

THE FEMININE GENDER AS A LITERARY DEVICE
IN THE NARRATIVE OF JUDGES

by
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Theology in
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Title: THE FEMININE GENDER AS A LITERARY DEVICE
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It is believed that the judges period was more dark and bleak than commonly understood. The narrator draws attention to this fact by a carefully constructed narrative consisting of selected stories, many which significantly include woman, and pertinent literary devices that enable the reader to see more clearly the tragedy of that time.

The book of Judges falls in the literary genre of historical narrative, and it shows the religious and political experience of Israel after the death of Joshua. It is proposed that the historical narrative be further classified as tragedy. Indications of tragedy are seen in the two paradigms in Judges 2 (vv 11-16, 17-19) and the artfully repeated thematic phrases as part of a formulaic introduction to the stories (e.g., "the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord"). The feminine gender is viewed as an additional device to portray tragic times in Israel. Sometimes the narrator indicated unusually unsettled times by showing that badly needed leadership and action was not assumed and performed by males as expected.

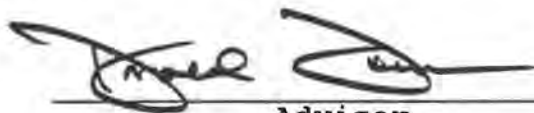
Gender roles have not been clearly delineated or established in Scripture prior to the judges period. Biblical society was essentially patriarchal, however, and certain gender roles are expected by the reader. Through the stories of Deborah and Jael, the woman of Thebez, and Manoh's wife the narrator gives examples of role reversal. They are seen performing roles and actions that are not expected of them. These examples show that Israel experienced times that were lacking social, spiritual, and political leadership by males during the judges period.

There is a focus on the three women in Samson's life: the Timnite, the Gazite prostitute, and Delilah. These women were termed "deterrents" because, though they were female associates of his choosing, they deterred him from a commitment to his calling, hindered family relationships, and shortened his career.

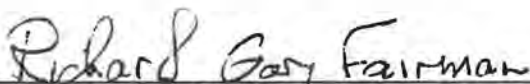
The narrator sought to provoke a response from his contemporary and future audiences. Selected stories suggest that responses of surprise, chagrin, and outrage were expected.

The narrator neither glorifies the role of women in Judges nor demeans men. Instead his use of the feminine gender illustrates the lack of political and spiritual leaders and gives evidence of the moral and theological confusion that prevailed in the personal and national life of the Israelites during the judges period.

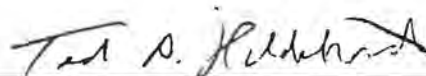
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A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Ted A. Hildebrand", written over a horizontal line.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<u>AbrN</u>	<u>Abr-Nahrain</u>
<u>BASOR</u>	<u>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</u>
BDB	Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs, <u>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</u>
<u>BHK</u>	<u>Biblia hebraica</u> , ed. R. Kittel
<u>BHS</u>	<u>Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia</u>
<u>BJRL</u>	<u>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</u>
BL	Bible and Literature Series
<u>BSac</u>	<u>Bibliotheca Sacra</u>
BS	Biblical Seminar Series
<u>CBQ</u>	<u>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</u>
<u>EvQ</u>	<u>The Evangelical Quarterly</u>
<u>ExpTim</u>	<u>Expository Times</u>
<u>HAR</u>	<u>Hebrew Annual Review</u>
<u>HUCA</u>	<u>Hebrew Union College Annual</u>
<u>IB</u>	<u>Interpreters Bible</u>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<u>Int</u>	<u>Interpretation</u>
<u>JBL</u>	<u>Journal of Biblical Literature</u>
<u>JETS</u>	<u>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</u>
<u>JFSR</u>	<u>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</u>

<u>JNES</u>	<u>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</u>
<u>JQR</u>	<u>Jewish Quarterly Review</u>
<u>JSOT</u>	<u>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</u>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament-- Supplement Series
KB	Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner, <u>Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros</u>
<u>OTS</u>	<u>Oudtestamentische Studiën</u>
OTL	Old Testament Library
<u>PRS</u>	<u>Perspectives in Religious Studies</u>
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies
<u>TDOT</u>	G.J. Botterwick and H. Ringgren, eds., <u>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</u>
<u>TWOT</u>	R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, and B.K. Waltke, eds., <u>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</u>
<u>USQR</u>	<u>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</u>
<u>VT</u>	<u>Vetus Testamentum</u>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum, Supplements
<u>WTJ</u>	<u>Westminster Theological Seminary</u>
<u>ZAW</u>	<u>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</u>

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Judges As a Book of Stories

Like so many other books of the Old Testament, Judges is primarily narrative and is thus a book of stories.¹ Leland Ryken has noted that "the big pattern in the Bible is a narrative pattern" and he demonstrates how at least six ingredients make up a story.² To some degree at least, examples of all of them appear in the book of Judges, giving indication of its narrative qualities.

First there is a central plot that is comprised of individual episodes. Although interpretations of the structure of Judges may vary, it is clear that a central plot of the book is Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh and the various difficulties that ensue, because interspersed throughout the book are passages that interpret the events (cf. 3:7, 12, 4:1, etc.) and keep the reader focused on the

¹A feature recognized years ago by Richard G. Moulton as he laid out the text of Judges "story" by "story" in his The Modern Reader's Bible (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1895).

²See his discussion of these six items in "'And It Came to Pass': The Bible as God's Storybook," BSac 147 (April-June 1990): 131-133.

plot. At times the precise order of events or shorter episodes is somewhat ambiguous, but no one will claim that all the events are simultaneous. Quite clearly there is a series of complementary stories, both historical and theological in nature, that contribute to a major plot of the narrative running throughout the book.

Second, there is interaction among the characters. Although Judges is found among the "historical" books it is more than "the chronicle of events, character profiles, and catalogs of accomplishments"³ normally found in histories. Dialogue is prominent throughout the book. Note the conversation of Gideon with the Angel of the Lord (6:12-23), Ehud and the enemy king Eglon (11:35-38), Manoah and his wife (13:6-7, 22-23), Samson and Delilah (16:6-20), to cite just a few of the examples of the dialogue that helps to captivate the interest of the reader of this book.

Third, attention is directed to the choices of the characters. The reader of the book of Judges is tantalizingly drawn from one episode to the next, wondering who the next leading character will be, what problems he will face, how he will react, what choices he will make, and how the story will turn out. Sometimes a leading character will choose to take matters into his own hands (e.g., positively, Ehud; negatively, Abimelech). He may choose to respond

³Ibid., 132.

slowly to the clear direction of God (e.g., Gideon) or he may refuse, imposing conditions (e.g., Barak). Others may make rash choices (e.g., Jephthah) while still others make generally bad choices (e.g., Samson). All in all, there is rarely a lull in the events of the book.

What is said of individuals equally reflects upon the nation. Israel's troubles did not arise from the hostilities it faced from its plundering neighbors or oppressors. Israel's environment provided the occasion to choose to serve Yahweh or the local deities of their neighbors. It is Israel's failure in this regard that makes the over-all narrative of Judges so disturbing.

Fourth, a characteristic of a good story is its unity, coherence, and resolution. Most of the individual episodes in Judges have these qualities. A tribe or two or a section of the nation has been plundered. An individual steps forward and confronts the aggressor, is successful, and restores peace once again. Usually the reader has a feeling of satisfaction that the story has ended well. The immediate problem or conflict in the story has been resolved.

But such is not the case with the overall story of Judges. While it is possible to detect unity and coherence that binds each episode or story of the book together as Israel continues its pursuit of false deities, and as a result is made the victim of plunderers, the book itself

does not end well. It ends as a cliff-hanger with no resolution. The reader painfully watches as Israel continues to plummet spiritually on a course of progressive disaster. All hopes of a spiritual rebound are dashed when the final judge himself proves to be as unrestrained and immoral as the people he has been appointed to lead.

Then the reader encounters the epilogue of sorry stories only to read the final line--"everyone did what was right in his own eyes."⁴ The reader has been captivated with the stories of Judges right to the very end, but he is not satisfied with the ending. He has come to know what Israel's real problem has been, and it has not been the aggressive nations round about. He also knows what Israel fails to comprehend--how to resolve its recurring problems. But the resolution is not forthcoming. The reader is pressed to move on in hopes of finding Israel's unhappy circumstances yet resolved.

Fifth, stories find unity around a central protagonist. In the separate stories within Judges numerous protagonists emerge. Some are viewed by the reader as heroes (e.g., Gideon and Samson). Some, however, might appropriately be viewed as anti-heroes (e.g., Abimelech, and perhaps Samson?).

⁴Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted Scriptures are from the New American Standard Bible, reference edition (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, Inc. 1971).

In considering the whole book, however, one might focus on God. Ryken has observed, in the Bible "all other characters and events interact with this great Protagonist. The story of the Bible is the story of God's acts in history."⁵ His observation can not be refuted, because God is indeed sovereign over every person and event in history. But in another sense, Israel is the protagonist. Judges is a series of stories about a nation that persists in unfaithfulness to a covenant-keeping God and regularly gets itself into such serious trouble that only the God they rejected is able to rescue them.

Sixth, stories consist of the experiences of everyday life. When Judges is read the reader is transported back to the experiences of yesteryear. As the reader mentally accompanies Ehud on his mission to pay Eglon tribute, the experience is relived. The tempo picks up considerably as Ehud pulls out his previously concealed dagger and hides it once again in the belly of the fat king. The story is experienced through its vivid details.

These six components do indeed make a good story. Such are the stories found in Judges, and such is the book as a whole.

The above discussion leads to recognition of an important issue--selectivity of data. In the period of the

⁵Ryken, "And It Came to Pass," 133.

judges, an era that spans several centuries, the scope of people that lived and participated in the events that occurred is most certainly greater than what is recorded in the narrative of Judges. One has to acknowledge the selectivity by which the writer has chosen his material. Out of all the events in the period of the judges, why did the writer select these? Selectivity, one must conclude, apparently reflects the writer's intent. The stories of people and events he included were not meant merely to entertain the reader like a modern novel. Rather, he was illuminating the theological realm of history. The writer hoped, therefore, to capture his reader's attention through narration which included certain necessary elements in each event.

Purpose of the Study

Not only is Judges a book of individual narratives, but it is quite exceptional in that it abounds in stories that involve women. This is especially noteworthy because as O'Connor observes, "In the great history that spans the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, women play a comparatively minor role. . . ." ⁶ This is not to suggest that relatively few women appear in the Old

⁶M. O'Connor, "The Women in the Book of Judges," HAR 10 (1987): 277.

Testament, but that their marginal role is often as foils for the male protagonist.

Some writers have attributed this minor role to male authorship. In her study of Israelite women, Carol Meyers distinguishes between "Israelite women" and "biblical women" because of "the overwhelming orientation of the Hebrew Bible to the male world."⁷ In other words, the actual role of the Israelite woman and how it is portrayed in the Bible is not one and the same due to its male orientation. In response, however, it might be asked, is this orientation a phenomenon that is true only of the Hebrew Bible? Is it not probably true of most literature from the ancient Near Eastern world?

Phyllis Bird quite bluntly blames biased authorship when she states, "The Old Testament is a collection of writings of males, in a society dominated by males. These writings portray a man's world."⁸ Athalya Brenner also addresses the issue of male authorship, but she is less critical than Bird.

First, we must remember that all or most of the stories we shall be dealing with were invented, preserved, and/or written by male authors. This

⁷Carol Meyers, Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4.

⁸Phyllis A. Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," in The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics, ed. Norman K. Gottwald (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 253.

does not necessarily mean that the literary result is always biased. However, more often than not the literary creation under discussion does represent a male's viewpoint, his comprehension of the female psyche, his understanding of female motives and behavior,⁹ and his male judgment of all these factors.

Thus a matter of concern for some writers has been the predominance of the Old Testament's male writers and their biased representation of women in the biblical text.

Another concern is this: when women appear in the Hebrew Bible, they are almost always exceptional, those who somehow have risen to positions of prominence.¹⁰ But is this true only of women? In the writers' telescoping of time, place and personality to meet their purpose, of necessity they have been selective. Any person who receives mention, man, woman, or child, is a "somebody," whether or not the reader determines his/her role to be major or minor.

Bird believes women appear less as real historical individuals and more often as types of their gender. Her critical observation is to the point.

Even where a woman (or a woman's name) has attained legendary stature, where force of character or peculiarity of vocation or position has procured a unique place for her, or where an author following his own sympathies or artistic aims has lingered over a particular female figure, the roles played by women in these writings are almost exclusively subordinate and/or supporting roles. Women are

⁹Athalya Brenner, The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative, BS, 2 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 89.

¹⁰Meyers, Discovering Eve, 5.

adjuncts to the men: they are the minor (occasionally major) characters necessary to a plot that revolves about males. They are the mothers and nurses and saviours of men; temptresses, seducers, and destroyers of men; objects or recipients of miracles performed by and for men; confessors of the power, wisdom, and divine designation of men. They are necessary to the drama, and may even steal the spotlight occasionally; but the story is rarely about them.¹¹

While Bird's observations are important, her implications are that women have been intentionally slighted in the Old Testament narrative in deference to men. O'Connor supports this opinion when he states that "the women of the stories seem to serve as points of reference in narrative strategies, against which the movements of the major, male actor may be calibrated."¹² In other words, literary analysis of the narrative seems to suggest that "the females serve only to underscore the importance of certain male figures."¹³

So it is that the reader finds no less than seventeen different women singled out for special mention in the book of Judges. Some of them are named while others remain unnamed.¹⁴ Some are represented in their

¹¹Bird, "Images of Women," 267.

¹²O'Connor, "Women in Judges," 277.

¹³Meyers, Discovering Eve, 44.

¹⁴These women are not slighted. Important men also remain unnamed. Cf. the unnamed prophet (6:8) and the unnamed man of God who confronted Eli, the priest (1 Sam 2:27). Perhaps the writer makes a stronger point by having a person of name confronted by someone of no name (e.g.,

expected¹⁵ roles: daughters, mother and mate. Others are seen in roles unexpected by the reader, those normally reserved for men: prophet, judge, leader and victorious warrior. Not only are the roles unexpected, they are narrated with frequent ironic twists.

In considering the large number of women who lived among the Israelites during the judges period, the selectivity of the writer must again be acknowledged. To meet his purposes and objectives in writing his historical and theological narrative, he has isolated a few women and included them in his narrative.

An important question relating to these women must be addressed: Which of them must be considered essential to the narrative and which of them might be considered incidental? If they are essential, what is their role? If they are only incidental to the narrative, why are they included --as foils against whom the acts of the protagonist (of an episode) are calibrated? If so, why?

Abimelech and a certain woman).

¹⁵"Expected" is used to describe role, not "normal." O'Connor, "The Women in the Book of Judges," 270, entertains the issue of women's roles in pre-modern society. Women, he says, do duty as representatives of the private; they are of the inside, i.e. the domestic sphere. Men, on the other hand, do duty as representatives of the public; they are of the outside, i.e., the common sphere. Meyers, Discovering Eve, 5, contends that biblical information is too fragmented to determine what women's roles were. More concerning roles will follow in Chapter IV.

In the historical narratives from earlier periods the inclusion of the feminine gender was relatively infrequent, but vital to the plot (e.g., Eve--her temptation in the garden; Sarah and Hagar--the issue of Abraham's posterity; Rebekah--wife of Isaac and mother of Jacob; Leah and Rachel--wives of Jacob; Miriam--sister of Moses and Aaron). In the book of Judges certain women unquestionably fall into the category of "essential." Women such as Deborah and Jael (Judg 4) and the woman of Thebez (Judg 9:50-57) help to accomplish deliverance from foes, thus playing extremely important roles. Manoah's wife's role is also a major one (Judg 13). The Angel of the Lord comes to her to announce the birth of Samson and instructs her, not her husband, in the up-bringing of their son as a Nazirite. The three women in Samson's life (Judg 14-16) are necessary to show how he was distracted from successfully living the separated lifestyle of a Nazirite.

Other women and their roles, however, are noticeably secondary to the protagonist of some stories and might be considered "incidental" to the narrative. For example, in the narrative pertaining to Jephthah (Judg 11), the account of his daughter is clearly a story within a story. The details concerning her are not necessary to the account of Jephthah's defeat of Ammon, rather they are incidental. Therefore, why is the story of his unnamed daughter inserted in the narrative? In the story of the religious Micah (Judg

17), his mother, who makes a syncretistic suggestion for the worship of Yahweh, is only briefly mentioned (vv 2-3). Why is she included at all? In the account of the Levite and his concubine (Judg 19-20), the Levite is the protagonist. It is he who pursues his unnamed runaway concubine, persuades her to return home with him, permits her to be raped until she dies, and then reports the sordid details to the nation. What did the narrator hope to accomplish by drawing the reader's attention to the Levite's concubine's mistreatment?

The purpose of this study, then, is to analyze some of these stories which include women. How do these women not only contribute to the narrative of their historic episode, but how do their stories contribute also to the overall purpose of the writer, the theme and message he was intent on communicating? Were any of the stories which include women intended to elicit a particular response from the reader?

Limits to the Study

Certain issues, though important in and of themselves, will not be germane to this study and will fall outside the parameter of its intent. Therefore the following matters will not receive extensive treatment

Matters of Introduction

Time of writing

Quite clearly there was a good deal of material upon which the writer of Judges was able to draw as the cyclic episodes throughout the book indicate. By and large liberal scholarship¹⁶ has accepted Judges as Deuteronomic history, edited as late as 550 B.C. It is claimed that the loose compilation of stories underwent a series of revisions, the latest coming probably in the exile at the hand of a Deuteronomic editor who compiled an interpretative history of the judges period based upon a seventh century B.C. Deuteronomy. Conservative scholarship¹⁷ has rejected this view.

¹⁶For older representative views, see Robert H. Pfeiffer, Introduction to the Old Testament (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1948), 331-337; Otto Eissfeldt, The Old Testament: An Introduction, trans. Peter R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 258-267; and Georg Fohrer, Introduction to the Old Testament, trans. David B. Green (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 212-214. For more recent representative views, see Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 256-261; J. Alberto Soggin, Judges: A Commentary, trans. John Bowden, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 4-7; Peter R. Ackroyd, "The Historical Literature," in The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters, eds. Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 300-305; Norman K. Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 138-139, 240-246; Richard E. Friedman, Who Wrote the Bible? (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 103-104, 130-132.

¹⁷See as representative, Roland K. Harrison, Introduction to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 682-690, who adamantly

With regard to the book of Judges, the term "Deuteronomic" can reflect two different senses. If it is intended to imply a philosophy of history that ties the historic details of Judges to the above hypothesis that Deuteronomy is of seventh century origin,¹⁸ the term is rejected in this study. If, however, it is intended to denote a philosophy of history that views the introduction and narrative of Judges in light of Moses' parting passionate pleas and warnings to Israel concerning faithfulness to Yahweh, then the term is accepted.¹⁹ The reader is reminded of the true nature of Israel's difficulties during the judges era and the seriousness of Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh and his revealed instruction for living in Canaan is reinforced.

This study accepts an early monarchy dating for the writing of Judges, not a post-seventh century editing. This is based on internal evidence. First, the phrase, "there was no king in Israel" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) draws a contrast between the monarchy and the period that preceded

rejects the view.

¹⁸For a summary of the arguments for a seventh-century Deuteronomy, tracing current presuppositions back to the views of Wellhausen, see Gordon Wenham, "The Date of Deuteronomy: Linch-pin of Old Testament Criticism" (two parts), Themelios 10 (1985): 15-20; and Themelios 11 (1985): 15-18. He carefully refutes these arguments and gives a cogent defense of an early (Mosaic?) Deuteronomy.

¹⁹G.T. Manley, "The Deuteronomic Redactor in the Book of Judges," EvQ (1959): 34.

it, and the judges period is cast in unfavorable light. Second, Jerusalem, the Jebusite city which was taken by David (2 Sam 5:6-9) still remained outside Israel's control at the time of writing (1:21). Since Saul's reign was not a clear contrast to the times of the judges and David did not take Jerusalem until after his seventh year of reign, the evidence seems to point to the beginning of David's reign as the date of the book's writing.²⁰

The writer

Old Testament introductions normally cite the Talmudic reference (Baba Bathra 14b) which states that Samuel wrote his book and Judges. Naturally this claim is difficult to substantiate since the author's name is nowhere mentioned and the rest of Scripture is silent on the matter. However indications of an early origin of the book allow for Samuel's influence and initiative, humanly speaking, even if he himself did not write it.²¹ The issue need not be pressed here.

²⁰For further lines of evidence and more extensive treatment, see the excellent discussion of C.J. Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, in the Bible Student's Commentary, trans. Ray Togtman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 217-223.

²¹Ibid.

Nature of the "Office" of Judge

The nature of the office of the judge in Israel remains a complicated issue. Two classifications, "minor" and "major," are designations not found in the book of Judges and have not contributed very much to the discussion. The question remains: What was a judge? Was he/she a charismatic leader, a precursor to the king, a warrior, a civil magistrate, or perhaps a combination of these?²²

In the book (11:27) only Yahweh is directly called a judge by name (יְהוָה הַשֹּׁפֵט). All other references to judges (שֹׁפְטִים) are found in the introduction (2:16-19). There are those whom Yahweh raised up to deliver (יָשַׁע) Israel from their plunderers and enemies. Usually it is simply said of the individual, "he judged Israel," and no qualifying statements are added to define that person's precise duty. Only of Deborah is it said (4:5) that "the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment" (לְחֻשָּׁפֶט). Apparently, then, a judge was recognized as someone with authority to mete out justice and to take administrative action when neces-

²²See the helpful summary of scholars' suggestions in Donald A. McKenzie, "The Judge of Israel" VT 17 (January 1967): 118-121; and Daniel I. Block, "The Period of the Judges: Religious Disintegration Under Tribal Rule," in Israel's Apostasy and Restoration, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 40-41.

sary.²³ But additional questions remain. What was the scope of a judge's power and influence? What kinds of activities are ascribed to the individual in the phrase, "he/she judged"? Did these activities always fit into both a political and religious framework? How did he/she (e.g., a "minor" judge or Deborah) come to power and for how long did the judge retain power?²⁴

Discussion on these questions is not relevant here, but consideration will be given to some of these issues in the analysis of the Deborah and Barak story.

Nature of Israel's Confederation

Much discussion has centered on the type of alliance the tribes of Israel experienced during the period of the judges. With the appearance of Martin Noth's Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels,²⁵ the theory of an amphictyony became very popular. Briefly stated, he proposed that Israel was a confederacy of twelve tribes which gradually came into existence in Palestine sometime before the foundation of the monarchy. Originally existing as nothing

²³Leon Wood, Distressing Days of the Judges (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 5; and Block, "The Period of the Judges," 41.

²⁴For discussion of these questions, see Alan J. Hauser, "The 'Minor Judges'--A Re-evaluation," JBL 94 (1975): 190-200; and "Unity and Diversity in Early Israel Before Samuel," JETS 22 (December 1979): 296-302.

²⁵Martin Noth, Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1930).

more than independent clans and families, "Israel" was founded as twelve tribes in Joshua 24. Bound together in common cultic worship of Yahweh, they made Shechem their central shrine for periodic worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Although by and large the views of Noth have been rendered passé by more recent scholarship,²⁶ his work has proved to be a valuable stimulus for further study on the relationship of the twelve tribes to each other during the period of the judges.

Block argues convincingly that the narrator perceived the tribes of Israel as one people.²⁷ He draws attention to the various "pan-Israel" terms throughout the book. He also believes that Israel was closely linked religiously with Yahweh as their national deity, but he admits that the nature of Israel's premonarchical government is not clear. His view seems to coincide with Barnabas Lindars' who concludes, "Their common identity as the people of Israel and worshippers of Yahweh was no doubt strongly felt, but was not expressed in pan-Israelite institutions.

²⁶See as representative critiques, A.D.H. Mayes, "The Period of the Judges and the Rise of the Monarchy," in Israelite and Judean History, eds. John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 299-308; and Henry E. Chambers, "Ancient Amphictyonies, *Sic et Non*," in Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method, eds. William W. Hallo, James C. Moyer and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 39-59.

²⁷Block, "Period of the Judges," 41-45.

There was no tribal system--much less an Amphictyony--in the days of the judges."²⁸ He believes that there is very little indication within Judges that the tribes banded together in any co-operative effort. Whenever they did join together, their purpose was to mop up after the success of a local leader, hoping to prevent further trouble from the enemy and perhaps cash in on the spoils. However there was no apparent internal cohesion within the individual tribes.²⁹

Hauser blames a modern "hyperorganizational mode of thinking" for any attempt to find some unifying organization within Israel.³⁰ In his estimation, "Israel" during this period was a multifarious category of groups and clans. They were loosely affiliated together by their worship of Yahweh, but their concept of his nature was not unified. They had no exclusive commitment to Yahweh and they had no central religious office authorized to enforce a standard-

²⁸Barnabas Lindars, "The Israelite Tribes in Judges," in Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament, ed. J.A. Emerton, VTSup, 30 (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1979), 110.

²⁹Ibid., 109. Sean M. Warner is so convinced of Israel's lack of internal cohesion of any sort that he not only denies the existence of amphictyony, he proposes to reposition the narrative of Judges historically before Joshua. See his "The Period of the Judges Within the Structure of Early Israel," HUCA 47 (1976): 57-79.

³⁰Hauser, "Unity and Diversity," 291.

ized religious practice for the worship of Yahweh.³¹

While it is not the purpose here to determine once and for all the exact nature of Israel's tribal relationships, a careful reading of Judges does not provide a model that closely coincides with Noth's theory of amphictyony. It would appear that the tribes had some consciousness of their ethnic and spiritual unity. They were all sons of Israel (Jacob) and the national deity for all was Yahweh, the God of their fathers. But the point remains. There was no political center. In fact, there was a critical void in leadership. It is this void in leadership, political and spiritual, that provides an essential part of the backdrop for the stories in Judges that concern women and are the focus of this present study.

Feminist Issues

It is not the purpose of this paper to use its theme (feminine gender) as an opportunity to drift into debate over current feminist issues. Judges has proved to be a popular book for feminist writers. They have zeroed in on some of the persons that will be dealt with in this study and have often approached the narrative from the standpoint of rhetorical criticism.

Tremper Longman, III has observed that feminist readings sometimes have a hidden agenda and they "distort

³¹Ibid., 302-303.

the text by having their themes be their only interpretive grids."³² Danna Fewell, a feminist critic, would admit that pure objectivity in any reader is non-existent. It would appear, though, that for some feminists an encounter with the value system of certain biblical narratives (e.g., Abraham's denying his full relationship to Sarah out of cowardice) is like an encounter with a red flag. Fewell confesses:

When we [feminist critics] read from such perspective, often the result is negative. We must pass judgment on the value system of the text. We cannot accept the national chauvinism. We cannot forgive the androcentric attitudes. We cannot even consider the divine voice in the story world is in any way a reliable portrayal of the God who transcends the text. In short, our ideology takes precedence over the ideology of the literature. We cannot be transformed by our reading.

Today, many feminists critics are reading biblical literature from such a perspective. In our efforts to produce feminist theologies, to find ways of effectively engaging our world as people who view female and male to be of equal worth, we come to the Bible in our search for meaning. In some instances we find, to use one of Phyllis Trible's biblical metaphors, some coins that have been lost, the finding of which is cause for rejoicing. More often, however, we collide with the sociological structure of patriarchy, the very hierarchy of values that we fight against in our own world. For feminist critics in the Judeo-Christian tradition, these negative reading experiences have raised and magnified the issue of biblical authority.³³

³²Tremper Longman, III, "The Literary Approach to the Study of the Old Testament: Promise and Pitfalls," JETS 28 (December 1985), 388.

³³Danna Nolan Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible: Affirmation, Resistance and Transformation," JSOT (1987): 78-79.

Despite their reservations concerning biblical authority and oft-times hostility to it, feminist critics have produced comments on the narrative that are insightful and helpful. As Longman has remarked, "These readers bring out themes of Scripture that are commonly passed over by most readers of the Bible. . . ." ³⁴ Therefore in this particular study numerous feminist critics will be cited. However any citation of their observations should not necessarily be interpreted as an endorsement of their theological or sociological ideologies.

Method of Study

To achieve the purpose stated above, this study will not follow routinely the norms of historico-gramatico exegesis. This is not meant to be an exegetical paper per se. Instead the primary focus of this study will be upon the narrative, looking at the artful manner in which the narrator recounts selected details concerning certain women of this period of Israel's history. Why did he include what he did? Why did he say what he said, and in the manner he did? What does his choice of words communicate explicitly

³⁴Tremper Longman, III, Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 3, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 40. Rabbi Benjamin E. Scolnic observes that the overwhelming body of feminist biblical interpretation has come from the Christian community, but concedes that much can be learned from their efforts. See his "The Validity of Feminist Biblical Interpretation," Conservative Judaism 38 (Spring 1986): 10.

or implicitly? How does his inclusion of women contribute to his over-all intent for the book? These are questions that will be entertained either directly or indirectly and will contribute to issues discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter II will present a brief review of past critical scholarship to show that that which was formerly called literary criticism focused on the sources of Judges or on its components. It will be seen that rhetorical criticism is presently making significant contributions to the interpretation of Judges. The genre of the book will be identified as historical narrative.

Chapter III will propose that the historical narrative of Judges be further classified as tragedy. Attention will be directed to paradigms and thematic phrases which depict Israel's spiritual and political decline. It will be proposed that the narrator used the feminine gender as an additional device to portray tragic times in Judges.

Chapter IV will focus on role reversal displayed by four women: Deborah, Jael, the woman of Thebez, and Manoah's wife. The narrator indicates unsettled conditions by showing that badly needed leadership and action were not assumed and performed by males as expected. Therefore, women will be seen performing in ways unexpected of them.

Chapter V will direct attention to the three women in Samson's life. They will be seen as associates of his

choosing who will deter him from being the successful leader the nation needed and the reader expects him to be.

Chapter VI will propose that the narrator thoughtfully elected to include certain women and their roles in his narrative for the purpose of provoking in his reader an emotional response. For this chapter only a select few stories will be cited and a few responses will be suggested.

CHAPTER II

THE BOOK OF JUDGES AND LITERARY CRITICISM

A Review of Critical Study

Introduction

There have been varying opinions concerning the literary value of Judges. In the past, it seems, few scholars took seriously its literary qualities and only occasionally did the literary aspect receive comment, and then in an off-handed way. For example, Robert H. Pfeiffer, who was committed to source criticism, was struck by the literary genius of J. He wrote of the "literary excellence" of the J stories.¹ He repeatedly characterized him as "brilliant": the brilliant author,² the brilliant personality,³ the brilliant historian,⁴ and noted that some of the specific details of his stories may merely be the product of his "vivid imagination and superb literary

¹Pfeiffer, Introduction to the Old Testament, 315.

²Ibid., 319.

³Ibid., 320.

⁴Ibid., 321.

art."⁵ But he did not credit the book as having unified, literary excellence.

Relatively early in this century Irving Wood and Elihu Grant hinted at the literary feature in the final paragraph of their discussion of Judges:

As literature, the interest of the book lies in the fact that it presents primitive ideals in the form of tales about popular heroes told in popular form. . . . The religious values of the book lie in the point of view of its editors. Few prophetic teachings are more skillfully conveyed than that of the Deuteronomic editor. . . . (emphasis added).⁶

The literary quality of Judges has received greater recognition in recent years, albeit more attention has been directed to the component stories of the book rather than to the literary unity of the whole book. Kenneth Gros Louis states:

The richness of Judges as a source of artistic inspiration makes the book, from our perspective, one of the most important in the Bible. At the same time, the literary potential has been detached from the narrative as a whole. Artists and readers have turned admiringly to the individual stories, culled from them, reworked them, without paying much attention to the ways in which the stories might fit together, without, in other words, considering all of Judges as a literary work with its own themes and structures.⁷

⁵Ibid., 324.

⁶Irving Francis Wood and Elihu Grant, The Bible as Literature: An Introduction (New York: Abingdon Press, 1914), 130.

⁷Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, "The Book of Judges," in Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, ed. K.R.R. Gros Louis, J.S. Ackerman, and T.S. Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 141. Over a decade earlier L. Alonso-

It is commendable that attention is now beginning to turn properly to Judges' literary unity and qualities.⁸

An important question remains, however. Why has literary recognition been so slow in coming to Judges? The answer, at least in part, lies in historical criticism.

Historical Criticism

In years past historical criticism in the shape of either source criticism or form criticism passed under the guise of literary criticism when in fact neither were literary criticism⁹ at all (in the pure sense of the term). Consider, for instance, excerpts from the form critic Klaus Koch's extended definition of literary criticism.

Literary criticism begins with the recognition that the period of origin of a biblical writing presents enormous difficulties, and that the situations of the writers have also become greatly obscured through a many levelled process of redaction. . . .

Schökel drew attention to the artistry of the Judges narrative in "Erzählkunst in Buche der Richter" Biblica 42 (1961): 143-172.

⁸See Barry G. Webb, The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading, JSOTSup, 46 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987); and Robert Alter, "Language as Theme in the Book of Judges," the Eleventh Annual Rabbi Louis Feinberg Memorial Lecture in the Judaic Studies (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1988).

⁹James Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," Prooftexts 1 (1981): 219, sees them "directly in opposition" to current terms of "literary criticism." See also Adele Berlin's critique of source criticism and form criticism in her chapter, "Poetic Interpretation and Historical-Critical Methods," in her Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative, BL, 9 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 111-134.

The literary critic . . . attempts to discover the original writings, to determine exactly their date of origin, and to grasp the personality of the writer as much as is possible. This means that he approaches the text with, so to say, a dissecting knife in hand. . . . Literary criticism is the analysis of biblical books from the standpoint of lack of continuity, duplications, inconsistencies, and different linguistic usage, with the object of discovering what the individual writers and redactors contributed to a text, and also its time and place of origin¹⁰ (emphasis his).

This is the "literary criticism" of the past century. Source critics concentrated their attention primarily on the sources, layers of composition, discontinuity and inconsistencies in the biblical text¹¹ and form critics followed with their focus on the oral tradition and sitz im leben behind the text. Robert Alter well observes that whereas a reader might have naively imagined that he was reading a unified text, scholarship instead informed him that what he was actually reading was a "constant stitching together of earlier texts drawn from divergent literary and sometimes oral traditions, with minor or major interventions by later editors in the form of glosses, connecting

¹⁰Klaus Koch, The Growth of the Biblical Tradition, trans. S.M. Cupitt (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 69-70.

¹¹In their discussion of Judges, notice the total commitment to these areas of study in two older representative works on OT literature: S.R. Driver, An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), 160-172; and Julius A. Bewer, The Literature of the Old Testament (New York: Columbia University Press, 1922), 229-231. Wood and Grant, The Bible as Literature, 130, are committed to source criticism also, but they at least hint at Judges' literary nature.

passages, confluations of sources, and so forth."¹² The text was fragmentized and the smaller parts or units were often said to contradict one another. Ryken, a literary (in its pure sense) critic objects to such treatment of a text. "Literary criticism is impossible when a story is divided into different fragments, each of which is claimed to have been written by different writers living at a different time in the development of biblical religion."¹³

It might be said that the "literary criticism" of the past has been counter-productive to the development of a literary theory of approach to the text. This is not to say that all historical criticism has been invalid, unproductive, and of no benefit to biblical interpretation. So often, however, its goal has seemed to be to identify and isolate the parts (smaller units) from which the whole of the text was composed rather than to understand the meaning of the text by observing its unity and purpose. Attention might be drawn to basic genres found in the text, but rarely were principles presented for dealing with the genre. Thus a reader might have recognized a book such as Judges by its

¹²Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1981), 132.

¹³Leland Ryken, "Literary Criticism on the Bible: Some Fallacies," in Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, ed. K.R.R. Gros Louis, J.S. Ackerman, and T.S. Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 33; Robert Polzin expresses similar concerns in his Moses and the Deuteronomist (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 1-12.

genre as narrative, but he was ineffective in determining how that contributed to the meaning of the book. He was unable to show how the book or story was structured, how it was unified by narrative principles, how plot conflicts were resolved, how the protagonists developed through the movements of the narrative, or how the theme was embodied in the narrative. Happily there has been a change in the trend.

Rhetorical Criticism

In a little more than two decades there has occurred a most welcome shift in biblical scholarship. While scholars have not necessarily abandoned conclusions derived from historical criticism, they have transferred their attention from sources and forms to the text as a whole, the canonical shape in which it now appears.

This new approach to biblical studies is attributed largely to the programmatic appeal made by James Muilenburg in his presidential address to the Society for Biblical Literature in 1968.¹⁴ In his speech he praised the accomplishments of form criticism, but also pointed out its shortcomings. He expressed his interest in "understanding the nature of Hebrew literary composition, in exhibiting the structural patterns that are employed for the fashioning of a literary unit, whether in poetry or prose, and in discern-

¹⁴James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," JBL 88 (March 1969): 1-18.

ing the many and various devices by which the predications are formulated and ordered into a unified whole."¹⁵ This enterprise he described "as rhetoric and the methodology as rhetorical criticism,"¹⁶ and his terminology caught on. Muilenburg did not leave his audience with an identifiable model of rhetorical criticism, but simply planted the notion which grew and continues to develop. It is not the purpose here to trace that development.¹⁷

The change in criticism has been so striking in recent years that it is tempting to dub rhetorical criticism or the literary approach as the new orthodoxy in biblical studies. In this regard, however, Meir Sternberg's comment serves as an important caution. "The very phrase 'literary approach' is rather meaningless in view of the diversity of the languages of criticism throughout history, and 'the literary approach,' with its monolithic ring is downright misleading."¹⁸ In other words, rhetorical criticism

¹⁵Ibid., 8.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷For discussion of rhetorical criticism's development, see David M. Gunn, "New Directions in the Study of Biblical Hebrew Narrative," JSOT 39 (1987): 65-75; Wilhelm Wuellner, "Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?" CBQ 49 (July 1987): 448-463; Joe M. Sprinkle, "Literary Approaches to the Old Testament: A Survey of Recent Scholarship" JETS 32 (September 1989): 299-310.

¹⁸Meir Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 3.

should not be considered the ultimate or final approach to biblical studies to the exclusion of historico-gramatico exegesis, but a complementary method of study.¹⁹ Polzin writes of "a circular movement that begins with a literary analysis, then turns to historical problems, whose attempted solutions then furnish further refinements and adaptations of one's literary critical conclusions."²⁰ Such an approach provides a healthy balance to biblical studies.

Importantly rhetorical criticism resists the previous trend of biblical scholarship to fragmentize the text²¹ and looks at the text in its present form as a unit.²² Attention is also drawn to the art form of the text, what the narrator said and the artistry with which he said it (i.e., truly literary devices), and the intent conveyed by saying it a certain way.

¹⁹David Robertson, The Old Testament and the Literary Critic, in the Old Testament Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 4, states, "Literary criticism is not superior to alternative methodologies, just different."

²⁰Polzin, Moses and the Deuteronomist, 6.

²¹Longman notes that Evangelicals are guilty of their own kind of fragmentation when he says they "commonly tend to atomize the text and to focus attention on a word or a few verses." In Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation, 60.

²²Not everyone has viewed this as a positive step. Stephen A. Geller, "Some Pitfalls in the 'Literary Approach' to Biblical Narrative," JQR 74 (April 1984): 413, says, "One of the most blatant excesses is ill-conceived 'canonical criticism' that attempts a literary analysis of a text as if it were all one piece."

By its very structure, Judges has been subjected to fragmentization. The present study is not directed at establishing the unity of the book. Though it will concentrate on some of its parts, it intends to draw attention to the "literariness" of Judges, the artful manner in which its material is presented. The recognition of Judges' literary features will be beneficial for its interpretation.

The Structure of Judges

Scholars who have been influenced by source criticism have had a notorious bias towards fragmentation of Judges. It has been easier for them to see the pieces rather than the whole as a literary unit. Robert Boling calls the structure of Judges "primitive." He sees "blocks of successive editorial remodeling . . . piled around the edges of nuclear stories."²³ Such an appraisal seems less than adequate, but why did the narrator structure the book and relate his story the way he did? Is there a literary explanation? These questions must be addressed.

There is general agreement that the book of Judges consists of three parts: I. an introduction; II. a main body of stories pertaining to Israel's difficulties and deliverances at the hand of judges; III. an appendix of two other unrelated stories, each concerning a Levite. Here is

²³Robert G. Boling, Judges, in The Anchor Bible 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 29.

where the basic agreement ends, however. Scholarly opinions differ, for example, over the delineation of the first two parts. Where does Part I end and Part II begin? Commentaries and Introductions are almost equally divided in opting to close Part I either at 2:5 or 3:6.

