁹“Gideon the reforming son of Joash (proprietor of Baal’s cult place) turned at last to the supervision of his own oracular facility, where, it was later claimed, Israel again prostituted itself.” R.G. Boling, *Judges*, (New York, Doubleday, 1975), 164.

³⁰Boling notes that of all the judges only Gideon and Samson are said to have been buried in the tombs of their fathers.

punishing Succoth and Penuel for their refusal to help, Gideon has for the first time turned the hand of Israel against herself. It remains for the rest of the book to relate how many others will follow his example, and at what cost to the nation.

ABIMELECH: A house built on quicksand, divided against itself

In our opinion the Abimelech episode is central in the book of Judges in at least two ways. First, it is central in its position in the narrative of the book; second, it is central in that it concerns one of the most important themes of Judges—that of the monarchy in Israel.³¹

Abimelech, of course, was not a judge. Rather, he was the antithesis of all that a judge should be or do. On the other hand, neither can he be considered any sort of secondary figure (as is the case with the so-called minor judges), since a rather lengthy chapter which describes a complex series of events is devoted to him.³² Thus his prominence and his antithetical character combine to attract our attention.

How does Abimelech reinforce the message of the book of Judges, or some of its principal themes? That the downward spiral in Israel's experience involved the political dimension is much in evidence. Abimelech's usurpation of some sort of royal authority began with the slaughter of 70 of his half-brothers, continued in the destruction of two cities and over 1,000 people, and terminated in his own violent death and the collapse of his rule. Of course, that things were to proceed in this fashion was all too clear from the prophetic fable pronounced by the only survivor of the inaugural bloodbath, Jotham. This treacherous act of Shechem toward the house of Gideon seems paradigmatic of the perfidy of the whole house of Israel toward her God, whose people responded with infidelity to both their human and divine saviors.

The essentially pagan categories of the political proposal advanced by Abimelech are evident from the opening verses of chapter nine. 1) The offer to rule appealed to self-interest rather than the provisions of Israel's divine constitution; 2) the political "campaign" was funded with money

³¹Note the trilogy of individuals who are explicitly associated with some sort of royal office in this central part of the narrative: Gideon (who vehemently refuses it); Abimelech (who assiduously seeks it by political means); and Jephthah (who makes it the necessary condition of his military service on behalf of the tribes).

³²Chapter nine, with its fifty-seven verses, is the longest single chapter in the book. Boling (184) also sees this chapter as the center of the book.

from an idolatrous fertility cult; 3) all potential political adversaries were ruthlessly eliminated.³³ For all of this, the imaginative denunciation uttered by Jotham against Abimelech, his associates and their abominations is essentially a prophetic proclamation of divine judgment against those who have violated not only the canons of the divine covenant but even those of normal human behavior.

After three years, the prophesied falling-out occurs.³⁴ Robbery (9:22-25) gives way to rebellion (9:26-41), which in turn leads to a horrible reaction on the part of Abimelech (9:42-46). Shechem is razed and sown with salt, and her inhabitants, who had sought refuge in a tower, are burned to a crisp. Upon those who had failed to put into effect the provisions of the divine covenant against the pagans fell the curse of that same covenant, and an Israelite city experiences the fate that should have been reserved for the Canaanite centers.³⁵ But the pretender's triumph is short lived, as his skull is cracked by a millstone thrown down upon him by a woman.³⁶ Thus the self-serving son of Gideon is brought to his end by a daughter of Jael,³⁷ according to the word and will of God (9:23, 56, 57).

This story of Abimelech, then, serves to anticipate the theme of the monarchy to which the final chapters of the book repeatedly refer. It qualifies the impression that the absence of a king was an unmitigated evil for Israel, since the mini-monarchy of Abimelech was a disaster for all those who had anything to do with it from beginning to end. Moreover, the death of Israelites at the hands of their fellows reinforces a theme already present in the narrative dedicated to Gideon (8:13-18) and sets the tone for the second judges' cycle and as well for the epilogue. With Abimelech there occurred a confirmation of the process of personal and national suicide which led Israel dangerously close to the very brink of self-annihilation.

³³On top of all this, the text notes Abimelech's at best semi-legitimate birth (8:3).

