

The Book of Judges: Its Structure and Paradigmatic Figures

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I. JEPHTHAH

The material dedicated to Jephthah comprises nearly three entire chapters (10-12), and even those verses summarizing the activities of the five minor judges have important links to him and to certain aspects of the Gideon-Abimelech narrative. The structure of these chapters can be set out as follows:

- Israel's deliverance—two judges
- Israel's apostasy, repentance and defense
- Israel's deliverance—Jephthah
 - conflict with his brethren (rejection, recall, recognition)
 - conflict with the enemy (diplomacy, vow and victory, tragedy)
 - conflict with his people (Ephraim's complaint and threat, Jephthah's justification, Ephraim's disastrous defeat)
- Israel's deliverance—three judges

"Inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my brethren . . ."

After a summary description of the two judges following the Abimelech episode the narrative proceeds to relate another instance of Israel's unfaithfulness and the consequent judgment through foreign oppression (10:6-9). This and the description of Israel's repentance due to the heavy hand of her oppressors (10:10-16) closely parallel the state of affairs just before Gideon's call (6:1-6, 7-10). This similarity is underlined by the fact

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that in both cases the plea of the people is answered by a divine rebuke (6:8-10; 10:11-14). But in the face of foreign pressure Israel is forced to respond, and after the nation is mustered the search begins for a suitable leader. Abruptly the focus shifts to Jephthah, the one who will eventually be chosen, and the text notes his character as well as the unfortunate circumstances of his birth including his subsequent rejection by his closest relatives (11:1-3). Now, in a critical moment of need, Jephthah finds himself hastily recalled. He questions the inconsistency of the Gileadites in their actions toward him and then makes clear the condition on which he will lead them in battle: That they submit to his authority once the hostilities have been brought to a successful conclusion (11:4-9). The elders consent, and the agreement is solemnized in a religious ceremony (11:10, 11).

What is the point of such a lengthy introduction? The lesson can be grasped once the parallel between Israel's treatment of Jephthah and its treatment of Jehovah is discerned. Just as Israel had turned its back on the Lord until the Ammonites forced the people to their knees politically and drove them back to Him spiritually, so the Gileadites had cruelly driven away one of their own until the circumstances forced them to humbly acknowledge their need of him as a military commander. It seems, then, that Gilead's rehabilitation of Jephthah was a sort of humbling which God required of them before He would intervene on their behalf.

" . . . having a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge."

The second part of the narrative dedicated to Jephthah opens with an account of his diplomatic activity which aimed at the cessation of Ammonite attacks against Israel (11:12-28). When the enemy turns a deaf ear, Jephthah is invested by the Spirit and leads his men against Ammon. Recognizing that the battle is the Lord's, he vows to sacrifice whatever (or whoever?) first greets him upon his return from the campaign.¹ It is, of course, this vow which transforms his military triumph into a personal tragedy, for it is none other than his only daughter who comes forth first

¹Judges 11:30; cf. 11:9. Whether or not Jephthah had a human being in mind has been the subject of perennial debate among the scholars, but archeological research seems to indicate that typical construction of homes in ancient Israel featured a central gate that served both for members of the family and domesticated animals. See R. G. Boling, *Judges*, (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 208 and illustrations 8a and 8c. Thus it seems reasonable to suppose that Jephthah did not expect to be greeted by a human member of his household.

of all to welcome him home. Though overwhelmed by grief, Jephthah maintains his pledge and sacrifices her.² Gideon had raised his hand against two Israelite towns and Abimelech had murdered his seventy half-brothers, but Jephthah kills his one and only child. By this act he effectively destroys the future of his own family since he is doomed to die without an heir. Yet this is only the penultimate tragedy in the book.

“From whence come wars and fightings among you?”

In the third portion of the narrative the circle closes once again as Jephthah’s fellow Israelites (specifically the Ephraimites) accuse him of bad faith and initiate hostilities against him (12:1). But they do not reckon with the fact that one capable of offering his own daughter in sacrifice is not to be meddled with. Jephthah answers their challenge and 42,000 Ephraimites fall at the fords of the Jordan (12:2-6). Again, the message is not difficult to discern: The land of promise remains locked to all those who sow strife among God’s people. When these descendants of Joshua reach the river, they find it not the gateway to a land flowing with milk and honey, as it was for their illustrious ancestor, but rather to *Sheol* itself.