Part I: Introduction (1:1-3:6)

If Part I is contained in 1:1-3:6, as is accepted in this study, there are additional questions to be answered. Are there not virtually two introductions: 1:1-3:6 and 2:1-3:6? What is the relation of one to the other? Nathan Stemmer disregards 1:1-3:6 and argues that 2:1-3:4 is the introduction to the book (note that he argues to begin Part II with 3:5, not 3:7).²⁴ Judges 1:1-3:6 clearly reiterates almost verbatim examples already given in Joshua of the tribes' failure to take all the land. Therefore there is a military and political emphasis in the opening chapter. In 2:1-3:6, however, the emphasis shifts to Israel's religious life for here the reader is forewarned of Israel's persistence to do evil in the sight of Yahweh and cause his anger to burn. It has been almost normal procedure for scholars to see these as unrelated editorial additions. Webb convincingly argues that 1:1-3:6 is a coherent literary unit and serves as an introduction and orientation to the book.

²⁴Nathan Stemmer, "The Introduction to Judges, 2:1-3:4," JQR 57 (January 1967): 239-241.

He summarizes that Israel's inability to take all the land is a complication from which the conflicts of the narrative emerge. As Israel becomes ensnared by the gods of the remaining Canaanites, Israel comes into conflict with Yahweh whose intervention brings conflict with surrounding peoples.²⁵ Therefore the narrator has prompted his reader's expectations for concrete historical evidence that will support the paradigms he has set forth in chapter two.

Part II: Stories of the Judges (3:7-16:31)

Since the phrase "Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (2:11) recurs in several episodes in this section, it is often claimed that Part II is a stylized compilation of stories. Although the stories are made to appear in historical sequence, the chronological sequence is considered artificial. Therefore the claim demands that the reader determine the reason for the narrator's selected arrangement of the stories. Several theories have been suggested.

Bound according to paradigmatic alignment

Some have linked the six major episodes by their alignment to the rhetorical framework that is found in the

²⁵Webb, Book of Judges, 121.

composite of the paradigm(s) of 2:11-19²⁶ (to be discussed in Chapter III). In this framework is the following:

1. Israel does evil in the sight of Yahweh; 2. Yahweh gives/sells Israel into the hand of oppressors; 3. Israel cries to Yahweh; 4. Yahweh raises up a deliverer; 5. the oppressor is defeated; and 6. the land has rest. The outworking of this formula in the six episodes is quite varied. The first story involving Othniel aligns perfectly with the formulaic framework. Each story thereafter, however, seems to depart progressively from the formula until it is almost unrecognizable in the final story of Samson. The people do not cry to Yahweh, the land does not receive a period of rest, and the judge does not deliver his people, but dies instead at the hand of the oppressors.

Bound according to geographic arrangement

Following somewhat the geographic order of notations of tribal failure in chapter one, moving from Judah (1:2) in the south to the northern tribes of Zebulun (1:30), Asher (1:31), Naphtali (1:33), and Dan (1:34), some have suggested this geographical pattern to be a rhetorical device for

²⁶David M. Gunn, "Joshua and Judges," in The Literary Guide to the Bible, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 105.

organizing the stories.²⁷ The first story involves Othniel from Judah in the south and the stories progressively move northward and end with a Danite, Samson. There is a flaw in this suggestion, though, for while the Danites are seen to have migrated northward, the story of Samson (a Danite) occurs in the south near Judah and in Philistine country.

Bound according to the judges' characters

In a very intriguing article D.W. Gooding argues for the unity of Judges on the basis of its design. From beginning (two-part introduction) to end (two-part epilogue) he sees a chiastic arrangement of the material. He notes that since 2:19 warns of a cyclical worsening pattern for Israel, the reader should expect things at the end of the book to be worse than at the beginning. With regard to the book's chiastic arrangement he states, "At least a definite pattern emerges from the symmetry: in each pair within the symmetry the second member presents a deterioration from, or a worse example of, the position presented by the first member."²⁸ For example the first judge, Othniel, was a good man with a stable marriage while Samson's character and

²⁷Ibid. See also W.J. Dumbrell, "'In Those Days There Was No King in Israel; Every Man Did What Was Right in His Own Eyes.'" The Purpose of the Book of Judges Reconsidered," JSOT 25 (1983): 25.

²⁸D.W. Gooding, "The Composition of the Book of Judges," Eretz Israel 16 (1982): 74.

marriage were both a disaster. He sees Gideon, whose account is also chiastic, as the turning point in the narrative.

- a. his stand against idolatry (6:1-32)
- b. his fight against the enemy (6:33-7:25)
- b¹. his fight against his own people (8:1-21)
- a¹. his lapse into idolatry (8:22-32).

Quite interestingly in his structural arrangement he pairs the third story (Deborah, Barak, and Jael) with the fifth story (Abimelech), two stories which seemingly have little in common, with one surprising exception. Each story features a woman who ends a war by crushing the enemy warrior's skull (to be discussed in Chapter IV).

For the reader whose interest lies primarily in rhetorical devices in the narrative, the above proposals for the narrator's arrangement of the stories may be attractive. However, these rhetorical devices are not so pronounced as he might be led to believe. The elements of the paradigmatic formula are so varied within the successive stories that it is not immediately apparent that there is a departing progression from the formula. Neither do the stories follow a clear geographic path from the south to the north as some suggest. A sharp contrast does indeed appear in the character of the first and last judge, Othniel and Samson, but Gooding's chiastic symmetry of this section is somewhat artificial. His arrangement of stories has symmetry only if he pairs Deborah, a judge and prophetess,

with Abimelech, who was neither a deliverer nor a judge, but was a political usurper. What Gooding has detected in the lives and character of the judges cannot be completely discounted, however. Beginning with Gideon, in each episode there is a gradual but noticeable deterioration in the leader's character. This characterization is not just that of individuals, however. It reflects the decline of a nation also. The major fault of these proposals is that interpreters have attempted to discover the pattern of the writer's narrative scheme and thus bind each episode to it. In so doing, they have lessened the chronological and historical value of this part of the book.

Bound according to biographical reporting

It seems preferable to view the narrator as presenting the stories biographically, i.e., historically and sequentially.²⁹ The narrator is not bound by a pattern of his own making, but he is instead recording historic actuality.³⁰ Here is what actually happened. If there is any

²⁹The narrator uses several terms and phrases that demand chronological sequence within the narrative. E.g., note the following: "after him" (אַחֲרָיו) introduces all the minor judges (3:31; 10:3; 12:8; 12:11; 12:13) with the exception of Tola who is introduced by "after Abimelech" (אַחֲרֵי אֲבִימֶלֶךְ); Israel "continued to do" (וַיַּעֲשׂוּ . . .) evil (3:12; 4:1; 10:6; 13:1); and the numerical notations of years the land had rest between deliverance and a new oppression (3:11; 3:30; 5:31; 8:28).

³⁰J.P.V. Lilley, "A Literary Appreciation of the Book of Judges," Tyndale Bulletin 18 (1967): 98.

pattern, it is the pattern that the narrator has observed, that there is a progressive deterioration of Israel's condition until the land is unable to recover its peace.

Part III: Appendix (17:1-21:25)

What is being termed "appendix" consists of two unrelated sorry stories that at first glance may appear to have been attached randomly to the previous narrative section. The stories are such that a spiritually sensitive reader is horrified by the conduct of Israel and almost wishes these stories could be struck from the record as being untrue and inadmissible. Bewer designates them as stories from the older JE book of hero tales that the Deuteronomist could not use because they contained no "judge" in them and were therefore unsuitable for his purpose.³¹ It is true that no "judge" appears in them, but historical information within chapters 17-21 (to be discussed in Chapter III) would indicate that these stories do not occur in chronological sequence after the narratives of Part II. Instead the events of these stories occur early, perhaps shortly after the death of Joshua.

This section is indeed purposeful. Its stories pick up elements stated in the introduction and describe a

³¹Bewer, The Literature of the Old Testament, 230.

quality of life³² that occurs early and appears to be the norm throughout the judges period. When the reader ponders the question, "How could Israel stoop to such behavior?", he observes that this section is framed by an inclusio: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25). This phrase not only indicates the spiritual and moral relativism at this time, but as the last line of the book, it echoes a theme that both opens Part I (1:1) and closes Part II (16:30, 31) --a leaderless Israel.³³

An additional comment on this section bound by the inclusio is necessary. This section is more than an inconsequential addendum to the book. It serves as a natural conclusion instead, for as Lilley has observed,

One feels that without chapters 17-21 the end of the book would display neither the literary skill nor the sense of history which characterizes its earlier portions. There would be neither climax nor summing up, nor any pointing forward.³⁴

Summary

To summarize, then, the narrator purposefully organizes the material of this book in three parts with

³²Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture, 259.

³³Theodore E. Mullen, "The 'Minor Judges': Some Literary and Historical Considerations," CBQ 44 (April 1982): 190.

³⁴Lilley, "Literary Appreciation of Judges," 99.

literary skill to portray graphically Israel's serious decline in the years spanning from Joshua's death to the rise of a united monarchy. In the introduction (1:1-3:6) he has included paradigms that prepare the reader for the record of Israel's failure. The narrator does not condemn Israel so much for its inability to drive out the Canaanites from their towns as he condemns the nation for failing "to stamp out Canaanite religion in the territory which they did occupy."³⁵ In the stories of the judges (3:7-16:31) the narrator records in chronological sequence Israel's repeated failures and the progressive deterioration of the nation. The reader comes to the end of the second section troubled by a haunting question: Why? Why did Israel repeatedly fail? The narrator answers this question in the appendix (17-21). "There was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." It seems obvious that the narrator regarded the evils of this period "as due to the absence of the strong, centralized authority of the monarchy."³⁶ There was a lack of continual, stable leadership, and political conditions at times bordered on anarchy. A moral relativism extended from idolatry to a breakdown in the social code among Israelites. The judicial system was apparently ineffective for there was no evidence

³⁵Ibid., 97.

³⁶A.E. Cundall, "Judges--An Apology for the Monarchy?" ExpTim 81 (1970): 180.

of a consistent court of appeals to which the Israelite could turn for justice. Cundall's summary is to the point:

The Judges period is shown as the "dark ages," when there was no unity, no peace, prosperity or security, no justice or righteousness. The Davidic dynasty had secured all these, and instead of a covenant constantly violated by erring Israel, the Sinaitic covenant had been renewed and strengthened by its incorporation into the covenant with the house of David. The advantages of the new administration, when compared with the dismal failure of the old in the Judges period, were apparent.³⁷

The narrator's explanation for Israel's failures helps the reader to understand better the times of the judges. It also depicts the setting into which the episodes that include women and their unexpected leadership roles are cast.

Literature, History and Inspiration

At first glance, these terms may appear to be incongruous and may tend to cause an uneasiness in the minds of some. But are the terms actually mutually exclusive? Part of the issue rides on the enormous problem of defining literature. What is it? Is the Bible literature? It is apparently believed so, for more and more universities are teaching courses in the Bible as literature.

Without stating what literature is, James Kugel seems unable to come to terms with the Bible as literature. For him the Bible is Scripture. He states, "The point is

³⁷Ibid.

that, in some important ways, the Bible is not literature, and that, more precisely, 'literary analysis' is not, simply because it exists, an operation to be performed on any text that comes along."³⁸ His doubt shows when he asks, "On what grounds can we declare the conclusions of what we call literary criticism to be valid interpretation without also including midrash?"³⁹ He is skeptical of the literary critics' ingenuity in finding symmetry in the narrative, their classifications of genres, and in general, their "self-consciously anachronistic set of rules." For him, the differentness of the Bible calls for some special consideration because it is Scripture.⁴⁰

Adele Berlin responds to Kugel, also without defining literature. For her the Bible as Scripture is not opposed to literature. She asks three penetrating questions:

Are there different rules for reading Scripture and non-Scripture? Is God's grammar of rhetoric different from man's? May we not judge religious works by the same standard as secular works?⁴¹

Berlin does not deny the uniqueness of the Bible, but she does view the Bible as ancient literature and opts for using

³⁸Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," 219.

³⁹Ibid., 224.

⁴⁰Ibid., 224-234.

⁴¹Adele Berlin, "On the Bible as Literature," Prooftexts 2 (1982): 324.

"modern literary competence as a tool for uncovering an ancient literary competence."⁴²

If the Bible is literature, is it nothing more? Ryken affirms that "the Bible is more than a work of literature, but it is not less," and he combines "three impulses" that account for the Bible's uniqueness: historical, theological, and literary.⁴³ These three "impulses" must be explored further, especially as they will relate to the book of Judges.

A large part of the Old Testament is commonly perceived as sacred history and so it is, for it records acts of God such as creating the world and working out his will in it, especially with regard to his covenant people, Israel. However, history in the Bible is more than just a cataloging of events, characters, and accomplishments arranged in some semblance of chronological sequence; it is also narrative. James G. Williams suggests that history must be narrative, because it is the narrative that gives the details coherence. As the historian tells the story, it is a story that is shaped by the narrator.⁴⁴ Alter also recognizes this shaping and sees a close relation to

⁴²Ibid., 326.

⁴³Leland Ryken, "'Words of Delight': The Bible as Literature," BSac 147 (January-March 1990): 9.

⁴⁴James G. Williams, Women Recounted: Narrative Thinking and the God of Israel, BL, 6 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), 24.

fiction. He writes of the Bible as "historicized prose fiction" or "fictionalized history."⁴⁵ With these terms he is implying that the biblical writers worked their historical data into the medium of prose.⁴⁶ These terms should not be necessarily objectionable to the evangelical reader as long as they are interpreted and used correctly. The Bible's historical accuracy must be insisted upon, but it must also be acknowledged that the reporting of events is not "objective," "neutral," or "unshaped." "An uninterpreted historical report is not even conceivable," Longman rightly insists.⁴⁷ This interpretative reporting is seen from the narrator's selectivity of material, the way he structured it, and what he chose to emphasize.

The book of Judges illustrates the point. It is a comparatively short account of a long period of history. The history is biographic. It tells what happened. It is also fragmentary. It relates only a few major events (e.g., only one event appears in story-form for approximately every fifty-five years of time⁴⁸). Even if an event happened,

⁴⁵Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 24-25.

⁴⁶In Alter's own view of biblical "history" (ibid., 33) is included "factual historical detail . . . with purely legendary 'history'; . . . vestiges of mythological lore; etiological stories; archetypal fictions."

⁴⁷Longman, "Literary Approach: Promise and Pitfalls," 395.

⁴⁸If the dates of Wood, The Distressing Days of the Judges, 11, are followed.

why was it recorded? Why was one event considered worthy of inclusion when another event was not?

The narrator does not spell out the answers to these questions, but quite clearly he has been selective. He wishes to inform his reader of what God and Israel did, but it is selective history. It is not random selectivity, picking and choosing capriciously, but theological. Judges can rightly be termed a theological history. It is a true and accurate account that is condensed into a short form in order to accomplish a theological purpose. In other words, the reader is not simply told what happened, but he is also instructed as to why it happened. As the reader witnesses Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh he learns that disobedience forfeits the blessings of God.

If the historical accuracy and the theological significance of that history is important, should it not be expected that its manner of reporting should also be noteworthy? Why are some events of Judges given as dialogue while other events are reported without dialogue? Why did the narrator choose to express something a particular way? Why are some seemingly insignificant details even mentioned? The reader may never fully know the answers to these questions, but Burke Long suggests that the implication is that the narrator's considerations were not only historical and theological, but were also literary. The narrator's imagination and his desire to express events dramatically is

evident.⁴⁹ Patrick and Scult's comment on the purpose of the biblical narrator employing narrative for reporting history deserves quoting.

The narrative form as they employed it was much better suited than the chronicle as a way to realize the divine rhetorical impulse: (sic) By placing God's historical interventions in a coherent narrative frame, the meaning of those interventions for how people should live their lives could be made persuasive--made into "an object of desire."⁵⁰

The narrative, then, of Judges is both historical and theological. The narrator relates human experiences in story-form in a structural and literary manner, artfully employing literary devices that will captivate the thoughtful attention of his reader.

Viewing Judges from this literary standpoint in no way impugns the inspiration and inerrancy of the text. Kept in proper perspective, a literary analysis of Judges is not incompatible with its historicity and inspiration. Behind the writing of Judges is the Holy Spirit's inspiration. The Holy Spirit's work, however, did not render the work of the human author unnecessary. He located, selected, and prepared the material, but the Holy Spirit superintended his work from beginning to end, controlling his mind, guiding him to truth, and enabling him to write artistically. In

⁴⁹Burke O. Long, "Historical Narrative and Fictionalizing Imagination," VT 35 (October 1985): 415.

⁵⁰Dale Patrick and Allen Scult, Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation, JSOTSup, 82 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 37.

other words, Judges represents the combined literary style of its divine and human authors.

The Literary Genre of Judges

Thus far attention has been drawn to three matters:

1. the great stride in biblical studies to recognize the literary quality of Scripture and the importance of that recognition to biblical interpretation; 2. the narrator's purposeful arrangement of his material to portray graphically the critical spiritual and moral decay that left Israel virtually bankrupt of leadership; 3. the fact that recognition of Judges' literary qualities, historical accuracy and credibility, and its inspiration are not contradictory notions. On previous pages the term "narrative" has been used rather loosely to include the "words" of Judges or the "stories" of Judges. Now attention must focus more technically, but only briefly, on the term as the literary genre of Judges. Recognition of the literary genre will affect how the writer's material will be handled and interpreted.

The identification of literary genres in the Old Testament is somewhat subjective, varying according to the analyses of different literary scholars. Norman Gottwald, for instance, has compiled an impressive list of genres

found in the Old Testament.⁵¹ He names forty different genres under six classifications that are found in the historical and legal writings alone. Six different examples are cited from Judges. As an anthology of separate works, the Bible contains a mixture of genres. The main literary genres (by broadest definition) are narrative, poetry, proverb, and visionary writing.⁵² Ryken comments that "historical writing often moves in the direction of narrative by virtue of its experiential concreteness or the principles of pattern and artistry that it exhibits."⁵³

All will agree that Judges falls in the literary genre of narrative. More precisely, the genre is historical narrative (although the issue whether the material is fact, fiction, or a combination of both is irrelevant and of no concern to some⁵⁴), but it is more than a historical chronicle. It is not a theological treatise, but it does deliver a theological message. The narrator was concerned to show that the religious experience after the death of Joshua was disastrous. The book is not poetry, but it includes poetry for in the story of Deborah the reader is

⁵¹Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction, 99-101.

⁵²Leland Ryken, Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 16.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 33.

informed that she and Barak sang the song which appears in poetic verse (Judg 5). As a historical narrative, then, Judges presents plot and characters realistically according to the rules of ordinary human experience, and recounts what the particular events were, how they happened, and to some extent, the theological implications. Thus the reader can expect to find in Judges what Ryken calls the "four modes of narration"⁵⁵: 1. direct narrative, the simple reporting of events; 2. dramatic narrative, dramatizing the scene and quoting speeches; 3. description, describing the details of the setting or the character; 4. commentary, explanations of the narrator about details of the story.⁵⁶

Can the historical narrative of Judges be further defined? Is the narrative merely a series of hero (and anti-hero) stories, an epic, a tragedy, a comedy, or perhaps a satire? Which of these suggestions might best distinguish the narrative of Judges and contribute most to a proper understanding of the book? This study will opt for tragedy and will develop that notion in the following chapter.

⁵⁵Ryken, Words of Delight, 43.

⁵⁶Examples of the four "modes of narration" can be seen in the opening verses of Judges 14: description (v 1), dramatic narrative (vv 2-3), commentary (v 4), and direct narrative (vv 5ff.).

Summary of Chapter II

This chapter has shown that rhetorical criticism *per se* has not fared well in biblical studies until recent decades. An awareness of the literariness of Scripture and a literary approach to its interpretation has impacted on the study of Judges. Critics now tend to see the book as one of unity and purposeful arrangement. Thus it can be emphasized that all its parts, including stories of women, are part of the artistic design of the narrator to communicate what conditions were like in the Judges period. His artistry of writing and historical reporting do not impugn on the inspiration of the text, for all was supernaturally superintended by the Holy Spirit. With divine assistance the narrator writes literature that is commonly called narrative and that coincides with descriptive and dramatic recording of historical events.

CHAPTER III

THE NARRATIVE OF JUDGES AS TRAGEDY

Introduction to the Genre

To understand why the literary designation "tragedy" is seen in this study to apply to the book of Judges it is necessary to present here a brief overview of this literary genre. Ryken describes tragedy this way:

The one common denominator in all tragedies is the downward movement of the plot from positive experience to catastrophe. The tragic hero begins in an exalted position and ends in disgrace and usually death. The key element in this downward plunge in the action is some great mistake that the hero makes. The element of choice is essential to the tragic plot. . . . Tragedy thus focuses on the destructive potential of evil in the human experience.¹

He elaborates by calling attention to six phases normally found in tragedy.² First, tragedy begins with the hero's dilemma. He finds himself in a situation which demands a choice. Second, the hero makes a moral choice. Third, this choice results in catastrophe for the hero. Fourth, this catastrophe is accompanied by suffering for the hero. Fifth, near the end of the action, the hero arrives at some

¹Ryken, Words of Delight, 145.

²Ibid.

perception or insight into what went wrong. Sixth, the tragedy normally ends in the death of the hero.

Lee Humphreys introduces two other features of tragedy in his discussion of this genre, the concepts of fate and flaw.³ Simply stated, tragedies of fate are those in which the hero is the victim of forces that thwart full human potential. His world is flawed, restrictive, but he is entrapped within it nevertheless. Such is the tragedy commonly portrayed in non-biblical literature. In tragedies of flaw, however, the tragic hero is himself flawed. This point relates to Ryken's second phase noted above. The actions and decisions of the hero are very important. He is more than a dumb beast driven by instincts. So when decisions or choices are made, they determine the hero's course of life, for he is compelled to live by them, often suffering as a result. His choices had been made in the face of genuine alternatives, so he is held responsible for his deeds and he reaps what he sows.

Therefore, as Ryken points out, in tragedy the focus is on the hero, the protagonist, not so much on the circumstances that surround him. The protagonist is responsible for his downfall because he has initiated his own tragedy. Therefore he is deserving of tragedy because it stemmed from

³W. Lee Humphreys, The Tragic Vision and the Hebrew Tradition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 3-6.

a flaw of his character.⁴ Ryken further elaborates that the protagonist is especially responsible in biblical tragedy because the issues are clearly defined before choices are made. The protagonist knows what choice he should make, but he does not because of a root sin--disobedience to God.⁵

Most literary scholars agree that there are very few full-fledged tragedies in Hebrew scriptures. Thus they may refer to the "spirit of tragedy"⁶ or the "tragic vision"⁷ that sometimes appears in the Bible. Humphreys finds that the two most extensive developments of tragic vision group around two crises in the life of Israel--the formation of the empire and the destruction of Jerusalem.⁸ Ryken cites Samson and Saul as examples of protagonists in biblical tragedy,⁹ but neither Ryken nor Humphreys cite the period of the judges as tragic or the narrative of Judges as tragedy like this study is about to do.

⁴Ryken, Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible, 146.

⁵Ibid., 155.

⁶Ibid., 146-148.

⁷Note Humphreys' book title, The Tragic Vision and the Hebrew Tradition.

⁸Ibid., 136.

⁹Ryken, Words of Delight, 145-155.

First, a question must be addressed. A story normally has as its leading character a hero or protagonist. In each of the individual stories in Judges that person is usually easily identifiable. But is there a protagonist to be identified for the narrative of Judges as a literary unit (with all its parts)? Stemmer offers the curious suggestion that the nations (3:3) that God used to test Israel are the principal protagonists.¹⁰ Perhaps he should be faulted merely for a poor selection of terms, for it seems senseless to argue that these nations are equivalent to a leading personality in a story, especially when the nations do not appear consistently throughout the narrative. It seems more appropriate to consider them as a series of antagonists in the narrative.

It might be more logical to consider Yahweh to be the protagonist. Obviously God is the focal Person of the Bible and he is certainly a central figure in Judges. He is the One Israel rejects, disobeys, appeals to for help and deliverance. He remains faithful even though Israel is unfaithful.

It is suggested here, however, that the real protagonist is Israel.¹¹ It may seem irregular for a nation and

¹⁰Stemmer, "The Introduction to Judges, 2:1-3:4," 241.

¹¹Lillian R. Klein, The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges, BL, 14, and JSOTSup, 68 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 16-18, concurs that Israel is the protagonist.

not a lone individual to be considered the protagonist, yet it should be quite apparent that Judges as a whole does indeed concern Israel. It is the nation as it existed in this critical period of time that is the narrator's point of focus. It is the nation that continually makes bad choices and finds itself in disastrous straits.

The narrative account of the experiences of Israel in Judges certainly fits the literary model of tragedy. This is not to suggest that it was the conscious purpose of the writer to write in this genre, but his historical narrative fits the description of tragedy as portrayed by literary scholars. What is normally said of a person, the hero in tragedy (noted above), can be said of Israel. For example, the book begins with Israel in a favorable position. The nation has made initial, positive strides in conquering Canaan under Joshua's leadership. Israel is in Canaan, but there is a dilemma. Joshua is dead. There are still people to conquer and land to take. Israel makes a bad choice, however. It chooses not only to tolerate the presence of those remaining peoples, but also to serve their gods at the expense of Yahweh. This choice results in catastrophe as Yahweh sells them into the hand of their enemies, bringing distress and suffering. How much perception or insight into what was wrong is debatable, but it is clear that God always

She also proposes that Yahweh is "the antagonist to the political, non-ethical, mundane values of Israel" (18).

prevented their complete destruction although they seemed bent on it.

Some may argue that with the happy, prosperous ending that is prophetically promised to Israel, the narrative of Israel's history is more closely aligned with the genre of comedy. Such reasoning may accurately pertain to Israel's total history which is still unfolding, but in the book of Judges there is not the faintest hint of the U-shaped plot, that rise to a happy ending after tragic events, that is characteristic of comedy.¹² Therefore the book is viewed as a historical narrative with the additional characteristics of tragedy. It is in this literary context of tragedy that this study deals with the narrator's use of the feminine gender as one of his literary devices. First, however, evidences of tragedy from the book must be examined.

¹²Robert G. Boling, "In Those Days There Was No King In Israel," in A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Meyers, eds. Howard N. Bream, Ralph D. Heim, and Carey A. Moore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 35, argues that the chapters 1 and 19-21 provide the entire book of Judges with a "tragicomic" framework. He states that the book, "in its finished form, begins with the historical Israel starting to fall apart in the wake of initial military successes (ch 1) and ends with a very delicate, persistent ideal, Israel, reunited at last in the wake of the tragic civil war with Benjamin. . . ." Boling's argument is unacceptable for two reasons: 1. his estimate of Israel as "united" in chapters 19-21 is exaggerated; 2. his argument is based on the Benjamin story's position in the book, not its position in history.

Indications of Tragedy

There are two complementary paradigms in Judges 2 containing several phrases that can be considered leitmotive. These appear repeatedly throughout the book and function to unify the book thematically. These paradigms and leitmotive not only enable the reader to view the literary genre as tragedy, but also see Israel's history as tragic.

Paradigm of Judges 2:11-16

Writers consistently draw attention to the cyclic nature of the events/stories of the narrative of Judges, and how these stories align or nearly align to the formulaic pattern introduced in Judges 2:11-19. Writers often observe six stages set forth in this pattern: 1. Israel does evil in Yahweh's eyes; 2. Yahweh's anger burns and he gives/sells Israel into the hand of an oppressor; 3. Israel cries to Yahweh in repentance; 4. Yahweh raises up a deliverer; 5. the oppressor is defeated and Israel is delivered; and 6. the land has a period of rest from an oppressor. These steps are variously numbered and described¹³ but Cheryl

¹³Compare the pattern in two different kinds of studies. Irving L. Jensen, Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), has five stages: rest/rebellion/retribution/repentance/restoration. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward an Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 136, has apostasy/punishment/repentance/divine compassion/a deliverer/a period of rest in the land. Most evangelicals stress repentance as the turning point in the cyclic pattern.

Exum is more correct when she states that the pattern is not "apostasy/punishment/repentance/deliverance, but rather one of apostasy/punishment/cry for help/deliverance" (italics added).¹⁴ Polzin has narrowed the pattern to just two stages: punishment and mercy.¹⁵ Israel's apostasy or return to sin is not seen as the recurring first step in each cycle because Israel never repented and broke from apostasy, but persisted in it.

The pattern scholars have formulated for the cycles of stories is not one and the same as found in the two paradigms in 2:11-19. The following discussion will show that neither repentance nor a cry for help is included in the paradigms even though a "cry" does occur several times in the narrative.

The paradigm of Judges 2:11-16 is the backdrop for the stories which follow in 3:7-16:31. It can be divided under three simple headings:

2:11-13	Israel's Apostasy
2:14-15	Yahweh's Anger
2:16	Yahweh's Compassion

Each of these points will be treated individually.

¹⁴J. Cheryl Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges" CBQ 52 (July 1990): 411.

¹⁵Polzin, Moses and the Deuteronomist, 154.

Israel's apostasy

Israel's apostasy must be viewed against repeated warnings. Moses clearly admonished Israel to serve the Lord in Deuteronomy 10:12-13. In summary, God required Israel to fear him, to walk in his ways, to love him, and to serve him wholeheartedly for their good. Obedience to Moses' words would be good and right in the eyes of Yahweh (Deut 12:28). Before his death Moses was warned that Israel would forsake Yahweh, go after foreign deities and Yahweh's anger would burn against them (Deut 31:16-17). And before Joshua's death he warned Israel twice to serve only Yahweh or his anger would turn on them (Josh 23:3-16; 24:14-15). Israel failed to heed these many warnings and the words of Deuteronomy 31:16-17 are virtually mirrored here.

The narrator's vivid description of Israel's apostasy in 2:11-13 is made more apparent by the following arrangement of consecutive lines.

Lead statement: the sons of Israel did (וַיַּעַשׂוּ) evil in the sight of Yahweh

- A. they served (וַיַּעֲבָדוּ) the Baals
- B. they forsook (וַיַּעֲזֹבוּ) Yahweh
 - they went (וַיֵּלְכוּ) after other gods
- C. they bowed down (וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ) to them
 - they provoked to anger (וַיִּכְעֲסוּ) Yahweh
- B¹. they forsook (וַיַּעֲזֹבוּ) Yahweh
- A¹. they served (וַיַּעֲבָדוּ) Baal and Ashtoreth

Several observations are worthy of mention. First, this part of the paradigm stands in direct antithesis to 2:7, "the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua." While Joshua was alive, Israel served (עָבַד) Yahweh, but when Joshua died and Israel did evil, they served (עָבַד) Baal. Second, the phrase, "the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord," a recurring leitmotiv (to be discussed later), is the opening statement to the paradigm and needs further definition.¹⁶ The narrator promptly provides seven supplementary verbs (served, forsook, went after, bowed down, provoked to anger, forsook, served) which clearly set forth "the evil" (רָעָה) that Israel did. Third, notice the concentric arrangement of the verbs and the emphatic repetition of "served" and "forsook" which frame the center. It is possible that the narrator also intended for his reader to detect the assonance of the first three verbs (וַיַּעֲבֹד, וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶי, וַיִּזְנוּ) as they point the reader to the center. Fourth, the first two verbs of the center explain further the verb "forsook." When Israel forsook Yahweh, they went after other deities and bowed to them. Fifth, the

¹⁶Frederick E. Greenspahn, "The Theology of the Framework of Judges," VT 36 (October 1986): 386, is wrong when he states that Israel's wickedness is neither identified nor described.

third verb of the center, כָּעַס, is not strictly synonymous to הִתְרַחֵץ of 2:14 (the latter is a stronger term), but its concept points the reader ahead to what follows as a result of God's anger (2:14-15). Sixth, in addition to the chiastic arrangement of the verbs, the deity Baal functions as a further inclusio to this section. It is serious enough that Israel has forsaken Yahweh, but to serve a substitute, Baal (and Ashtoreth) makes Israel's evil-doing more grave. The narrator has carefully and forcefully described Israel's wickedness. He recapitulates their wickedness in 2:17 and boils it down in one phrase, "they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them."¹⁷ Gros Louis summarizes:

Their sin is obviously infidelity, but infidelity of a very special kind. As the language indicates, the Israelites continually prostitute themselves. They turn away from a loyal lover, break a covenant, make leagues with others, forsake their lover, bow to others, serve others, corrupt themselves, . . .¹⁸

Before Joshua's death Israel made a choice to serve Yahweh. They said, "We will serve the Lord" (Josh 24:14-24). After the death of Joshua, the following generation was in a similar dilemma. They had to make a choice--to

¹⁷Phyllis Bird, "'To Play the Harlot': An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor," in Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), believes this phrase's earliest metaphorical use is found in the book of Hosea.

¹⁸Gros Louis, "The Book of Judges," 144.

in the subsequent narrative, the phrase "he gave/sold them into the hand of the enemy" remains (3:12; 4:1; 6:1; 13:1). This observation supports the notion that the two phrases are complementary. Although the former phrase is a stronger statement of God's anger than the lone verb **נָסַח** in 2:12, the latter phrase gives substance to Yahweh's anger, showing how his anger worked out in action.

An important leitwort in Judges is "hand" (**יָד**). Time and again the word is used metaphorically to denote someone subjected to or delivered from the power or control of another. In this paradigm Yahweh both gives/sells Israel into the hand (**יָד**) of plunderers (2:14) and delivers Israel from the hand (**יָד**) of plunderers (2:16). The phrase "the hand of Yahweh was against them" (2:15) adds significance to the aforementioned action of Yahweh's anger. It was meant to be punishment, and the narrator comments, "it distressed them exceedingly."

Distress for Israel because Yahweh's hand was against them is what the reader should expect in tragedy. Israel made bad choices for which it now suffered at the hand of the God it had forsaken. The stories that follow in the text serve to amplify in detail what the paradigm adumbrates.

Yahweh's compassion

This third phase of the paradigm (2:16) is often treated as two stages: first Yahweh raised up a judge and then, second, he delivered Israel from oppression by the instrument, the judge. Here both stages are viewed as one action--Yahweh delivering Israel.

Admittedly nowhere in 2:16 is there any mention of Yahweh's compassion. However, there is no reason given why Yahweh delivered Israel. The paradigm anticipates 2:18 where Yahweh "was moved to pity (חָנַן) by their groaning."

Both the paradigm and subsequent stories reveal apostasy (evidence of bad moral choices) and oppression (evidence of suffering); each are an evidence of tragic narrative. The third phase of this paradigm, however, Yahweh's compassion and deliverance, at first glance may be considered to be the happy ending of the U-shaped plot of comedy. However, when this paradigm is compared to the complementary paradigm of 2:17-19, it will be seen as something other than comedy.

Complementary Paradigm of Judges 2:17-19

It was pointed out earlier in this chapter that for many scholars an important stage in the formulaic pattern for the book is Israel's repentance which led Yahweh to respond with deliverance. There is no hint of such a notion in the paradigmatic cycle of 2:11-16. Never is it said that

Yahweh delivered Israel because that nation repented. Yet this notion persists. After taking his reader step by step through the supposed cycle, Kaiser concludes with

"they cried to Yahweh" (Judg. 3:9; 4:3; cf. also 1 Sam. 12:19)--and there it was. Misery would finally find a voice and in her despair, Israel would "return" (šûb) to the Lord.

The basis for this injunction was to be found in Deuteronomy 30:1-10. Three times the catchword "to return" was repeated (vv. 2, 8, 10). "If you will turn back to Yahweh your God with all our heart and with all your soul," then God would again bless His people.¹⁹

Several objections to Kaiser's statement must be raised. First, Israel's "cry" to the Lord (to be discussed later in this chapter) does not appear in the paradigms of 2:11-16 or 2:17-19 (though inferred in "groaning" of 2:18). Neither does it appear in the text (1 Sam 12:19) Kaiser asks his reader to compare. Second, never is it said in Judges that Israel returned (שׁוּב) to Yahweh. Twice the verb is used of Israel's return to sin (2:19; 8:33). Third, the injunction of Deuteronomy 30:1-10 pertains to a people scattered among the nations. It does not prevent a merciful God from coming to the physical rescue of his covenant people in their land apart from repentance.

It is necessary to examine the features of the paradigm in 2:17-19 before offering additional comments. The lines of these verses can be arranged as follows.

¹⁹Kaiser, Old Testament Theology, 137.

Introductory statement: but even to their judges they did not listen

- v. 17 they played the harlot (זָנוּ) after other gods
they bowed themselves (וַיִּשְׁתָּחוּ) to them
A. they turned aside (סָרוּ) from the way . . .
fathers had walked
they did not do (עָשׂוּ) thus
- v. 18 Yahweh raised up (הָקִים) judges
Yahweh was (וַהֲיָה) with the judges
B. he delivered them (וַהֲשִׁיעֵם) out of the
hand of their enemies
Yahweh took pity (יָנַחם)
- v. 19 they would turn (יִשְׁבוּ)
they would act more corruptly (וַהֲשַׁחֲתוּ) than
their fathers
A¹. to go (לָלֶכֶת) after other gods
to serve them (לְעַבְדָם)
to bow themselves (וַיִּשְׁתָּחוּ) to them

Summary Statement: they had not ceased (הִפְּלִיּוּ) from their practices and stubborn way

The opening statement of 2:17 deserves special attention. It not only introduces this paradigm, but it does so with special emphasis. Normally the Hebrew sentence begins with the verb, but not here. Instead it opens with וְנִם אֶל־שֹׁפְטֵיהֶם in the emphatic position, presenting a contrast to what the reader expects. In 2:16 Yahweh raised up judges. Surely Israel will listen to them, but no, "even to the judges Israel does not listen." Although the narrator never speaks of judges attempting to instruct Israel in obedience to Yahweh, such an attempt is indeed implied here.

Perhaps Deborah, a prophetess and a judge was one who made the effort but was unsuccessful.

Israel's failure to listen (or obey) should remind the reader of the seemingly positive but ominous statement in 2:7: "And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua." Granted, a tremendous amount of information is lacking in Judges, but it is significant that the text never says "the people served Yahweh during the days (or the remaining days) of X" (any of the judges). The most that can be said is that while a victorious judge was alive, Israel lived in peace.²⁰

Israel's peace is a related issue that warrants brief mention. Four times (3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28) the text says the land "had rest" (שָׁקֵט) for x amount of years. Austel comments, "The basic meaning of the root [שָׁקֵט] is 'tranquility.' It implies the absence of strife, war on the one hand, and worry or anxiety on the other."²¹ With reference to Judges and this verb he remarks further:

Judges shows a pattern of peace, then apostasy, oppression, deliverance, followed once again by peace and rest from war and oppression. This state of peace and tranquility is clearly seen to be

²⁰Cf. Polzin, Moses and the Deuteronomist, 157.

²¹TWOT, s.v. "שָׁקֵט," by Herman J. Austel, 2.953.

dependent on, and a direct result of, God's blessing on an obedient people (emphasis added).²²

Austel attributes Israel's rest to (implied) repentance and obedience, something the narrator of Judges does not do. Austel's judgment may be correct for the reigns of Asa (2 Chr 14:1, 5-6) and Jehoshophat (2 Chr 20:30) where it clearly states that God gave them rest, but in Judges it is simply, "the land had rest."

As the first part of the first paradigm was concentrically arranged, so is this second paradigm. All the verbs of verse 17 and 19 are 3rd plural with Israel clearly the subject whereas the verbs of verse 18 are 3rd singular with Yahweh as the subject. Thus the merciful action of Yahweh is framed by the apostate deeds of Israel. The narrator's portrayal of Israel's evil-doing is very graphic, describing their deed as playing the harlot (זָנָה). Both framing groups of verbs reiterate key details from verse 12: Israel went after other deities and they bowed themselves to them.

One verb in verse 19 may give the reader cause to believe that Israel repented of its evil doing. Seemingly as a matter of routine, when a judge died, Israel returned (שָׁבָה) and acted more corruptly than before. Does this verse imply, then, that previously Israel had turned from its sin

²²Ibid.

to God? Only twice is שׁוּב used of Israel in Judges (here and 8:33). Both times it is in a context of returning to sin. Within its shades of meaning is the nuance "again."²³ The use of שׁוּב in 8:33 where NASB translates "again" may be helpful in determining its meaning in 2:19.

In 8:33 Israel again played the harlot (שׁוּבָה) with the Baals. Preceding this statement the judge Gideon had made himself an ephod and all Israel played the harlot with it (8:27). After Gideon's death, Israel again (שׁוּבָה) played the harlot with Baals. After Gideon's death, Israel merely exchanged one harlotry for another. There is no suggestion that the nation had ever broken with harlotry under Gideon's period of leadership. Perhaps this is why Israel was so quick to embrace Gideon's ephod.