³⁴The remarks of Jotham seem to presage those of Samuel concerning the possible or probable future consequences of the monarchy, and particularly the final warning of the latter: "But if you do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king" (1 Sam. 12:25).

³⁵Just as Gideon was threatened with a punishment intended to apply to the pagan Canaanites (6:30).

³⁶A subtle reminder of the divinely appointed hailstones that destroyed the Canaanites (6:30)?

³⁷Gooding notes the parallel between the death of Sisera and that of Abimelech.

III. ABIMELECH AND HIS ALLIES: CANAANITES OR ISRAELITES?

It is sometimes thought that Judges nine deals with a Canaanite city whose population survived the Israelite invasion under Joshua. Cundall affirms:

The fact that the Shechemites were still described as “men of Hamor” (9:28), together with their allegiance to the Canaanite deity Baal-Berith, and the obvious point of the appeal made by Abimelech at the end of verse 2, makes it clear that the population of Shechem was dominantly Canaanite.³⁸

On the other hand Keil states categorically:

The possessors or citizens of Shechem . . . are not merely Canaanitish citizens, of whom there were some still living in Shechem according to verse 28, but all the citizens of the town, therefore chiefly Israelites.³⁹

For the following reasons, Keil’s judgment seems to us correct: 1) Abimelech could scarcely derive any political advantage from his relation to Gideon (clearly an Israelite) if he was appealing to a predominantly Canaanite majority; 2) Jotham’s prophetic fable identifies Shechem as the beneficiary of Gideon’s military intervention, while the preceding chapters identify Israel as the object of Gideon’s concern; 3) Judges 9:22 states that Abimelech ruled for three years “over Israel” which would be incomprehensible had Shechem been populated primarily by non-Israelites; 4) Abimelech’s troops are explicitly termed Israelites (9:55); 5) the fact that chapter nine makes repeated reference to one or more pagan (or syncretistic?) cults can be easily harmonized with a predominantly Israelite population at Shechem, since one of the key themes of the book of Judges is Israel’s recurrent religious apostasy (1:22, 19; 3:6, 7; 6:10, 25); 6) the closing verses of the book of Joshua note that the bones of Joseph, which had been brought up from Egypt, were interred at or near Shechem, and this territory became the inheritance of his descendants (Josh. 24:32, 33).

The events narrated in chapter nine, then, essentially involve an Israelite population, but one that included Canaanite elements and was greatly influenced by Canaanite religious and political traditions. This view accords well with the implicit and explicit polemic of the book

against the social and spiritual intercourse of Israel with the Canaanites. Thus the reign of Abimelech was destined to fail miserably because, having embraced both Israelites and Canaanites, it was a house divided against itself, built not on the solid foundation of God’s law but rather on the shifting, treacherous sands of human self-interest and expediency.

IV. ADDITIONAL NOTE ON ABIMELECH

“And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head, and crushed his skull” (9:57).

The conclusion of that portion of the narrative of Judges dedicated to Abimelech documents how the “kingdom” collapsed when the head of its head was crushed. Reflection on this event brings to mind a classic biblical text—Genesis 3:15. Could it be that the author of Judges meant us to make a connection between Abimelech’s demise and that significant and enigmatic verse in the first book of Scripture? The following pieces of information certainly seem to point in that direction.

1) Genesis 3 and 4 are a unity, and it is obvious that the author of Genesis meant to portray the murder of Abel by his own brother as a consequence of the primal human disobedience.

2) Abimelech slew his brothers, just as did Cain. John in his first epistle tells us that Cain was of the Evil One in that he slew his brother (3:12). (Note that the “seed” of the serpent was born of woman also.)

3) Abimelech was the head of an organized community, while Cain was the founder of the first city in human history.

4) Abimelech sowed the soil of Shechem with salt, thereby rendering it sterile; for the murder of his brother God rendered the soil sterile to Cain.

What is the sense of this? We would suggest that the author of Judges implicitly identifies Abimelech as morally and spiritually a descendant of Cain and therefore of the seed of the serpent.

To be continued

³⁸Cundall, *Judges*, 126.

³⁹C.F. Keil, *Judges*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, n.d., 361.