After the death of Jephthah is duly noted, the final verses of chapter 12 briefly catalogue three other judges (12:8-15). What is said about two of them (Ibsan, v. 9, and Abdon, v. 14) calls to mind what was said of Jair earlier (10:4). All of these men were characterized by numerous offspring. Thus the author of Judges would have us know that in spite of the death of Gideon’s sons and Jephthah’s daughter (which leaves both of these men without a posterity), God has not withheld from His people some measure of fruitful growth.³

II. SAMSON: FROM PROMISED CHILD TO PRODIGAL SON

The story of Samson could seem too familiar to require any detailed rehearsal, but as in the case of other important figures of the Old Testament, the significance of his acts and experiences in relation to the

²Thus while Deborah led Israel in a celebration of Barak’s and Jael’s victory in the first judges cycle, Jephthah’s daughter leads her companions in an extended period of mourning in the second.

³Note the structure of these chapters:

The numerous progeny of Gideon	The single descendant of Jephthah
The death of all but one	Her death as the result of a vow
The numerous progeny of Jair	The numerous progeny of Ibsan and Abdon

message of the book of Judges is perhaps not so evident at first glance. Because of the length of the narrative dedicated to him, and especially to its familiar character, we present the following outline which summarizes it:

- 13:1-24 The circumstances of Samson’s conception and birth
- 13:25 His first (unrecorded) exploits
- 14:1-20 Samson and the Philistines (I)
- 15:1-20 Samson and the Philistines (II)
- 16:1-3 His last (recorded) exploit
- 16:4-31 The circumstances of his capture and death

In the figure of Samson, it might be said that the book of Judges, or at least its second judges cycle, reaches a paradoxical climax of paradigmatic significance for the experience of Israel. Of him alone, among all the judges mentioned, are the circumstances of his birth recounted in detail. And those circumstances are classic in the sense that, prior to his conception, an angel tells a barren woman she will give birth to a son who will be an instrument of the Lord against the enemies of His people.⁴ The appearance of the angel is reminiscent of the experience of Gideon (6:11ff.), while the prominence of Samson’s mother in the narrative recalls the emphasis on Deborah (4:4ff.). What is stressed in the angel’s revelation is that code of conduct which is to control the promised child’s existence and be observed as well by his mother in anticipation of his birth. Though the term is not used, Samson is placed even before he is born⁵ under a vow meant to safeguard his life and guarantee his power. The passage concludes by noting the fulfillment of the divine promise in the birth of Samson. Thus he is illustrative of Israel in that he is miraculously brought into being, his existence is to involve consecration to his Creator, and he is to be an instrument against the Philistines. All this reminds us of the grace of God reflected in the call of Abraham and the birth of Isaac, the revelation of the law at Sinai and the role of Israel in Canaan.

The narrative next briefly notes the activity of the Spirit in Samson, though in ways not specified. As the proposed outline above suggests, this verse (13:25) and 16:1-3 are essentially transitional in function.

⁴Thus this passage harks back to certain patriarchal narratives (Sarah, Gen. 17:15-18; Rebekah, Gen. 25:21) and as well looks forward to the experience of Hannah (1 Sam. 1, 2).

⁵The repetition of the instructions concerning the vow underscores its importance.

Chapters 14 and 15 contain an explanation of a series of events in which Samson acts in the power of the Spirit in such a way that the Philistines begin to feel the heavy hand of the God of Israel against them. It is in these two chapters that three of the four references to the Spirit of God are found in connection with him.⁶ Chapter 14 seems to exhibit the following structure:

- Samson's request for a Philistine bride
- His parents' objection
- Samson's insistence—at the instigation of the Lord.
- Samson destroys an attacking lion
- The carcass of the lion becomes a home for honeybees
- Samson's marriage feast and riddle bet
- The ignorant Philistines threaten his wife to learn his secret
- Samson's insistent wife extracts from him the secret of his riddle
- The informed Philistines present the solution
- Samson's reaction—another riddle . . . and revenge.