Thus it could be that the most שׁוּב suggests in 2:19 is that while the judge remained alive, there was a brief lull in Israel's apostasy. Apparently hearts or attitudes had not changed for Israel only waited for the opportunity to resume old ways.

Positioned between the narrator's accounting of Israel's persistent acts of apostasy and in the center of the paradigm is a return to God's deliverance. Archer

²³BDB, 998; and TWOT, s.v. "שׁוּב," by Victor P. Hamilton, 2.909.

properly notes that "the purpose of this book is not to glorify Israel's ancestors, . . . but rather to glorify the grace of the God of Israel,"²⁴ and that is especially demonstrated here. Yahweh's mercy and grace are clearly viewed in stark contrast to Israel's disobedience. The act of elevating a judge was one of Yahweh's initiative.²⁵ He responded to Israel's groaning from oppression and delivered Israel, not because he felt any obligation due to repentance on Israel's part, but because he was moved to pity despite their lack of repentance.

Finally, this paradigm concludes with a summary statement. "They had not ceased (לֹא עָלָו) from their practices and their stubborn ways." This final statement stands alone. Its predicate is not connected by a conjunction to the preceding predicates. The Hebrew verb form is in the grammatical perfect aspect which is most frequently translated into the English past tense, but sometimes is represented by the English pluperfect.²⁶ In this summary statement the pluperfect seems to be the better option. The narrator explains Israel's persistence in apostasy despite

²⁴Gleason L. Archer, Jr., A Survey of Old Testament Introduction (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 264.

²⁵Mullen, "The 'Minor Judges,'" 191. Jephthah appears to be an exception (cf. 10:17-11:6).

²⁶Ronald J. Williams, Hebrew Syntax: An Outline (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 30, § 162.

Yahweh's deliverance. After a judge would die, the nation would return to their former ways (though even more corruptly) because they had never ceased from those practices in the first place. Israel consciously chose to persist in apostasy despite the continual distress and suffering it brought. This is tragedy. The conclusion that Israel failed to repent will find additional support in the following phrase to be discussed.

"The Sons of Israel Did Evil in the
Sight (eyes) of the Lord"

This lead statement of the first paradigm (2:11) becomes the basis for a recurring leitmotiv in the main body of stories in Judges. The phrase appears in a variant form seven times at six different locations (3:7, 12 (twice); 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).

The recurrence of this phrase has elicited various explanations by different scholars. For many it is nothing more than a stylized introduction to the account of the individual judges and is evidence of some late editor's work in integrating the various narratives.²⁷ For Gunn it is a simple connecting device, giving unity to the book.²⁸ Although Grant and Wood's views concerning the sources of

²⁷Cf. Cundall, "Judges--An Apology for the Monarchy?" 178; and Driver, Introduction to Literature, 167.

²⁸Gunn, "Joshua and Judges," 105. Cf. also Block, "Period of the Judges," 47.

Judges are unacceptable, their conclusion concerning this phrase is very perceptive.

Each of these passages [the six stories introduced by "Israel did evil. . . ."] is the text of a prophetic sermon, designed to show that Israel's national safety lies only in the service of Jehovah. The author looked over the old stories of his people's history, and found tales which he thought he could use to teach this lesson; but he would not leave the readers to draw their own conclusions. Again and again he repeated the truth he wished to teach (emphasis added).²⁹

Grant and Wood detected a literary technique that many writers overlooked until the more recent studies of rhetoric--the technique of repetition. Alter recognizes that for many readers of biblical narrative, repetitions appear quite primitive and that commentaries have often attributed their presence to oral origins, a background of folklore, or a composite nature of the text that has been transmitted. However he remarks, "under scrutiny most instances of repetition prove to be quite purposeful."³⁰ Ryken concurs, "Repetition is often the best clue to what a story is about."³¹ Ryken's comment is apropos to this phrase under discussion and the book of Judges.

Israel's sin in the eyes of the Lord is even more significant when seen against the contrasting inclusio of the two stories in the so-called appendix--"everyone did

²⁹Grant and Wood, Bible as Literature, 128.

³⁰Alter, Art of Biblical Studies, 89.

³¹Ryken, Words of Delight, 83.

what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25). Israel had received a mandate from Moses and Joshua against the very deeds in which they were involved. In a time of moral and spiritual relativism, however, Israel chose to ignore divine instruction and to do instead what met their approval. It is important to understand what Israel never seemed to grasp: what was right in Israel's eyes was evil in Yahweh's eyes.

Without going into the disappointing and sickening details of the final two stories squeezed between the *inclusio*, it is necessary to establish the approximate time of their happening. The first story (chs 17-18) occurs during the life of Jonathan (18:30), the grandson of Moses.³² The second story (chs 19-21) occurs during the priesthood of Phinehas (20:28), the grandson of Aaron. Both stories, then, involve people just three generations removed from the exodus from Egypt. This sets the time very early in the judges period, probably shortly after the death of Joshua and before any of the judges in the main body of the book.

The events of the stories occurred early but their appearance at the end of the book serves a purpose. In

³²Most English translations read "Manasseh" instead of "Moses," following the MT. But for full discussion of the suspended *nûn*, see George F. Moore, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895), 400-402. See also Boling, Judges, 266; and Soggin, Judges, 268.

answer to the reader's query "Why did Israel persist in wickedness, doing evil in the sight of Yahweh?" the position of these stories at the end of Judges show that chapters 17-21 were intended to characterize climactically the whole period of the judges from a particular point of view that is manifestly clear from the *inclusio*.³³ The manner of living depicted of Israel in these chapters is what should be expected from a society that is governed, not by God's mandates, but by what seems right to each person. If these stories are early and conditions progressively deteriorated as 2:19 indicates, it can only be imagined what choice stories of spiritual debauchery the narrator could have included from the other end of the judges period.³⁴

"The Sons of Israel Again Did Evil"

On four occasions the phrase just discussed above appears with an additional idiom, וְיָסְפוּ . . . לַעֲשׂוֹת

³³Shemaryahu Talmon, "In Those Days There Was No King in Israel," *Immanuel* 5 (1975): 33, believes that the *inclusio* "actually praises the rule of Israel by the judges and epitomizes the transition from the period of the elders who followed after Joshua, . . ." Dumbrell, "No King in Israel," 30, believes a post-exilic writer sees the *inclusio* as a recommendation for post-exilic Israel, once again without a king, "to do what was right before Yahweh without any sacral political apparatus to get in the way."

³⁴On the individual level, the old man of Jerusalem offered his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine to the perverse crowd to ravish and to do, he said, "the good in your eyes" (19:24). The last judge, Samson, chose his wife from the Philistines because, he said, "She is right in my eyes" (14:3, cf. v 7).

(literally, "they added to do"). Its meaning is important and must be considered for it is believed that it reinforces the thesis that Israel did not repent when oppression came.

Virtually all English versions (e.g., KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, JB, NEB, NASB, NIV) translate the phrase and the idiom thus: "the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord." This rendering has an interesting implication. For some action to be done again, it implies that that action has ceased for a while, then resumed once again. Therefore it could be argued that Israel had ceased from apostasy (repented), thus prompting God to raise up a judge for their deliverance, but then they eventually apostasized once again after the judge had died.

The idiom consists of the Hiphil imperfect form of the verb הוסיף ("to add") plus the infinitive of עשה ("to do"), thus "he/it added to do," i.e., "to do again."³⁵ However הוסיף also carries the meaning of "to continue" when it is tied to an infinitive.³⁶ Boling argues that the

³⁵BDB, 415.

³⁶William L. Holladay, A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 137. KB, 386, cites several instances where the idiom is best rendered "to continue": Gen 4:12; Exod 5:7; Num 22:26; Josh 7:12; 2 Sam 3:34; Amos 7:8; Hos 9:15.

idiom means "again" only with the addition of the particle עוֹר, citing as an example 11:14.³⁷

"To continue" implies that the action (idolatry in this case) had not ceased. There had been no repentance. This meaning seems to fit best the context, especially in light of the paradigm in 2:17-19. Even after Yahweh had delivered them, they did not listen to their judges (implying that they did not serve the Lord even while the judges lived). They turned back (after a brief lull) because they had not ceased their practice. To cite Goslinga, "Once again they openly committed deeds that were hateful to the Lord, particularly idolatry and the sins related to it" (emphasis added).³⁸ His inference is that Israel did not repent inwardly, but merely refrained from blatant outward idolatry for a short time.

Noth sees a slightly different nuance in the idiom, but his observation nevertheless supports the thesis being presented here. He states that the "Dtr [Deuteronomist] probably means by wyspw, which introduces most of the section . . . , '(their evil doing) became worse still,'

³⁷Boling, Judges, 85. Webb, Book of Judges, 221 (note 2), cautions against dogmatism on this point of syntax.

³⁸Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 280.

since he has stated in the introduction that each successive generation behaved worse than their fathers."³⁹

The point is, Israel had ample opportunity to repent, to reverse the bad moral choices that occasioned the distress Yahweh sent their way. Instead they took advantage of the deliverance that came to them. They disregarded the Deliverer (Yahweh, who raised up the judge) and chose to persist in the course they had set for themselves. What was said above concerning repetition needs to be underscored here also. The repetitious "Israel continued to do evil in the sight of the Lord" not only gives a certain cohesion to the several episodes it introduces, it also focuses the reader's special attention on Israel's continued callous failure to serve the God who in mercy and grace had just come to their rescue.

"The Sons of Israel Cried to the Lord"

The verb צעק/צעק⁴⁰ ("cry out") is not found in either of the two paradigms already discussed (2:11-16; 17-19) but it is an important leitwort in Judges, especially in the introduction to several episodes (3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6, 7; 10:10). It is prima facie evidence that is probably the

³⁹Martin Noth, The Deuteronomistic History, trans. Jane Doull and rev. John Barton et al, JSOTSup, 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 44.

⁴⁰The two forms are viewed as synonymous in the lexicons.

strongest support for the thesis that after periods of oppression Israel finally cried out to Yahweh in repentance and he was then able to bless the nation with deliverance from its oppressors.⁴¹

The primary meaning of the verb is "cry, cry out, call."⁴² It is an emotion-filled utterance, an agonizing cry of someone in acute distress who is calling for help and seeking immediate assistance in affliction.⁴³ The verb is found in a variety of settings with slightly differing nuances. The cry may be a complaint or protest against injustice (Gen 4:10; Exod 22:22 [Heb]; 2 Sam 13:19), an appeal directed to a higher authority against an offender. It may be a cry of desperation when no one is present to help (Deut 22:24, 27). It may be "a general outcry against an unbearable situation in which it is not a plea addressed to anyone, but it is simply an undirected grieving"⁴⁴

⁴¹See Soggin, Judges, 39, who inserts "But they cried" into the text of v 16 because "as well as being required by the logic of the text (Yahweh can reply only to a particular request, to a lament) it appears in 3:9, 15; 6:6; 10:10 and gives the idea that penitence follows punishment and precedes salvation."

⁴²BDB, 277, 858.

⁴³TDOT, s.v. "זעק," by G. Hasel, 4.115.

⁴⁴Walter Brueggemann, "Social Criticism and Social Vision in the Deuteronomic Formula of the Judges," in Die Botschaft und die Boten: Festschrift für Hans Walter Wolff zum 70. Geburtstag, ed. J. Jeremias and L. Perlitt (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 109.

(Esth 4:1). Regardless of the verb's nuances, Hebrew scholars are in agreement: the verb means essentially "to cry out in distress." This response of Israel was quite apropos; when Yahweh's hand was against them for evil, "it distressed them exceedingly" (2:15). However, does the verb's range of nuances include repentance? This question must be considered next.

It is curious that so many writers have assumed a priori that Israel did indeed repent when they cried to Yahweh despite the fact that lexicons do not even entertain the notion that repentance falls within the range of the verb's meanings.⁴⁵ Greenspahn observes that the root נעץ is used often in the motif of mourning. When the Israelites perceived themselves to be in dire straits, they (sometimes Moses) cried out--to God or to Moses (Exod 14:10; 15:25; 17:4; Num 11:2).⁴⁶ He states:

The "crying out" to which the word refers cannot therefore be assumed to include repentance. Indeed one could reasonably argue that the cries so described have no spiritual or theological component, but are simply "the loud and agonized 'crying' of someone in acute distress, calling for help and seeking deliverance."⁴⁷

⁴⁵Cf. BDB, 277, 858; KB, 263, 810; Holladay, Lexicon, 91, 308. See also discussions of the term in TWOT, s.v. "נעץ," by Leon J. Wood, 1.248; and TWOT, s.v. "נעץ," by John E. Hartley. None of these associate the term with repentance.

⁴⁶Greenspahn, "Theology of Judges," 392.

⁴⁷Ibid.

Greenspahn finds the meaning of זעק in Judges ideologically close to the exodus paradigm which begins in Exodus 2:23-25.⁴⁸ There Israel is in agony from the persecution Pharaoh has inflicted upon them and they cry out (זעק). Although it is not explicitly stated to whom their cry was directed, their cry (שִׁנְעָה⁴⁹) for help rose up to God who heard their groaning (נִאֲקָה, cf. Exod 6:5) and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 3:23, 24). Israel's repentance was not a factor in their deliverance from Egypt, but Yahweh's faithfulness to his covenant with their forefathers was. Interestingly enough, it was Israel's groaning (נִאֲקָה) that moved Yahweh to pity in Judges 2:18 and he delivered them. Though it is unstated, it is implied that Yahweh followed a pattern established while Israel was on its forty year trek through the wilderness. Whenever difficulties arose that left Israel in distress and despair, even to the point of accusing Moses (and in essence, God) for their troubles (Exod 14:11, 12), or complaining that Yahweh judged them in anger (Num 11:1, 2), only twice did Israel admit, "We have sinned" (Num

⁴⁸Ibid., 393, as does Brueggemann, "Social Criticism," 109.

⁴⁹Hasel, "זעק," 4.115, notes that the root שִׁנְעָה appears in poetic parallelism with the derivatives of צַעַק/זַעַק (cf. Hab 1:2; Job 19:7; 35:9; Lam 3:8).

14:40; 21:7). Only once did Yahweh respond to their confessions (Num 21:8, 9). Normally there is neither a hint of a changed attitude nor the faintest apology. Israel simply cried out in their distress, and Yahweh rescued them. Such seems to be the case in Judges also. Israel continued to sin without any indication of repentance. Israel cried out in distress and Yahweh responded in grace. As Greenspahn comments, "The theological implication, therefore, is that God's response is occasioned not by Israel's religious fidelity, but rather by her need, just as it was at the time of the exodus."⁵⁰

Hasel sees a major difference between the situation in Judges and Israel's oppression in Egypt in that in Judges Israel's cry is due to their subjugation by foreign powers as punishment for their sin of apostasy and idolatry. He sees in Judges 10:10-16 the association of a confession of sin with the cry for help.⁵¹ Israel's "repentance" in this passage is unique in the book of Judges. Oppressed this time by both the Philistines and the Ammonites, "the sons of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, 'We have

⁵⁰Greenspahn, "Theology of Judges," 394.

⁵¹Hasel, "זעק," 4.121. He also cites as support 1 Sam 7:6, 8 and 12:10. In the former passage, Samuel leads the people in confession of sin at Mizpeh, then he is asked to cry to the Lord for them in threat of Philistine attack. In the latter Samuel is simply reviewing Israel's words spoken in Judges 10:10.

sinned against Thee. . . ." (10:10). Brueggemann suggests that נָחַם is used in Judges 10:10, 12, 14 in three ways.

First, in v. 10 it is indeed used as repentance, but this appears to be the only such case in Judges. However, that meaning is carried not by the term itself, but by the words which follow. Second, the term is used in historical review (v. 12), to cite past acts of Yahweh's responsiveness. And then in v. 14, Israel is challenged to seek an alternative source of help which Israel rightly refuses (v. 15). In the unity of vv. 10-14 the topic is repentance, but the motif belongs to the total wording and not to the term נָחַם.⁵²

This passage is fraught with irony and interpretative problems. To Israel's confession of sin Yahweh surprisingly retorts after reviewing their record, "Go and cry out (נָחַם) to the gods which you have chosen" (10:14). According to Webb, Yahweh had recognized the purely utilitarian nature of their cry and confronted them with it. He had observed their ways in the past (10:12-13b) and did not accept their confession at face value.⁵³

It is generally held by the commentaries that this changes in 10:16. Once Israel put away the foreign deities, giving evidence of the genuineness of their repentance,⁵⁴ Yahweh was able to respond favorably to them. Webb's observations here are intriguing. Yahweh's words in 10:12-

⁵²Brueggemann, "Social Criticism," 109.

⁵³Webb, Book of Judges, 45.

⁵⁴E.g., see Boling, Judges, 193; and Goslinga, Joshua, Judges and Ruth, 379.

13 may imply that their putting away the foreign gods had become routine. It is not that Israel had never backed up their words before by putting away other gods, but each time they just as quickly abandoned Yahweh for the previous deities once deliverance had been attained. Yahweh's refusal to deliver them this time only reveals his anticipation of their reneging on their confession.⁵⁵

The meaning of קצר and עמל in the final phrase is crucial to the understanding of 10:16. The verb קצר means "to be short."⁵⁶ Webb has noted that "when used of a personal response to a situation קצר normally expresses frustration, impatience, exasperation, anger--inability to tolerate the situation any longer."⁵⁷ The noun עמל means "trouble, labor, toil."⁵⁸ But what does the phrase mean and how does it relate to Israel putting away the foreign gods?⁵⁹ Webb calls attention to its ambiguity by stating, "Comparison with Jonah 3:10 throws the special character of our present text into sharp relief: not, 'God repented when

⁵⁵Webb, Book of Judges, 46.

⁵⁶BDB, 894.

⁵⁷Webb, Book of Judges, 47.

⁵⁸BDB, 765.

⁵⁹Polzin, Moses and the Deuteronomist, 177, translates this difficult and ambiguous final phrase as "he grew annoyed with the troubled efforts of Israel."

he saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way,' but 'Yahweh could no longer tolerate their misery'" (emphasis his).⁶⁰ In other words the phrase specifies Yahweh's irritation, annoyance, exasperation with Israel's hardship. Webb summarizes:

He is angered by Israel's apostasy (7a) yet unable to accept their repentance. He is aware that even if it is real it is temporary--it will not last. He is affronted by Israel's attempt to use him and hotly rebuffs their appeal, but finds their continued misery unendurable (16c).⁶¹

Lest Webb's summary should appear harsh and unfounded, two additional points need consideration. First, it should be noted that in every previous episode, when Israel cried out to Yahweh, he raised up a deliverer. In the first two episodes the narrator simply states that Yahweh raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel (3:9, 15). In the third episode Yahweh used Deborah, his prophetess, to call Barak the warrior into service (4:4-7). In the fourth episode Yahweh (the Angel of the Lord) came to Gideon directly and after a series of events convinced him that he was to be the next deliverer for Israel. But in this, the fifth episode, Yahweh startles Israel with "I will deliver you no more," and in this instance it is not stated that Yahweh raised up a deliverer. In fact, it appears that Israel sensed Yahweh's dissatisfaction and the intent of his

⁶⁰Webb, Book of Judges, 47.

⁶¹Ibid., 48.

startling declaration for they did not wait for him to raise up a deliverer. Evidently they expected none from him. Instead, for the first recorded time they began their own search for someone to lead them (10:18-11:6).

Second, this fifth episode is the last time Israel is said to "cry out." This is certainly not because Israel has finally come to its spiritual senses and turned from its wicked ways in genuine repentance to walk in loyal obedience to God. On the contrary, in the sixth episode the narrator informs his reader that Israel has continued to do evil in the sight of Yahweh and that this time he has given them into the hand of the Philistines (13:1). What is conspicuous for its absence is the verb *קרא*. Israel did not cry out to Yahweh this time and the narrator does not tell his reader why. Could the inference be that Israel has persisted in idolatry too long? Has it meddled with so many different foreign deities (cf. 10:6) that over the generations the nation has degenerated to such an extent that in times of trouble it has forgotten even to call out in distress to Yahweh?

To summarize, the narrator has projected a consistent picture of Israel during the period of the judges. In the first paradigm (2:11-16) he prepared his reader for the cyclic nature of Israel's existence--its apostasy and idolatry which led to cycles of distress and deliverance. The

second paradigm (2:17-19) is complementary, giving further explanation for the repeated times of oppression--Israel's persistence in sinning. Its failure to repent was demonstrated in the repetitious reminders: "the sons of Israel continued to do evil in the sight of Yahweh" (because it was right in their eyes) and "the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh" (because of their distress). They had made a bad choice to forsake Yahweh to serve foreign gods and as a result they suffered to the point of extreme distress. Thus the narrator has recorded Israel's tragic history and he has made it most impressionable by writing in a narrative that is consistent with the genre of tragedy.

Use of the Feminine Gender in Tragedy

From the introductory paradigm the narrator has prepared his reader to expect bad times for Israel. His bleak portrayal is reinforced throughout the book by his repetitious inclusion of the thematic phrases discussed above. The narrator describes not only Israel's spiritual failures in his account, but he also relates aspects of social and political life that were affected by those failures. In so doing the narrator has included another feature that adds an ironic twist.

Scattered citations of the feminine gender appear throughout his narrative. Some of these women are named; some remain unnamed. Their inclusion in the narrative,

presenting them in expected and unexpected roles, serves as a literary device that is complementary to the genre of tragedy.

Sometimes the presence of women in the narrative simultaneously reinforces the narrator's picture of tragic times and detracts from the tragedy of the moment. For example, it must be acknowledged that society in biblical times was indeed "patriarchal" (some feminists might prefer the term "androcentric"). The father was expected to lead his family and men were expected to be leaders in society. However, during the judges period, especially during times of oppression and distress, there seemed to be no spirit of volunteerism. When male leadership was lacking a woman would appear and be used by God to effect his will.

Sometimes the presence of women contributed to the tragedy. For example, just when the reader has been primed to expect success from a man, the man of promise is seen to be deterred by women, adding further to the tragedy.

Having attempted in the first three chapters to demonstrate that Judges is a book of stories written with artistic skill and consistent with the genre of tragedy, the following three chapters will concentrate on the narrator's use of the feminine gender in his narrative. Throughout the book the narrator will evoke surprise and emotion from his readers.

Summary of Chapter III

This chapter has attempted to show that the literary style of Judges is not only narrative, but can be further identified as tragedy. After briefly describing the components of tragedy, it was shown that the paradigms of Judges 2 and certain recurring formulaic phrases all contribute to a descriptive narrative of Israel's history during the judges period that is consistent with the features of tragedy. All is not well in Israel. Included in the narrative are stories of women whose roles are unusual. This, however, adds support to the thesis that the narrator is most emphatically trying to show that something tragic is going on in the nation.

CHAPTER IV

FOUR WOMEN AND ROLE REVERSAL

Introduction

At least seventeen different women receive recognition in the book of Judges. Frequently these women are seen as a positive influence in negative times. Sometimes they assume roles that the reader does not expect of them. At times their surprising activity is calibrated against the inactivity of men who the reader anticipates will take the initiative and perform in their normal roles.

Gender Roles and Israelite Society

It must be granted that gender roles are not clearly defined and established in Scripture. For the most part, gender roles must be deduced by general observations, not by particular descriptive statements (e.g., nowhere is it expressly stated that "the role of the male shall be . . . , and the role of the female shall be").

The task of deducing gender roles, however, is complicated by several additional issues.¹ The narrative language employed by the biblical writers preserves the

¹Meyers, Discovering Eve, 8-14.

essential themes of Israel's experience. The language can be considered theological since human events are described in terms of God's activity. But as stated in Chapter I, the reporting is highly selective. Sometimes apparently trivial or mundane matters are included while facts and personalities, seemingly of great social importance, are omitted. While this reporting is not without purpose, the purpose may not be immediately recognized, and certain interests of the reader may not always be addressed.

Without question the biblical text remains the primary source of information about the Israelite population and life in biblical times. However, the Old Testament is, by and large, the result of the literary activity of a small segment of that population and undoubtedly can not be considered entirely representative. The focus of the narrator frequently concerns decisions and actions of people of prominence (patriarchs, priests, kings, etc.). Rarely does it provide a rehearsal of the daily activities of all levels of Israelite society. In addition, there is a telescoping of time and personalities to suit the writer's purpose. Thus it is not to be expected that the reader be supplied with specific details regarding gender roles.

An appeal to the creation of mankind (Gen 1:26, 27) contributes little to the question of gender roles. It is clear that both male and female are created in the image of God and therefore are ontologically equal. Some may main-

tain that the creation order establishes some sense of gender roles.² In Genesis 2:18 God states, "I will make him [the male] a helper [the female] suitable for him," and Genesis 2:22 adds that the "Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which he had taken from the man." On the basis of these two texts it might be contended that God decreed a difference in male and female; and their gender roles were established at creation as indicated by their relation to one another (e.g., the woman was made from man and for man). However, this relationship must be viewed within its proper context. God was providing the man with a mate. Therefore it can be argued that the gender role distinction is not that pronounced. It appears that these texts infer subordination of the female to the male primarily within the marriage relationship. It is not necessarily a prescription of the role of male and female within society.

There are a few other passages within the Pentateuch which at first glance may seem to cast light on the role of gender. From an economic standpoint, certain passages indicate that women did not have equal rights with men. For example, the law did not provide for daughters the right to inherit land from their fathers as it did for sons--unless there were no sons to inherit (Num 27:1-8). Only in the

²James A. Freerksen, "The Biblical Role of Woman With an Exegesis of First Corinthians 11:2-16 (unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1980), 17.

absence of sons could a man's property be inherited by his daughters, but even then there was an additional stipulation. They were required to marry husbands from their own tribe. Otherwise their right to the inheritance was forfeited (Num 36:1-3).

A related provision was made for the firstborn son. He was entitled to inherit a double portion of his father's property (Deut 21:15-17). No similar custom is said to apply to firstborn daughters. With regard to inheritance regulations, it would appear that gender role was not the major factor. Instead at issue was the preservation of the family and tribal unit. It must be recognized that inheritance rights were in essence privileges, not roles.

From a religious standpoint, there is some evidence that a distinction between male and female existed. Religious expression and commitment of the female was subordinate to the will of males. For example, both male and female could take vows (cf. the vow of the Nazirite, Num 6:2), but the vow of the female could be annulled by her father (if she were unmarried) or by her husband (Num 30:1-16). Apparently the role of the female's outward devotion to God was governed by her father or husband who had responsibility in such spiritual matters. It is evident from several texts that women apparently were permitted to serve at the tabernacle (Judg 21:21; I Sam 2:22), but their role is largely undefined. Therefore, even from the standpoint

of religious participation, gender roles remain somewhat unclear.

If the reader has journeyed through the Old Testament in canonical (Jewish or Christian) sequence, certain societal features such as the patriarchal family structure are observed, especially in the opening book of Genesis. Thus the reader is led to suppose that the male, the undeniable leader of the family unit, was probably also the one who was expected to assume the role of leadership in larger social contexts (tribally and nationally).

Another feature of Israelite society is the generally undefined, but apparently well-recognized body of leaders known as the "elders of Israel" (זְקֵנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל). (Is the masculine gender of the participle significant?) This group of leaders in the Israelite community was already recognized while Israel was still in Egypt (Exod 3:16). It was comprised of seventy persons at Mt. Sinai (Exod 24:1). Apparently it was assumed that each Israelite city would have its body of "elders" and duties were assigned this body in Mosaic legislation. For example, elders served as judges in civil (Deut 19:12; 21:2) and domestic (Deut 22:15; 25:7) disputes. Never is it stated specifically that these bodies of elders were comprised only of males, although that is the natural impression. Thus, while there was no law forbidding a female from serving (city or community) as an "elder," the

the natural impression is that filling this position was the role of a male.

Twice Moses conducted a pre-conquest military census to determine how many Israelites were potentially capable of fighting for the nation (Num 1, 26). Both times only males were numbered. Neither time were females explicitly prohibited from volunteering their participation in military service, yet the natural impression is that such service was a role for males.

In similar fashion Moses conducted a census of the Levites to determine how many males from their tribe were qualified to assist the priests in the service of the tabernacle. Once again the natural impression is that such service was the role of males.

Perhaps one of the most gender role-related statements is the pre-monarchial (end of the judges period) prediction of Samuel. When the elders of Israel collectively requested that Samuel provide a king for Israel, he warned them of the duties their children would be expected to perform for the king. On the one hand, some of their sons would serve as horsemen and charioteers; others would be appointed commanders in the army; and others would be assigned to plant and harvest the king's fields; still others would be charged with manufacturing weaponry (1 Sam 8:10-12). On the other hand, their daughters would be assigned duties as perfumers, cooks and bakers (1 Sam 8:13).

It is clear that certain tasks or assignments had come to be gender-related in the Israelite community.

To summarize, it must be conceded that the text of Scripture canonically preceding the book of Judges does not provide a definitive description of gender roles. However, the reader's observations of life in Israel leads him to formulate some general assumptions regarding gender roles and to arrive at certain expectations from both genders. In the book of Judges, role reversal can be addressed because certain women do not perform in the role or in the manner the reader has come to associate with their female gender.

Purpose of the Chapter

This chapter will zero in on four such women: Deborah and Jael (4:4-22), the unnamed woman of Thebez (9:50-57), and the unnamed wife of Manoah (13:2-23).

A word concerning purpose is perhaps in order here. First, it is not the purpose of this chapter to provide a commentary on these passages. Of necessity selected exegetical features will be considered, but for a verse-by-verse exegesis per se, the reader is directed to the commentaries (see bibliography).

Second, and specifically concerning the discussion of the narrative of Judges 4, it is not the purpose here to analyze the difficult parallel poetic version in Judges 5 that has attracted much scholarly attention. Frequently the

prose and poetic versions are compared and apparent discrepancies become the center of attention. Lindars is correct when he remarks that "it is virtually impossible to tell the story without drawing on both accounts, because each has gaps which can be supplied from the other."³ Therefore, while attention here will be directed primarily to the prose account of Judges 4, supplemental details from the poetry of Judges 5 will be called upon at times.⁴

Positively, the purpose is to direct attention to telling evidence of the narrator's design. How the action of certain women benefitted their people or city and how the narrator graphically tells their stories in descriptive language will be seen. The time between Joshua and the monarchy was marked by a lack of consistent leadership. Into that leadership void stepped several women who did what the reader expected of a man. Therefore an unexpected role-reversal occurs.

Relevant to this purpose is a word of caution. Every method of biblical criticism and interpretation is

³Barnabas Lindars, "Deborah's Song: Women in the Old Testament," *BJRL* 65 (1983): 159. Athalya Brenner, "A Triangle and a Rhombus in Judges IV and V," *VT* 40 (April 1990): 137-138, writes of the "structural complementarity of the message" and "the two strata of the single message."

⁴The purpose of this study is to focus on the narrative of Judges. Although the narrative of Judges includes poetry at this point, it is a different literary genre. The poetic section is more laconic and has a different set of exegetical problems.

open to the subjectivity of the reader-interpreter and narrative (or rhetorical) criticism is certainly no exception. In reading the narrative, the reader must keep in balance the biography of details and events and the artistry of the narrator who recorded them. Some critics have been enthusiastic in praising the literary genius of the narrator, but less than assuring about the reliability of the biographic-historic or moral value of the story.⁵ Again it is a matter of subjectivity, but the reader must keep his imagination in check for it is possible to attribute to the narrator genius he did not possess nor ever intended to convey. For example, in his very helpful study, "The Bee and the Mountain Goat: A Literary Reading of Judges 4," John H. Stek sees so many rhetorical features of aesthetic consequence that the reader tends to wonder where the artistry of the narrator-writer of the Deborah-Jael story ends and where the imagination of Stek begins.⁶ Hopefully

⁵Cf. D.F. Murray, "Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story (Judges IV 4-22)," in Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament, ed. J.A. Emerton, VTSup, 30 (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1979), 184-187. Lindars, "Deborah's Song," 164, is unconcerned that moral questions are not raised in the text about Jael's action, for "the story is a story, intended to entertain the hearers."

⁶In A Tribute to Gleason Archer, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Ronald F. Youngblood (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 53-78. See e.g. his treatment of the names of all who play a role in the account, names which he says the narrator could exploit to support the development of his plot. Stek provides a literal meaning for the name of each one in the story (61-62), then sees each one's role in the

this study will be able to present a balanced appraisal of a selected assortment of purposeful language that graphically conveys the historical and theological intent of the narrator.

Deborah and Jael (Judges 4)

This intriguing story is one of the more popular stories in Judges and has become an important favorite for feminist writers. Jane Shaw states, "The Bible having so few stories of women like Deborah, whose role seems to deviate from the norm designated for women, it is not surprising that such stories are immediately picked up by those wanting to contribute to the debate today and wanting to give biblical authority to their views on the nature and role of the sexes."⁷ There is a "feminist" theme in Judges 4.⁸ No one can deny that the chief interest of the story is the part that is played by the two women, Deborah and Jael. The two men, Barak and Sisera, are portrayed as powerless, but they are not presented as fools in the company of Deborah and Jael. Block is quite correct when he remarks that contemporary feminists can not claim these two

account as a playing out of the character depicted in his/her name.

⁷Jane Shaw, "Constructions of Woman in Readings of the Story of Deborah," in Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible, BL, 22, and JSOTSup, 81 ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 115.

⁸Lindars, "Deborah's Song," 160.

this woman, Deborah, will be the deliverer that Yahweh intends to use.¹⁰ First, Deborah is introduced at a strategic point exactly where the reader expects a reference to the deliverer. Second, the fact that she is a prophetess directly links her to Yahweh. It is their link with God that activates the other deliverers. Third, she was also a judge. From 2:11-19 on the reader has recognized a relation between a judge and deliverer, for Yahweh would raise up judges who would deliver them. To the contrary, however, Amit points to three other factors that argue against the assumption that Deborah will be the next deliverer.¹¹

First, the formulaic refrain, "Yahweh raised up a deliverer," is lacking. Second, her sex is stressed twice. She is a "prophetess" and a "wife of Lappidoth." These terms tend to rule against connecting her with soldier-figures and heroes like Othniel and Ehud. Third, he believes Deborah's judgeship seems to pertain to civil and personal disputes, and not the organizing and leading of a military force. So at this point the reader has reasons to believe or doubt whether Deborah will be the next deliverer.

How familiar Israel was with Othniel and Ehud before they were recognized as military leaders, deliverers, and subsequently as judges is not told. Therefore it is a

¹⁰Yairah Amit, "Judges 4: Its Contents and Form," JSOT 39 (1987): 92.

¹¹Ibid.

surprise to the reader not only to see a woman introduced into the narrative without a word about how, when, or why she was placed in office, or what Israel's initial reaction to her might have been, but also to see her seemingly well established in her defined roles. All the reader knows is that she has gained recognition for her dual office and is apparently accepted by the greater part of the nation (she "held court" in Ephraim, but was acknowledged as a prophetess in Naphtali).

Normally God called a man into service, but here a woman is already serving, but she is not to be the nation's deliverer. Instead Deborah, a woman must issue the call to Barak, a man (perhaps more accurately, confront him with his neglect to answer a previous summons to action). Men will sometimes hesitate to obey God's directive (cf. Moses, Exod 3:11-4:13; and Gideon, Judg 6:15, 36-40), but Barak refuses to comply with God's call to lead Israel against enemy oppression, even though he has been guaranteed success, unless his one condition be met--that he is accompanied by a woman. Webb correctly observes, "The fact that she holds a position of authority and takes the initiative in relation to the prospective male hero is the first intimation of a thematic development that will give this particular episode its unique character."¹²

¹²Webb, Book of Judges, 134.

The Structure of the Narrative

Reduced to its simplest outline (and apart from the formulaic verses 1-3) the narrative of 4:4-22 consists of only three scenes.¹³ In the first scene (vv 4-10) the narrator introduces Deborah who inspires Barak to raise a fighting force to meet Sisera, the Canaanite general, in battle. In the second scene (vv 12-16) the battle ensues and Yahweh routs the enemy before Barak. In the last scene (vv 17-22) Sisera is a fugitive from the battle seeking safety. Thinking he has found it in the tent of Jael, an ally's wife, he is murdered there instead.

Murray has taken two approaches to the structure of the narrative. First, he identifies some eleven scene-changes as the plot of the story begins to unfold in verse 6. After deciding that certain scenes involve a higher degree of discontinuity to what precedes than do the others, he boils the number of scenes down to just four: Deborah's initiative and Israel's preparations for battle (vv 6-10), Sisera's response, battle, and rout (vv 12-16), Sisera's escape and death at Jael's hands (vv 17-21) and Barak's confrontation with Sisera and the woman who killed him (v 22).¹⁴

¹³Lindars, "Deborah's Song," 161.

¹⁴Murray, "Narrative Structure," 157-159.

Then taking his cue from Andersen's discussion on circumstantial clauses,¹⁵ Murray zeroes in on the pericope's ten circumstantial clauses (4a, 4b, 5a, 11a, 17a, 21ba, 22bβ, 22bγ) as episode markers and determines which clauses (or combination of clauses) are "episode-initial" or "episode final." Thus he divides the narrative into four episodes (vv 4-10, vv 11-16, vv 17-21, and v 22) which correspond closely to his analysis of scene changes. Thus he is convinced that the evidence of these two independent conclusions proves the basic structural framework of the narrator.¹⁶ Within each episode he sees a common pattern. The circumstantial clause opens each plot. This is followed by waw + prefix conjugation verbs which unfold the plot of the episode. The major part of each episode consists of speech and response.¹⁷ He sees in this structure "a skillful adjustment of . . . balance, a tense and suspenseful variation in the forward momentum of the story."¹⁸

Amit believes that the uniqueness of the Deborah story is not in the message it conveys, but the way it is

¹⁵Francis I. Andersen, The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew, Series Practica, 231 (The Hague, The Netherlands: Moulton Publishers, 1974). See especially his comments on "episode-initial" and "episode-final" circumstantial clauses (79-82).

¹⁶Murray, "Narrative Structure," 160-162.

¹⁷Ibid., 162.

¹⁸Ibid., 166.

shaped. It is his thesis that the narrator directs his reader to hypothesize regarding the identity of the redeemer (deliverer) in the story, thus ultimately developing in the reader the consciousness that God is the redeemer. He divides the story into six units by noting changes in time, place, characters and manner of narration: first unit--exposition or setting of the story (vv 1-5); second unit--Barak's appointment (vv 6-9); third unit--summary report of events in the confrontation area (vv 10-13); fourth unit--the battle (vv 14-16); fifth unit--the scene in Jael's tent (vv 17-21); sixth unit--the finale (vv 23-24). Amit contends that the design of each of these units complicates the solution to the question, Who is the deliverer in this story?¹⁹ The structure introduces a variety of human characters. Deborah is the center of attention in the first four units, and the reader anticipates her being the deliverer, but she is not. Barak appears in units two-five, but he never takes the initiative and he is overshadowed by women. Jael appears to be the solution to the question, but her "heroics" occur after the battle has been decided. Sisera appears in all units, but he is not the center of interest. Amit concludes there has been no human deliverer. The narrative points to one central hero, Yahweh, who routed the

¹⁹Amit, "Judges 4," 90-91.

Canaanite army (v 15) and subdued Jabin before Israel (v 23).²⁰

John Stek provides a more structural (and perhaps more subjective) framework for the narrative than Murray or Amit. Most of his units fall into concentric or chiastic symmetry. A detailed reproduction of his structure need not be supplied here, but certain salient features should be noted. He combines the introduction (4:1-3) and conclusion (4:23-29 with 5:31b) to form a chiastic pattern that virtually conforms to the combined paradigms of 2:11-19. At its center is "Israel cried to Yahweh" (v 3) and "God subdued . . . Jabin" (v 23). Verses 4-5 are not concentrically arranged. They are prologue, introducing the one who initiates the action. Verses 6-10 have a concentric structure. At its center is the hesitant Barak (v 8), framed on one side by Deborah's transmission of Yahweh's commission and promise of victory, and by her commitment to accompany him and fulfilled promise on the other. Verse 11 breaks the action and prepares for a new sequence of actions. Verses 12-17 are again concentrically arranged. This time the center is Yahweh's overwhelming the enemy (v 15a), framed by Barak and Sisera preparing for battle on the one side, and Sisera fleeing with Barak pursuing on the other. Verses 18-22 center on Sisera's speech (vv 19-20), framed first by

²⁰Ibid., 100-101.

Jael's invitation to Sisera and then to Barak. Thus Stek sees three episodes and three centers: Barak's speech, Yahweh's victory, and Sisera's speech. The speeches of the two opposing field commanders, Barak and Sisera, not only characterize them, but also frame and focus attention on Yahweh's action.²¹ Stek observes, "That in the first episode Deborah and in the last Jael dominate the action surrounding the centers structurally reinforces a major theme in the narrative and evenly distributes the honor for victory between these two redoubtable women."²²

While it is somewhat speculative to try to discern the structural design the narrator may have consciously desired to convey, it is of special interest to see that all three of the writers cited above saw a meaningful structure to the narrative. Each writer saw a significance that was different, but nevertheless complemented the views of the others. For example, to summarize, Murray focused his attention on the sentence structure of the narrative, the interchange of circumstantial clauses and waw + prefix conjugation verb constructions, and concluded that the narrator built his story on suspense and movement. Amit also believed that the narrative was shaped to create suspense, to drive the reader through a maze of characters

²¹Stek, "The Bee and the Mountain Goat," 54-59.

²²Ibid., 59.

and events to its conclusion in search for the real hero of the story, God who defeated the Canaanites. Stek's structure also made Yahweh's decisive action the center of attention, but his action was framed by two episodes where the initiative and action of two women dominate (from the human point of view). Thus the reader is struck by the fact that even the structure of the narrative emphasizes a reversal of roles. The reader wonders, why is God's action framed by the initiative and responses of women (two wives, no less!) and not men? Why do these women dominate while the lone Israelite male who is named remains in the background? Where are the men who have a spirit of volunteerism and are committed to the cause of God and Israel? The reader senses immediately that something is seriously wrong in Israel.

There is one structural aspect upon which all the above writers agree--verse 11 is pivotal (to be treated later). This verse marks a break in the action and a shift in focus. The narrator introduces Deborah first, and understandably the reader expects her to be the heroine of the story, especially after she warns Barak that the glory of Canaanite defeat would be awarded a woman. At verse 11 the flow of action is mysteriously interrupted and the reader is prepared to expect the unexpected.

Literary Analysis of the Narrative

"Literary analysis" is a comprehensive term that perhaps promises too much. The narrator has marshalled many literary devices that make the story vivid, but not all of them are necessarily germane to the purpose of this study. Therefore selectivity will be evidenced as discussion of the narrative unfolds in each episode. With a couple of minor variations, the narrative is divided essentially according to the structure of Stek (given above): introduction to Deborah (vv 4-5), Barak's hesitancy to respond to leadership (vv 6-10), a parenthetical narrative intrusion (v 11), description of the battle (vv 12-16), and the denouement in Jael's tent (vv 17-22).

Introduction to Deborah (vv 4-5)

Robert Alter writes, "The paradigmatic biblical story . . . starts with a few brief statements that name the principal character or characters, locate them geographically, identify significant family relationships, and in some instances provide a succinct moral, social, or physical characterization of the protagonist."²³ Verses 4-5 serve as a prologue to the story, introducing Deborah to the reader, and in general meet all paradigmatic requirements Alter sets forth for the introduction of the protagonist of

²³Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 80.

the biblical story. The setting is established in verses 1-3 (see above).

The protagonist at this point is a woman who is introduced by a circumstantial clause in Hebrew. Her name is placed in an emphatic position followed by a string of qualifying nouns. The reader immediately senses something out of the ordinary. The previous two protagonists were not introduced in this manner. Both Othniel (3:9) and Ehud (3:15) were raised up (רָם) by Yahweh and they are introduced in the usual narrative language sequence, waw + prefix conjugation verb, not with a circumstantial clause. After Israel cried (זָעַק) to the Lord, the narrative continued with Yahweh's action. He raised up these men to be deliverers. In Judges 4:3 Israel has cried out (זָעַק) once again. However, the narrative is then interrupted by the circumstantial clause. The positioning of the introduction of Deborah (v 4) immediately after Israel's cry of distress leads the reader to expect her to be the next deliverer, but the phrase, "Yahweh raised up a deliverer," is lacking.

The narrator's language does not convey any emotion of shock, surprise, or dismay that Deborah,²⁴ his protagon-

²⁴Most commentaries note that her name means "Honey bee." Stek, "The Bee and the Mountain Goat," 61, says that all the characters in this narrative had names "the author could exploit, if he chose, to support the development of his plot."

onist, is a woman or that she is a prophetess, but he most definitely draws his reader's attention to this fact.

In addition to the emphatic positioning of her name, there is a pleonastic use of נָשִׂיא that immediately follows.²⁵ Translated literally in its accompaniment of nouns, it reads, "Deborah, a woman, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth." It is quite apparent that Deborah is a woman without the added presence of נָשִׂיא. The narrator uses a similar, yet arguably different, construction in 6:8. Yahweh sent (literally) "a man, a prophet" (אִישׁ נָבִיא) to the sons of Israel. שֹׁפֵט appears pleonastic also, but in light of the fact that Deborah was the named prophetess in the previous story, it could be argued that the narrator makes it clear that this time Yahweh sent a man. In contrast, Deborah was successful in her role whereas this man was unsuccessful in that he was unable to effect repentance in his audience. Huldah,²⁶ another prophetess to appear much

²⁵A fact very few commentaries note. A.R. Fausset, A Critical and Expository Commentary on the Book of Judges (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1885; reprint James & Klock Publishing, 1977), 77, comments, "a female in authority was so rare a thing, that the reason is subjoined."

²⁶Duane L. Christensen, "Huldah and the Men of Anathoth: Women in Leadership in the Deuteronomistic History," in Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers 1984, ed. Kent Harold Richards (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 399-404, has the curious view that the two prophetesses, Deborah and Huldah, form an inclusio around the Deuteronomistic History of Life in the Promised Land.

later, is identified in almost identical words as a prophetess and a wife (2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chr 34:22) but any redundant reference to her being a woman (אִשָּׁה) is lacking.

Deborah proves to be a delightful and intriguing character. In a book where a reference to a spiritual leader is a rarity,²⁷ Deborah is characterized first as a prophetess,²⁸ without any negative response voiced by the narrator.²⁹ Brenner remarks, "The few biblical prophetesses . . . prove by their existence that the prophetic vocation was not out of bounds for women: they could become authoritative and respected mouthpieces for divinely inspired messages."³⁰ The term, then, marks Deborah as a

²⁷There is only one prophet (6:8) in the book, but he is unnamed. The only reference to an Aaronic priest is to his grandson, Phinneas (20:28), but he appears early in the period, shortly after the death of Joshua.

²⁸This puts her in the company of Miriam (Ex 15:20), Huldah (2 Ki 22:14; 2 Chr 34:22), Isaiah's wife (Isa 8:3), and Noadiah (Neh 6:14).

²⁹Bird, "Images of women," 272, comments, "None of the authors who introduce these figures [prophetesses] into their writings gives special attention to the fact that these prophets are women--in contrast to Old Testament commentators, who repeatedly marvel at the fact."

³⁰Brenner, The Israelite Woman, 66. Women's participation in this vocation should not be viewed as liberation. See Carol L. Meyers, "The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel," in The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics, ed. Norman K. Gottwald (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 303, who says, "their existence gives testimony to an epoch of liberation in which stratified hereditary leadership was abolished and anyone, women included, could rise to irregular positions of authority. They thus testify to the notion that God's

spokesperson for Yahweh. The term alone tells very little about her past prophetic ministry, but in connection with Barak, she will clearly be seen as the one who brings a divine word to the military leader, especially as she prods him into duty (vv 6, 7) and announces the day of attack (v 14).

Like Jael, Deborah is married, but her husband, Lappidoth, is an enigma. His name appears only here.³¹ However the focus is on Deborah, not her husband. Perhaps he is mentioned here only to show her marital status, but it is possible his name appears for purposes of contrast. What did he do in/for Israel? Where is he while his wife is serving Yahweh? Does he accompany her to lend support to the hesitant Barak? Why is he not involved or at least mentioned in a supportive role? He will not be the only husband to be outshone by his wife (cf. Manoah, Judg 13).

spirit or wisdom could rest upon any individual, male or female, and grant that person a role in the community based on personal gifts rather than on social status."

³¹Lappidoth's name has been awarded different meanings: "torches" or "lightening flashes," and Barak's name means "lightning." Boling, Judges, 95, explains that the name Lappidoth does not appear again because tradition knew him chiefly as Barak. John Gray, ed., Joshua, Judges and Ruth, in The Century Bible, new edition (Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, Inc., 1967), 286, suggests rather "that the unknown husband of Deborah was named Lappidoth by tradition, after the well-known Barak." Freema Gottlieb, "Three Mothers," Judaism 30 (Spring 1981): 195, views "wife of Lappidoth" literally and more descriptively of Deborah's temperament. She was a "woman of flames," i.e. "a fiery woman."

The announcement of Deborah's role as judge (v 4) to whom the Israelites came for judgment (v 5) is exceptional for several reasons. The verb form **שֹׁפֵטָהּ** is a participle indicating she was actively engaged in a recognized office. In addition, the pronoun "she" (**הִיא**) stands in the emphatic position. Commonly the narrator introduces individuals who were raised up as deliverers, and once they have earned the right of respect through victory in battle or have brought deliverance from oppression, they are permitted to govern or judge. But Deborah is introduced as a judge already rendering service, and before any battle or victory. Also it is said only of her that people came to her for judgment, seemingly making her role the most defined of all the judges.

Her place of residence is not told, but her base of operations is described quite vividly. She was sitting (**יוֹשֶׁבֶת**) under her palm tree somewhere between Ramah and Bethel in Ephraim, a semi-central point where she was easily accessible to all Israel. Once again the verb form is a participle and the pronoun (**הִיא**) is emphatic. Her activity is cast against the activity of Sisera, the commander of the army of Jabin (v 2), who too has been sitting (**יוֹשֵׁב**) at his camp at Harosheth-hagoyim to oppress Israel while Deborah, in contrast, is sitting and rendering judgment for Israel. At first glance, Deborah is Sisera's counterpart and the

reader is led to believe she is destined to be the new deliverer.

While there has been much debate over the meaning and role of the "judge" (שֹׁפֵט) in the book of Judges, the appearance of the word שֹׁפֵט, normally translated "judgment,"³² has led to general agreement that in Judges 4:4 the narrator is clearly defining Deborah's role as giving case decisions.³³ Daniel Block disagrees.

In his recent study³⁴ Block has re-evaluated the relation of the term "prophet," "judge" and "judgment" in the account of Deborah. His observations are important and cast new light on her particular ministry to Israel, and are especially supportive of the thesis of this present study.

First, he prefers a general meaning of "to govern" for the root שָׁפַט. This interpretation applies to other deliverers in Judges. He questions "why the narrator would have made this passing reference to the settlement of rela-

³²BDB, 1048, and so rendered by KJV, NKJV, NRSV, and NASB. The NIV reads, "the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided."

³³See McKenzie, "The Judge of Israel," 119; and Mullen, "The 'Minor Judges,'" 201.

³⁴Daniel I. Block, "Deborah Among the Judges: The Perspective of the Hebrew Historian," paper presented at the Old Testament Historiography Symposium: "Faith, Tradition, and History" (Wheaton, IL, November 1990). Essays from the Symposium are scheduled for publication by Eisenbrauns. I am indebted to the author for making his paper available to me in advance of publication.

tively petty civil disputes when the issue in the chapter is a national crisis."³⁵ Second, the "sons of Israel" is an expression consistently used collectively for the nation as a whole in Judges. Israel's coming to Deborah "for the judgment" (deliberate use of the articular construction, למשפט) "suggests that a particular issue is in mind, not a series of cases"³⁶ Third, he follows the lead of J.S. Ackerman who observes that צעק and משפט are closely related in the narratives on the united monarchy. A subject could appeal (צעק) to the king for help and his responding decision on the matter was termed משפט (cf. 1 Kgs 20:39-40).³⁷ In the book of Judges such cries (צעק) are always addressed to Yahweh, not to a human authority. Block concludes

It appears that when "the sons of Israel" come to Deborah for "the judgment" they are not asking her to solve their legal disputes, but to give them the divine answer to their cries. She functions as a representative of Yahweh.³⁸

Deborah's function in "judging Israel" is seen as complementary to her office as prophetess. It was her

³⁵Ibid., 11.

³⁶Ibid., 12.

³⁷J.S. Ackerman, "Prophecy and Warfare in Early Israel: A Study of the Deborah-Barak Story," BASOR 220 (December 1975): 11.

³⁸Block, "Deborah Among the Judges," 13.

prophetic status, not her judicial office, that brought Israel to her. They came up to Deborah to hear from her Yahweh's *מִשְׁפָּט*, i.e., his oracle, concerning their case.³⁹

If Block's assessment of these terms and their relation to one another is correct, then what the narrator is communicating takes on a whole new dimension. He is not only introducing a female spiritual leader, he is also making another profound statement about spiritual conditions in Israel. Why did Israel not instead consult the priest (who wore the ephod with the Urim and Thummim) for an oracle from Yahweh? Block's suggestion is attractive.

By Deborah's stationing herself near Bethel, her oracle presents an alternative to the Urim and Thummim of the priesthood. . . . The fact that the Israelites come to her instead of the priest reflects the failure of the established institution in maintaining contact with God, a spiritual tragedy that is given explicit expression in the early chapters of 1 Samuel.⁴⁰

Thus this prologue to the story ends with the reader introduced not only to the initial protagonist, but quite possibly to additional clues to the spiritual climate of the time. In contrast to her people, Deborah is presented in unequivocal positive light. Her character is untarnished. The reader can only believe she will be the heroine of the story, the deliverer of Israel from the Canaanites.

³⁹Ibid., 13-14.

⁴⁰Ibid., 15.

Barak's Hesitancy (vv 6-10)

"Everything in the world of biblical narrative ultimately gravitates toward dialogue,"⁴¹ writes Alter, and his assertion is observable in this story. He adds, "As a rule, when a narrative event in the Bible seems important, the writer will render it mainly through dialogue, so the transitions from narration to dialogue provide in themselves some implicit measure of what is deemed essential."⁴²

In the story of Othniel (3:7-11) there was no dialogue. With the barest of details and without emotion the narrator relates the success of Othniel. The reader is glad to read of Israel's victory, but would he enjoy reading for very long a sequential series of similar stories? In the story of Ehud (3:12-30) a short dialogue is introduced. As before, the reader learns of the deliverer's success, but this time the narrative is charged with suspense and excitement. When Ehud tells Eglon, "I have a secret message for you," and the king responds to all, "Keep silence," the reader (who knows Ehud is secretly wearing a dagger on his thigh) can almost hear his own heart beating with the excitement the dialogue has provided.

In the story of Deborah the narrator again chooses to incorporate dialogue--a series of short clips of conver-

⁴¹Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 182.

⁴²Ibid.

sation throughout the narrative that are vital to the story and the overall message he wishes to convey. In verses 4-5 he introduces the reader to Deborah. Now in verse 6 the plot of the story begins to develop with dialogue. Deborah takes the initiative and the movement of the story begins with a rhetorical question.

Verse 6 is commonly referred to as Barak's summons. NASB translates, "she sent and summoned Barak" (literally, "she called to/for Barak" (וַתִּקְרָא לְבָרָק). That Deborah addresses Barak with a rhetorical question is quite evident; where the question ends and how it is to be interpreted is a different matter.

Her address to Barak is introduced by הֲלֹא. Literally translated, her statement begins, "Has not Yahweh the God of Israel commanded, 'Go . . . '?" But where does the question end? Translators have not always been in agreement. In the NKJV the question is completed at the end of verse 7. The KJV, RSV, and the LXX complete the question at the end of verse 6, but this rendering poses a problem of pronoun identification in verse 7. Who is the antecedent to "I"? Who will "draw out Sisera" and "give him into your [Barak's] hand," God or Deborah? Surely not Deborah,⁴³ for the subsequent account of the battle does not record her

⁴³Klein, Triumph of Irony, 42; Gottlieb, "Three Mothers," 96; and Gray, Joshua, Judges and Ruth, 270, all see Deborah luring Sisera into battle.

being actively engaged in the warfare nor is her presence a diversion of any kind. Also she will say in verse 14, "This is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hands."

The rhetorical question is a powerful device for the speaker, forcing his listener personally to agree with the speaker and commit himself to the answer the speaker desires. Moore says concerning Deborah's question, "The question which compels the hearer himself to make the affirmation is more forcible than the affirmation of the speaker."⁴⁴ Deborah clearly want a "yes" for an answer, and translated thus, her question to Barak might be viewed as a reprimand.

The NASB, NIV and NRSV, however, translate the statement as an affirmative declaration: "Behold, the Lord, the God of Israel, has commanded," Most commentaries translate as affirmative. Block acknowledges the interrogative but states that "in the context it signifies a firm declaration: 'Surely Yahweh has commanded . . . !'"⁴⁵ The context of which Block speaks is his conclusion that Deborah has already been introduced as a prophetess who delivers oracles from God to Israel. This, then, is an example of such an oracle.

⁴⁴Moore, Judges, 115.

⁴⁵Block, "Deborah Among the Judges," 21.

His translation of הלא as introducing a declaration finds possible support in the study of H.A. Brongers⁴⁶ who has divided the use of הלא into three categories:

1. introducing genuine questions; 2. introducing something so obvious the particle is best rendered "Lo" or "Look" (he compares it to the Hebrew הנה); and 3. as an indication of emphatic stress. As an example of his second classification he cites Deborah's statement in Judges 4:14 which is structured quite similarly to that of 4:7 (he does not classify 4:7 at all). He has found it necessary to devise his categories because in a lot of cases הלא does not fit very well if it is conceived only as a mere interrogative particle. He does admit, however, the subjective nature of attempting to classify his examples.⁴⁷

Recognizing the subjectivity in translating the particle and interpreting the narrator's intent, perhaps an interrogative reading would be just as appropriate for Deborah's statement especially since Hebrew grammars⁴⁸

⁴⁶H.A. Brongers, "Some Remarks on the Biblical Particle hālō," OTS 21 (1981): 177-189.

⁴⁷Ibid., 188-189.

⁴⁸W. Gesenius, E. Kautzsch, and A.E. Cowley, Hebrew Grammar (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 474, comments on the special use of הלא. "It serves merely to express the conviction that the contents of the statement are well known to the hearer." Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, IN:

confirm that הלא is employed to elicit a "Yes" response. Similar examples can be cited. In Joshua 1:9 Yahweh asks, "Have I not commanded you?" (הלא צוֹוִיתִיךָ). There is no break in the Hebrew sentence, however, until the midpoint of the sentence, at least suggesting that the question should extend to include "Have I not commanded you, 'Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed'?" The expected answer is a definite "Yes" for it follows on the heels of two previous commands to "be strong and courageous" (Josh 1:6, 7). In Judges 4:14 Deborah asks, "Has not Yahweh gone out before you?" (הלא יְהוָה יָצָא לְפָנֶיךָ). Deborah expects a "Yes" answer, for she has just issued an imperative and a declaration: "Arise (קום), for this is the day which Yahweh has given Sisera into your hands." In like manner Deborah clearly wants a "Yes" answer to her question in 4:6-7, but she receives neither a "Yes" nor a "No."

Block argues from the context that Deborah's statement is a firm declaration. It can be argued just as easily from the literary context that it was a reprimand. On two occasions before (3:9, 15) Yahweh had raised up deliverers when Israel cried out in distress. The reader is not told how God issued his call or raised them up. In 4:3

Eisenbrauns, 1990), 684, nt. 48, state, "The combination hālō' is often likened to the Latin particle nonne, a double negative used to indicate that an affirmative answer is expected."

Israel once again cries to Yahweh, but in the following verse, there is silence with regard to a deliverer. Precisely where the reader expects to find Yahweh raising up a deliverer, Deborah, a prophetess is introduced instead, but she is never called a deliverer, although at this point the reader expects her to be one. The narrator then introduces Barak with a rhetorical question. Noting the contrast to follow in Deborah's and Barak's characters increases suspicion. Did Yahweh call a deliverer who did not respond? Does not Deborah's question imply she is reminding Barak in reprimanding tones (voice inflection would help) of something--a previous call he has ignored? If so, this will not be the last time one who has been called to lead will be issued a reprimand. In 1 Samuel 2:27⁴⁹ an unnamed "man of God" (presumably a prophet) is sent to reprimand Eli the priest for failing to take action against his disobedient sons. Here Deborah, a prophetess, seemingly reminds Barak of previously known revelation that he has failed to act upon.

Whether Deborah's statement to Barak is a reprimand for failed duty or the initial summons to duty, his response casts him in bad light. If the reader suspects Barak might be the new protagonist, Barak's response makes it doubtful.

⁴⁹The Hebrew construction is not identical. The interrogative particle is present, but the negative לֹא is lacking.

In all the dialogue in this narrative, Barak's answer in verse 8 is his only recorded statement. Up to this point, the reader knows nothing about Barak, but his answer shows his character to be a stark contrast to that of Deborah.

Barak neither affirms nor denies Deborah's question. He retorts, with a condition, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." He demands the prophetess' presence, whereas Gideon, even though visited by the Angel of the Lord directly, is still reluctant to lead and demands signs.

In the MT the narrator does not offer a reason for Barak's hesitance. The LXX includes the following clause at the end of verse 8: ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα τὴν ἡμέραν ἐν ᾗ εὐδοῖ τὸν ἄγγελον κύριος μετ' ἐμοῦ⁵⁰ ("For I do not know the day whereupon the Angel of the Lord will prosper me"). Ackerman believes this represents the Hebrew Vorlage: כִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־יוֹם הַצֵּלָהּ מִלְּאֶךְ יְהוָה אִתִּי.⁵¹ Boling offers the suggestion that "perhaps he [Barak] had been going out and coming in from

⁵⁰See Alfred Rahlfs, ed., Septuaginta (Stuttgart: Privilegierte Württembergische Bibelanstalt), 1935.

⁵¹Ackerman, "Prophecy and Warfare," 10. He believes that the MT lacks a verb after וְיָדַע in verse 9 and this clause from the LXX supplies the verb "know," i.e. "only know that" Also Barak's concern "to know the day" in verse 8 (LXX) is picked up in v 14, "Arise, for this is the day. . . ."

battle without the benefit of adequate or proper inquiry."⁵² Burney, however, regards the clause as an early gloss intended to prevent an unfavorable interpretation of Barak's demand for a woman to accompany him.⁵³

Since the narrator refrains from providing motives for Barak's refusal to obey his call, the true reason can only be surmised,⁵⁴ but the reader has less than complimentary thoughts regarding him. Sternberg's comment is derogatory: "Of the two leaders, it is he who plays the woman."⁵⁵

Barak's demand is quickly accommodated, but there will be an attending serious consequence. His dependence on

⁵²Boling, Judges, 96.

⁵³C.F. Burney, The Book of Judges (reprinted, New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1970), 89. See also Mieke Bal, Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death, trans. Matthew Gumbert (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 48, who writes, "Another bias, which we call gendered, joins that belonging to the Septuagint. I explain it thus: the fact that Barak's dependence upon Deborah is considered shameful--and the response attributed to Deborah confirms this judgment--could have led the Septuagint to introduce a theological argument at precisely this point in the text."

⁵⁴Gros Louis, "Book of Judges," 148, offers two explanations. 1. It shows the weak faith of the Israelites. They have little confidence in the power of God. 2. Barak doubts the prophecy of a woman. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, trans. James Martin, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1970), 303, are probably more correct when they say "his mistrust of his own strength was such that he felt too weak to carry out the command of God."

⁵⁵Sternberg, Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 274.

Deborah will alter Yahweh's promise and affect its outcome.⁵⁶ The honor of vanquishing the enemy will be awarded to another, not to one of his subordinates, a man, but to a woman, still undisclosed. The intonation of Deborah's new prediction is not revealed,⁵⁷ but her words properly put Barak in his place and he does not counter in protest. Deborah arises (immediately?) and joins Barak.

Whether the narrator's use of הלך so far in this narrative is clever or strictly utilitarian can not be fully determined, but the eight occurrences of the verb in verse 6-9 again show Deborah and Barak in sharp contrast. Barak was commanded, "Go" (imv.) to prepare for warfare by taking 10,000 men with him. Barak's obedience was contingent upon the prophetess. "If you will go with me, then I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." Deborah replies, "I will surely go (inf. abs. + impf.) with you; nevertheless the honor shall not be yours or the journey that you are about to take (lit. "going")," for it will "go" (supplied by implication) to a woman. Then Deborah went with him. In review, Barak had been reluctant to go, but Deborah would surely go. Her readiness stands in contrast

⁵⁶Stek, "The Bee and the Mountain Goat," 65.

⁵⁷Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, V. v. 3, writes concerning Deborah, "She had indignation at what he said, and replied, 'Thou, O Barak, deliverest up meanly that authority which God hath given thee unto the hand of a woman, and I do not reject it!'"

to his reluctance. He hesitates to go but she arises to go immediately.

The story began with Deborah clearly in the foreground as the protagonist, but will she be the heroine of the story? When Barak, a man, enters the picture, the reader envisions a new protagonist, one who will step to the front and be the needed hero for the story. His hesitancy and dependency upon a woman disappoints though, and any expectancy for his ascendance to hero status is dashed by Deborah's prediction. With the honor to go to a woman and not to Barak, it is suspected that Deborah herself is the subject of her prediction. Supposedly she will remain the protagonist throughout the narrative and Barak will serve only as a foil. Apparently Barak is willing to accept his role as "second fiddle," for he does not withdraw his conditional demand. Perhaps he too expects Deborah to be the woman of honor and is content to allow the prophetess to retain her prominence. But the narrator is about to interject some information that will clarify nothing and only add to the mystery.

Parenthetical Narrative Intrusion (v 11)

The narrator employs a device in verse 11 that the reader, though he may not at first understand it, will most certainly detect. There is a sharp, almost distracting, break in the action that is pointed out by virtually every

commentator on this story. Stephen Hanselman is correct when he affirms that "verse 11 is not merely a late device sloppily interjected to make two disparate stories cohere."⁵⁸

The verse introduces a heretofore unheard-of character by the name of Heber⁵⁹ from the clan of the Kenites.⁶⁰ At this point in the narrative, however, the reader sees no relevance at all for the sudden break in the storyline to include this biographical data on Heber. What is the purpose for its insertion?

Verse 11 begins with a circumstantial clause. Circumstantial clauses do more than initiate a new episode in the story. Frequently they introduce parenthetical information that casts light on the activity that was just completed or perhaps is still in progress. For example, when the narrator recounts Joshua's encounter with the Captain of the Lord's host nearby Jericho (Josh 5:13-6:5), he breaks into his narrative with a parenthetical detail

⁵⁸Stephen W. Hanselman, "Narrative Theory, Ideology, and Transformation in Judges 4," in Anti-Covenant: Counter-reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible, BL, 22, and JSOTSup, 81, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 103.

⁵⁹Soggin, Judges, 65-66, translates חֶבֶר not as a personal name, but as "group," and הַקֵּינִי as an attributive adjective, "the Kenite group." But if such were the case, one would expect חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי or הַחֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי.

⁶⁰A clan of Midianites into which Moses had married (cf. Num 10:29-32).

which begins with a circumstantial clause: "Now Jericho was tightly shut because of the sons of Israel; no one went out and no one came in" (Josh 6:1). Why was this information so important to the narrator? He probably wanted to assure his reader that Joshua was in no danger when he ventured so close to the city of Jericho.

Sometimes a circumstantial clause provides the reader with details that appear irrelevant at the present time, but set him up for the precise moment in the future. An example can be found regarding the Kenites in Judges 1:16, an earlier occurrence where the Kenites are introduced by a circumstantial clause. There the writer breaks into his description of Judah's attempt to occupy its allotted territory to interject that the Kenites who have been accompanying Israel since the exodus at Moses' invitation have chosen to settle among the tribe of Judah to the south. For the most part, it appears that the Kenites remained in this southern locale. What at first seems to be a clumsy intrusion in Judges 1 is there by design. The reader is being readied for the next intrusion into the narrative (4:11) with regard to the Kenites where Heber proves to be the exception. He has separated himself from his kin and verse 17 will inform the reader that he has become an ally to Jabin, the one who has been holding Israel in his grip.

Verse 11 is indeed pivotal. What the reader does not realize is that he is being prepared to shift his

attention from one woman to another. At this point he does not know Jael exists, much less that she will be the heroine of the story. However, when she is introduced in verse 17 all necessary background information is already in place and the reader is able to proceed quickly to the denouement of the story. Murray well observes that the structure of the narrative is so tight in 4:16-18 that the inclusion of verse 11 there would totally disrupt the story.⁶¹

There are other advantages to the MT's placement of verse 11. Positioned between verse 10 and 12 it breaks up the narrative description of two captains preparing for war.⁶² In verse 10 Barak assembles his force of men, but what is his counterpart doing? The reader must wait until reading verse 12 to learn that Sisera is aware of Barak's activity and will prepare to meet him in verse 13. The narrator's postponement of presenting battle preparations by Sisera adds suspense to the story. In addition, the reader's curiosity is aroused concerning the relevance of the location of Heber's tent.⁶³ He presses on for a hint and finds that it is to Heber's encampment that Sisera will flee for safety and meet his death.

⁶¹Murray, "Narrative Structure," 179.

⁶²Alonso-Schökel, "Erzählkunst im Buche der Richter," 161, questions whether Heber's "tent" is a literary device to separate the two "camps" of Barak and Sisera.

⁶³Murray, "Narrative Structure," 180.

In summary, what at first pause seems to be disruptive proves to be a very versatile and effective literary device. It is a transitional device that creates suspense and fosters curiosity--both which propel the reader on to the climactic finish of the story.

The Battle (vv 12-16)

As it is so often the case in biblical accounts of Israel's warfare, more attention is devoted here to the battle preparations of Israel and the Canaanites than is given to the actual battle. The reader is struck by the verb used to describe the mustering of the opposing forces. In verse 3 the Israelites cried/called out (קָרָא, a leitwort in most of the stories) to Yahweh in their distress. Barak responded to Yahweh's call and in verse 10 he called (קָרָא, a bi-form of קָרָא, Hiphil stem), to Zebulun and Naphtali for fighting men. When Sisera heard of the Israelite "army" assembling on Mt. Tabor, he also called (קָרָא, Hiphil stem) his army to counter Barak's attack (v 13).

It will be Deborah who once again initiates the action. While Barak may be commended for patiently awaiting further instruction, he never initiates inquiry.⁶⁴ Deborah is clearly the leader. Her order to begin battle is her last recorded speech. It consists of an imperative,

⁶⁴Stek, "The Bee and the Mountain Goat," 67.

"Arise" (קום), followed by a declarative promise and a rhetorical question. The promise, "This is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand" echoes God's statement in verse 7 and seemingly contradicts Deborah's prediction in verse 9. In verse 2 Yahweh sold (מכר) them into the hand of Jabin. In verse 7 Yahweh promised to give (נתן) Sisera into Barak's hand. When he hesitated, Deborah predicted Sisera would be sold (מכר) into the hand of a woman, but now she predicts that Yahweh will give (נתן) Sisera into Barak's hand. The reference to Sisera here must be viewed as synecdoche. His name represents his army, for he himself will escape the hand of Barak.

Deborah's rhetorical question, "Has not Yahweh gone out before you,"⁶⁵ demands an affirmative answer once again and reaffirms the promised victory. Barak does not reply this time. To his credit there are no delays and he makes no insistence that certain conditions be met first.

Barak enters the battle with his ten thousand men.⁶⁶ Whether Deborah accompanies him is not mentioned.

⁶⁵James D. Martin, The Book of Judges, in the Cambridge Bible Commentary, eds. P.R. Ackroyd, A.R.C. Leaney, J.W. Packer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 59, connects this phrase to the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence.

⁶⁶Richard Patterson, "The Song of Deborah," in Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg, eds. John S. and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody

The reader reads on to find what her next role will be, but she has mysteriously disappeared from the story.⁶⁷ She will not be the heroine, the woman Sisera will fall to. Instead, another woman with initiative will replace her as the story's protagonist.

After such a stimulating introduction, the battle account is exceptionally abbreviated--one sentence (the poem [5:19-22] supplements details suggesting a sudden rain-storm⁶⁸). Yahweh receives all the credit for the rout of Sisera's army. Sternberg aptly states, "She [Deborah] has initiated and forced the battle; God has won it; and Barak remains with a mopping-up operation to his credit"⁶⁹--with one exception. Sisera has fled the scene on foot. The

Press, 1981), 152, nt. 17, writes: "The imagined contradiction between the two tribes and ten thousand men of Judg. 4:10 and the response of the six tribes in Judg. 5:13ff. is resolved by recognizing that Judg. 4 is simply detailing the initial muster of those tribes most closely associated with Barak, whereas Judg. 5:13ff. delineates the final roll of all the tribes that responded to Deborah's call."

⁶⁷Rachel C. Rasmussen, "Deborah the Woman Warrior," in Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible, BL, 22, and JSOTSup, 81, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 79-93, proposes that Deborah, not Yahweh, was the warrior who fought Sisera. Her antecedent in this role was Anath the divine warrior of Canaanite religion. She was redacted out of the story at this point by editors who were unsympathetic to polytheistic religion.

⁶⁸See Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, Judges, Ruth, in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 86-87; and Wood, Distressing Days of the Judges, 191-192.

⁶⁹Sternberg, Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 277.

narrator employs a pun and a touch of irony. Barak had assembled ten thousand men "at his feet" (בְּרַגְלָיו), i.e., with him at his command. Now Sisera, the charioteer with a decided advantage, is forced to abandon his vehicle of war to flee on his feet (בְּרַגְלָיו). While Sisera is escaping to the east, Barak is pursuing the Canaanite army (presumably) to the west⁷⁰ until all are fled and dead.

The Denouement in Jael's Tent (vv 17-22)

This unit begins with a circumstantial clause which enlarges upon Sisera's flight (v 15). Where will the Canaanite captain go? The reader is not given Sisera's point of determination (i.e., where he pre-determined to go) but his point of destination (i.e., where he ends up at Jael's invitation). The purpose of the previously mysterious verse 11 is now clearly seen. Heber the Kenite is a friend of the Canaanites, an ally to their king Jabin; and he has a wife Jael who appears to be a most gracious hostess. Apparently Sisera has reached safety. The background information thus far prevents the reader from

⁷⁰The exact location of Harosheth-hagoyim is unknown. Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, The MacMillan Bible Atlas (New York: MacMillan Company, 1968), plate 59, suggest that the Hebrew Harosheth refers to the wooded hills, north of the battle site along the Kishon River, in central Galilee that was controlled by the Canaanites. Barry J. Beitzel, The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), map 36, suggests a site west of the battle site, somewhere in the Esdraelon Plain nearer the Mediterranean Sea.

suspecting that Jael will murder Sisera⁷¹ and be the "woman" of verse 9.

The initiative is clearly with Jael who goes out to meet Sisera without any orders to do so. How many other tents did the lonely fugitive pass on his escape route before coming to Jael's tent? How many others had opportunity to do (in one way or another) what Jael does?

The narrator returns to dialogue. Just as Deborah had the first and last lines in earlier episodes, Jael will have the first and last lines here. Both times she will address a man outside her tent and invite him in. Her invitation to Sisera is persuasive, but her words are ironic.⁷² "Turn aside,⁷³ my master, turn aside to me! Do not be afraid." The irony of a housewife telling an army captain not to fear is striking. She can only assume that Sisera is fleeing out of fear, and that he will "turn aside" only if he is assured that he has found a place where he need no longer fear.⁷⁴ Her actions are as assuring as her

⁷¹Amit, "Judges 4," 97.

⁷²Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 53.

⁷³Stek, "The Bee and the Mountain Goat," 71, notes alliteration in סִיסְרָה, סוֹרָה, סוֹרָה.

⁷⁴Ibid.

words, for she covered him with a "rug"⁷⁵ in her tent. When he politely asks (imperative + particle נָּ) for a drink of water, she provides him with milk.⁷⁶

Sisera's next statement is spoken like a line from the captain he is. He orders (imperative, no particle נָּ) her to stand as a "lookout" for any pursuer. If anyone (literally, "a man," אִישׁ) should ask of her, "Is there anyone (אִישׁ) here?" Jael is to answer, "No." Sisera must suspect that he is being pursued by Barak, but he certainly does not realize how sinister a foreshadow of his fate⁷⁷ are his words, for when Barak arrives at Jael's tent, there is no man there. Only a corpse remains. Sisera never dreams that his real threat is not a man in hot pursuit, but this cooperative woman.⁷⁸

Jael has spoken and acted as a gracious, hospitable housewife and an obedient servant. Now her role abruptly changes. At what point she decides to do her deed is not told. Her killing of Sisera is not viewed as the act of a

⁷⁵For possible meanings of שֶׁמֶרֶת , "rug," see Boling, Judges, 97; Gray, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 273; and Soggin, Judges, 73.

⁷⁶Boling, Judges, 97-98, comments on the soporific effect of the milk and adds, "she duped him and doped him."

⁷⁷Stek, "The Bee and the Mountain Goat," 72.

⁷⁸Sternberg, "Poetics of Biblical Narrative," 82.

soldier, but in 5:6 she is mentioned in the same breath as Shamgar who was honored as a (military?) hero in 3:31.⁷⁹

Before describing Jael's murderous deed, the narrator reminds his reader that she is Heber's wife. She is the wife of a friend (v 17). Her loyalty to Israel proves to be stronger than her loyalty to her husband. The quick sequence of verbs shows a climactic development.⁸⁰ She "took a tent peg and seized a hammer in her hand, and went secretly to him and drove (וּפְתָה)⁸¹ the peg into his temple," and he died at her feet (cf. 5:27).⁸² She had no weapons of war, but her domestic tools for construction

⁷⁹Jo Ann Hackett, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel," in Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality, eds. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles, Harvard Women's Studies in Religion Series (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 28.

⁸⁰Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 54.

⁸¹Same verb describing the thrusting of Ehud's dagger into Eglon's belly.

⁸²Brenner, Israelite Woman, 120; and Susan Niditch, "Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael," in Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 43-57, propose that the reference to "feet" suggest sexual connotations, i.e., Jael used adulterous seduction, a legitimate situational ethic, to destroy Sisera. But why would one being pursued from a battle scene, exhausted from battle and flight, be enticed to sexual activity? In addition, she is ordered to stand guard at the door. Patterson, "Song of Deborah," 159, nt. 149, does not entertain this notion.

became tools of destruction and she handled them effectively.⁸³

Now for the first time the reader is able to identify the woman of whom Deborah spoke (v 9). Just as Yahweh had drawn (משך) Sisera out to the Kishon River (vv 7, 13), he has drawn (implied) him to Jael's tent.

The term בְּיָד is idiomatic for "in the power/control of," but it proves to be a graphic leitwort in this story. Yahweh had sold Israel into the hand of Jabin (v 2), but he assured Barak that he would give Sisera into his hand (v 7). Because of Barak's conditional demand for Deborah's presence, Yahweh will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman (v 9). Barak eventually goes out to battle with the promise, "this is the day Yahweh has given Sisera (synecdoche for army) into your hands" (v 14), but the captain flees the battle scene and in essence escaped out of Barak's hands (v 15). In her tent Jael seized a hammer in her hand (v 21) and drove a peg through his temple into the ground and fastened him there. Her action symbolically affirmed to all, "This man will not escape my hand." Deborah's prediction (v 9) turned out to be fulfilled

⁸³Moore, Judges, 124, explains that pitching a tent is women's business among the bedouins.

literally.⁸⁴ When Sisera is finally delivered into the hands of Barak (implied), he is a corpse.⁸⁵ After this event, the hand of Israel continues to press upon Jabin until he is destroyed (v 24).

Meanwhile, Barak is unaware of what the reader now knows. He is still pursuing his opponent. Goslinga commends Barak for his unslackened zeal despite Deborah's predictions that the honor would not be his (v 9),⁸⁶ but perhaps the momentum from the rout at the Kishon River (v 15) has motivated and inspired him to attempt to regain the honor in spite of her prediction. Since Jael has already done her deed, all that remains is to inform Barak. So once again she goes out to meet a man (cf. v 18) and beckons Barak into her tent. "Come, and I will show you the

⁸⁴Many have criticized the ethics of this hostess turned murderer. Cundall, Judges, 90, calls it "treachery." Keil and Delitzsch, Judges, 306, say, "Her heroic deed cannot be acquitted of the sins of lying, treachery, and assassination, . . ." Lindars, "Deborah's Song," 173, calls her action "morally ambiguous." Her courage should silence her critics. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward Old Testament Ethics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 276, explains that "Jael's loyalty to Jehovah and to his people was her justification. It was part of the old command to exterminate the Canaanite (Deut. 20:16)."
Another perspective must be considered. If the Israelites were doing what was right in their own eyes, what was the rationale of a non-Israelite like Jael?