In this passage we find a familiar motif which is rooted in the patriarchal narratives: The problem of intermarriage between Israel and noncovenant peoples.⁷ Yet, ironically, Samson's insistent request for a pagan bride is motivated by God Himself. If Israel insists on mixed marriages, then God will work through them (while at the same time effectively frustrating their consummation—14:20 - 15:2) for the destruction of Israel's enemies. The narrative then proceeds to relate the first example of Samson's awesome power. When attacked by a lion, through the Spirit's empowerment he tears the beast to pieces with his bare hands. This episode is important for at least two reasons. First, it sets the tone for the rest of Samson's acts, which will all be destructive in nature. Second, it defends the character of Samson against the charge of being a bully, since the text indicates that the attack was initiated by the lion. Thus we are prepared by this first example of Samson's prowess to expect that he will be attacked or at least in some way provoked by others and that, when this happens, he will respond with terrible destructive violence against his enemies.

Later, passing by the rotting carcass of the lion, he finds that it has

⁶Judges 14:6, 19; 15:14. The only exception is 13:35.

⁷See Genesis 24:3, 4 and 26:34, 35.

become the home of honeybees and this furnishes him with both a sweet snack and, during his wedding feast, a formidable riddle. When he propounds it to his Philistine guests and sets the stakes high, they⁸ are unable to solve it for three days. Sensing the pressure of time running out, they threaten aggressive action against his wife, whom they accuse of setting them up, if she does not extract the answer from him. The threat works and superman Samson proves no match for the "weaker sex."⁹ When, however, they confidently reveal the solution of the riddle to him, it becomes clear that Samson is either quick-witted, or a capable and far-sighted strategist, or both. He responds with another riddle in which he contests the foul play of his opponents and then proceeds to maintain his part of the bargain at the expense of the Philistines themselves. The chapter concludes by noting that his wife, though pledged to him, was given to another and this sets the stage for the next episode.

In chapter 15 there are three main events. When Samson returns to visit his wife, he finds out that she is no longer accessible to him. Refusing the girl's father's offer of her younger sister, he destroys Philistine crops. Thus the one who had fed the Philistines at his wedding feast some time earlier (14:10) now takes food from their mouths by burning their fields. They respond by avenging themselves against their own as they destroy Samson's wife and her family. Once again, the enemies of Israel are unwittingly caught in the tragic consequences of their own actions. Reacting to this provocation, Samson kills an unspecified number of them and then seeks refuge in a cave.

The second half of the chapter could be said to begin with verse 9, since the action now takes place in Judah rather than in Philistia. The members of this tribe, who had formerly been the first to expunge the Canaanites, now reveal themselves as the real descendants of those Israelites who had desired to return to Egyptian servitude,¹⁰ as they tell Samson to leave them undisturbed in their subjection to the Philistines. He surrenders to them on the sole condition that they not kill him¹¹ and they turn him over to their foreign masters. Once again, and for the last time, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him and this time the slaughter is of superhuman propor-

⁸This is an indication of another recurring motif—Samson alone against many.

⁹Here another theme of great importance is introduced: Power is no match for persistence.

¹⁰Exodus 14:12; Numbers 14:4.

¹¹This recalls the threats of the Israelites against Gideon (6:30).

tions—a literal fulfillment of the covenant promise.¹² With a “weapon” much less lethal than that wielded by Shamgar, Samson realizes an even greater victory.

Chapter 15 concludes with the first recorded prayer of Samson—a prayer for the water of life which God immediately grants to His “servant”¹³—and with a reference to the temporal duration of his judgeship. As we have already indicated, the opening verses of chapter 16 furnish a bridge which connects (rather loosely) the account of his capture and death with the foregoing material. A casual and unexpectedly brief rendezvous with a Philistine harlot is capped by the rip-off of the gates of the city itself in the middle of the night. Thus Samson the burglar demonstrates tactical ability as he extricates himself from a potentially fatal situation (16:2) in anticipation of an enemy maneuver and so catches the Philistines by surprise.