⁸⁵Note the interesting assonance. When Barak (בָּרַק) locates his man, he is already dead with a peg in his temple (בְּרִיקְתּוֹ).

⁸⁶Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 293.

man whom you are seeking" (v 22). If Jael had not called him in, he would not have known the fate of Sisera, but would have surmised that the captain had successfully escaped to Jabin from the hand of everyone.

The dialogue in this story has been most interesting. It is dominated by the women speakers. Deborah first speaks (vv 6-7) either to inform or to reprimand, and Barak replies unheroically (v 8). Deborah's response is assurance and predictive rebuke (v 9) to which Barak does not respond. When Deborah issues the directive to engage in battle, Barak proceeds without a word. Jael initiates the dialogue with Sisera by inviting him into her tent (v 18). That he considers himself still to be a captain in control is evidenced by his last words to her, an order: "Stand in the doorway. . . ." (v 20). She has no need to respond verbally to him, for she will get in the last word by her deed, an action that speaks louder than words and with greater finality. Jael speaks only briefly to Barak, also inviting him to see his dead opponent (v 22). Barak never utters a word. What is there to say? He can only stand and stare in silence with the realization that the prediction (v 9) now has fulfillment. The honor has indeed gone to a woman. There has been no recorded communication between the two military leaders--attempted diplomatic negotiations (cf. Jephthah and the king of Ammon, Judg 11:12-28) or confrontational

threats. When they are together in the same tent, they are silent. One is stunned, the other is dead.

Summary Observation

The role-reversal in Judges 4 depicts the more powerful (males) showing weakness and the more weak (females) demonstrating strength. The victory is attributed to God, but he has his helpers (cf. 5:23). An extraordinary feature of this narrative is that "women become the 'helper' through whom God accomplishes victory and that one of them is not a member of the Israelite tribes."⁸⁷

There is nothing in Mosaic law that forbids women from taking places of responsibility that are normally accepted as the roles of men. But why must they accept these roles? Williams aptly observes:

There is an inherent relationship between the story of instability in Judges and the representation of the importance of feminine personages. Women lead or affect the course of history when times are out of joint.⁸⁸

That the times are "out of joint" is a theme of the narrator of Judges, and the story of Deborah, Barak and Jael has forcibly given demonstration of this fact.

⁸⁷Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 58.

⁸⁸Williams, Women Recounted, 74.

A "Certain" Woman (Judges 9:50-57)

The story of Abimelech serves as a sequel to the story of Gideon and provides the reader with a new assortment of drama, most of which will not be discussed here. After the setting of the story is established, attention will focus on the small narrative segment (9:50-57) concerning an unnamed woman in the climactic (anti-climactic?) end to the larger Abimelech narrative. She, like Deborah and Jael, will be seen to be a woman who stepped in and accomplished what the reader has expected from a man.

The Setting of the Narrative

Gideon's failure, retirement and death (8:27-35)

It is saddening to see Gideon's career end in failure with a blot on his name. From the spoils taken from the defeated Midianites he made an ephod⁸⁹ that was a rival to the ephod worn by the high priest. It provided Israel with something new with which to "play the harlot."

⁸⁹The ephod worn by the high priest (Exod 39:1-21) was associated with the Urim and Thummim (Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8) which were used to declare God's will (Num 27:21). The nature of Gideon's ephod is a matter of conjecture. Cundall, Judges, 123, submits three possible alternatives: "that it was a garment after the pattern of the high-priestly ephod but with an unusual degree of gold ornamentation; that it was a replica of the high-priestly garment made of pure gold; or that it was a free-standing image." Was Gideon trying to separate the ephod from its high-priestly function and using it to receive divine oracles apart from the high priest? See Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 351.

The only bright note is that the land was undisturbed for forty years and Gideon was able to retire to his own house in peace. When Gideon died, the peaceful situation began to unravel as Israel once again continued their harlotry with the Baals (v 33). Never is it said that they abandoned the Baals during Gideon's lifetime and turned to Yahweh.

Israel's return (שׁוּב) to the Baals is apparently nothing but a turning from Gideon's ephod. It is not necessarily a turning from Yahweh who had delivered them (by the hand of Gideon), for there is no indication that Israel had turned to Yahweh under Gideon's judgeship. Israel neither remembered Yahweh nor did (עָשָׂה) kindness (חֶסֶד) to Gideon's house. In essence they "forgot" the good Gideon had done for the nation. Verses 34, 35 are juxtaposed in such a way as to show that neither Yahweh nor Gideon's family was treated fairly by Israel. At this point the reader is unaware of any details of mistreatment against Gideon's house that would warrant such criticism. That information comes shortly.

These final verses of Gideon's narrative are nearly paradigmatic. The deliverer Yahweh raised up is dead. Israel continues in idolatry. Surely Yahweh will sell Israel into the hand of another oppressor. Surely he will raise up a new deliverer. Previous patterns produce expectations in the mind of the reader. On the contrary,

however, the narrative proceeds by presenting the story of an anti-judge, an anti-hero, a non-deliverer.⁹⁰ Yahweh allows Israel to slip into the hand of one of its own. This time the enemy is a wicked usurper from their own ranks who defies the resolve of his own father that only Yahweh should rule over Israel (8:23) and he seizes control through bribery and murder.

Parenthetical intrusion (8:30-31)

Verses 30, 31 are introduced by circumstantial clauses that interrupt the narrative concerning Gideon. Between statements about his return to his home and his death is interjected information about his family (cf. how 4:11 had interrupted details of battle preparation in 4:10-13). With the first circumstantial clause the reader is informed of Gideon's seventy sons born to many wives. At this point, none are named.

The second circumstantial clause tells of a concubine (פִּילְגֶּשֶׁת), a lesser wife, who, instead of dwelling with her husband in Ophrah, remained with her family in Shechem in the southern part of Manasseh's tribal allotment. It was she (emphatic in Hebrew, הִיא) who bore Gideon a son who is named here. A curious line follows: "and he appointed (שָׁם) his name Abimelech." Normally the Hebrew reads: "he

⁹⁰Klein, Triumph of Irony, 70.

called (קרא) his name" "To appoint a name" means "to give a new name."⁹¹ Three similar occurrences of קרא (2 Kgs 17:34; Neh 9:7; Dan 1:7) are examples of renaming. Who renamed Abimelech? The antecedent is unclear. If Gideon gave him a new name, Why? Kaiser suggests that it was occasioned by Gideon's rejection of the kingly office when he declared that Yahweh would rule Israel (8:23).⁹² Martin Buber proposes that Abimelech renamed himself. In keeping with his character he "assumed a proud name ('my father before me was--really--a king') which, however, basically refers to the divine king, a name accordingly which judges him."⁹³

The reader should wonder: Why is the one son who is most likely the least significant (i.e., born to a lesser wife and living in a different city) introduced here and selected for special attention by being the only one to receive a name in the text? Recognizing that parenthetical intrusions are also preparatory, the reader is placed on the alert for additional follow-up information on this character. A long wait is not required.

⁹¹Kaiser, Toward an Old Testament Theology, 144.

⁹²Ibid., 145.

⁹³Martin Buber, Kingship of God, trans. Richard Scheimann (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1967), 74. Boling, Judges, 163; and Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 353, nt. 120, concur that "my father" refers to Yahweh and "king" refers to his position in Israel.

Abimelech, conspiracy, fratricide and usurpation (9:1-6)

Abimelech is immediately portrayed as an opportunist, a manipulator, and even a scoundrel. After the death of his father he inspires a conspiracy to gain the position his father had wisely refused. His aspiration may be fueled by his name change, but his goal will be achieved through his matriarchal connections.⁹⁴ Going to his home city, Shechem, he appeals to the relatives of his mother (they and his mother are mentioned three times) to speak on his behalf to the leaders (בָּנֵי) of Shechem. Presumably they have political "pull" whereas he does not (cf. an earlier incident when this same city⁹⁵ listened to the appeal of a young man because he was more honorable than his brothers [Gen 34:19]). By means of a rhetorical question he argues that it would be better (literally, "what is good [טוֹב] for you") for Shechem that one man from them (namely himself, a descendant of Gideon, but also their relative) to rule over them than the seventy out-of-town sons of Gideon.

Though not stated in so many words, his plan is "right in their eyes" and they supply him with funds from

⁹⁴Klein, Triumph of Irony, 71.

⁹⁵It is not clear from the narrative to what extent the population of this former Canaanite city is still Canaanite. The review of untaken cities in Judges 1:27-29 gives no hint either. Neither is the reader told whether Abimelech's mother is Canaanite. It is clear that Shechem lives by Canaanite standards, as do so many Israelite cities.

Baal's temple to pay his hired assassins. The narrator makes a moral judgment of these characters--worthless and reckless--but Abimelech is worse. He inspires the treacherous scheme. Even though he intends to mass-murder his seventy half-brothers, the men of Shechem justify their support because Abimelech is a relative (literally a "brother").⁹⁶ His intentions find fulfillment as he slaughters his brothers on "one stone"⁹⁷ (v 5). Now that he is without rival from his father's house, he is made king in Shechem. The narrator's irony marks the action of Shechem as failure,⁹⁸ for he juxtaposes the root (מלך) three times in one short statement which reads literally, "they made king 'My father is king' king." Abimelech is now both a mass-murderer and a usurper. The reader now understands why this character was singled out from all of

⁹⁶T.A. Boogaart, "Stone for Stone: Retribution in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem," *JSOT* 32 (1985): 55, nt. 8, comments on the irony of their "brotherhood" conversation. "The men of Shechem and Abimelech, although physically brothers/kinsmen and apparently sincere in their words, have no idea at all as to the true meaning of brotherhood; indeed both parties are planning fratricide. . . . [They] are true brothers after all, brothers in a sense they could never have intended. They are not only brothers in blood, but brothers in character, both plotting treachery."

⁹⁷The phrase is enigmatic. Does it merely mean a formal execution (see Keil and Delitzsch, *Judges*, 362) or does it signify the slaughter of his brothers like sacrificial animals on an abattoir (cf. 1 Sam 14:33-34)? For the latter possibility, see Boling, *Judges*, 171; and Soggin, *Judges*, 168.

⁹⁸Buber, *Kingship of God*, 74.

Gideon's sons for special introduction (8:31). It is also becoming apparent how Israel did not show kindness to the house of Gideon (8:35). He does not know yet, though, how the nation will respond to the news of the massacre.

The Expectation of the Reader

The behavior of Abimelech has been absolutely repugnant. The reader expects Israel to experience the same feelings he does. He waits for Israel to rise up in horror and anger to defend the nation's honor and to deal with Abimelech like the criminal he is. Surely the nearby tribes will convene as they did at Mizpeh (20:1) in a unified action to mete out retribution. Where are the elders, priests, Levites (prophets?)--anyone who will publicly condemn the action of Abimelech and support of Shechem and will lead Israel against them to avenge the blood of Gideon's sons? How long will Abimelech's crime and improper claim go unchecked? How long will his rule persist?

The narrator gives no hint that there was a moral reaction of any kind on the part of Israel. Only Jotham, the one half-brother who had escaped the massacre, seems to have any understanding of the significance of what had happened. After delivering his "fable of the forest" to the citizens of Shechem (9:7-20), he escapes and finds safety in Beer while Abimelech appears "safely" established as king in Shechem and the nearby vicinity. The non-reaction of Israel

to Abimelech's usurpation of power brings the reader to a fuller understanding of 8:35: Israel did not show kindness to the household of Gideon (cf. Jotham's words in 9:16-19).

When the tribes fail to take any action, God initiates action of an unexpected sort. He sent an evil spirit⁹⁹ between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem which created distrust and disunity. Cundall aptly notes that "self-seeking opportunists and those capable of treacherous murder never make easy companions."¹⁰⁰ Lest the reader miss the point here that it is God who causes the evil of Abimelech and Shechem to rebound in retribution upon their own heads (v 24), after the dust settles at the end of the narrative, the narrator once again credits God with retribution (vv 56-57). Notice the chiastic arrangement of two key ideas.¹⁰¹

- A God caused to return (שׁוּב, Hiphil)
- B the evil of Abimelech which he did to his father to kill his seventy brothers
- B¹ and all the evil of the men of Shechem
- A¹ God caused to return (שׁוּב, Hiphil) upon their heads.

⁹⁹"Evil spirit" is neither defined nor explained. Did God use demonic power here? See Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 362. The view that God sent Abimelech "distress" is preferable, however. See TWOT, s.v. "רָעָע," by G. Herbert Livingston, 2.856.

¹⁰⁰Cundall, Judges, 130.

¹⁰¹Boogaart, "Stone for Stone," 49.

This is not to suggest that God will not employ helpers, for he does. The first is Gaal, another opportunist like Abimelech, who will lead Shechem in a revolt to oust the "king" from power (9:26-29). Abimelech will retaliate and take action against Gaal who is defeated in battle and driven from Shechem (9:30-41). Abimelech then punishes Shechem for disloyalty to him by preying upon innocent citizens in their fields, storming the city, razing it, killing its residents, and burning the tower that harbors fugitives (9:42-49). In a roundabout way the first helper brought retribution upon Shechem, but he was unable to subdue Abimelech before he himself was driven off. The reader still awaits the resolution to the story and retribution for Abimelech.

The Unexpected Resolution

The reader is aware of something that seemingly escapes Israel--that Abimelech's vengeful destruction of Shechem and its inhabitants was ultimately retribution from God. From the human perspective, however, it was the vindictive reaction of a cruel tyrant. Yet there is no indication that the nation recoils in horror at Shechem's fate or has any intention of unifying to prevent further disaster.

It would appear that the human tragedy at Shechem is about to be repeated at Thebez,¹⁰² a few miles to the north, when Abimelech moves his men there and captures the city (9:50). Will no one take a stand against the unchecked tyranny of this agent of evil? All the men (אֲנָשִׁים), women (נָשִׁים) and all the leaders of the city (בְּעָלֵי הָעִיר) flee to the tower within the city. No one will "stand up" to Abimelech until one woman stands over him with a stone.

The phrase אִשָּׁה אַחַת in verse 53 is rendered "a woman" or "a certain woman" in virtually every version. Boling is indeed correct when he states, "The word 'one' is used in the sense of an indefinite article, e.g., I Sam 6:7; 24:15; 26:20, and in the sense of 'a certain one' in I Sam 1:1; II Sam 18:10; II Kings 4:1."¹⁰³ But this is a generalization. The basic meaning of אֶחָד/אַחַת is "one." To translate אַחַת in verse 53 as an indefinite article seems woefully inadequate. Its usage stands in contrast to its absence in the final phrase of Abimelech's dying statement, "A woman slew him" (v 54). A.D. Crown observes, "The bathos of this episode is better demonstrated by the translation 'one

¹⁰²The narrator gives no clue of elapsed time since Shechem's destruction or the purpose of visiting Thebez. It seems probable that Thebez was sympathetic to Shechem's revolt.

¹⁰³Boling, Judges, 182.

'woman' i.e., one woman alone, . . ."¹⁰⁴ Gerald Janzen concurs, "Such a translation ['a certain woman'], justifiable in standard usage, is here imprecise. For the rhetorical context in this instance gives the phrase specific pith and point."¹⁰⁵

The rhetorical context¹⁰⁶ of which Janzen writes begins with Abimelech's appeal to the leaders of Shechem. He asks, "Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you or that one man (אִישׁ אֶחָד) rule over you?" (9:2). Abimelech was seeking the position of king for one single person, himself, and not for "a certain man." With the assistance of his hired worthless and reckless associates he killed his seventy half-brothers upon a single stone (אֶבֶן אֶחָד), not on "a certain stone" (9:5). Jotham reiterates Abimelech's dastardly deed in 9:18, calling special attention to the fact that Gideon's seventy sons were all killed upon a single stone (אֶבֶן אֶחָד). The word אֶחָד is just an adjective, but its repetitious use in the narrative seems more significant than a mere indefinite article. This woman, a lone individual, stands

¹⁰⁴A.D. Crown, "A Reinterpretation of Judges IX in the Light of its Humor," AbrN 3 (1963): 96.

¹⁰⁵J. Gerald Janzen, "A Certain Women in the Rhetoric of Judges 9," JSOT 38 (1987): 33.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 34.

out by her throwing her millstone when everyone else was paralyzed by fear.

She threw (שָׁלַךְ) her grindstone, striking Abimelech on the head when he approached too close to the tower. Boling claims her "throw" is a hyperbolic touch to the conclusion of the narrative. She may have "dropped" the stone, but she certainly did not "throw" it.¹⁰⁷ However, his explanation is unnecessary if one understands the nature and size of her (upper) millstone,¹⁰⁸ for she could have flung it like one shot-putting, thus delivering a lethal blow to Abimelech's skull.¹⁰⁹

The millstone is another example of improvised weaponry.¹¹⁰ Of all the domestic implements available, the millstone seems less violent. Shamgar's oxgoad (3:31)

¹⁰⁷Boling, Judges, 182.

¹⁰⁸She threw the upper millstone (literally the "riding stone"). It fits the description of the quern and muller (see The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology, s.v. "Mill, Millstone," by Martin H. Heicksen, 314-315). The bottom stone (averaging 13 in. wide by 25-30 in. long), called the "saddle quern" by archaeologists, had its top surface worn concave through long usage which gave it the appearance of a saddle. The upper stone, the "muller" was a small hand stone in the shape of a loaf of bread that was used in washboard fashion, riding over the bottom stone.

¹⁰⁹Wood, Distressing Days of the Judges, 250.

¹¹⁰Shamgar used an oxgoad; Jael a hammer and tent peg. Gideon used lamps, pitchers and rams' horns as catalysts for fear and panic; and Samson used a moist jawbone of an ass.

could be fashioned into a spear, and it is already known what Jael could do with a hammer and tent peg (4:21). This woman's millstone however, seems to be truly an instrument of peace, especially in contrast to the fire with which Abimelech intends to destroy the tower of Thebez with its fugitives.¹¹¹

This latter observation presents interesting questions. Why did this woman have a millstone with her? Grinding is not normally done on tower tops. What occasioned her taking her upper millstone as she fled with fellow citizens to the tower for safety? Is it normal procedure to take the top half of a grinding unit (the lower half would have been too heavy and cumbersome to move quickly to the tower) with a fleeing person? And what could be done with just half of a grinding unit? In addition to describing what the woman did, is there also a suggestion of purpose and preparation for what she did? Cundall appears to be correct when he says that "this woman, in her desperation, had brought this upper millstone (grinding was not normally done on the roof) as a defensive weapon."¹¹² While everyone else is panicky, she is calculating a way she can contribute to Abimelech's demise should an opportunity

¹¹¹Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 220.

¹¹²Cundall, Judges, 136.

afford itself. Writers do not criticize this woman for her ethics as they do Jael. This woman's act is purely military without any ambiguity.¹¹³

Neither is there any ambiguity in the damage done to Abimelech. He knows he has received a (near) fatal blow, but he also knows the source of the blow (throw?)--a lone woman--and at the moment he is more concerned about his humiliation in dying at the hand of this woman than in dying itself. Therefore his last order as "king" (cf. 1 Sam 31:4) is to his armor bearer, "Draw your sword and kill me, lest it be said of me, 'A woman slew him.'" He considers death at the hand of a woman an ignominy of the worst kind. (Perhaps he recalls derisive comments of men rehearsing Sisera's death at the hand of Jael.) The armor bearer grants Abimelech's request and he dies. Bal notes, "Instead of saving his honor, he further damages it: he did not even fall for a cause."¹¹⁴

Summary Observations

The narrative begins and ends with death scenes. In between is evidence of either no leadership or opportunistic, misguided leadership. Is it not ironic justice that narrative which begins with a man killing his seventy

¹¹³Bal, Death and Dissymmetry, 222.

¹⁴Ibid.

half-brothers on a single stone, ends with the same man, an undeniable murderer, killed by one woman with one stone?

There are several other touches of irony involving the feminine gender in this story that have not yet received comment. Abimelech's achievement, though murderous, is through the influence of one woman--his mother (recall he was made king by Shechem due to the appeal of his mother's relatives). In essence, her influence put him in office. Abimelech's demise, however, comes through the "aim" of another single woman. That fatal fling of the millstone in revenge and judgment took him out of office.

The narrator never gives the woman's name as he did in the Deborah-Jael story. Is this significant? Perhaps. Perhaps the narrator never learned her name. Perhaps it was not necessary to know and include her name, for it may be more emphatic for the narrator's purpose for her to remain nameless. Abimelech, a man who aspired to make a name for himself ("My father is king") dies at the hand of a nameless woman.

It was noted above that God was responsible for bringing retribution on Shechem and Abimelech (9:23-24). Gaal was God's instrument for bringing judgment upon Shechem, but when tribal or spiritual leadership of Israel failed to check the progress of the wicked tyrant within their own ranks, Yahweh used one woman to act as his agent. She stopped Abimelech in his tracks and his men dispersed.

Therefore his death has varying significance to different historical participants. To Abimelech, it was the epitome of humiliation (9:54). To the narrator, it was retribution from God (9:56). To the Israelites of succeeding generations, it was proverbial (cf. 2 Sam 11:21). But for past and present readers of Judges, it is another example of role reversal. Women did not go out to battle in biblical times. On this occasion, neither did the men. In the Jael incident, Israel's men had gone out to fight, but they allowed the enemy captain to escape. When he arrived at Jael's tent, he was a fugitive, not an aggressor. In this present situation, however, Abimelech is an aggressor. This woman has been forced to flee her home (and her "kitchen"?). The men of the city have not taken offensive action. They are rushing for a tower where they will be trapped and destined to die in flames just like the residents at Shechem unless there is some intervention. To the surprise of the reader, it comes from one lone woman who has come to the scene armed with a simple domestic implement that becomes her offensive weapon. She saves her life and the fellow residents of Thebez, and spares the nation of Abimelech's spreading tyranny.

The Wife of Manoah (Judges 13)

Judges 13 is the introductory segment of the Samson narrative, but it is written in such a way so as to direct

attention to the unnamed wife of Manoah and mother of Samson.

The Setting of the Narrative

For the last time in the book, the story begins with what the reader has come to expect--a formulaic introduction: the sons of Israel continue to do evil in Yahweh's sight and he gives them into the hands of the Philistines. However, two notable features of the formula are lacking. Interestingly there is no record that Israel cried out in distress (זעק). Also Yahweh does not raise up (קים) a deliverer. Instead, in this particular story the reader is introduced to a childless couple. At the end of the story (v 24), the woman will bear a son as a fulfillment of divine promise (v 3). In subsequent chapters this child will prove to be Israel's next deliverer. Indirectly he receives his commission through his mother in the prediction addressed to her and the restrictions imposed upon her (vv 3-5).¹¹⁵ However he never accomplishes a complete deliverance like his predecessors (cf. Othniel, Ehud, Barak, etc.). As predicted, he will only begin to deliver Israel (v 5). So instead of the compressed phrase, "the Lord raised up a deliverer," the reader is introduced to a man and wife, a divine messenger, and a prediction.

¹¹⁵Webb, Book of Judges, 164.

In the introduction of the couple (v 2), the man appears first and is named Manoah. His unnamed wife, however, is destined to be the center of attention in the narrative. Manoah is identified by his locale and tribe, "a certain¹¹⁶ man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites." The unnamed wife (וְאִשְׁתּוֹ) is introduced to the story in a circumstantial clause: "and his wife (was) barren and she had not borne (children)." Nevertheless, it is this unnamed, seemingly insignificant woman (וְאִשְׁתּוֹ) that the Angel of the Lord singles out for a direct announcement of her pregnancy and prediction of her child's calling and future duty. In fact, this Angel will appear to her twice in the course of the story.

The barren woman motif is a recurring one throughout the historical narratives of the Old Testament, but with variations.¹¹⁷ After years of awaiting promised seed Abraham was visited twice by the Angel of the Lord (once in Sarah's absence [Gen 17:15-16], once in her "presence" [Gen 18:9-15]) who announced that the aged, barren wife would

¹¹⁶Versions normally render וְאִשְׁתּוֹ as "certain" in this verse. However a literal rendering of "one" could emphasize that Manoah was one who did not migrate north with the Danites to take the city of Laish and resettle there. He was one who remained at Zorah.

¹¹⁷Cf. the various type-scenes as presented by Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterizations of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," *Semeia* 46 (1989): 151-166.

bear a son. Isaac prayed to Yahweh on behalf of barren Rebekah and she conceived (Gen 25:21). A barren Rachel became envious and exasperated and demanded of Jacob a son (Gen 30:1) before God remembered her and allowed her to conceive (Gen 30:22). Hannah went to the tabernacle at Shiloh and entreated the Lord herself that he might give her a son, and received assurance from Eli the priest that her prayer would be granted (1 Sam 1:9-11, 17).

The annunciation to Manoah's wife is markedly different from the above examples. Twice it is emphatically stated that she is childless. It is interesting to note that "and she had not borne" (וְלֹא יָלְדָהּ) and "and you have not borne" (וְלֹא יָלְדָהּ) is juxtaposed to "barren" (עֲקָרָה) in verses 2, 3 in a kind of hendiadys of ideas.¹¹⁸ Only the note on Sarah (Gen 11:30) compares. No special insight into the woman's situation is given. Are Manoah and his wife old? Are they beyond the years of bearing children? Does Manoah want a son? Has his wife felt obligated to produce an heir for her husband and tried other means? (cf. Sarah in Gen 16). Has she experienced a social stigma for being barren? (cf. Hannah and Peninnah in 1 Sam 1:2, 5-6). Has she begged her husband for a child? Has either of them prayed for a

¹¹⁸Hendiadys is normally the linkage of two nouns by the conjunction "and." Cf. Williams, Hebrew Syntax, 16, § 72.

child? None of these questions is addressed.¹¹⁹ The narrator simply states that the Angel of the Lord appears apparently unsolicited to the barren woman to predict the birth and mission of her son¹²⁰ and to place restrictions upon her. The news is received with excitement, joy and anticipation.

The Nature of the Narrative

Dialogue is central and important to this story as so often is the case in biblical narrative. The divine messenger speaks to both the wife (announcing, vv 3-6) and her husband (answering, vv 11, 13, 16, 18). The woman speaks only to her husband (informing, vv 6-7, 9; and correcting, v 23). The man speaks to Yahweh (praying, v 8), to the divine messenger (usually questioning, vv 11, 12, 15, 17) and only one line of frantic despair to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God" (v 22). These excerpts of conversation are important to the story, for they reveal something of the character of the speakers, especially of Manoah and his wife, whose personalities and insights are contrasted.

¹¹⁹Cf. J. Cheryl Exum, "Promise and Fulfillment: Narrative Art in Judges 13," *JBL* 99 (March 1980): 47; and Keim, *Triumph of Irony*, 111.

¹²⁰Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 412, states, "By choosing a barren couple, the Lord made clear that deliverance would only come through a special dispensation on His part and that His people, who were powerless in themselves, could only receive it as a gift from above."

It is immediately apparent that the woman is the human protagonist¹²¹ of the story, not Manoah. He may be named, but it is to the unnamed wife that the divine messenger appears when her husband is absent. Only a few women in the Old Testament had such an encounter, but what other Old Testament woman learns of her pregnancy in this manner? (Only the mother of Jesus in the New Testament compares.) It is unclear why the messenger did not appear to Manoah, but it will be noticed that throughout the story the narrator casts the woman in better light than her husband.

It is an interesting feature that at the beginning of the story the narrator reveals to the reader the identity of the messenger. He is the Angel of the Lord.¹²² Now the reader knows something positively that the woman seems to suspect, but her husband fails to grasp. Not until the end of the story (v 22) do they come to a certain knowledge of what the reader has known all along.

When the divine messenger appeared to the woman, his announcement was at once seen to be supernatural. It was no

¹²¹Exum, "Narrative Art in Judges 13," 46, states that the messenger is the central character in all parts of the story.

¹²²This person appears frequently in the OT, sometimes as the "angel of God." In many passages he is identified as deity, speaking not merely for God, but as God. Cf. Gen 16:7-13; 22:11-19; 31:11-13; Exod 3:2ff.; Judg 6:11-23, to cite just a few examples.

secret that she was barren, but who but God could know with certainty that she would (in the future) bear a son? (Note that the verb forms are waw + perfect conjugation.) Who but God could know and add, "For behold, (literally) you (are) pregnant and bearing a son" (v 5)? (Note that הָרָה, "pregnant," is a f. adj. and that יִלְדָּה "bearing," is a Qal act. f. pt.) Surely if this messenger knew something that she did not yet know--that she was already pregnant--then he also had the authority to impose upon her standards that were in keeping with the Nazirite her son was to be. No other woman had such restrictions placed upon her.

The woman accepts the message without any recorded comment, and rushes off to inform her husband of the messenger and the news. Clearly she believed the man to be at least a prophet, maybe more. She called him a "man of God" (cf. Deut 33:1) whose "appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome" (v 6). She had not asked him where he had come from, and he had not offered his name. The reader senses that the woman may have intuitively recognized the messenger's true identity, but was too awe-struck to have her suspicions verified. She seemingly drops hints to her husband about the man's possible identity, but he never tunes in to them.

Manoah is apparently unsatisfied with what he learns from his wife, but does not reply. Instead he prays that

the "man of God" may "come to us again that he may teach us what to do for the boy who is to be born" (v 8). Was this a noble request? Or was he curious concerning the identity of the man of God? Did he not trust his wife's report?¹²³ Or did he want to be included with parental duties to perform for the child? The narrator offers no clue, but Manoah's appeal is answered.

Manoah's granted request is ironic in several ways. First, he wants the "man of God" to return to him and his wife ("us"). The Angel returns to the wife, however, when Manoah is again absent. She must find her husband to notify him of the "man of God's" coming. The woman must then lead her husband to him. Granted, her leading him was utilitarian, but it is almost symbolic of her leading her husband to an understanding of who the visitor is and the significance of his mission to them. The messenger came to the woman, but the husband must come to the messenger.¹²⁴ It is questionable what Manoah would have learned apart from his wife. Would he have ever seen the divine messenger?

Second, it is ironic that when the messenger returns, he discloses nothing new to Manoah. There are no

¹²³The view of Boling, *Judges*, 221.

¹²⁴Exum, "Narrative Art in Judges 13," 51.

directions for him.¹²⁵ He is merely cautioned that his wife must be careful to comply with previously given instructions. It is ironic that he wanted more information, but the messenger actually told him less than what had been told the woman. So the instructions are repeated three times in the narrative, indicating the central importance of the divine communique, but the amount of information repeated is reduced each time.¹²⁶

Third, it is ironic that Manoah was so oblivious to what his wife had immediately detected at the divine messenger's first appearance. She noted that his appearance was like the Angel of God, awesome. Struck by his appearance, she reverently did not question him, but readily accepted his message. In contrast, Manoah treats the divine messenger like a human with his rapid firing of questions.¹²⁷

¹²⁵J. Cheryl Exum, "The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga," *VT* 33 (January 1983): 39, believes that "the messenger's appearance to the woman alone in v. 9, and his refusal to tell Manoah as much about the child (vv. 13-14) as he told the woman (vv. 3-5) are subtle indications that the divine intention is to highlight the role of the mother."

¹²⁶Exum, "Narrative Art in Judges 13," 52, proposes that the reduced message emphasizes the original message.

¹²⁷It is an interesting possibility that Manoah's seeming inclination to incessant questioning is the reason why the Angel of the Lord came to the wife alone--to be able to deliver his message uninterrupted!

A careful scrutiny of Manoah's conversation with the divine messenger reveals him to be slow to think but fast to speak. First, he appears to doubt his wife's judgment and memory when he asks, "Are you the man who spoke to the woman?" (v 11). His second question relates to the boy, "What shall be the boy's mode of life and his vocation?" (v 12). This question seems to be prompted by curiosity. If the boy is to be a Nazirite (as his wife had informed him in v 7), what is he going to do? The messenger neither acknowledges nor answers his questions, but reiterates the woman's previous instructions. Strangely Manoah never presses for more information--concerning the boy or for himself. He had requested the "man of God's" return to instruct him and his wife, but instruction is now one thing for which he does not ask. And when his question concerning the boy's mission goes unanswered, he does not seem to notice. It appears he was not listening to the messenger's answer, but was anticipating his next statement which is totally unrelated to his own question and the messenger's answer: "Please let us detain you so that we may prepare a kid for you" (v 15). He continues to treat the divine messenger like a human (cf. Gen 18:3-5).

It is here that Manoah misses his second opportunity to identify the messenger. The "man of God" refused the offer of food, but instructed Manoah to make a burnt

offering (עֹלָה) to Yahweh instead (Gideon had offered him a מִנְחָה to Yahweh in 6:18). But Manoah fails to recognize the divine messenger as Yahweh himself. Thus the narrator reminds his reader "For Manoah did not know that it was the angel of the Lord" (v 16) lest the reader who does know the messenger's identity becomes impatient with Manoah.

Manoah's final question may indicate a confused curiosity, for it begins with the wrong interrogative pronoun, "who?" (מִי¹²⁸) instead of "what?" (מָה). It appears that he began to ask "Who are you?" but that being too blunt, he went on to ask for his name.¹²⁹ Again the messenger does not answer Manoah's question, but returns with a question, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful (or 'incomprehensible')?" (v 18).¹³⁰ His wife had described the messenger's appearance as "awesome"; now the messenger says his name is incomprehensible, but Manoah still fails to identify this person.

¹²⁸TWOT, s.v. "מִי," by Walter C. Kaiser. He states, "Whereas mā 'what?' inquires after the character or quality of things and sometimes persons, mī 'who?' usually refers to persons and seeks only the identity, ancestry, or some external fact."

¹²⁹Boling, Judges, 222, says Manoah momentarily stuttered. He translates, "Who . . . ? Your name?"

¹³⁰Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 417, sees a mild reprimand here.

It is not until he offers his grain offering (מִנְחָה) to Yahweh and the Angel of the Lord ascended in the flame that Manoah knows the identity of the "man of God." His supernatural disappearance left no room for doubt. The narrator emphasizes, "Then (adverb ¹³¹) Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord" (v 21). It is noteworthy that the narrator singles out Manoah here; the wife is not included, perhaps suggesting that she knew all along who the messenger was. She joins her husband in reverence, however. Boling interestingly observes, while the flames and the messenger "go up" (עלה), husband and wife "go down"¹³² (וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם אֶרֶץ), lit. "they fell upon their faces to the ground").

What follows is the only recorded statement of Manoah to his wife: "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." Note the emphatic position of אֱלֹהִים. "God we have seen." Numerous scholars have noted the similarities in the theophany to Manoah and his wife and the one to Gideon (Judg 6),¹³³ but there is a curious dissimilarity. Both Gideon

¹³¹Fuchs, "Mothers and Sexual Politics," 156, states, "The emphasis on the temporal adverb at the beginning of the sentence adds an additional dash of irony to the satirical presentation of the obtuse husband."

¹³²Boling, *Judges*, 222.

¹³³See the extensive bibliography cited by Exum, "Narrative Art in Judges 13," 43, nt. 1.

(6:22) and Manoah are panic-stricken with the realization that they have looked upon deity, but Yahweh himself assures Gideon that he will not die (6:23) while it is Manoah's wife who offers him assurance (v 23). She has the clearer head theologically and logically. She sensibly quiets her husband, citing three reasons why Yahweh did not desire to kill them: 1. Yahweh would not have accepted their offering; 2. he would not have performed the wonders they had just witnessed; and 3. he would not have let them hear the things he did (that they would have a son who would begin to deliver Israel--impossible if God strikes them dead). Goslinga is correct when he says the wife "clearly surpassed him [Manoah] in spiritual strength and knowledge of the Lord."¹³⁴

The story ends with the promise of verse 3 finding fulfillment. The woman gives birth to a son and she names him Samson.¹³⁵

The Significance of the Narrative

Why did the narrator choose to recount this story? Was it merely to introduce Samson's parents? Little is

¹³⁴Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 419.

¹³⁵Lest it be emphasized that the woman named the son and not her husband, Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel, vol. 1, Social Institutions (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), 43, states that the name was usually chosen by the mother. His conclusion is based primarily on the experiences of Jacob's wives (Gen 29:31-30:24; 35:18) and Hannah (1 Sam 1:20).

known of previous deliverers' parents. Manoah and his wife are mentioned only briefly in the following chapter when Samson sought to acquire a Philistine wife,¹³⁶ but they are unheard of after that. So is their presence and dialogue of real consequence to the Samson story? Is this just an additional demonstration of God's grace to a couple afflicted by barrenness? Or is the narrator, in addition to introducing Samson, giving the reader a glimpse into what may have been a typical Israelite home? Could the narrator be suggesting by the inclusion of this story that what he has been making known to his readers regarding Israel on the national level (i.e., its lack of spiritual awareness and leadership) unfortunately is also reflected on the local level, even in families? An encompassing criticism of all Israelite families can not be made, but lack of spiritual leadership on the part of the father seems to be the order in Samson's home.

Why did the Angel of the Lord appear to the woman and not to Manoah? Was it only because she was to obey the

¹³⁶Is the mention of Samson's mother in 14:2, 3, 5 and her accompanying Manoah to negotiate the marriage of Samson with the woman of Timnah possibly another hint of prominence and leadership in the home even years later? Soggin, *Judges*, 239, notes that marriage negotiations are carried on by the father of the groom. Her presence here seems so extra-ordinary that the editors of the critical apparatus of BHK and BHS question whether "his mother" (אִמּוֹ) should not be deleted, evidently considering her presence in these verses a carry-over of her prominence in chapter 13.

rules of a Nazirite during her pregnancy? Why was Manoah never given instructions to perform in preparation for fatherhood? Why was he not formally charged with duties for preparing his promised son for his role in history as a deliverer? Israelite parents were charged with the responsibility of teaching their children (cf. Gen 18:19; Deut 4:9-10; 6:7). In a patriarchal society, how much of this responsibility would have fallen to the father? Is it not to be expected that some assignment be directed to Manoah? However, the Angel of the Lord appears instead to his wife and even when Manoah asks for additional information he is overlooked. His motive for requesting the "man of God's" return seems less noble in light of his curious rambling with the Angel of the Lord. Nothing in his conversation (nor in the whole narrative) gives any indication that he is a leader. His spiritual awareness and reaction is slow. His wife outshines him in every regard. Questions worth pondering are these: How many other homes in Israel during the period of the judges are represented by this example? How did the lack of central spiritual leadership affect families, and how did the lack of leadership in families contribute to the spiritual chaos in the nation?

Summary of the Three Stories

All three stories discussed in this chapter involve women (Deborah, Jael, the women of Thebez, Manoah's wife)

who give evidence of the unexpected--appearing in roles normally thought to pertain to men. It is no surprise to learn that Deborah is the wife of Lappidoth, but it is surprising to see that she is a prophetess and a judge, one who prods a man into military action to deliver the nation and bolsters him with her presence.

It is no surprise to see a non-Israelite play hostess to a fugitive who is an ally of her husband. It is not expected of Jael, however, to side against her husband and his loyalties to Jabin and the Canaanites and become the heroine in Israel's battle by killing Sisera.

It is no surprise to see the woman of Thebez rush with her fellow citizens to the tower for protection from Abimelech. It seems out of the ordinary, however, for her to have her millstone on hand, seemingly prepared to do what she could when no one else is taking offensive measures.

It is no surprise for a barren woman to be blessed finally with a child. However, to have her pregnancy announced to her by no less than the Angel of the Lord, and to be charged with instructions instead of her husband, this seems truly remarkable!

Each of these women appear and perform their task when men did not. The absence of males from the narrative, or their secondary function in the narrative reinforces a negative emphasis--male leadership is lacking. Positively,

however, females are included who fill the roles of males who are either absent or lack initiative.

These stories help to confirm the thesis that all is not well in Israel. The last story above of Manoah's wife performs a dual role. It provides a look into the lives of an Israelite couple and also serves as an introduction to the next chapter (of Judges and of this study). With the promise of a son, the prediction of his mission, and the instruction given to the mother, the reader who has been following Israel's steady spiritual decline is now anticipating a reversal to the trend--a success story at long last. But such expectations will be dashed.

CHAPTER V

THREE DETERRENTS TO SAMSON'S SUCCESS

Introduction

Samson is the only person in Judges who is designated to be a deliverer before his birth. Also he is the only one to be specially and divinely set apart--he was to be a Nazirite. Before Samson utters a sound or makes a move, it is apparent that he deviates diametrically from the typical Israelite judge.¹ Up to this point the judges were more or less weak, humble and unlikely candidates for leadership. Ehud was left-handed (lit. "bound" or "hindered in his right hand"); Deborah was a woman; Gideon claimed he was the youngest son of the least family in Manasseh; Jephthah was the son of a prostitute and an outcast. By contrast, Samson's conception is by divine intervention and announced by the Angel of the Lord. His manner of living, from prenatal infancy to death, was to be governed by Nazirite restrictions. He is the one from whom the reader expects

¹Edward L. Greenstein, "The Riddle of Samson," Prooftexts 1 (1981): 240.

the greatest achievement and success.² The supernatural events of Judges 13 lead the reader to expect a pious, religious and patriotic hero. Certainly he is prepared to witness a virtuous and socially-conscious judge.

However all the expectations of the reader evaporate in Judges 14-16.³ Despite all the excitement he generates, Samson proves to be an extremely disappointing figure. Instead of leading the nation to liberty from the Philistines, he takes personal liberties with the Philistines. Instead of abiding by the restraints of his Nazirite vow, he lives a life of no restraint. Instead of being spiritually astute, he proves to be an incredible dupe, especially as he is drawn into dangerous liaisons with three women.

Samson thus proves to be an intriguing personality, and as Crenshaw observes,

The Samson saga has captured the imagination of countless interpreters. Biblical critics have approached the text from nearly every conceivable perspective, while artists, poets, and dramatists have given their understanding of the story for countless viewers and listeners.⁴

²James A. Freeman, "Samson's Dry Bones: A Structural Reading of Judges 13-16," in Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative, II, ed. K.R.R. Gros Louis and J.S. Ackerman (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 146-147.

³Probably more so than in any other story in Judges, the reader comes to expect the unexpected in the story of Samson. Cf. the comments of Gros Louis, "Book of Judges," 159-160.

⁴James L. Crenshaw, Samson: A Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 21.

Though much has been written on the Samson stories, not all writers have accepted the details of the stories as historically reliable.⁵ Comparisons are often made to the hero legends, aetiological legends, or local nature-mythological legends. Crenshaw accepts the story as a saga. He defines a saga as a story which takes minimal historical events and personages and treats them in an elevated fashion, abounding in exaggerated feats, tending toward hyperbole, and treating the fantastic as if it were the ordinary.⁶ For Crenshaw the historicity of the details is incidental and irrelevant. He sees the purpose of the saga as two-fold: it was written to provide entertainment and to teach by providing a negative example.⁷ This study will view the details as historical and the story will be viewed as didactic rather than entertainment.

Much of the scholarship on the Samson narrative has focused on identifying the central theme of Judges 14-16. Is it 1. his filial devotion vs. sexual desires;⁸ 2. his

⁵E.g., Gray, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 233-237; and Soggin, Judges, 225-232, questions the historicity of the account's details.

⁶Crenshaw, Samson, 19.

⁷Ibid., 64.

⁸Cf. James L. Crenshaw, "The Samson Saga: Filial Devotion or Erotic Attachment?" ZAW 86 (1974): 470-504.

violation of the Nazirite vows;⁹ or 3. his being a symbol of the nation Israel?¹⁰ It will not be the purpose of this chapter to lock in on any one of the above themes in particular, although much of the discussion will pertain to the first theme. Neither is it the purpose here to engage unnecessarily in a study of the life of Samson. As noted already, the reader has been primed for Samson to be a smashing success in every regard. The opposite was the case, however.

In the previous chapter attention was directed to four women who performed roles unexpected of them. It should not be presumed that the narrator's every mention of women portrays them in some aspect of role reversal. On the contrary some women who are cited by the narrator perform within the scope of the gender role the reader has come to assume for them. In other words, some women do what the reader expects women to do, regardless of any moral judgment upon their actions.

In this study attention will focus on the three women with whom Samson willfully associates in the three major sequences of Judges 14-16: 1. his descent to Timnah; 2. his trip to Gaza; and 3. his ventures in the valley of Sorek. These three sequences are uneven in length but they

⁹Cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Structure and Style in Judges 13-16," *JBL* 82 (1963): 65-76.

¹⁰Cf. Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," 237-260.

are similar in that a significant role is played by a woman in each one.¹¹ Each one of the women stands in a different social and personal relationship to Samson. He is drawn to the first, "one of the daughters of the Philistines" (14:1), by physical attraction, and she becomes his wife. He is drawn to the second, the prostitute at Gaza (16:1), by physical lust. He enters into a relationship of unreciprocated love with the third woman, Delilah (16:4), his mistress.

These three women prove to be deterrents to the success the reader wishes for the hero, Samson. Though they are being called "deterrents," they will not be considered antagonists to Samson, the protagonist. With Delilah being a possible exception, Samson is not in any conflict with them so as to justify calling them antagonists. They do not bring Samson down. He brings himself down. In a sense, he, the protagonist, is also the antagonist. The first two women are foils in the narrative as Samson tragically makes bad choices that start him on a path of self-destruction. The third woman, however, is more than a foil. In her narrative segment she so completely dominates that one might believe the narrator has purposely cast her as the

¹¹John B. Vickery, "In Strange Ways: The Story of Samson," in Images of Man and God: Old Testament Short Stories in Literary Focus, BL, 1, ed. Burke O. Long (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981), 65; cf. also Crenshaw, Samson, 70.

protagonist and has reduced Samson to a foil. Not until Delilah has accomplished her purposes with Samson will the narrator portray Samson once again as the protagonist.

The Woman of Timnah

Introduction to the Story

Through Samson's desire for this unnamed Philistine woman the narrator immediately informs his reader that Samson, the set apart one (a Nazirite), is not set apart. Instead, he is very much a part of the moral relativism of his spiritually disintegrating society. Israel has done evil in the eyes (literal reading) of Yahweh (13:1), everyone will be seen to have been doing right in his own eyes (17:6; 21:25), and now Samson's assessment of the Philistine woman is, "She is right in my eyes" (13:3, 7).

It is in Samson's relationship with this woman that both the Philistines and the reader will be introduced not only to Samson's supernatural strength, but perhaps more importantly, his very human weakness--women. He may have superhuman strength, but this woman (and Delilah, who comes later) can melt him with her tears and complaints of insincere love. Her love for him is questionable also. When she is under threat, she has the emotional difficulty of determining her loyalty--to her new husband or to her father. Her betrayal of Samson will set in motion a chain reaction of events which will ultimately cost her her life,

and the resultant rampage of Samson will bring even the Israelites' loyalty to Samson in question.

It will be shown later that many of the unfolding details of this story in chapters 14-15 will repeat themselves in kind in the two stories of chapter 16. There is no noticeable structure within these chapters, however, that unequivocally directs the reader's attention primarily on the woman from Timnah. More emphasis is placed on the movement of Samson. Five times in chapter 14 the reader is told that Samson or his father went down (ָָ) to Timnah (vv 1, 5), to the woman (vv 7, 10), or to Ashkelon (v 19). Blenkinsopp uses three of the occurrences of ָָ to divide the story into three units, but instead of stressing the action or movement of the story, he employs these units to support the unity and development of what he sees to be the central theme of the story, violation of the Nazirite vow.¹²

- 14:1-4 "Samson went down to Timnah"
(In this unit "there is an implicit repudiation of the vow in intent.")
- 14:5-9 "Samson went down to Timnah"
(In this unit there is "explicit violation of the first regulation by eating honey from the carcass of the lion.")
- 14:10-20 "His father went down to the woman"
(In this unit is the marriage feast which

¹²Blenkinsopp, "Structure and Style in Judges 13-16," 66.

leads to the violation of the second regulation.)

Exum observes symmetry within the Samson stories and focuses attention on **וַיֵּרָד** in chapter 14. She, however, divides the chapter into four units to correspond with the four units she identifies in chapter 15. Her arrangement of the two chapters appears thus:¹³

- 14:1-4 Samson went down to Timnah
- 14:5-6 Samson went down to Timnah
- 14:7-9 He went down and spoke to the woman
- 14:10-20 His father went down to the woman
- 15:1-3 After a while . . . Samson visited
- 15:4-6a Samson went
- 15:6b-8 The Philistines came up
- 15:9-16 The Philistines came up

Exum's analysis emphasizes the unifying action in all the units or episodes. In chapter 14 each episode is introduced by **וַיֵּרָד**. In chapter 15 the first two episodes are introduced by two somewhat synonymous (in this context) verbs "visit" (**בָּקַר**) and "go" (**הָלַךְ**). The last two episodes are introduced by a complement of **וַיֵּרָד**: "go up" (**עָלָה**). Clearly in this story there is constant movement of the characters from place to place.

¹³J. Cheryl Exum, "Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga," *JSOT* 19 (1981): 12-13.

Just as important is the movement of the narrative itself as it rapidly unfolds from one episode to the next. It is noteworthy, therefore, that while this entire story is interrupted only once with parenthetical information, it comes at a very critical point.

The story opens with Samson in Philistine territory and there a woman catches his eye. The narrator anticipates that his reader will be just as surprised and disappointed by Samson's activity as his parents will be shocked and dismayed at his demand to marry her in verse 2. Samson's rude response to his parents in verse 3 gives cause for additional concern. Samson's choice and behavior is not what the reader nor Samson's parents expect of him. At this crucial point in the narrative the narrator inserts a circumstantial clause (v 4) which disrupts the flow of the story, but eases the troubled mind of the reader. He informs the reader that although Samson's parents are unaware, God is sovereignly in control of this situation. While Samson is not necessarily excused from bad choices and actions (to be discussed later), God will use Samson in this incident to begin his mission against the Philistines (cf. 13:5). Thus, very early in the story, the reader is privileged to know something that the participants, especially the parents, do not know. Therefore, even though he now has the assurance that God knows what is going on, his curiosity has been further stimulated, encouraging him to

read on to see how the story will end and to see what possible good can come from Samson's first performance.

Introduction to the Woman

A rehearsal of Samson's courtship is lacking and his betrothal does not conform to the betrothal type-scene cast in earlier times. In regard to betrothal accounts, Alter remarks,

The betrothal type-scene, then, must take place with the future bridegroom, or his surrogate, having journeyed to a foreign land. There he encounters a girl--the term "na'arah" invariably occurs unless the maiden is identified as so-and-so's daughter--or girls at the well. Someone, either the man or the girl, then draws water from the well; afterward, the girl or girls rush to bring home the news of the stranger's arrival . . . ; finally, a betrothal is concluded between the stranger and the girl, in the majority of instances, only after he has been invited to a meal.¹⁴

Alter cites as examples two of the earliest and most famous betrothal scenes, those of Isaac and Jacob (Gen 24:10-61; 29:1-20) and that of Moses (Exod 2:15b-21). By comparison, Samson's betrothal has only one point in common with the type-scene--it occurs in a foreign town. Because of the incongruity of his betrothal scene, Klein suggests that "the reader is invited to perceive thereby that the marriage will not be fruitful."¹⁵

¹⁴Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 52.

¹⁵Klein, Triumph of Irony, 134.

The account of Samson's meeting the Philistine woman is laconic as are also the details about the woman. It is not related how often Samson may have ventured onto Philistine soil before spotting the woman from Timnah, or how many times he may have seen her before deciding she was the right one for him. It would appear that he fell for her the first time he saw her, for not until another occasion does he speak to her (v 7). Even when he reports to his parents and announces the woman as his choice for a wife, he can only say, "I saw a woman" (v 2). Notice the momentary leitmotif of "seeing" and "eyes." He saw the woman (v 1). He reports that he saw a woman (v 2) and she was right (verb, רָאָה) in his eyes (vv 3, 7).¹⁶ In addition, his demand that his parents comply with his desire implies that what he was doing was right (adj., יָשָׁר) in his eyes (cf. 17:6; 21:25). That his relationship to her was one of physical attraction and infatuation seems evident enough.

The name of the woman from Timnah is never given. She remains a "woman" or his "wife" (both אִשָּׁה) throughout the story. Interestingly, four times (vv 1, 2, 7, 10) she is uncommonly called a "woman" (אִשָּׁה) instead of the expected "maiden, damsel" (נַעֲרָה) or "virgin" (בְּתוּלָה), the

¹⁶LXX^A adds to verse 1 the synonymous phrase, "καὶ ἤρεσεν ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ" ("and she was pleasing in his sight"). Boling, Judges, 229, opts for this reading over the MT.

ordinary but more honorable terms for an unmarried girl. Scholars have suggested an element of contempt in the way she is described.¹⁷ Burney notes a speculation that perhaps she was a widow or a divorcee.¹⁸ Apart from the unexpected occurrence of ~~וְהָיָה~~, however, there is no description of the woman that would cast aspersion on her character.¹⁹

There may be a hint of dismay on the part of the narrator when he identifies the woman as not only a foreigner, but one of the enemy, the Philistines who, incidently, were ruling over Israel (v 4). Thus the term "Philistine" in verse 1 may be more than mere identification, it may be derogation. The parents' dismay is clearly seen when they add the term "uncircumcised" (cf. 1 Sam 17:26, 36). In the opinion of his parents, no one was more despicable than an uncircumcised Philistine, and they are displeased and devastated to learn that Samson wants to marry one. The repetition of "Philistines" (five times in vv 1-4) may indicate the narrator's own displeasure over Samson's choice for a wife.

¹⁷Cundall, Judges, 162.

¹⁸Burney, Judges, 356.

¹⁹Crenshaw, Samson, 78.

Samson's Dialogue Pertaining to the Woman

It has been noted before that dialogue is a very important factor in narrative. In this story Samson will speak to his parents, his wife, his wedding companions, his father-in-law, the Philistines, and to the men of Judah. All conversations are not relevant to this study, however. Thus only those segments of dialogue that deal directly with the woman will be considered. It is believed that these brief excerpts reveal much about the character of Samson and the influence the woman of Timnah has on him.²⁰

Dialogue with his parents about the woman

When Samson returns from Timnah to his parents, he takes them into his confidence for the only recorded time in the narrative (cf. vv 6, 9, 16). It is impossible to determine from his simple statement whether he addressed them with hesitancy or nonchalance. Certainly he does not expect their ready approval of his marrying a foreigner. Therefore a certain resolve on his part is sensed as he calmly announces, "I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the

²⁰Shimon Bar-Efrat, Narrative Art in the Bible, trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson, JSOTSup, 70, and BL, 17 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 64, aptly remarks, "Speech is also an important way of characterizing individuals indirectly. Traits of both the speaker and the interlocutor are expressed through speech, or to be more precise, all speech reflects and exposes the speaker, while it sometimes also brings to light qualities of the person being addressed. . . ."

daughters of the Philistines," and further demands, "now therefore, get her for me for a wife" (v 2).

The only recorded statement of the parents to their son is a question. Their dismay is easily detected when they ask, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" (v 3). It is clear that they are troubled that he would not choose a wife within his own clan, tribe or nation, but the reason for their dissatisfaction is left unstated. Is their desire for an endogamic marriage as opposed to an exogamic one? If so, their grief might compare to that of Isaac and Rebekah over the marriage of Esau to two Hittite women (Gen 26:34-35).²¹ Or does this reflect their sensitivity to divine prohibitions which prevented marrying daughters of the Canaanites (granted, the Philistines are not directly named in the prohibition) who might draw Israel into the worship of other deities? (cf. Exod 34:15, 16; Deut 7:1-5; Josh 23:12). Another possibility is that they are chagrined that their son, who was marked before birth to begin Israel's deliverance from the Philistines, is apparently countering the prediction. As Webb comments, "Samson does not want to

²¹Victor H. Matthews, "Freedom and Entrapment in the Samson Narrative: A Literary Analysis," PRS 16 (Fall 1989): 248.

fight the Philistines; he wants to intermarry with them."²² He has selected his wife from among the enemy, the uncircumcised Philistines. Note the emphatic slur. No people were more despicable. Probably no choice of Samson would have been more disgraceful. His parents are clearly crushed by his capricious desire. It virtually constitutes an insult for Israelite women in whom Samson is seemingly disinterested.²³ At this point no one (parents or reader) is aware of Samson's motivation for asking for her. Nothing is said about her personality, abilities, attributes-- anything that would make her desirable to Samson. While Samson's response contributes nothing to knowing the woman, it reveals plenty about Samson.

His rejoinder to his father is short and to the point. It reeks of disrespect because he demands to get what he wants with no regard for the concerns or feelings of his parents. He states most emphatically, "Get her for me." (v 3). This demand (אוֹתָהּ קַח לִי) shows an important departure from the word order found in his request (וַעֲתָה קַח-אוֹתָהּ לִי) in verse 2. The verb (לִקַּח) is an imperative both times (though plural, addressed to both parents in v 1, and singular, addressed to his father in v 3). In his request

²²Webb, Book of Judges, 163.

²³Crenshaw, "The Samson Saga," 480.

the object follows the verb, but in his demand the object is placed first in an emphatic position. Samson wanted the woman he had spotted. Therefore his charge is nearly an ultimatum, "Get her for me." Burney writes, "Her and none other. Samson will brook no interference with his wayward inclinations."²⁴

Samson's reason is rendered literally, "she is right in my eyes." His estimation remains unchanged after he talks to her in verse 7, because the narrator affirms, "she was right in his eyes." Greenstein has shown that this phrase is quite odd in this context. The idiom "right in the eyes of X" is nowhere else used to describe an attractive woman. He observes that the fairness of women in the Old Testament is described by the roots טוֹב/טָב, "good, fair" (cf. Gen 6:2; Judg 15:2; Esth 2:2), the expression טֵבַת מְרָאָה "good-looking" (cf. Gen 24:16; 26:7; 2 Sam 11:2), the root יָפָה, "fair, nice" (cf. Gen 12:14; 2 Sam 13:1; 1 Kgs 1:3, 4), and the expressions יָפֶת מְרָאָה (cf. Gen 12:11; 29:17; 2 Sam 14:27) and יָפֶת חָאָר (cf. Gen 29:17; Deut 21:11; 1 Sam 25:3) which mean "nice-looking, pretty." The term "right in the eyes of X," however, relates not to physical attributes, but to proper conduct.²⁵ This observation does not

²⁴Burney, Judges, 357.

²⁵Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," 249.

necessarily minimize his infatuation. These words may denote that his attraction for her was not only physical,²⁶ but perhaps it was also a cultural attraction. The narrator is describing Samson here as a typical Israelite because he will describe the period with these very words (17:6; 21:25). This woman represented a more advanced culture which took advantage of superiority in cosmetics, clothing, etc.²⁷ (which of course would have enhanced her physical attractiveness), and the woman (and what she represented) was right in his eyes. Klein remarks, "Samson never has the sense to choose a wife like his mother; he only follows the instincts of his senses and the foreign women are more intriguing than those of Israel."²⁸

So this unnamed woman has already had ill-effects on Samson's temperament and character. He has treated his parents rudely, throwing off their parental authority.²⁹ His short statement shows him to be aggressive, self-indulgent and obsessed with what he has determined to be right. He also is "right (i.e., correct) in his own eyes."

²⁶It must include the physical, however, for when her father tries to give the younger sister to Samson to appease him (15:2) he draws attention to her beauty (lit. "Is not her younger sister more beautiful [טובה ממנה] than she?") which he must know from experience appeals to Samson.

²⁷Crenshaw, Samson, 81.

²⁸Klein, Triumph of Irony, 125.

²⁹Crenshaw, Samson, 82.

He is not to be reasoned with. His parents recognize that any further discussion on the issue is pointless. Their subsequent compliance with his terms does not indicate a change of mind, but that they submit to their strong-willed son. Interestingly, any mentioned of their presence (and any other Israelite, for that matter) at the festivities of his marriage is conspicuously lacking, perhaps implying their condemnation of his marriage.³⁰

Dialogue with his wife because of the riddle

The reader learns that Samson has talked with his bride-to-be on at least one occasion (v 7), but no hints are dropped concerning the subject matter of that personal conversation. Whether Samson expressed his love for her is anyone's guess, but at no point in the narrative is it said that he loved her (cf. 16:4). The narrator only emphasizes that Samson liked what he saw. His only recorded statement to her is in response to her accusation that he does not love her. One can reciprocate with a like question: Does she love him?

The account of two other dialogues is placed between the notice of his chat with her (v 7) and the later recorded short conversation (v 16). The first concerns his speech to his companions during the wedding festivities when he puts a riddle to them with an accompanying wager (vv 12-14).

³⁰Soggin, Judges, 242.

Discussion of the riddle and its meaning is not germane to this study except to say that his companions' acceptance of the wager and their inability to decode his riddle incite exasperation and hostility and as a result, they threaten the bride in the second short dialogue (v 15). This threat on her life and her father's house precipitates her recorded dialogue with Samson.

Faced with the humiliation of losing a wager to an Israelite, on the fourth³¹ day of the festivities the Philistine companions see the new bride as their only hope to gaining access to the meaning of Samson's riddle. They order her to entice her husband to learn the secret. The verb translated "entice" (פָּתָה) frequently has negative connotations, especially in the Piel/Pual stems. She is not necessarily ordered to charm Samson into revealing the answer, but they want her to use her female abilities to circumvent his better wisdom and sensibilities³² and dupe him into a disclosure. Of course their threat to burn her and her father's house if she fails is a very effective incentive to comply. In addition, they essentially accuse

³¹MT reads the "seventh" (הַשְּׁבִיעִי) day. Most modern versions (JB, NASB, NEB, NIV, and NRSV) read the "fourth," following the LXX. The critical apparatus of BHK and BHS suggest the "fourth" (הַרְבִּיעִי). Cf. the comments of Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 426, nt. 245.

³²Cf. Gray, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 351.

her of responsibility for the dilemma in which they find themselves.

Their dilemma poses a larger one for her. Crenshaw explains it this way:

One hesitates to call it fate, yet how can one explain the plight in which the Timnite woman finds herself? Caught up in the clutches of a power beyond her ability either to comprehend or to elude, this pitiful figure walsk (sic.) slowly but surely into a flaming death. Faced with a choice between kinship and the novelty of wedded bliss, and hastened to a decision by a terrifying threat, she makes the inevitable move toward deception of the only one who could extricate her from the power of destiny. The awful threat . . . really leaves her no option. The sequel makes it plain, nevertheless, that hers is the wrong choice.³³

It should come as no surprise that she chooses to save her family. It has already been noted that nowhere does Samson express his love for her, even when she accuses him of not loving her. And nowhere does she indicate that she loves him. After all, Samson is virtually a stranger, and his father (and undoubtedly her father) arranged for the wedding, so her loyalties should not be expected to lean to her new husband and not to her own family.

Her only speech to him is a complaint and it is combined with weeping. The term וַתִּבְכֵּהוּ עָלָיו (see also v 17) is literally "and she wept upon him." This could denote that she embraced him, or clung to him as she voiced her teary complaint (cf. Gen 45:14; 46:29; 50:1). In view of the

³³Crenshaw, "The Samson Saga," 484.

accompanying verb צוץ in verse 17, she "pressed upon" him, it could denote that she burdened him with moaning, whining, or wailing.³⁴ The latter meaning seems to fit the context best.

Her complaint is an emphatic declaration comprised of two contradictory verbs: "You only hate me, and you do not love me." Her complaint is even more accusatory with the addition of the adverb כִּי which maximizes "hate" and has been rendered variously: "you only hate me" (NASB); "you simply hate me";³⁵ "you surely hate me."³⁶ The truth of her charge is substantiated with a further statement that bristles with condemnation. "You have propounded a riddle to the sons of my people, and have not told it to me." She expects her logic to be convincing and persuasive. After all, how he can claim to love her (if he indeed has) if he withholds information from her by not taking her into his confidence?

At this point Samson is not moved by emotion or logic. His response is harsh and to the point. It is generally interpreted to be a question although the interrogative אִם is lacking. "Behold I have not told it to my

³⁴Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 426.

³⁵Boling, Judges, 231.

³⁶Burney, Judges, 364.

father or mother; so should I tell you?" His rationale is this: he has not revealed the secret of the riddle to others closest to him, so why should he make an exception in his wife's case.³⁷

He never buckles under her logic, but her tears and persistence eventually wear him down and he divulges the precious secret to his wife who promptly relays it on to her countrymen. Vickery fittingly comments on the fact that Samson's action

indicates his unsuspecting nature and his short-sightedness and almost foolhardy willingness to endanger knowledge private to him and of the utmost importance to him. Here we get our first glimpse of the tragic hero's penchant for blindness to matters closest to him and for a kind of hubristic confidence that nothing he does or says can ever redound against him.³⁸

Aware that the secret of his riddle has been found out and surmising the source of disclosure to be his wife, Samson utters a protest that is loaded with emotion, but lacking affection: "If you had not plowed with my heifer, . . ." (v 18). To call her his "heifer"³⁹ probably has the same disparaging sense in Hebrew as it does in English

³⁷Vickery, "Story of Samson," 67.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Crenshaw, "The Samson Saga," 493, proposes that Samson's final retort to his companions is another riddle and bears sexual connotations. Mieke Bal, Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 43, believes Samson is accusing his wife of committing adultery with these men.

or any other language.⁴⁰ The romance is gone, and devotion to her, if ever it existed, is gone too. At the moment, he appears less than infatuated with her. All is not "right in his eyes," but matters will worsen.

Dialogue with his father-in-law about his wife

After losing his wager to his companions, he paid up and went home to his parents, leaving his wife behind with her father (14:19). This was interpreted as his rejection of her, so she was given to his companion (best man?) for a wife. Van Selms proposes that this second marriage violated a social law that was established by Sumerians which, in the case of a failed marriage, prohibited the abandoned bride from marrying her former husband's best man.⁴¹ Van Selms claims that the Philistines' knowledge of this law is evidenced by the fact that they do not question Samson's right to avenge himself, but direct their anger against the father-in-law instead because his unlawful action has brought Samson's wrath on them⁴² (cf. 15:3-6).

Scholars frequently have considered Samson's marriage to have been of the tsadigah type, one in which the groom visits his wife in her father's house from time to

⁴⁰Soggin, Judges, 242.

⁴¹A. van Selms, "The Best Man and Bride--From Sumer to St. John, with a New Interpretation of Judges, Chapters 14 and 15," JNES 9 (April 1950) 65-75.

⁴²Ibid., 74.

time.⁴³ Matthews argues against this view, however, because it is out of character for Samson and does not fit the context well. Samson had abandoned her in a fit of anger over her disloyalty. His return to her father's house was to reclaim what was his. His action can be compared somewhat to that of the Levite in Judges 19 who followed his runaway concubine to her father's house to retrieve her.⁴⁴

So when Samson arrives at her father's house and announces, "I will go in to my wife in her room," he was unaware of what had occurred in his absence and was unprepared to be refused. Her father reasons, "I really thought that you hated her intensely; so I gave her to your companion" (15:2). Soggin and Boling compare the term "you surely hate her" (שָׂנֵא שְׂנֵאתָהּ) to the repudiation formula in Deuteronomy 22:13, 16 and 24:3 where שָׂנֵא also occurs. In other words, Samson's abandoning his wife was interpreted as repudiation or divorce, and the woman's father was in a difficult position because social law prohibited the return of the wife to her first husband if she had married again (cf. Deut 24:3-4).⁴⁵ Therefore he attempts to appease

⁴³See Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 429; Soggin, Judges, 240; and de Vaul, Ancient Israel, vol. 1, 29.

⁴⁴Matthews, "Freedom and Entrapment," 250.

⁴⁵Soggin, Judges, 245, and Boling, Judges, 235. Their application of Deut 24:3-4 can be considered valid only if Mosaic law coincided with Canaanite/Philistine social custom at this point, for it can not be granted that

Samson by offering him the younger, more beautiful daughter for a wife. Such a proposal is insulting to the judgment of Samson who is no more interested in compromise with her father than he was with his own father when he had insisted that Manoah arrange the marriage.⁴⁶

Samson's revenge is not said to be sparked by love for the wife he has lost. Rather it seems to be a release of pent up emotions. His pride had taken several serious blows. He had been betrayed by his wife who had remained loyal to her people. It had been extremely humiliating to lose face before the wedding crowd he had been hosting. And then to be double-crossed and lose his wife to his best man--all of this made revenge seem justifiable to him. As already observed, when he burns the Philistines' crops, the Philistines seemingly agree, for they do not challenge his action in taking revenge upon him. Instead they punish their own by burning the wife and her father. It is ironic indeed that the threat made by the companions to destroy her father by fire if she did not assist them (14:15) has precipitated a chain reaction of events that have come full circle to destroy both her and her father in fire.⁴⁷ Of course the Philistines' action against the father-in-law and

her father was guided by Mosaic law.

⁴⁶Matthews, "Freedom and Entrapment," 250.

⁴⁷Ibid.

(former) bride is unsatisfactory to Samson who takes further revenge, and the chain reaction continues (but will not be followed here; see 15:7-19).

Results of Samson's Relationship to the Woman of Timnah

When Chapter 15 ends, it would appear that Samson has scored a personal victory--sweet revenge. But how successful has Samson been in his relationships? What are the results of his marriage that was based on physical attraction, personal desire and the moral relativism of his day? A few observations will be mentioned with only brief discussion.

First, his self-willed determination to acquire the wife of his tastes in defiance of the transparent wishes of his parents disrupted any harmony that was in his father's household. Samson threw off paternal authority in total disregard for the crushed feelings of his parents. He would use them to his advantage (to arrange the wedding) but he no longer would take them into his confidence lest he face rebuke again (cf. 14:6, 9).

Second, he violated his Nazirite obligations (cf. 13:5; Num 6:2-8). It is anyone's guess why he went into the vineyard on his first trip to Timnah with his parents (14:5) or what he may have done there (eating forbidden grapes?) before being confronted by a lion. Why did he return to the

women as normative models, for the reverse is true if the intent of the narrator is properly understood. He states,

Although the idea of women in leadership is not offensive to the narrator, this passage again points out the degeneracy of the nation. In the absence of firm committed leadership from the men, YHWH will use women.⁹

The Setting of the Narrative

The narrative is introduced in 4:1-3 by three stereotypical statements that the reader has come to expect. First, "the sons of Israel continued to do evil in the sight of Yahweh" (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1). Second, "Yahweh sold them into the hands of" (2:14; 3:8; 4:2; cf. 3:12, "Yahweh strengthened Eglon . . . against Israel"). Third, "the sons of Israel cried out in distress to Yahweh" (3:9, 15; 4:3). Here the similarities to previous episodes end.

Mindful of the pattern established in 2:16 and 3:9, 15, the reader expects to find next that "Yahweh raised up a deliverer," but this phrase is lacking. Instead he is introduced to a woman (v 4). The reader is quite surprised by the initial focus upon this woman, especially since there was a complete absence of women in the previous stories about Othniel and Ehud. In addition, the reader learns that she has already gained recognition in Israel from her dual position of authority as prophetess and judge. Yairah Amit suggests three factors that lead the reader to assume that

⁹Block, "Period of the Judges," 49.

lion's corpse on the second trip? Both times he refrained from divulging his secret activities in the vineyard to his parents. Was it due to a guilty conscience? The feast he hosted in Timnah (14:10) was a drinking feast (משתה). It is unlikely that the host was not an active participant. Apparently his parents absented themselves from the festivities. He should have followed their example.

Third, he violated intermarriage restrictions. Moses had clearly forbidden Israel from intermarrying with the inhabitants of the land they were to possess (Exod 34:15, 16; Deut 7:1-5). The Philistines were not named directly, but they could be included under the umbrella term "Canaanites." Yahweh spoke of the Philistines who were still dwelling in Israel's land that remained to be taken (Josh 13:3) and Joshua forbade Israel from intermarrying with any of the nations that remained (Josh 23:12). And the Angel of the Lord forbade any covenant with the inhabitants of the land (Judg 2:2). So Samson's marriage was clearly in violation of divine instruction.

Fourth, his marriage celebration led to a rift in his relationship with his wife. He was harsh and impatient with her when she attempted to protect her family by learning the secret of his riddle. He became disparaging when he learned of her betrayal. His angry departure from her was interpreted as divorce. His inability to effect

reconciliation with her initiated revenge. Ironically the steps he took to get her back led to her death when she perished in the flames set by her countrymen.

Fifth, his escapades did not inspire the confidence and support of fellow Israelites. The men of Judah upbraided Samson for contributing to their plight: "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?" (15:11). Samson never organized Israelites to do battle against the enemy as previous judges had done. All of Samson's battles were personal vendettas.⁴⁸ But as Cundall has pointed out,

There is no doubt that his exploits sharpened the animosity of the Philistines against the Israelites and led to the employment of greater force in carving out their empire. This represented a greater threat to Israel than any other invasion up to that point, . . . Israel was able to appreciate and meet this threat, whereas the earlier and greater threat had largely been unrecognized.⁴⁹

Up to this point, then, Samson's interpersonal relationships have been fiascoes. His decisions and actions have been characterized by disobedience. His accomplishments against the Philistines have been personal vendettas and any influence upon the nation for good is doubtful.

⁴⁸Cf. Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," 253.

⁴⁹Cundall, Judges, 154.

Summary: An Evaluation of Samson's Actions

It was observed earlier in this chapter that the narrative is interrupted briefly in 14:4. Scholars frequently draw attention to Yahweh's involvement behind the scenes, but just as frequently fail to comment on the ramifications of Samson's reckless activity. Consider this remark by Wharton:

We are confronted with an obstreperous lout prepared to betray his Israelite heritage and dishonor his father and mother in order to gratify his sexual desires! But now the narrator finally drops the other shoe: This whole affair was "from Yahweh . . . seeking an occasion against the Philistines," though the point is made explicitly that the parents "did not know" (vs. 4). Yahweh is underway in the world to free his people from Philistine tyranny, though not a soul in the story knows it and his chosen instrument looks very much like an over-sexed buffoon.⁵⁰

So what about the involvement of Samson? Is he to be excused even though there is not the slightest hint that his motivation may have been national (i.e., patriotic) rather than personal?

It must be remembered that the narrator wrote verse 4 after all the events of the story had occurred and could view the whole with 20/20 theological hindsight. The parents who at that time had no understanding of God's sovereignty working in the current events were noticeably disappointed and dismayed. Even the reader who is fore-

⁵⁰James A. Wharton, "The Secret of Yahweh: Story and Affirmation in Judges 13-16," *Int* (January 1973): 58.

warned in the narrative that some good will come from Samson's bad, willful choices is shocked.

God overrules in history, including the mistakes of mankind. Cundall comments, "It is apparent that God may make a man a vehicle of His revelation, or a channel of power, quite apart from the quality of life of the individual concerned."⁵¹ That God used Samson's wedding as the event that would trigger a series of provocations against the Philistines does not excuse Samson for contracting the wedding. God used Samson in spite of his wrongdoing, not because of it.⁵² If God in his matchless grace could use Samson, unrestrained and self-willed as he was, what might God have accomplished through an obedient and submissive servant?

To this point the character of Samson has run so counter to all that the reader was led to anticipate from chapter 13 that he almost hesitates to read on for fear of what foolish thing Samson might conceive to do next. But then, perhaps Samson has learned some valuable lessons from his experience in chapters 14-15 that will change for the good his attitude, character and point of view.

⁵¹Cundall, Judges, 44.

⁵²Wood, Distressing Days of the Judges, 312.

The Prostitute of Gaza

The Story as an Introduction to Judges 16

The account of Samson's visit to the prostitute at Gaza is the shortest (only three verses) of the stories pertaining to the Samson-women relationships. His marriage to the woman at Timnah and the aftermath of events that followed due to its failure is the longest story (thirty-nine verses) and ties chapters 14-15 together as a unit. The story of his activities at Gaza is the first of two in chapter 16. Though it tells of a separate segment of his life, it is quite related to the second story and serves as somewhat of an introduction to it. Both recount his relationships with women who were not his wife and together form a unit that parallels the unit of chapters 14-15 in many ways.

Literary Similarities in Judges 14-15 and 16

It is interesting to observe that the two stories of the second unit are framed by a reference to Gaza. At the beginning of the unit he goes there and sees the prostitute but at the end of the unit he is taken there, blinded and disgraced. It is also noteworthy that both units (chapters 14-15 and 16) are framed by a reference to the geographical locale between Zorah and Eshtaol. He had been reared there at Mahaneh-dan (13:25) and it was also there that he was buried (16:31). Though Samson made his visits into

Philistine territory, he never ventured very far from home. But more importantly, the stories that occur within this inclusio reveal an unfortunate and disappointing, but strangely consistent, pattern in Samson's lifestyle--carelessness.

It has often been said that "history repeats itself." That the history of Israel during this period has been cyclic has been quite manifest as generation after generation failed to rise above the sins of their fathers, but only repeated them. The narratives of Samson show him to be one with his people, not strikingly different from them. If the reader has high expectations that Samson's experiences in chapters 14-15 have been beneficial to his moral and spiritual growth and will noticeably effect a change in his behavior, he will be sadly disappointed. The narrator is careful to emphasize a pattern in Samson's life that carries over from the first story to the second and third stories. Exum, like other scholars, has noticed the similarities that appear in chapter 14-15 and 16. That which happens in the first cycle essentially occurs in the second cycle. She states, "The repetition of key words, phrases, themes, and motifs at strategic moments in both accounts and their associations in particular contexts provide a clue to the symmetry."⁵³ Exum presents an

⁵³Exum, "Symmetry in the Samson Saga," 4.

impressive list of similarities⁵⁴ that bind the cycles together historically and aesthetically. Space prohibits a full rehearsal of them here, but enough examples of the similarities, especially the leitwörter and the leitmotive, will be cited to establish the symmetry and continuity of the two cycles.

In 14:1 Samson went down (יָרַד) to Timnah where he saw (רָאָה) a Philistine woman who "appealed" to him. In 16:1 he went (יָלַךְ) to Gaza where he saw (רָאָה) a prostitute, and since she apparently "appealed" to him, he went in to her. In the next episode, though it is unstated, he obviously went to the valley of Sorek where he saw another woman, Delilah, who appealed to him (16:4). In 14:2 he returned and told his parents about the woman of Timnah. In 16:2 it was told⁵⁵ to the Gazites that Samson had come to town and it was apparently told to the Philistine lords that Samson had struck up a relationship with Delilah (cf. 16:5).

In the first story the woman seeks to discover the secret to his riddle whereas in the third story Delilah seeks to discover the secret to his great strength. There is the similar motif of telling (דָּבַר) and not telling in the two enticement stories. Both women want Samson to tell them

⁵⁴Ibid., 4-9.

⁵⁵Supplied by LXX, "καὶ ἀνηγγέλη."

the secret and he does not tell until harassed. In both stories the Philistines are behind the scheme to learn his secret (14:15; 16:5), and both women are instructed to entice (פָּתָה) Samson for the desired information. The woman of Timnah is coerced, being threatened with death by burning if she did not comply (14:15) whereas Delilah is bribed with a promise of a large sum of money (16:5).

Both women accuse him of insincere love. The first said, "You only hate me, and you do not love me" (14:16). Delilah complained, "How can you say, 'I love you'?" (16:15). Both harassed him until he divulged the secret. The Timnite wept before him seven days, pressing (צִוֵּק) him until he gave in (14:17). Delilah pressed (צִוֵּק) him daily (כָּל־הַיָּמִים) until "his soul was annoyed to death" (16:16).

The revealed secrets led to his being handed over to the Philistines (15:11-13; 16:21-24). In 15:12 the men of Judah came down (יָרָד) to bind (אָסַר) Samson for the Philistines, but in 16:21 the Philistines bound (אָסַר) Samson to take him down (יָרָד) to Gaza. Samson the "prisoner" in turn killed Philistines (15:15-16; 16:30). The first time he called (קָרָא) on Yahweh after the slaughter (15:18), the second time the Philistines had called (קָרָא) on him for sport (16:25), but he called (קָרָא) on Yahweh for help

(16:28). The first time he called he said, "I shall die" (but he did not). The second time he said, "Let me die" (and he did). Both units of stories conclude with a statement that Samson judged for twenty years (15:20; 16:31).

These points of symmetry have been displayed to illustrate not only the points of similarity in the two cycles of stories, but to demonstrate that there was a distinguishable pattern in Samson's reckless living. Obviously a lot more occurred in Samson's lifetime that the narrator could have recalled and recorded, but these few events are all that he chose. Also there is a variety of ways he could have narrated the details, but quite clearly he chose to repeat key words. These not only described what Samson did with women (or perhaps what they did to him!) but they also were artistically designed to catch the reader's attention and direct it to his character that was inconsistent with his calling (a Nazirite) and office (a judge). He consistently failed. All seems to show Samson's inability to profit from these repeated experiences.

Samson's Visit to the Prostitute

The narrative of this episode is simple and straightforward. The narrator does not cite any dialogue between Samson and the prostitute, or any other citizen of Gaza for that matter, so Samson's intents and purposes are

left totally to the imagination of the reader. His encounter with this unnamed woman does not spark a reactionary chain of events like before, unless the Philistine lords' determination to discover the secret of Samson's strength is considered to be their revenge for his dismantling and theft of Gaza's gate.