But it is in the account of Samson’s betrayal and death that the story reaches its paradoxical climax. Once again, Samson finds himself powerfully attracted to a woman, and now neither his father nor hers stands in the way. By this time the Philistines realize that a new approach is needed if they are to deal effectively with this increasingly destructive menace who endangers their crops, their cities, and their lives—in short, their entire civilization. Thus they entice Delilah to pry from Samson’s lips the secret of his strength and she finally succeeds. Only by a careful reading of the text, however, can a misunderstanding fatal to its real meaning be avoided: The shaving of his locks (16:19) occasioned the departure of the Lord, who was the real source of his strength.

So the invincible Samson found himself blinded and enslaved by the enemy. In this condition he became both the motive of the Philistine’s joy and the object of their scorn. Meanwhile, though, those natural processes ordained by the God of Israel (who is also the Lord of creation) continued quietly and unnoticed as Samson’s hair grew back. With consummate skill the narrator depicts Thanksgiving Day in Philistia. Gathering to honor their god Dagon for the capture and domination of Samson, the Philistines call out Israel’s once-glorious champion to perform a comic routine. At one point in the program, he asks to lean against the pillars of

¹²Leviticus 26:8; Deuteronomy 32:30; Joshua 23:10.

¹³Significantly, only Joshua and Samson are explicitly referred to in the text of Judges as “servants” of the Lord (2:8 and 15:18).

the temple and bows in prayer.¹⁴ This time he requests not the water of life but the power to avenge himself against his captors for the loss of his sight, even if this means his own death. Then, pushing with all his might against the pillars, this underpaid and overworked entertainer literally brings down the house both on himself and on some 3,000 Philistines.¹⁵ In this scene victory and tragedy reach their paradoxical climax. The last judge of the book dies by his own hand, thus heightening that sense of tragedy so evident in Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter.¹⁶ Yet in the tragedy of his death Samson (and through him Israel) finally realizes that which God had willed all along—the destruction of the pagan enemies of God’s chosen people together with their religion. Thus in Samson we find the tragic yet profoundly appropriate conclusion to the narrative concerning the ministry of the judges: At the end of this period of Israel’s history, the judges had only “begun” to deliver the nation from her foreign oppressors, had only “begun” to extricate the people from their spiritual apostasy,¹⁷ and had accomplished these very limited objectives at a price far too high—that of the destruction of their fellow Israelites (Gideon and Jephthah), of their own families (Jephthah), or of themselves (Samson).

III. EPILOGUE—JUDGES 17-21

A Note Concerning chronology

The book of Judges does make explicit reference to a temporal progression; judges are said to follow one another (3:31; 4:1). However,

¹⁴Just as Ehud acted alone in a pagan palace, so Samson acts alone in a pagan temple. And Israel’s God hears his prayer, despite the fact that Samson prays in such a place.

¹⁵Note the ever-increasing numbers of people that Samson destroys—first 30, then a great number, then 1,000, and finally 3,000. The explicit and repeated emphasis on the presence of the Philistine “lords” (16:23, 27, 30) brings to a climactic conclusion the theme in Judges of the destruction of the enemy leaders that we have noted in the cases of Ehud, Jael, and Gideon.

¹⁶The element of the vow underscores an implicit contrast between Jephthah’s daughter and Samson. She willingly submitted to her father’s profoundly mistaken vow even though it meant her death, evidently out of fear of the Lord (11:36). Samson, however, flagrantly violated that divinely imposed vow which alone could safeguard his life and strength.