The explanation for Samson's trip to Gaza is not revealed. It was the important southernmost city of the Philistine pentapolis. Though not a seaport, it was a city just a few miles inland that served as the land gateway between Egypt and Asia for military and caravan traffic.⁵⁶ Though Israel was dominated by the Philistines at this time, there was no apparent outward friction between the two nations (the Samson incidents being exceptions) and persons could evidently travel freely across the border without fear (unless Samson is again the exception). Samson, however, is a marked man. Certainly he is unaware of the inveterate hatred of the Philistines and their resolve for revenge, so perhaps it is out of arrogance or a sense of pride in his untouchable strength that the mighty man boldly enters the Philistine stronghold.⁵⁷

⁵⁶The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, s.v. "Gaza," by W.F. Steinespring, 2.357.

⁵⁷It is tempting to relate "Gaza" (גָּזָא) to the verb "be strong" (נָצַח), though BDB, 738, does not. What more suitable place could Samson select to flaunt his supernatural strength?

Some scholars have concluded that Samson went to Gaza because of the harlot. Wharton has suggested that a "standard feature of the Samson repertoire" is Samson's being among the Philistines because of a woman.⁵⁸ It seems more likely that she was not his reason for visiting Gaza (certainly there were prostitutes closer to his home), but that he found her after he arrived there and did not hesitate to take advantage of her services.

That the woman is a prostitute is clear enough (she is a זֹנֶה, a participle of זָנָה, to "have illicit intercourse"⁵⁹). It is unnecessary to attempt to spare Samson the accusation of immorality as some older scholars have done. They claim that she served merely as an innkeeper to Samson, and since he was a national menace in a strange city, he would have been welcome to spend the night only in such a place.⁶⁰ Accompanying statements prohibit such an interpretation. The phrase, "he went in to her," (וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ) is almost certainly a Hebrew euphemism meaning to go to a woman for sexual a relationship (cf. Gen 6:4; 38:16). The fact that he lay "until midnight" supports this meaning. If

⁵⁸Wharton, "The Secret of Yahweh," 52.

⁵⁹Holladay, Lexicon, 90.

⁶⁰Paulus Cassel, "The Book of Judges," trans. P.H. Steenstra, in vol. 4 of Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, ed. John P. Lange, 12 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, n.d.), 212. Josephus, Antiquities, V. viii. 10, writes only of Samson's lodging at an inn.

he had intended to lodge there for the night, why should he leave at midnight? Wood's suggestion that Samson left because his conduct had caused him feelings of guilt seems unlikely.⁶¹

Once again the narrator says he saw (ראה) her (cf. 14:1), but does not add that "she was right in his eyes" (cf. 14:3). Nevertheless, his "going in to her" is implication enough. He does what is right in his eyes with a woman who is fulfilling her publicly recognized role. However, the Israelite judge was not fulfilling his role.⁶² At this point Samson is neither judging nor delivering Israel; he is fraternizing with the enemy. Oddly enough, this enemy woman, though she is immoral, is the one woman he chose to associate with who did not use the relationship for some ulterior motive against him.

It is not within the purpose of this study to discuss either the Gazites' ineffective plan to capture Samson or his humorous (for Israel) "repositioning" of Gaza's gates. This particular detail does contribute, however, to the narrator's characterizing of Samson. Without question Samson is the protagonist in this short story. The woman, the city, the gate--all serve as foils to establish Samson's continued spirit of independence and ability to dominate.

⁶¹Wood, Distressing Days of the Judges, 328.

⁶²Boling, "In Those Days," 40.

In 16:1 three verbs appear in an order that bring to mind the famous quote of Julius Caesar with which he summed up his five days' campaign against Pharnaces: "veni, vidi, vici."⁶³ With Samson it was "he went, he saw, he entered," Samson does what he wants. Even though the Gazites set a trap for him with the intent to kill him (16:2), Samson lays down (when he wants) and rises up (when he wants), he takes the doors and pulls up the posts and the bars (he does what he wants) and transports the complete gate structure to the hill before Hebron (he takes it where he wants). Samson is clearly in command. He is in control of everything, but with one notable exception--his own passion for Philistine women. Even in the next episode near the end of his life, Samson's passion for women remains out of control.

Summary: Purpose of the Story

What was the narrator's purpose for including this incident in the Samson narrative? Was it meant to be a titillating but laconic account of Samson's night life? Was it meant to be an opportunity for the narrator to amuse and humor his reader with another dramatic demonstration of his supernatural strength? Such suggestions are woefully inadequate. Once before (14:1) Samson saw a woman and "she was right in his eyes" even though she was a foreigner. His

⁶³"I came, I saw, I conquered."

relationship to her was presumably one of infatuation, based primarily on physical attraction. Though his choosing a Philistine wife was dishonoring to his parents and in principle contrary to Mosaic law, he was honorable in that he married her, taking the culturally accepted steps to make her his legal wife. On this occasion (16:1), however, when he again sees a woman she is a prostitute. Though he knows her trade, instead of being repulsed by her, he is attracted to her. The narrator does not suggest whether being "out of the country" makes it easier for him to indulge since there is apparently no one to whom he must give account. His decision to take advantage of her services is clearly based on lust.⁶⁴ There is no hint of a sense of moral guilt. After the satisfaction of a one-half night stand in Gaza with the prostitute, he attempts to leave only to find his exit blocked. Instead of simply escaping and returning home in the quiet of the night, he humiliates the Gazites by removing their symbol of defense and presenting it like a trophy to Hebron.

Throughout the book the narrator has depicted a nation that continues to decline spiritually. Once again he uses the feminine gender for that purpose. This time he has cited Samson's visit to the prostitute of Gaza to show that

⁶⁴There is not, as Crenshaw, "The Samson Saga," 497, supposes, "a subtle suggestion that Samson has decided that the safest relationship with the lovely Philistine women is that of a man with a harlot."

even the leader of Israel is unable to rise above its abysmal immorality. The narrator leaves unanswered these questions: Did anyone in Israel react adversely to Samson's immoral behavior? In what sense did Samson judge Israel? Did his life reflect integrity in some other respect? The narrator forces the reader to speculate in this regard, but he has indeed graphically portrayed a sick and sorry spiritual climate by including this three-verse segment.

Delilah from the Valley of Sorek

The story of Samson and Delilah is unquestionably one of the best known in the Old Testament. It has been popularized in children's Bible story books and major film productions. Greenstein says the story "exploits a classic paradigm of deception"⁶⁵ and indeed the mere mention of the name Delilah conjures up in the minds of most people the notion of seduction. Perhaps no other story in the Old Testament so completely captivates its reader. Crenshaw remarks, "The story is a masterpiece of dialogue, suspense, action, psychological insight, [and] narration."⁶⁶ The story is indeed all that and more for it is the narrator's vehicle to continue his characterization of Samson and his times.

⁶⁵Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," 245.

⁶⁶Crenshaw, "The Samson Saga," 497.

The Identity of Delilah

It is somewhat ironic that Delilah, the only named woman in the Samson narrative (including his mother), bears a name whose meaning is uncertain. Burney found a correspondence of Delilah to Akkadian theophoric names such as Dalil-(ilu)-Ištar and Dilfil-(ilu)-Ištar and determined that her name meant "worshipper" of or "devotee" to some Canaanite deity (therefore a sacred prostitute?).⁶⁷ McKenzie cites the suggestion of A. Vincent that her name is to be connected to an Arabic root from which two words derive, each providing a pun on the name: dalla, "to behave amorously," and dalila, "a guide." McKenzie favors the latter, calling her "a guide to disaster"⁶⁸ whereas Boling prefers the former. He gives her name the meaning of "flirtatious" and adds that the "sense is quite congenial to the narrative structure."⁶⁹ Crenshaw sees another pun in the similarity of the name Delilah to the Hebrew word for night (לילה). He proposes that the four occurrences of לילה in the preceding three verses (16:1-3) serve as a transition between two unrelated episodes, continuing the erotic mood

⁶⁷Burney, Judges, 407. Cundall, Judges, 175, is one of the more recent scholars to follow Burney.

⁶⁸J.L. McKenzie, The World of the Judges, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966), 155.

⁶⁹Boling, Judges, 248.

introduced by the earlier reference to the prostitute.⁷⁰ The foregoing discussion indicates that the meaning of Delilah's name is still debated with no consensus.

Just as debatable is Delilah's ethnic background. Was she Hebrew or Philistine? Though scholars generally concur that her name is Semitic, she is generally thought to be a Philistine (Samson's inclinations favor this view) although the text does not say. The close proximity of the two people would allow for an interchange of names. If she were a Philistine, would Samson confide his secret in a foreign woman a second time? Would she have grasped the significance of his statement, "I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb"? (16:17). However, would the Philistine lords offer such a high bounty to a Philistine woman for the secret? (Cf. the Philistine coercive measures in 14:15 to Samson's Philistine wife.) McKenzie argues that the very fact that she is not explicitly called a Philistine suggests she was an Israelite.⁷¹ Freeman notes that though Delilah may have originally been a Hebrew in lineage, during her affair with Samson she was not an Israelite in loyalty.⁷² If she was a Hebrew, her actions may imply that conditions are so bad that an Israelite would side with

⁷⁰Crenshaw, Samson, 19.

⁷¹McKenzie, World of the Judges, 156.

⁷²Freeman, "Samson's Dry Bones," 157.

the enemy (for payment), the very enemy from whom Samson was raised up to initiate deliverance (13:5).

She is not identified as a prostitute as Vickery⁷³ supposes, but neither is she called Samson's wife as Brenner affirms.⁷⁴ In her dealings with Samson she is portrayed as a woman of low morals who serves as Samson's mistress. In her dealings with the Philistine lords she is a calculated business-like woman. She displays no sense of coercion or reluctance to betray her lover.⁷⁵

One additional detail regarding Delilah must be commented on briefly. She came from the Valley of Sorek (16:4). The name שֹׂרֵק is identical to the word used in Isaiah 5:2 and Jeremiah 2:21 of "choice vines."⁷⁶ Thus Delilah may have come from a valley known for its vineyards⁷⁷ and Samson's venturing off the road into the vineyards when he and his parents went to arrange his wedding with the Timnite is called to mind (14:5). If the name is indeed descriptive of what grew in the valley, Segert is correct when he remarks, "Samson as a nāzīr . . .

⁷³Vickery, "Story of Samson," 69. Cf. Josephus, Antiquities, V. viii. 11.

⁷⁴Brenner, The Israelite Woman, 112.

⁷⁵Matthews, "Freedom and Entrapment," 254.

⁷⁶BDB, 977.

⁷⁷Boling, Judges, 248, calls it "Vineyard Valley."

should have been warned by this name and should have avoided this place of renown grape vines."⁷⁸

Setting and Relation to the Gaza Story

It was shown earlier that similarities appearing in chapters 14-15 and 16 are abundant. Many key words, themes, and parallel events recur. It is necessary now to analyze the two stories of chapter 16 in the same manner to see their similarities and differences. It is believed that the two stories not only follow one another in chronological sequence (cf. 16:4, וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי־כֵן, "and it happened after this") but that they are purposely juxtaposed to contrast the efforts of the Philistines to take Samson. It will be seen that what the Gazites attempted to do and failed when Samson visited the prostitute will be accomplished by Delilah when the stakes are high.

In 16:1 Samson went (הֵלֵךְ) to Gaza where he saw (רָאָה) a woman who was a prostitute and he used her (sexually). He "went (בֹּא) in to her," a euphemism for sexual relationship, while it was being announced about the town that "Samson has come" (בֹּא). In 16:4 Samson went to the Valley of Sorek. (The verb הֵלֵךְ is lacking but clearly implied because he did not live in this region. Cf. 13:25.) There he saw Delilah

⁷⁸Stanislav Segert, "Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative in Judges XIII-XVI," VT 34 (October 1984): 458.

(the verb ראה is implied). It is not stated that she was a professional prostitute although some scholars believe she was.⁷⁹ Did Samson use her (sexually)? The text is unclear, although implications of their ongoing relationship would suggest that he did. It is only said that he loved (אהב) her, a verb that emphasizes experiencing and desiring love (sometimes of carnal desire, cf. Gen 34:3; 2 Sam 13:1, 4, 15; 1 Kgs 11:1⁸⁰), but not sexual love which is normally expressed by the verb ידע.⁸¹ Delilah, however, will take advantage of their relationship and will "use" him for financial gain.

In 16:2 some Gazites lay in wait for him (ארב) at the gate (בשער). They kept silence (חרש) all night, evidently even when he uprooted the gate for apparently no one stepped forward to prevent his removal of it. In 16:9, 12 Delilah had an ambush, i.e., a "lier in wait: (ארב, a participle) hiding in the inner chamber (בחדר). Presumably he remained silent so as not to betray his presence and it is probable that he never came out of hiding until it was

⁷⁹McKenize, The World of the Judges, 156.

⁸⁰BDB, 12.

⁸¹TDOT, s.v. "אהב," by Gerhard Wallis, 1.107.

demonstrably proven that Samson's strength had departed from him.

In 16:3 Samson, having gone in to the prostitute, laid down (שָׁכַב) until midnight in a sexual relationship and at midnight he rose up (קָם). He had full control of his actions. He did what he wanted and he left when he wanted. In 16:19, however, Delilah made him sleep (יָשַׁן) on her knees; thus, she controlled him.⁸² When Samson awoke (קָם) from his sleep, he did not rise up (קָם) as he had done before and he was unable to leave as before.

In 16:3 when he left the prostitute and found the doors of the gate locked, he seized (אָחַז) the doors and the symbol of the Gazites' security was removed from its place. Samson left Gaza and went out into the darkness of night a free man. In 16:21 the Philistines seized (אָחַז) Samson. His hair, the symbol of his Nazirite dedication, had been removed. He was brought back bound to Gaza, a prisoner, in the darkness of his blindness. The Gazites had been unsuccessful in their attempt to take Samson because they did not know the secret of Samson's strength. Delilah learned the secret of his hair, and cut it. Samson's

⁸²Edward E. Hindson, The Philistines and the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 134, proposes that Delilah used sexual intercourse to induce a deep sleep upon Samson.

strength left (סִוֵּר) him (16:19) when Yahweh left (סִוֵּר) him (16:20). Thus the Philistines were able to bind (אָסַר) him and commit him to the house of prisoners (אֲסִירִים). Delilah was successful where Gaza had failed.

Delilah's Role in the Narrative

In the first two stories Samson is clearly the protagonist. He dominates the action and conversation. The women who are present in the stories, though they are essential to the narrative, can be viewed as foils. However, there is a marked change in this story. Delilah is seen in a more aggressive role than the previous two women in Samson's life. Since she is hired by the Philistine lords to seduce Samson, it is tempting to consider her to be an antagonist to Samson the protagonist. Nevertheless, since Delilah is so dominant and the focus appears to be directly upon her for a short while (16:4-20), this study will propose that the narrator temporarily exchanges Samson's leading role with Delilah. (This temporary exchange is unrelated to gender roles.) She becomes the protagonist; Samson is the foil. The role of protagonist will revert to Samson again, however, after Delilah achieves her purpose. The narrator drops her from the narrative and directs attention entirely upon Samson once more in 16:21.

There are two reasons for maintaining this notion of temporary role exchange. First, in analyzing the text of 16:4-20, it is observed that Delilah appears in the sentences more frequently as the subject whereas Samson is more frequently the object of her actions and the addressee of her conversation--i.e., she dominates (as subject) by doing things to Samson and saying things to him. Second, it is observed that once Delilah receives her commission from the Philistines, she becomes a woman who initiates. She is one who takes charge and makes things happen. A look at the structure of the narrative will make this second observation more apparent.

I. Introduction to Delilah	v 4
II. Philistines' bribery of Delilah	v 5
III. Delilah's four attempts to weaken Samson	v 6-20
A. First attempt	vv 6-9
1. Delilah's polite inquiry	v 6
2. Samson's false response	v 7
3. Delilah's action (based on Samson's response)	v 8
4. Samson's reaction (due to Delilah's action)	v 9
B. Second attempt	vv 10-12
1. Delilah's accusation and polite inquiry	v 10
2. Samson's false response	v 11
3. Delilah's action (based on Samson's response)	v 12a
4. Samson's reaction (due to Delilah's action)	v 12b
C. Third attempt	vv 13-14
1. Delilah's heated accusation and impatient inquiry	v 13a
2. Samson's false response	v 13b

- 3. Delilah's action (based on Samson's response) v 14a
- 4. Samson's reaction (due to Delilah's action) v 14b
- D. Fourth attempt vv 15-20
 - 1. Delilah's accusation, complaint, and persistence vv 15-16
 - 2. Samson's truthful response v 17
 - 3. Delilah's action (based on Samson's response) vv 18-19
 - 4. (Samson does not react as before-- Yahweh has left him) v 20

Attention must be directed to at least four important observations that can be drawn from this structural portrayal of the narrative because they contribute to a better understanding of Delilah's role in the narrative. First is the prominence given to Delilah. Once she is introduced as the woman Samson loves (v 4), she becomes the primary character of the story. The Philistines focus their attention on her because they see her as the possible means to their end. They will use her to discover the secret of his great strength by bribing her to seduce her lover (v 5). Samson clearly is the person of initiative in verse 4 by his locating and loving Delilah. In verse 5, however, the Philistines take the initiative by learning of Delilah's relationship with Samson and approaching her to strike a deal that will benefit both parties. After Delilah accepts the challenge to seduce her lover for financial gain, the initiative is all with her. This becomes very apparent by her four attempts to learn what can be done to reduce

Samson's strength to a manageable proportion (i.e., be like other men) so the Philistines can afflict him.

Second, it should be noted that all attempts to weaken Samson follow the same pattern, i.e., each attempt is an episode that follows an identical cyclic sequence. Delilah opens each episode by making an inquiry, accusation, or demand, or by registering a complaint. This first stage of the cycle is followed by Samson's response--his offering her false information (in the first three attempts) concerning what will weaken him. The third stage is always Delilah's acting upon the insight she has gained from Samson to prove its veracity--will Samson indeed become weak if she acts in accordance with his response? The final step in the cycle is Samson's reaction to her attempt to weaken him by employing his misinformation. Samson's reaction is always proof enough (in the first three attempts) that he has lied to Delilah. This discovery is indeed upsetting to her, and so the next cyclic episode is triggered.

Third, it should be observed that in each of the cycles Delilah is an initiator. She initiates all the dialogue. She requests information (she demands the information), she accuses him of lying, she questions his love and harasses him by begging daily for his secret.

She also initiates all the action, thus again indicating her dedication to her mission. In the first attempt she evidently orders fresh cords because the

Philistines make the delivery and she binds Samson. Also she assigns a man to hide in ambush in her inner room. In the second attempt she procures new ropes and binds him. In the third attempt she weaves his hair. In the final episode she confidently calls for the Philistine lords to come, puts Samson to sleep, shaves his hair, and wakes him to deliver him to the Philistines--weakened and defenseless for the first time.

Fourth is an observation of irony. After witnessing Samson's initiative and performance in the Gaza incident (16:1-3), it is strange indeed to see Samson so totally inactive and so lacking any drive as he appears in this narrative. He stands in stark contrast to the busy Delilah and he is overshadowed by her aggressiveness. His only noticeable activity is that of response to her demands and reaction to her moves to weaken him. His only examples of initiative are his return visits. He does not have to keep coming back.⁸³ but she knows he will and each time she is prepared to make him her victim of seduction.

⁸³The probability of short intervals of time between each attempt to weaken him is assumed here. If all of the attempts occurred in rapid succession while Samson remained with Delilah to play along, his disclosure of his secret is even more stupid than is already assumed. Her pressing him "all the days" (כָּל-הַיָּמִים) suggests some extended though indefinite period of time over which this last attempt takes place. Jack M. Sasson, "Who Cut Samson's Hair? (And Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)" Prooftexts 8 (1988): 335, argues against an extended period of time.

Delilah's Dialogue with Samson

In each of Delilah's attempts to learn the secret of Samson's strength and how he might be weakened, she first sought to gain information from Samson directly through dialogue. Then, second, she quickly found opportunity to test the truth and worth of the acquired information by using it on Samson. Without examining all the details of her actions against him it will suffice to note that whatever Samson suggested to limit his strength, she executed precisely and promptly. What will receive attention is her dialogue with Samson and how the narrator used it in the narrative.

Enticement and dialogue

The Philistine lords' instruction is to "entice" Samson to see wherein his strength is great (a literal rendering) and how they may be able to bind him to afflict him (16:5). The imperative "entice" (יִתְּנֶה) is the same word used in 14:15, but there are different motives for the ones instructed to do the enticing. The Timnite woman was under coercion. She had to entice Samson or she and her family would be burned. For Delilah it is a matter of business. She must entice Samson or she will not receive eleven hundred units of silver from each of the Philistine lords. Interestingly the bounty from the lords is for information, not for Samson's life. It appears that Delilah has ample opportunity to kill Samson and collect her money, but that

is not part of the agreement. The lords do not want him dead; they want him weakened so that they can afflict him; i.e., get their revenge by tormenting him.

It would have been simple enough for the narrator to have said, "So Delilah waited for Samson to come and she enticed him," i.e., she accomplished her mission. Instead the narrator uses dialogue between Delilah and Samson at this point and draws the story out, episode by episode, statement by statement, ploy by ploy. He heightens the dramatic suspense immensely for the reader who follows the cat and mouse game of the couple, their playful (but serious) mocking and teasing.⁸⁴ By the use of dialogue, the narrator plays upon the reader's anticipation who watches Samson with keen interest. Certainly Samson will not allow himself to be duped by a woman a second time, will he?⁸⁵ The reader is riveted to the text to find out.

Repeated phrases and dialogues

Crenshaw probably makes an overstatement when he says, "Both Samson and Delilah latched on to certain phrases and used them relentlessly."⁸⁶ But it is important to note that the repetition provides a certain predictability to the dialogue as the reader is somewhat enabled to

⁸⁴Vickery, "Story of Samson," 68.

⁸⁵Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," 245.

⁸⁶Crenshaw, Samson, 83.

anticipate what each new round of conversation will entail. Also the repetition of lines emphasizes what is important to both participants round after round.

The Philistine lords essentially want just two items of information from Delilah: 1. the source of his great strength, and 2. how to be able to bind him in order to afflict him. How to get the information is left to Delilah's devising. She is only told to entice him. The reader expects a wily woman to overpower Samson with her wits and trickery. It is logical expectation that Delilah will launch into treachery, tricking Samson into trusting her and fooling him into divulging the needed information.⁸⁷ Instead, she is surprisingly candid and outspoken. There is no noticeable trickery.⁸⁸ She gets immediately to the point and asks him directly for the two desired details, employing almost verbatim the speech of the lords. She says, "Please tell me where your great strength is and how you may be bound to afflict you" (v 6). There is no deception here, a fact that may be evidenced in Samson's response: "If they" (v 7). Who are the "they"? It is apparent that Samson already is aware of someone's

⁸⁷Betsy Merideth, "Desire and Danger: The Drama of Betrayal in Judges and Judith," in Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible, BL, 22, and JSOTSup, 81, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 71.

⁸⁸Bal, Lethal Love, 51.

motivating Delilah to put the question to him but he is willing to play along.

Samson addresses only the second part of the demand, "how may you be bound" In the next two rounds, that is all Delilah asks (cf. vv 10, 13). Each time Samson responds with false information. In the fourth round (v 15) she returns to the first part of her original question and asks concerning the source of his great strength. Samson delays answering, but after days of harassment, he truthfully responds with the information that will be used against him to his hurt.

Whenever Samson responded to Delilah's questions, his answer always consisted of two parts, a protasis and an apodosis. "If you bind me with . . . , then I will" (vv 7, 11, 13,⁸⁹ 17). The protasis is different each time, with Samson providing the truth only on the last round. The apodosis is fairly consistent. Twice he says he will be "like one of mankind" (כְּאַחַד הָאָדָם) (vv 7, 11) and once "like all mankind" (כְּכָל־הָאָדָם) (v 18). He knows that that is what Delilah wants to hear--that he will be like any

⁸⁹The MT has a partial protasis, but no apodosis in verse 13. The LXX has both, supplying the necessary sense that is lacking in the MT. The apparent lacuna between verses 13 and 14 is perhaps due to error in manuscript copying. Most modern versions (cf. JB, NEB, NRSV, NASB, and NIV) follow the LXX.

other man, without the extraordinary strength that has made him quite unmanageable.

Each time that Delilah acts upon the protasis element of Samson's response, she tests the truth of the apodosis by alerting him to danger. She consistently calls out the identical words, "the Philistines are upon you, Samson" (vv 9, 12, 14, 20). The regularity with which she shouts this warning should leave no doubt in anyone's mind, especially Samson's, exactly what she is attempting to do to him. Yet he continues to return to her. Is he really so naive? Gullible? Stupid? Or is he so brazenly self-confident in his strength and ability to protect himself, even apart from the Spirit of God, that he recklessly plays the game, finding enjoyment in sending her on wild-goose chases for his secret? The latter suggestion is probably true. But anyone can play games once too often, as Samson unfortunately is soon to find out.

No one hates being deceived more than a deceiver, so the humiliation and exasperation felt by Delilah when she sees that she is duped by the one she is trying to dupe is understandable. Twice she accuses him of telling lies (vv 10, 13). Three times she says, "You have deceived (חלל) me" (vv 10, 13, 15) and the last time she counts the occurrences for him ("you have deceived me these three times") to emphasize her point. By including all occurrences of her

criticism, the narrator expects the reader to focus on her double-standard ethics. She herself is guilty of her charges against him. Her accusations of deceit and lying seemingly affect Samson very little on the first two occasions. The third time, however, may have had greater impact when she, the only woman he is said to love (v 4), said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me?" (v 15).⁹⁰ Delilah's reference to his heart (לב) does not denote his affections for her, but the intimate secrets of his mind.⁹¹ The correct understanding of the term is determined from the opening words of verse 17, "So he told her all that was in his heart" (cf. a more current expression, "he bared his soul," and cf. also v 18 where "all his heart" occurs two more times). Delilah's rationale, like the Timnite woman's (14:16) is this: How can one profess love while at the same time refrain from confiding intimate information with the loved one?

Klein has provided a helpful analysis of key repeated elements appearing in the dialogue that support and complement what has just been presented above. Klein arranges three key elements found in the Philistines' speech

⁹⁰Crenshaw, "The Samson Saga," 498, comments, "If there ever was a clear case of the pot calling the kettle black, here it is!"

⁹¹Cf. Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 445; and Burney, Judges, 382.

to Delilah and in her speeches to Samson in the following manner:⁹²

Philistines	16:5	strength	binding	maltreatment
First speech	16:6	strength	binding	maltreatment
Second speech	16:10	<u>deceiving</u>	lies	binding
Third speech	16:13	<u>deceiving</u>	lies	binding
Fourth speech	16:5	love	<u>deceiving</u>	strength

The most repeated element in the five speeches is "binding," appearing four times⁹³ and indicating that the primary desire of the Philistines has been understood by their accomplice, Delilah. "Strength" and "deceiving" are each iterated three times. "Lies" and "maltreatment" each appear twice, and contrast the efforts of Samson and Delilah.

"Love" appears only once, and Klein remarks:

The least important element on Delilah's tongue, mentioned only once, is that which makes Samson "weak" to her, "love." Knowing that these are all Philistine-Delilah's words, the reader recognizes that Samson's position is hopeless. Delilah wants only to bind Samson; love is literally one of the last things that occurs to her. Samson, like many other lovers, hears only what he wants to hear; thus the reader judges the lover who should be the judge.⁹⁴

⁹²Klein, Triumph of Irony, 138. For consistency with terms above, "deceiving" has been substituted for "ridicule" in Klein's chart.

⁹³The verb appears an additional four times in Samson's lines and Delilah's actions (vv 7, 8, 11, 12).

⁹⁴Klein, Triumph of Irony, 138.

There is another development within the dialogue that deserves mentioning. Delilah's emotions gradually change from a polite calmness to agitated anger. In Delilah's opening line (v 6), she demands information. Her request, "Please tell me" (הַגִּידְהֶנָּא) is both firm (emphatic imperative) and courteous (with אָנָּה). When she is deceived she accuses Samson of lying, but the tone of her second request (v 10) remains unchanged (הַגִּידְהֶנָּא). However, after she is deceived the second time, she again accuses him of lying like before, but her tone changes in verse 13. This time she sharply demands, "Tell me . . . !" (הַגִּידְהֶנָּא, emphatic imperative only). Her mounting anger and frustration can be detected. While Samson is apparently amused with her urgency to test his latest incorrect advice, she is losing face with the waiting Philistine lords and losing patience with Samson.

Recognizing that angry demands are accomplishing nothing, she resorts to a further accusation. She questions the reality of his professed love for her and follows him, begging him to signal his love for her indeed by providing her with the information which she so desperately desires. This proves to be too much for Samson. Her change in emotions and tactics takes its toll on him, making him

impatient and "his soul was short to die" (וַתִּקְצֹר נַפְשׁוֹ לָמוּת).

As a result he tells (וַיֹּדֶעַ) ⁹⁵ her everything.

Delilah's only recorded speech to the Philistine lords comes after she learns the secret from Samson, but before she is able to test its veracity. However, her statement demonstrates her confidence that Samson has finally answered truthfully. She says, "Come up now" (הַעַתָּה), implying that Samson will be ready for the taking when they arrive. Most versions render הַעַתָּה as "this one" (KJV), or "once more" (JB, NKJV, NASB, NIV). If these rendering are followed, the meaning remains essentially the same, but with the possible additional implication that Delilah had called the Philistines to be on hand at previous tests of Samson's strength only for her to be humiliated before them. They came to witness her success, but their trips had been fruitless for they only saw her failure. It might also imply their growing impatience with her, thus providing an additional incentive for her persistence in the last round of dialogue with Samson.

⁹⁵Crenshaw, "The Samson Saga," 486-487, sees the common verb וַיֹּדֶעַ virtually as a leitwort in the Samson narrative (13-16), emphasizing that throughout there is a theme of information "not being told" and "being told." Delilah's announcement to the Philistine lords, "Come up once more, for he has told me all that was in his heart," gives a sense of finality to the story for it is the last time the verb occurs in the story and the book.

To reiterate, the narrator has carefully preserved the dialogue of Delilah and Samson and included it into his narrative account of their relationship. It adds dramatic suspense to an already intriguing story and gives insight into the characters of the two participants. Samson is blindly in love and recklessly involved in playing along with Delilah. Delilah, however, is not in love and is not playing games. She is resolute on attaining her reward of fifty-five hundred units of silver at Samson's expense.

Summary of Delilah's Success

It was noted at the beginning of this discussion of Delilah that her name has become virtually synonymous with "seduction." She was instructed to entice him, but it has been observed that she did not resort to wily devices of trickery per se. She, like the Philistine lords, used good psychology. They did not know the source of Samson's great strength, but they did know his weakness--women. They did not know how to take him, but they knew how to get to him--through Delilah. She knew how to get to his heart. In getting to his heart she contested his profession of love for her. She accused him of making mockery of her through his deception and lies, hoping to coerce him into feeling guilt for his actions and obligation to tell her what she wanted to know.

It is perhaps more fitting to remember Delilah for her diligence rather than her deception. By her persistent harassment of Samson for his secret, the truth of Proverbs 27:15-16 is exemplified:

A constant dripping on a day of steady rain
And a contentious woman are alike;
He who would restrain her restrains the wind
And grasps oil with his right hand.

Because of her determination she pressed him daily. Samson lacked her resolve; he gave in to her. Thus she "enticed" him. She had outwitted him by outlasting him. As a result, Samson, the servant of Yahweh who was more devoted to women, was overpowered by the Philistines and imprisoned in Gaza. There he became the servant of the Philistines, doing the work of women.

Summary of the Three Stories

This chapter began by calling the three women of these stories "deterrents to Samson's success." It must be remembered that they were not aggressive deterrents, i.e., they did not search out Samson to associate with him to bring him harm. All of Samson's associations with these women were of his volition. With each one he had a different kind of relationship. With the Timnite it was a relationship based on physical attraction. With the prostitute of Gaza it was lust. With Delilah--supposedly it was love. Each woman was in some regard "right in his eyes."

Samson's lifestyle was not exemplary of the leader he was called to be. Israel's spiritual decline was at such a disappointing nadir that his carelessness with the Nazirite regulations and his immorality drew criticism from no one (with the exception of the single question-rebuke from his parents in 14:3). Certain questions which have been asked before bear repeating: Were there no prophets at that time? What was the spiritual state of the priesthood? Was there neither a spiritual leader nor a moral consciousness of the nation to be heard? Was that which was right in Samson's eyes indeed right in everyone's eyes (cf. 17:6; 21:25)?

In a sense Samson epitomized the nation. As Israel had been called by Yahweh into a special relation with him through the Abrahamic covenant, Samson had been called before birth into a special relation with Yahweh as a Nazirite.⁹⁶ Gros Louis carefully parallels the life and conduct of Samson with that of the nation.

He is, like Israel, a special child of God. He also is, like Israel, immature, opportunistic, rash. His weakness for women culminates in the loss of strength through the wiles of Delilah--like Israel, he has played the harlot once too often. He is enticed, as Israel is enticed; the source of his strength is taken from him, as God, the strength of Israel, removes himself to punish the Israelites; he is overcome, bound, and subdued, as Israel is sold into the power of her enemies and driven into the hills and mountains. Samson's blindness seems to symbolize and crystalize the blindness of Israel

⁹⁶Cf. Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," 247.

when it gives in to temptation and weakness and does evil in the sight of the Lord.⁹⁷

In retrospect it might be argued that each of his relationships with women gave Samson an inroad into the Philistine community to wreak havoc and to destroy large numbers of them, thus fulfilling the prediction that he would begin to deliver Israel (13:5). Yet Samson must be held accountable for his misconduct and violation of clear Mosaic instruction. Samson is known for his "heroic" exploits, but the reader will forever wonder, How would the biography of Samson and the history of his exploits have differed if he had served Yahweh wholeheartedly without the distraction of the three women in his life?

Undoubtedly much more could have been said concerning Samson's twenty-year judgeship. What other stories from Samson's life could have been collected and recorded by the narrator? Why were only these--involving women--included? Apparently it was that these stories were the best ones available to show that Samson was very much like Israel which did that which was right in its own eyes (but evil in Yahweh's eyes). And the narrator has used the feminine gender, those women in Samson's life, to illustrate this point most vividly.

⁹⁷Gros Louis, "Book of Judges," 161.

CHAPTER VI

THE READER'S RESPONSE

Introduction

This chapter will assume once again that the narrator did not merely record historical facts. He selected persons and events and wrote with a purpose. He did not merely tell a story; he also had reasons for telling it. He not only conveyed a message through the stories he selected to include, he also intended to stimulate the emotions and feelings of his reader. By the stories that he recounted he sought to impress upon the mind of his reader the true nature of social, political, and spiritual conditions during this important segment of Israel's history. Here is what happened when Israel lived by its own standard of what was right. It is believed that the stories which include the activities of women not only contribute to the narrator's purpose, but also do much to elicit a response from the reader, probably to a greater degree than do stories that concern only men.

The narrator tells his story without suggesting what response he hopes to draw from his reader. For the most part the narrator appears to be neutral and non-committal in

his recital of details. He functions as a reporter, laying out the facts, but he allows the story content and the narrative presentation to impact upon the reader and cause an emotional reaction or response. The reader is permitted to arrive at his own conclusions and make moral judgments on the actions of the people of the stories.

It is important to bear in mind that certain stories may evoke more than one response from the reader or differing responses from different readers. Nevertheless there will probably be an overriding common response of disbelief: "How did conditions deteriorate so badly in Israel?"

It is not the purpose of this chapter to attempt to identify the narrator's desired response in every story that involves women. This would not only be subjective, it would be impossible, for the narrator never tells the response he is attempting to achieve. Therefore several suggested responses from a few selected stories will follow. These stories have been arranged according to categories of response, but there is no appreciable progression intended in the order in which the responses are presented. By nature this chapter will be more subjective than the preceding ones.

Response of Surprise

"Shocked" may be too strong a word to describe the reader's reaction, but he is indeed surprised to come upon

women appearing at times and performing in roles where a man is expected. The three women in two separate stories selected to demonstrate the response of surprise have already been discussed at some length in Chapter IV. It is not the purpose here to retrace unnecessarily the ground covered in that chapter, but to review how the narrator sets up the reader for a surprise. That the reader is indeed surprised only serves to illustrate the point that the events and outcomes of which he reads are far different from what he had expected to find. This in turn suggests that something must have been amiss in the nation.

The Story of Deborah and Jael

Presumably the reader will have read other narrative accounts before reading the book of Judges and will be somewhat aware of life within a patriarchal society, although, as it was noted in Chapter III, defined roles of women in the Old Testament are by and large lacking. The reader is most familiar with a few wives such as Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel who lived in the shadows of their husbands and subjected themselves to their authority. A couple of notable women of initiative are Moses' mother and his wife Zipporah (cf. Exod 2:3; 4:24-26). Usually any prominence achieved by these women was momentary and related to their husbands and family. One exception is Miriam, a

prophetess of Israel (Exod 15:20), but she served under the leadership of her brother and is largely remembered negatively for her rivalry with him (Num 12:1-16).

In the book of Judges the reader has learned of God's deliverance of Israel through judges (שופטים masculine participle). The first two judges (Othniel and Ehud) were men and in the narrator's account of them there is a complete absence of women. Thus in Judges 4 the name of Deborah appears abruptly and unexpectedly in the text. The reader is surprised to see a woman function as a prophetess and judge in Israel. At this point the reader has not yet come to anticipate the unexpected in the book of Judges.

The language (i.e., the words themselves) does not indicate anything abnormal. The narrator himself does not express surprise at her role. There is no hint that he believes her involvement (as a woman) in giving direction to Israel runs counter to any Mosaic legislation. The grammatical structure, however, signals that the narrator is pressing a point. Instead of following his formulaic pattern for introducing the deliverer, the narrator abruptly breaks into the narrative (4:4) with a circumstantial clause and Deborah's name is placed in the emphatic position. He clearly wants to capture the reader's attention to direct it to something unusual. The reader is struck by bewilderment. Instead of being introduced to the man he anticipates will

be Yahweh's next deliverer for Israel, he is introduced to a woman who is already performing as prophetess and judge. It is quite apparent that something out of the ordinary is happening and he feels compelled to ask, What is going on here? In addition to his obvious introduction of Deborah, is the narrator making some implicit statement? Might he be implying that conditions in Israel are such that males are not assuming their normally understood leadership roles? When the reader discovers the reluctant Barak, he is led to believe the answer is "Yes, indeed."

Between the introduction of Deborah and the denouement of the story there is dramatic suspense. The reader knows that the story will reach its climax with the glory awarded to a heroine, not a hero, but he does not know who she will be. Deborah's abrupt departure from the story is unexpected, especially since the reader has anticipated that she will be the heroine. However, the narrator has laid the groundwork for his final surprise. Jael, whose husband Heber is an ally of the enemy, is portrayed as a gracious hostess, but in 4:21 there is an abrupt and dramatic shift in her portrayal. The hostess becomes a murderess and the reader is left momentarily stunned. The narrator has graphically shown, however, that when Israel is slow to resist its enemies, God can raise up a woman, even a non-Israelite (Kenite) who will defy her husband's loyalties to the enemy. Thus his purpose is accomplished.

The Story of the Woman at Thebez

The aftermath of Gideon's victory over the Midianites is filled with surprises. It is not anticipated that Israel, who has offered to honor Gideon by making him king, will refrain from showing kindness to his household after he dies. It can hardly be conceived that the nation will permit Abimelech to mass-murder his seventy half-brothers and usurp leadership without moral outrage and retribution. Neither can it be imagined that the nation will stand idly by while Abimelech destroys one of their cities (Shechem) with its residents. It is not too surprising, though, to see that the residents of Thebez, especially its leaders, are cowards who will not take an aggressive stand to defend their city.

The narrator has prepared the reader for the climax of the story by providing many details to show that the nation is lethargic in administering justice even when crimes are committed on a large scale. The reader is surprised indeed to learn that one woman, perhaps a wife or a maid, fled to the tower for safety among many others and went "armed" with her upper millstone, apparently prepared to go on the offensive if she were provided the occasion. One woman preserved the city and prevented the advance of any further schemes Abimelech may have been devising to bring the nation under his ruthless control. In this case the reader is alarmed at the nation's indifference to

justice; and in light of his growing distaste for the character and actions of Abimelech, he takes great delight in being surprised once more. This time he sees one woman single-handedly bring judgment upon the head (literally) of the usurper.

Response of Chagrin

The story about Micah is probably one of the least known in the book of Judges. It does not rank in popularity with the stories of Gideon and Samson. Its importance to the book is not undermined by its lack of popularity, however, for it provides one of the clearest examples of religious syncretism during the judges period.