¹⁷Is it possible that the repeated expression “In those days Israel had no king; every man did that which was right in his own eyes” should be understood as also implying (among other things), that even when the judges exercised some sort of authority and won victories for the nation, they did not succeed in restoring the people to a real and lasting covenant faithfulness?

this does not exclude the possibility that several of the judges may have been contemporaries, or nearly so. Thus the time span covered by the book perhaps cannot be precisely determined.¹⁸ As far as the epilogue itself is concerned, though it is found at the conclusion of the narrative, it evidently relates events that occurred very early, as the reference to Phineas makes clear (20:28). This deliberate violation of normal chronology in the arrangement of the contents of the book is not without reason, however. While these momentous and tragic events took place early, they foreboded the future and the permanent institution of the dynastic monarchy that was destined to replace the temporary and transitional office of the judges. The recurring phrase found in the final five chapters, “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes,” thus orients us to the future, just as the double mention of the death of Joshua in the prologue (1:1; 2:8) directed our attention to the past.

The Future Foreboded

As we have indicated previously, there are two different chains of events contained in the epilogue. Before examining each one briefly, several features common to both should be noted.

1. In each case a strictly personal or domestic matter comes to involve, in one way or another, an entire tribe, or even the whole nation.
2. In both cases a traveling/wandering Levite becomes the link between a private, family matter and a public, national affair.
3. The end result of each chain (reaction) of events is tragic, though in differing ways: In one case the consequence is the apostasy of an entire tribe; in the other it is a bloody civil conflict and the near extinction of another tribe.

Thus the epilogue underscores two of the most prominent themes of the book: the nation’s idolatrous syncretism and apostasy; and an inability to peacefully resolve internal tensions and differences. Another way of

¹⁸Jephthah’s reference to the 300-year period that Israel had inhabited her territory (11:28) is normally considered a more or less reliable indication of the length of her settlement to that point. However, while this may be true, the context in which Jephthah’s remark occurs must not be overlooked. Since it comes in the course of a piece of diplomatic correspondence which attempts to establish Israel’s right to the land she inhabits, there is at least the possibility that it is a generous or inflated estimate rather than a precise calculation. And obviously, the 300 years to which Jephthah refers is a round number which could easily allow a latitude of 25 to 50 years in either direction.

saying this is that Israel seemed bent on both spiritual and physical self-destruction. While pagan influences cannot be excluded as factors in these events and trends in Israelite society and history, it appears that the author of Judges in no way wishes to exculpate God’s people by attributing to others the primary responsibility for all of this. Rather, it seems that he sees Israel as harboring deep within her own bosom the seeds of her extinction as a nation and as a people.

Israel’s Faithless Shepherds

The role of the Levites is surely significant in these final chapters. Throughout the entire preceding narrative, though there have been repeated references to various religious activities—individual and collective sacrifice and national assemblies—there has not been any mention at all either of the priesthood or of the Levites. This silence cannot be accidental, especially when we consider the heavy emphasis on the Levites in the epilogue.¹⁹ The unnamed members of the tribe of Levi who are brought to our attention in these last chapters, however, are anything but exemplary. Both of them are portrayed in the pursuit of their own personal affairs rather than in carrying out their religious and spiritual responsibilities. But the negative picture does not depend only on their sins of omission.

The Levite in search of a place to settle winds up as the private personal priest and “father” (surely a terrible blasphemy!) of Micah the Ephraimite in chapter 17—an innovation never envisaged in the Mosaic law—and presides over an idolatrous cult for money.²⁰ His mercenary nature is further confirmed by an unexpected turn of events. When representatives

¹⁹Altogether there are ten explicit references to Levites in these final chapters: 17:7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13; 18:3, 15; 19:1; 20:4. The term “priest” is used only in chapters 17 and 18 of the young Levite whom Micah consecrated as his personal priest. Interestingly, at the end of the book (20:28) Phineas the son of Eleazar is mentioned, just as toward the end of the book of Joshua (22:13ff) he appeared in connection with the investigation into the altar erected by the tribes who had settled on the other side of the Jordan. In Judges, however, his existence and ministry are acknowledged, but he evidently plays no active part in the events narrated.