Introduction to Judges 17

The chapter begins with the story of Micah from the hill country of Ephraim. Though the man was very pious (he had his own private shrine, ephod, "house of gods," and his own son performed as his personal priest), he stole silver from his own mother. Upon hearing the curse that she placed on the thief, he returned the silver to her. She blessed him and had him use part of the silver to make an idol for Yahweh.

The commentaries are fairly uniform in their treatment of Judges 17:1-6. Normally Micah's name and locale are discussed. Some commentaries focus on issues:

the integrity and order of the text,¹ Micah's departure from Mosaic law² (cf. Deut 12:4-14 and his improper shrine; also his improper priest), and the nature of his molten image.³ These are all important details which are worthy of careful attention. However, most commentaries view verses 1-6 as a short, simple story about Micah's idol, a story which functions primarily as the preface to a major and more significant story which follows, the Danite migration (Judg 18).⁴ In focusing attention on Micah's idol and the Danite migration it is unfortunate that so few commentaries give appropriate (if any) attention to Micah's mother. Frequently this interesting woman is virtually overlooked. In this study, she, not her son Micah, will be the focus of discussion.

Micah's mother is clearly not the protagonist of the story. That she is not the central person is evidenced by her absence from the story after verse 3. However, her very presence in the opening verses indicates some purpose for her inclusion, but what is that purpose? Why is she included? Is she a foil for her son, the initial

¹Soggin, Judges, 265.

²Wood, Distressing Days of the Judges, 148-149.

³Cundall, Judges, 184; and Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 457.

⁴Cf. Soggin, Judges, 264; and Martin, Judges, 182-183.

protagonist of the story? She is indeed that, but much more. She is not only present, she speaks and her statements serve to evoke a response from the reader who nearly chokes from chagrin. The reader detects immediately a misinformed piety for her words to her son are totally incongruous to Mosaic instruction concerning the worship of Yahweh.

The story has points of comparison and contrast with the Samson story. Both Samson and Micah are introduced through their mothers.⁵ Though juxtaposed in the book, the two stories are separated by many years. Micah lived relatively early⁶ in the judges period and Samson lived near the end. Samson's mother showed some theological insight, but Micah's mother displays theological confusion and syncretistic notions.

Theological Incongruities Displayed

by Micah's Mother

Micah's mother (and father?) shows apparent religious inclinations in the theophoric name chosen for her son (מִיכָיִהוּ, "Who is like Yahweh?"). However his personal conduct depicts a character contrary to his name for he took

⁵Cf. Boling, Judges, 255.

⁶The time is established by the identification of Micah's hired priest, Jonathan, the grandson of Moses. See the discussion of Judges 18:30 in Chapter III of this study.

(לקח) eleven hundred units of silver from his mother. The double occurrence of לקח emphasizes the negative implications--he has stolen from his own mother.

Aware of the missing money, she utters a curse (אלה) concerning the thief in the hearing of her son. Her action perhaps indicates a knowledge of Leviticus 5:1 where the related noun (אלה) is used. Goslinga comments:

It seems likely that she solemnly announced the theft and invoked the name of Yahweh to compel each person to testify what he knew (cf. Prov. 29:24). Anyone who willfully kept silent would therefore have been subject to the Lord's curse. The imprecation naturally would have fallen first of all on the thief himself if he did not speak up.⁷

Viewed from this perspective, Micah's confession and return of the silver seems to be a response stemming from his fear of the curse, not from conviction of personal wrongdoing and repentance. Therefore, his mother's reply to his confession is ironic and perplexing. Her statement, "Blessed be my son by the Lord" (v 2), seems to indicate her approval of him. Does it denote her appraisal of her son's confession, that she senses his remorse for stealing, and therefore blesses him? Or could it be that the blessing is meant to rescind the curse that she had placed on the thief, not knowing at the time that he was her son? The latter suggestion seems more probable. In other words, despite his motive, she is

⁷Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 465, nt. 6.

removing the curse now that her silver has been returned to her.

The first part of her stated intention for the silver, "I wholly⁸ dedicate the silver from my hand to the Lord," seems admirable initially. In contrast to her son's thievery, she dedicates the silver to Yahweh, but retains the greater part for herself,⁹ a sort of thievery of her own (cf. Acts 5:4).

Most troublesome is the second part of her statement which is totally incongruous with the first part: "for my son to make a graven image and a molten image." The statement is contrary to theological sensibilities. In view of earlier declarations the genuineness of her piety is preposterous. Moses had instructed Israel to be arranged by tribes on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal under the direction of Joshua to rehearse certain blessings and curses (Deut 27:2-4). This instruction was indeed performed under Joshua's leadership (Josh 8:30-35). At this meeting, all Israel was to respond with an "Amen" to the declaration: "Cursed is the man who makes an idol or a molten image, an abomination to the Lord, the work of the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret" (Deut 27:15). Though the meeting on

⁸NASB gives a quantitative interpretation to the absolute infinitive (הִקְדִּישׁ הַקֶּדֶשׁ), but NIV gives a qualitative interpretation: "I solemnly consecrate."

⁹Klein, Triumph of Irony, 147.

Gerizim and Ebal was chronologically proximate to the story of Micah, this woman called her son "blessed" (בָּרוּךְ) and proposed an action that was clearly to be recognized as "cursed" (אָרוּר).

The reader can not avoid feelings of dismay. He hardly knows whether to cry or to laugh. It is shameful for Micah who is so overtly religious to steal from his own mother. It is puzzling that she should bless him and solemnly assign him such a theologically contradictory mandate. Martin well observes that "there is a certain irony in the fact that no discrepancy is felt by Micah or his mother in the association of 'the Lord' with 'an idol and an image.'"¹⁰ The most appalling fact is that this is a story of a religious woman and her son whose worship of Yahweh is seemingly conducted in ignorance of Yahweh's will and is governed by what is right to them (v 6). If this story depicts spiritual conditions in Israel early in the period of the judges, to what extent will the spiritual climate deteriorate over many years when the nation continues to do evil by serving the deities of the Canaanites and not Yahweh? The reader may have many different responses, but one response must be chagrin.

¹⁰Martin, Judges, 185.

Significance of the Story

It may seem a curious thing that the narrator makes no overt moral application to such a clear departure from the proper worship of Yahweh. Myers comments, "The story is old, as may be seen from the archaic religious practices mentioned without a hint of editorial displeasure" (emphasis added).¹¹ Davis reacts to Myers' conclusion, stating that the narrator's "neutrality is only apparent."¹² He then proceeds through the entire narrative of chapters 17-18, showing a number of literary features that are to be seen in the narrative that suggest the moral stance of the narrator. Included among these literary devices are contrast in use of terms, the distance the narrator maintains from the events he describes, the use of irony and sometimes sarcasm. Most germane to this study is the narrator's depiction of the characters. Davis believes that the theological incongruities noted above seem especially to attract the narrator's disdain, a conclusion shared by this study.¹³

Davis laments the fact that commentaries are concerned with all the technical details of the text of the narrative, but rarely attempt to treat the theology of the

¹¹Jacob M. Myers, "The Book of Judges: Introduction and Exegesis," in vol. 2 of IB, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 798.

¹²Dale R. Davis, "Comic Literature--Tragic Theology: A Study of Judges 17-18," WTJ 46 (Spring 1984): 156.

¹³Ibid., 158-161.

text.¹⁴ Therefore he proposes several significant theological applications of this narrative, one of which pertains directly to Micah's mother. He remarks:

Finally, our writer has described the tragedy of false religion (18:27) [emphasis his]. The Danites reenact Micah's folly. It grows from an idea in Micah's mother's brain [emphasis added] to a reality in Micah's used god lot and spreads, like cancer, for, whatever the historical and critical questions involved, the existence of the Danites' cult may have provided some of the stimulus for Jeroboam I's injecting his own lethal infection into the life of Israel (1 Kings 12, especially v 29). If so, the tragedy continues into 2 Kings 17 and damns a nation.¹⁵

It is apparent from these opening verses that mother and son have done nothing right. In a sense they symbolize Israel,¹⁶ for undoubtedly they do not stand alone in their theological confusion and religious syncretism but represent a larger percentage of Israel's population. Nevertheless, instead of citing a number of examples, the narrator has introduced the story of Micah by use of the feminine gender. He has focused attention momentarily on one unnamed woman and her theologically incongruous statement to her son who is obviously just as confused theologically, but very religious. It is doubtful that the story would have had equal impact had the narrator simply identified Micah as idolatrous.

¹⁴Ibid., 161.

¹⁵Ibid., 163.

¹⁶Cf. Klein, Triumph of Irony, 151.

Response of Outrage

Few stories of the Old Testament will both shock and anger the reader quite like the two stories in Judges to be presented briefly here. Both stories include women. The one involves a Levite and his wife; the other concerns a judge and his daughter. Both stories are certain to prompt an almost predictable response--outrage.

The Rape of the Levite's Concubine

Setting of the story

Though this story appears in the so-called "appendix" of Judges, it can be determined that the events occurred quite early in the judges period. The aftermath of this story is civil war for Israel, as eleven tribes seek to punish one tribe for the crime committed in one of its cities. The one seeking divine retribution for the tribe of Benjamin is Phinehas,¹⁷ the grandson of Aaron (20:28). Thus the story is to be dated early.

An unnamed Levite from Ephraim had taken a concubine from Bethlehem. In the story she "plays the harlot"¹⁸ and

¹⁷For a differing view, see Myers, "Book of Judges," 819, who identifies this person as Phinehas II, predecessor of Eli.

¹⁸Scholars consistently note that זָנָה with עַל is an unusual construction. Many conclude that MT is corrupt. BHK proposes וַתִּזְעַק ("and she was enraged"); BHS proposes וַתִּשְׁתָּק ("and she rejected"). KB, 261, retains the MT reading, taking the verb זָנָה to be a cognate of the Akkadian zenū ("to be angry, hateful"). The LXX^A reads καὶ ὀργίσθη αὐτῇ

returns to her father in Bethlehem. After four months' time passes, the Levite goes after her and is able to "sweet-talk" (literally, "he spoke to her heart") her into returning with him. After a period of five days eating and drinking with his concubine's father, the Levite sets out for home with his concubine and a servant. When evening comes, the Levite refuses to seek lodging in Jebus, a "city of foreigners," but insists on pressing on to Gibeah, an Israelite city. There an elderly man finds the traveling trio on the street and he asks, "Where are you going and where do you come from?" The Levite identifies his home locale, where he has come from and his destination--the house of Yahweh¹⁹ (19:16-18). The man then takes the three travelers to his house for the night.

("and she was angry with him"). KJV, NKJV, NASB and NIV follow the MT; NRSV and NEB follow the LXX^A. For commentaries, see Boling, Judges, 274, and Gray, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 373. Neither reading alters the thesis of this chapter.

¹⁹KJV, NKJV and NIV follow MT's reading of בֵּית יְהוָה ("house of Yahweh"). NASB, NRSV and NEB follow LXX reading of εἰς τὸν οἶκόν μου ("to my house"). The LXX may find support in 19:28 where the Levite does indeed go to his home, but was this destination a change of plans due to the death of his concubine? If the MT reading is correct, was the Levite telling the truth, or was he lying, hoping to impress the old man of Gibeah with his destination and thus receive lodging? It is appalling to think that perhaps the Levite was living near the "house of Yahweh," i.e., the tabernacle, and that this sort of character may have been assisting the priests there.

While they are eating and drinking, vile and worthless characters surround the house and demand of the host the opportunity to have sexual relations with the Levite. The host offers his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine instead--an offer refused. Whereupon the Levite pushes his concubine out to the crowd of men who receive her and rape her throughout the night. Meanwhile the Levite sleeps in safety in the house. In the morning when he is ready to continue travel, he finds her at the threshold of the house, but she does not respond when she is spoken to (she is apparently dead). The Levite loads her onto his donkey and returns home.

When he arrives at his dwelling place, he divides her corpse into twelve pieces and sends a piece of her to each of the twelve tribes (cf. 1 Sam 11:7 for Saul's mustering of Israel by chopping up his oxen). The Levite gets the reaction from the tribes that he desires, for they all converge on Mizpeh to learn what horrible tragedy has occurred in Israel. When the tribes are present and demand an explanation, the Levite tells his version of what has happened and indicts the city of Gibeah for its immoral behavior. Eleven tribes are incensed by what they hear, and demand that the Benjaminites turn over the wicked men to be killed. When the Benjaminites refuse, civil war breaks out with eleven tribes against one.

It will not be necessary to deal with all the details of this rather long story. It should be observed, however, that the Levite is the protagonist. Although the reader is interested in and deeply concerned for the concubine, the story is about the Levite--how he behaves, what he says and does to her, and how he reports to Israel. The concubine never speaks. She volitionally has left her husband, but that is her only reported decision. Her husband decides how long to stay with her father before returning home. He decides where to spend the night. The host offers her as part of his proposal to the wicked men, and her husband decides her fate by pushing her out to them.²⁰ So although the concubine is clearly a central figure in the narrative, her husband predominates.

This story bears many similarities to the Sodomite treatment of Lot's "guests" in Genesis 19.²¹ This study focuses briefly, however, on the moral incongruities found in the story and how the story impacts on the thesis of this chapter.

²⁰See Phyllis Tribble, Texts of Terror, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 69-77, for a feminist reading of the concubine's treatment.

²¹For a study of the parallels, see Robert C. Culley, Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 56-59; and Susan Niditch, "The 'Sodomite' Theme in Judges 19-20: Family, Community, and Social Disintegration," CBO 44 (July 1982); 365-578.

Moral incongruities

As the story of the Levite's arrival at Gibeah with his concubine and servant unfolds laconically, the reader is totally ignorant of the wickedness that prevails there. To his dismay, the events are immoral and incomprehensible.

First, when the host is confronted by Gibeah's wicked men, he attempts to protect his male guest from homosexual abuse by offering them two females, his own virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine. Apparently he rationalized one form of sexual sin was the "lesser of two evils." Ironically he protested, "Do not evil" to the men, but to the women he was willing to permit these men (literally) "to do good in your eyes" (19:23-24; cf. Gen 19:7-8), a phrase uncomfortably similar to the refrain in 17:6 and 21:25. Did he suspect these men would kill the Levite? If so, he was willing to sacrifice two women's honor to save his life (cf. the action of Abraham [Gen 12:11-16; 20:2] and Isaac [Gen 26:7]).²² Tribble remarks, the "rules of hospitality in Israel protect only males."²³

Next, when the men refuse the host's offer, the Levite callously seizes his concubine and thrusts her out alone to the lecherous mob. If the MT is correct in 19:2 and the concubine had indeed been morally unfaithful to her

²²Cf. Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 481.

²³Tribble, Texts of Terror, 75.

husband, the reader is initially favorably impressed with the Levite's apparent continued love for her and willingness to forgive. Now that is all erased from the reader's memory as he visualizes in his mind the horror and agony experienced by the concubine that night while her husband enjoyed the safety of a house and the satisfaction of sleep, apparently unconcerned about the safety and discomfort of his concubine. Is it not incongruous "to speak to her heart" one day and then several days later allow her to be gang-raped to the point of death? Niditch is correct when she says "the substitution of the innocent woman for himself seems ethically indefensible."²⁴ The Levite's callousness and inhumanity is revealed when he speaks to her corpse clutching the threshold,²⁵ "Get up and let us go"--the reader is shocked and outraged.

This angry reaction is only intensified when the Levite piously indicts the men of Gibeah for the immoral treatment he experienced at their hands. Is he lying or telling the truth when he states, "They intended to kill me" (20:5)? Regardless, he chooses her death over his. He does not relate all that happened, i.e., the facts that implicate him. He accuses the men of Gibeah of rape and murder, but he never confesses that ultimately he is responsible for

²⁴Niditch, "'Sodomite' Theme in Judges 19-20," 369.

²⁵Klein, Triumph of Irony, 171.

the crimes they committed for it was he who seized (Hiphil, *קח*) his concubine and brought (Hiphil, *בא*) her to the men. Both verbs (causal stems) imply the Levite used force on his concubine and she was not necessarily a willing partner in his effort to protect himself. Yet standing before the tribes he hides his despicable conduct from them and accuses the men of Gibeah.

When the Levite distributes pieces of his concubine throughout Israel the reaction of the tribes is exactly what he desires. All are horrified and say, "Nothing like this has ever happened or been seen from the day when the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt to this day" (19:30b). Such an extraordinary experience was shocking, horrifying. When the tribes learn the cause of the concubine's death, they demand that the tribe of Benjamin turn over the scoundrels "to put them to death and remove this wickedness from Israel" (20:13). Yet Benjamin defends these wicked men to the point of engaging in a civil war that cost many lives and almost eliminated a tribe. The fact that God does not give immediate success to the eleven tribes may indicate spiritual deficiencies on their part also. While they may be angry at Benjamin, they are not necessarily more holy.

Israel's slaughter of innocent women and children at Jabesh-gilead, one of its own Trans-jordanian cities, and its taking of the virgin daughters in an effort to supply

wives for Benjaminite survivors of the war (21:1-15) is horrifying. By the current standards of the Canaanites it was acceptable to take the virgin daughters as spoil (cf. the expectations of Sisera's mother in waiting for her son to return, 5:30), but does Israel have no feelings for its own? How do these four hundred girls, survivors of massacred families, feel about being presented as spoil to six hundred surviving Benjaminite soldiers? And what about the other girls that the men of Israel will permit the remaining wifeless soldiers to kidnap? (21:16-25). The end to this horrible story could almost be considered humorous were it not so tragic. But the narrator reminds his reader that the action is simply characteristic--everyone is doing what is right in his own eyes.

Significance of the story

The low morality that pervades this lengthy story may cause the reader to question its value, but the story has tremendous value. The reader is certain to be appalled at the Levite's behavior toward his concubine, but the entire story with all its components depicts the types of sin that were prevalent in Israel during this period: sexual sin, defense of the guilty, low respect for human life, and violation of personal rights.²⁶

²⁶See Wood, Distressing Days of the Judges, 151-153.

Certainly the narrator wishes to inform his reader, but it is believed that he desired to do more than that. The story is not related for the reader's entertainment where he views Israel's immorality as if it were produced for a cinema audience. The reader is expected to react with a sensitivity to Israel's sin, to respond in horror and moral outrage because Israel is not the holy nation God had called it to be. Tragically, it was like the Canaanites it was instructed to destroy.

It would not have been any less sinful and repulsive if the elderly man of Gibeah had turned over the Levite to the evil crowd outside his house. Nor would it have been any less immoral for these men to have raped the Levite. The gathering of Gibeah's men at the host's door when they learned of a male visitor in their city may indicate that this was not the city's first episode in gang-rape. Perhaps the narrator could have cited similar stories of such hideous behavior. However, such examples probably would not have triggered the emotions of the reader nearly so much as this account involving the feminine gender. It is incredible to see a man (a Levite) subjecting his concubine to such despicable treatment and resultant death. The reaction is most certainly horror.

Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter

Setting of the story

None of the fascinating stories of Judges is more strange and difficult than the story of Jephthah. His story can be summarized as follows. Because of Israel's sin Yahweh's anger burned against them and he delivered them into the hands of the Ammonites who "afflicted and crushed" them for eighteen years (10:7, 8). Unlike other judges, Jephthah is not raised up by Yahweh. Israel negotiates with this Gileadite who had been born to a harlot and later ostracized as an outcast from society, and convinces him to return to become their leader against the oncoming Ammonites (10:17-11:11).

Jephthah accepts their offer to lead, and tries to negotiate diplomatically with the Ammonite king (11:12-27), but the king is intent on going to war (11:28). With the Spirit of God upon him and the battle imminent, Jephthah makes a vow to Yahweh:

"If Thou wilt indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's or [or "and"²⁷] I will offer it up as a burnt offering" (11:30b-31).

After victory over the Ammonites, he returns to his house to find his only daughter coming out to meet him with

²⁷NASB translates the waw as "or." A translation of "and" is preferred (cf. NKJV, NRSV and NIV).

timbrel and dance. He goes into mourning, but feels bound to his vow. After giving his daughter two months to bewail her virginity with her friends, he "did to her according to the vow which he had made" (11:39b). Jephthah's leadership is then challenged by the Ephraimites, but he and his Gileadites retaliate and destroy them (12:1-6).

The primary purpose of the Jephthah story is to show how Israel was delivered under Jephthah's leadership from the Ammonites. The story of his daughter is a story within a story. In a sense it bridges the account of his march to battle and his victory and return home to celebrate, but it also functions as a sad interlude that disrupts the flow of the stories of Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites (11:12-33) and his successful retaliation against the Ephraimite challenge (12:1-6).²⁸ The story is clearly about Jephthah who is the protagonist.²⁹ His unnamed daughter serves as a foil. Not so strangely, however, the tragedy that befalls her has captured the attention of the readers and has become

²⁸Esther Fuchs, "Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," JFSR 5 (Spring 1989): 36.

²⁹Cf. J. Cheryl Exum, "The Tragic Vision and Biblical Narrative: The Case of Jephthah," in Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus, ed. J. Cheryl Exum, in SBLSS (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 59-83; and W. Lee Humphreys, "The Story of Jephthah and Tragic Vision: A Response to J. Cheryl Exum," in Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus, ed. J. Cheryl Exum, in SBLSS (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 84-96.

a primary focus of writers, especially of feminists.³⁰ This particular study will contend that this story was intended to draw attention to itself. Therefore, it is necessary to note some theological incongruities of the story and their significance.

Theological incongruities of the story

It is a curious thing that Jephthah vowed his vow after the Spirit of Yahweh came upon him. Identical terms are used of the Spirit's coming upon Othniel (3:10), but he did not make a vow. The Spirit clothed (לבוש) himself with Gideon (6:34), but Gideon still had doubts and asked God for signs. Does Jephthah's action depict some uncertainty on his part? It does indeed seem superfluous³¹ since the Spirit of Yahweh has already come upon him. Since Jephthah

³⁰Cf. Phyllis Tribble, "A Meditation in Mourning: The Sacrifice of the Daughter of Jephthah," USQR 36, Supplementary (1981): 59-73. More recently published as "The Daughter of Jephthah: An Inhuman Sacrifice," in Texts of Terror, 93-116; Fuchs, "Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing," 35-45; J. Cheryl Exum, "Murder They Wrote: Ideology and the Manipulation of Female Presence in Biblical Narrative," USQR 43 (1989): 19-39; Peggy L. Day, "From the Child is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); Mieke Bal, "Between Altar and Wondering Rock: Toward a Feminist Philology," and Beth Gerstein, "A Ritual Processed: A Look at Judges 11:40," and Anne Michele Tapp, "An Ideology of Expendability: Virgin Daughter Sacrifice in Genesis 19:1-11, Judges 11:30-39 and 19:22-26," in Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible, BL, 22, and JSOTSup, 81, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989).

³¹Bal, "Toward a Feminist Philosophy," 213.

does not seem to "evince the assurance that the Spirit of Yahweh ought to give,"³² it is wondered how aware he was of the Spirit's presence.

The elders of Gilead had negotiated with Jephthah to convince him to be their leader and then he had attempted to negotiate with the Ammonite king. Now he appears to negotiate with Yahweh. "If you will indeed give" The infinitive absolute seems to express his insecurity.³³ It is an intense protasis that leads to a resolute apodosis.³⁴ "Then it shall be that whatever shall come out of the doors of my house . . . shall be the Lord's." Though the Spirit of Yahweh's coming upon him should have been assurance enough, he is vowing the ultimate in order to ensure his success in battle, something from his household that will prove to cost him dearly.³⁵

A second incongruity is that a prima facie reading of the narrative suggests that his vow included human sacrifice.³⁶ He quite clearly states that if Yahweh would

³²Tribble, Texts of Terror, 96.

³³Webb, Judges, 64.

³⁴Tribble, Texts of Terror, 96.

³⁵Exum, "Murder They Wrote," 22.

³⁶How Jephthah fulfilled his vow is debated. Did he actually sacrifice his daughter or did he dedicate her to the Lord for service? Wood, Distressing Days of the Judges, 287-295, maintains that Jephthah dedicated his daughter to service at the tabernacle. Goslinga, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 388-396, wrestles with the issue. He confesses that the

surely give the Ammonites into his hand, then the "going out one" (הַיֹּצֵא) who came out (יָצָא) to meet (קָרָא) him would be Yahweh's and would be offered (עָלָה) up a burnt offering (עֹלָה).³⁷ Moore states most emphatically,

That human sacrifice is intended is, in fact, as plain as words can make it; the language is inapplicable to an animal. . . . It is not, therefore, a rash vow to sacrifice whatever first meets him . . . but a deliberate one.³⁸

Jephthah was quite aware that heroes were welcomed after victory. It is not stated whom he expected to greet him, but it certainly was not an animal. (How could he be certain that the first animal to come out would be acceptable for a burnt offering?) The narrator is quite careful in his selection of words to show Jephthah's daughter met the conditions of his vow. She went out (יָצָא) to meet (קָרָא) her father with timbrels (בְּתֻפִּים) and dances

literal words are strong support for actual sacrifice of the daughter, but feels compelled to rationalize that perhaps she was not sacrificed. John J. Davis, Conquest and Crisis: Studies in Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 124-128, argues convincingly that he did indeed sacrifice her, a view that is accepted in this study.

³⁷The language parallels that of Genesis 22:2 where Abraham is commanded to offer up (עָלָה) his son Isaac as a burnt offering (עֹלָה).

³⁸Moore, Judges, 299. Boling, Judges, 208, maintains that Iron Age houses accommodate animals, so the possibility of an animal coming from his house is not unreasonable.

(וּבְמַחְלוֹת). Undoubtedly this was the kind of greeting he desired and expected (cf. Exod 15:20 and 1 Sam 18:6), but apparently he neither expected nor wished to be welcomed by his daughter.

Jephthah's response is alarming. He does not cry out in horror, "What have I done?" Instead his cry of anguish can be interpreted as selfish accusation. "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me" (11:35a). The Hiphil infinitive absolute (הִכְרַעַתְּ) emphasizes her action, "You have really brought me low." Jephthah presents the situation as if his daughter were at fault and he appears to mourn for himself rather than for his daughter.³⁹ At the same time his explanation expresses his deep grief and sense of helplessness. "I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot take it back" (11:35b). It should be noted, though, "that it is not his having to offer a human sacrifice that upsets Jephthah, but rather the fact that his daughter is the one chosen for the sacrifice."⁴⁰

The narrator never reveals the feelings of the father or his daughter when she returned after two months away in the mountain lamenting her fate with her friends.

³⁹Cf. Soggin, Judges, 214; and Tribble, Texts of Terror, 101-102.

⁴⁰Hauser, "Unity and Diversity," 298, nt. 27.

He only states that Jephthah "did to her according to the vow which he had made" (11:39b). When Abraham prepares to obey God's command to sacrifice Isaac, details of his preparation are given. Thus the suspense builds until the Angel of the Lord halts him, negates the command and issues another one: "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad" (Gen 22:9-12). Here, however, the reader is spared the suspense and agony of details. The outcome is sufficiently revealed in "and he did to her his vow which he vowed."

Scholars who oppose the interpretation that Jephthah literally sacrificed his daughter argue that such action violates clear Mosaic instruction not to engage in child sacrifice (cf. Lev 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut 12:31; 18:10) like the nations around them. It must be remembered that the first commandment prohibited following any god beside Yahweh, but Israel pursued other deities throughout the judges period. The second commandment prohibited the use of idols, but as it has already been seen above, early in the judges period religious syncretism was vividly demonstrated in the theological confusion of Micah and his mother when he made an idol to Yahweh. Is it so remarkable, then, that years later an individual's (maybe Israel's) theology may have become even more garbled so as to accommodate human sacrifice? It does not seem at all unlikely or impossible that Israel's notions concerning the worship of Yahweh had degenerated to such a point that the Israelite worshipper

would not have thought it incongruous to honor Yahweh with human sacrifice. Benjamin Scolnic remarks:

Jephthah would have sacrificed a son if the situation had developed in this way. This is not a text of terror against women [as Tribble argues], it is just a horrible story of the primitive, rough faith of very early Israel.⁴¹

It is also incongruous that Jephthah kept his vow. In view of the pervading moral relativism, it is surprising indeed that he fulfilled this promise. When he addressed his emotion-packed words to his daughter, he said (literally), "I have opened my mouth to Yahweh and I am not able to turn back." His commitment to his vow reflects the commitment demanded of Mosaic Law: "If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth" (Num 30:2). It is ironic that his commitment to a foolish vow held precedence over the acceptable worship of God.

Significance of the story

It is tempting to ask, Why does the narrator not pass judgment on the human sacrifices performed by Jephthah? Should he have? It is not his custom to pass judgment in the book of Judges on individual situations. He has already notified the reader that Israel continues to do evil in

⁴¹Scolnic, "The Validity of Feminist Biblical Interpretation," 15.

Yahweh's eyes and will later say that Israel does right in its own eyes. He always lets situations speak for themselves and he expects the reader to compare and judge wrong actions of the Israelites by the standard of Mosaic law. Therefore he withholds any judgmental comment on Gideon's ephod, Samson's marrying a Philistine, his visit to the prostitute, and his involvement with Delilah, or Micah's construction of an idol to Yahweh.

Why is this story included in the narrative of Jephthah among the other stories of the book of Judges? It is certainly not needed to explain Israel's success over Ammon for Yahweh gives Jephthah the victory, not because of his vow, but in spite of it.

The response the narrator desired to elicit from his reader must be considered as a reason for its inclusion. This is obviously a tragic story, and it would have been equally tragic if the sacrificial victim had been Jephthah's son. The reader can not encounter this story without strong emotional feelings and his response may vary in each reading. Like the story of Micah's mother and her theological confusion, this story is bound to cause chagrin. It is almost unfathomable that an Israelite judge's religion accommodated and included human sacrifice.

A more emotionally charged response, however, is the reader's moral outrage. It almost defies imagination that a man could engage in human sacrifice and his only apparent

regret is that the victim is his only child. In this case that child was his daughter, and perhaps in the reader's mind she was more dependent upon the care and protection of her father than a son would have been. This is indeed a horrible story.

Summary

Every writer or narrator desires a response from his reader or audience. The narrator of Judges is no exception. His purpose is certainly to inform the reader concerning conditions and situations during this part of Israel's history. Sometimes, though, information that jars the senses of the reader makes the greatest impression. No two persons react or respond to information in precisely the same way, so it is preposterous indeed to suggest that the foregoing discussion of objective details and the proposed subjective responses intended by the narrator are the only possible options for the reader. It is believed, however, that it is safe to say that the average reader will at the very least respond in the following ways. He will be surprised to find women either giving spiritual direction to the nation or helping to defend it by eliminating its enemies. He will be chagrined to see such vivid examples of theological confusion and religious syncretism. He will be shocked, horrified, and outraged to see the moral decadence that pervaded

the time. By using stories involving women the narrator has been able to elicit these responses.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

This study has been directed toward the stories in the book of Judges in which women have important roles. That the period of the judges was not a bright and glorious one for Israel is quite evident. It is believed, however, that this period of history was even more dark and bleak than commonly understood. The narrator draws attention to this fact by a carefully constructed narrative consisting of carefully selected stories and pertinent literary devices that enable the reader to see even more clearly the tragedy of that time.

Chapter I noted that the narrator deals with a historical period, but does not necessarily recite the historical details like a contemporary historian. Instead he resorts to presenting his information in a format that is popularly known as a story.

His stories match all the characteristics of modern stories. There is the protagonist, Israel. Virtually all the stories evidence an overriding plot that focuses on the nation's continuing unfaithfulness to Yahweh. There is interaction among the cited characters and they are seen to

be individuals who make (often bad) choices that impact importantly on the person, his family, or the nation. The experiences which are told are from everyday life and are of interest to the reader.

These stories that are gleaned from over a rather long period of time are relatively few, suggesting a high degree of selectivity on the part of the narrator. Thus it is especially curious that so frequently the narrator's selections include women in unexpected roles and subtly overshadowing the men in the stories. Thus this chapter concludes that there must be a purpose behind this carefully selected collection of stories. They must contribute somehow to the narrator's thematic intent.

Chapter II presented a brief review of critical study to show that what was formerly called literary criticism focused on the sources of *Judges* or on its components. Seldom were its literary qualities addressed, especially as they relate to unity or its coherence of theme. Happily interpreters of the past two decades have begun to analyze the book as it now appears, not according to how they conjecture it may have come together. They are applying the criteria of rhetorical criticism to arrive at interpretations for *Judges*. The methodology of rhetorical (narrative) criticism (though largely undefined) was the methodology of this study.

Though interpreters may differ on the structure of Judges, it was shown that a rationale for the unity of its three sections of the book, the introduction (1:1-3:6), the stories of the judges (3:7-16:31), and the appendix (17:1-21:25), is not impossible. The narrator organized his materials in such a way not only to communicate a theme, but to impress upon his reader the nature of Israel's sin and its impact upon the nation. It was concluded that though the narrator does biographical reporting of the historical details, it has theological significance and the narrator employed all the skills for writing good literature. The literary genre of the greater part of Judges is historical narrative. The fact that Judges is called literature and can be classified according to the genre in no way impinges upon its inspiration. The Holy Spirit employed the literary skills of a writer who accurately and artfully wrote of selected historical incidents (many containing women) that not only depicted the times, but also had theological ramifications.

Chapter III proposed that the historical narrative of Judges be further classified as tragedy. Israel consistently made bad choices and was unfaithful to Yahweh. The narrator makes this abundantly clear by two paradigms in Judges 2 (vv 11-16, 17-19). The first paradigm reveals Israel's apostasy, Yahweh's anger and his compassion. The second paradigm complements the first by showing that in

spite of Yahweh's compassion, Israel persisted in its apostasy. The particulars of the paradigms are borne out in the stories that are recited in Judges 3-16.

It was also noted that the narrator artfully repeats thematic phrases as part of a formulaic introduction to the stories. These phrases, "the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord," "the sons of Israel again did (continued to do) evil," and "the sons of Israel cried (in distress) to the Lord," are clearly literary devices which combine to depict Israel in spiritual and political decline and trouble. From these repeated phrases it was concluded that as a nation Israel never evidenced genuine repentance in the cycles of oppression and deliverance.

Having recognized the paradigms and repetitious thematic phrases as literary devices employed by the narrator as constant and vivid reminders of Israel's sin against and apostasy from Yahweh, this study proposed that the narrator also used the feminine gender as an additional device to portray tragic times in Israel. Sometimes the narrator indicated unusually unsettled conditions by showing that badly needed leadership and action were not assumed and performed by males as expected, but unexpectedly by females. At one particular time the expected performance of a male leader was severely hindered by his involvement with women and their negative influence upon him. The combined effect of these stories that include women indicate another device

used by the narrator to show that conditions in Israel were out of joint.

Chapter IV directed attention to four women who performed roles and actions unexpected of them: Deborah, Jael, the woman of Thebez, and Manoah's wife.

It was noted that the narrator breaks from his formulaic introduction of a deliverer and unexpectedly introduces Deborah, a woman who is serving in a dual role as a prophetess and judge. She must prod a reluctant man into service and give him needed encouragement and direction for leading an army against the enemy, even though from the start he is promised victory.

In addition to her position, Deborah was seen to be given prominence in the structure of the story as her action (and Jael's) frames God's deliverance of Israel. A literary analysis also showed the language to give her prominence in contrast to Barak who lacked initiative and a sense of direction.

While Barak pursued a routed enemy, the focus shifted to another woman, Jael, a Kenite woman who hosted Sisera, the defeated enemy captain and fugitive. Unexpectedly she proves loyal to Israel and disloyal to her husband's ally, killing him while he slept. This unexpected turn of events gained for her recognition as the heroine of the story.

Another unexpected heroine was the woman at Thebez. Literary analysis showed an emphasis on her "oneness." When no one else had courage or initiative to halt the movements of a murderous and vengeful Abimelech, this lone woman challenged him with a domestic instrument, her millstone, and brought him to "crushing" defeat.

In a patriarchal society it was normal to expect that the father would be given instruction for training and preparing a son for leadership. It was noted that ironically the Angel of the Lord appeared to the mother, Manoah's wife, and instructed her. She seemed to recognize the stranger's identity before her husband did and seemed more theologically perceptive than he was.

Though it can not be proven, it can be surmised that these three stories involving four women might not have been isolated or entirely unique. Though these stories are undoubtedly the more outstanding ones, it is believed that the narrator used them to depict that by and large Israel was socially, spiritually, and politically leaderless (i.e., of male leadership) during the judges period.

Chapter V focused on the three women in Samson's life: the Timnite, the Gazite prostitute, and Delilah. It was emphasized that although they were termed "deterrents," they were not necessarily antagonists. They were female associates of his choosing who deterred him from a commit-

ment to his calling, hindered family relationships, and shortened his career.

His aggressive pursuit of the Timnite for a wife disappointed his parents and strained their parent-son relationship. He violated his Nazirite obligations and disobeyed Mosaic restrictions concerning intermarriage. The rift between him and his wife (and his father-in-law) led to wild escapades that did not inspire Israel's confidence in his character.

His association with the Gazite prostitute was strictly for sexual gratification. In brief, the story showed that Samson was in control of everything but himself and his passions.

His association with Delilah showed his self-confidence, arrogance, and gullibility. She was seen to be the most aggressive of his women. Driven by desire for money, she initiated dialogue that ultimately gained for her the secret of his great strength. When that was learned, Samson was weakened, blinded and bound. In essence, what could have been a splendid career was virtually over. The reader was left wondering how Samson's life, career, and impact on Israel might have been wonderfully different had he lived a separated and restrained life without personal involvement with these three wicked women. In a vivid way Samson's life of bad choices mirrored the experience of the people he was called to deliver and lead.

Chapter VI was more subjective. It proposed that the narrator sought not only to inform his reader, but also to provoke in him a response. Normally the reader tends to evaluate the action of Israel (or a specific person) that the narrator has reported on. His response or reaction indicates somewhat his evaluation, his sense of rightness or wrongness of the reported decisions made or deeds done. It would seem that the response that the stories of Judges might evoke from today's reader should not be too markedly different from the response that the narrator wished to elicit from his first or more immediate reader. For this chapter selected stories were cited and only a few responses were suggested.

Today's reader is probably surprised to find females (e.g., Deborah, Jael, and the woman at Thebez) on certain occasions stepping in and assuming the roles men were expected to perform because males were unavailable or were dodging responsibility. What might a reader who was still living in that cultural framework have thought? Might he not have assumed that conditions were indeed irregular during the time of the judges?

Today's reader is chagrined at Micah's mother's misguided piety, her theological confusion, and belief that Yahweh could be worshipped by means of idols. It would appear that the narrator desired that his more immediate

reader recognize and understand how far Israel had departed from Yahweh and Mosaic instructions for worshipping him.

The modern reader is outraged at the moral incongruities in the story of the Levite's concubine and recoils in horror at the very possibility that Jephthah engaged in human sacrifice. It is presumed that the narrator wished to evoke no less a response from his more contemporary audience.

In conclusion, the writer of this study firmly believes that the narrator had history to recount, stories to recite, but more importantly, a message to convey. Here is what happens when people live by their own standards and criteria of what is right rather than by God's revealed instructions. The narrator has skillfully used a variety of stories and literary devices to depict the sad conditions that develop when God is ignored. One of the narrator's literary devices has been the use of the feminine gender.

It is believed that the narrator's use of women in the narrative has been objective. He neither glorifies the role of women in Judges nor demeans men who are reluctant or unavailable to serve in varying capacities of leadership. He did not capriciously insert female figures into the narrative to enhance the character of the male figures. There is no hint that he in any way viewed women negatively. If anything, the writer appears neutral or he depicts them as a positive influence when exemplary men were scarce.

There may be times when a man's actions may be calibrated against those of a woman, but the woman is not demeaned by the association. Instead, in light of the times in which she lived, she is most likely to be portrayed as more commendable than her male counterpart. To summarize, the narrator's use of the feminine gender illustrates the lack of political and spiritual leaders and gives evidence of the moral and theological confusion that prevailed in the personal and national life of the Israelites during the judges period.

All of history shows God in his grace to be actively engaged in pursuing sinful mankind. During many periods of Israel's history this nation's behavior was proven to be fickle, and the judges period was no exception. However this particular era presents an extraordinary lesson in human nature and the grace of God. During this period of time the Israelites were not only fickle, they were disobedient. They failed to eradicate the Canaanites and their influence and they chose Canaanite deities over the God who had delivered them from Egypt and had given to them Canaan. If ever Israel shows ingratitude, this example is classic. And if God's grace is ever evident and demonstrable, this is also a classic example. A close analysis of Judges from this perspective vividly illustrates the truth of Romans 5:20: "When sin increased, grace abounded all the more."

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