²⁰We suggest that Micah represents in some sense an anticipation of Jeroboam. They both were Ephraimites and both created an entire cultus which involved the consecration of priests, the creation of idols, and the establishment of shrines. Note also that the “Levite” drafted by Micah has a rather strange, even suspicious, pedigree, just as did those whom Jeroboam selected (1 Kings 12:31). And in the case of both Micah and Jeroboam the tribe of Dan was associated with the apostasy (Judges 18; 1 Kings 12:29, 30).

of the tribe of Dan pass through his area he blesses their mission and it is subsequently crowned with success. Remembering him, these Danites return and make him an offer he cannot refuse (18:19, 20). Thus Micah the idolatrous innovator ends up seeing his entire cultic apparatus carried off by force and losing the services of his priest and “father.”²¹ Through bitter personal experience he learns that the sins he committed have given birth to others of which he is the victim. The curse uttered by his mother (17:2) thus takes effect just as surely as, if less dramatically than, that proclaimed by Jotham against Abimelech. The supreme tragedy in all of this is not, however, Micah’s material loss but Dan’s spiritual declension as the cult stolen from the Ephraimite corrupts an entire tribe.

Turning our attention to the second portion of the epilogue, we find yet greater tragedy. A Levite seeking his wayward concubine finds her and a warm welcome in her father’s house. But when he lays over in Gibeah on the return journey, he finds himself in a veritable Sodom. To save himself from the lewd and violent men of the city, he sacrifices to their murderous lust the woman who had supposedly meant so much to him. When this Romeo-turned-chicken rises bright and early to continue his homeward trip he discovers her lifeless body on the threshold of the house into which they had been received the night before. After bringing her corpse home he refuses it the dignity of a burial but instead chops it into twelve pieces and sends these throughout the land. Thus the children of the Lord are confronted with the gruesome and incontrovertible evidence that they have become indistinguishable from those Canaanite inhabitants of the land that they had been commanded to exterminate.

So we find all Israel assembled “as one man”²² for radical and painful surgery. Because the offending “member” has refused to exercise the required self-discipline, the only alternative is amputation. The rest of the tribes swear vengeance against Benjamin and at Yahweh’s direction engages their unrepentant and rebellious brethren in battle. But against all odds and expectations, Benjamin prevails in the first encounter, and then again in the second. Only after the rest of the tribes engage in a time of profound contrition, soul-searching, and sacrifice before the Lord (20:24-28) does the just victory they sought cease to elude them. Once gained,

²¹Thus Micah becomes, in effect, an “orphan” spiritually when his “priest” is taken from him—surely another subtle but powerful criticism of all idolatrous, man-made religion.

²²Note the triple reference to the unity of the nation in this situation (20:1, 8, 11), the first time all Israel has acted in unison since the events recorded in chapter 2.

however, that victory brings not jubilation but anguish as the nation realizes that one whole tribe has been reduced to the point of virtual extinction. The righteous indignation of Israel has been satisfied, but her heart breaks as she contemplates the consequences of the carnage. The minds of the leaders then seek to devise a strategy by which to restore their fallen brother-tribe, but while their effort is ultimately successful it involves the destruction of another city whose sin was in no way comparable to that of Gibeah.²³

All that remains for the author of this history to do is reiterate that the events he has portrayed were not exceptional but rather representative—not rare happenings but everyday occurrences in the period prior to the monarchy.²⁴ And can we doubt his word, when even the Levites, who were to be the custodians and teachers of the law of God, acted in such a fashion as we read here? Thus the book, ending as it does on this note, reminds us that the internal and international, the military and judicial, the political and spiritual problems of God’s people were intimately intertwined. Israel had received her existence as a people, the law of God and the land under her feet as gracious gifts from the Lord, but not yet for her leader “a man after his heart who would do according to all (his) will” (Acts 13:22). Fortunately, in the providence of God, the provisional answer to this need lay in the not-too-distant future.

²³The destruction of Jabesh-Gilead as a penalty for its nonparticipation in the war against Benjamin conforms more closely to the pattern of warfare Israel was commanded to employ against the Canaanites (Ex. 23:23-33; Deut. 7:1, 2) than the one they were to follow in conflict with peoples surrounding the land of promise (Deut. 20:10-18).

²⁴This seems clearly to be the basic meaning of the phrase “In those days . . . every man did that which was right in his own eyes” which is repeated four times in these final chapters of the book.